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Somatics— A Radically Different View of Who We Are

The Church says: The body is a sin.

Science says: The body is a machine.

Advertising says: The body is a business.

The body says: I am a fiesta.

—EDUARDO GALEANO, from
“Window on the Body”

Somatics is a holistic way to transform. It engages our thinking, feeling, sensing, and actions. Transformation, from a somatic view, means that the way we are, relate, and act become aligned with our visions and values—even under pressure. More than understanding and insight, it supports us in embodying new ways of being, aligned with a broader vision. Somatics is very effective in both healing trauma and embodying new skills for leadership, organization building, and social change.

A young Vietnamese immigrant woman I met recently at a somatic training said, *“This is so exciting. I intend to be someone, to make a difference,*

and I don't know how to. This teaches me how to be able to do the things I want to, to be myself."

Somatics introduces us to an embodied life. It reminds us that we are organic and changing people. There are vast amounts of information within our bodies and sensations. When we learn to listen to the language of sensation, to live inside of our skins, a whole new world opens. What is most important to us, what we long for, is found and felt through our sensations, impulses, and an embodied knowing. Through the body, we can access ourselves, develop self-knowledge, and change.

The habits and survival strategies we develop through life are also bodily phenomena. One of the most effective ways to interrupt reactions, and instead respond based on what we care about, is through the felt senses. This is where we can learn about and retrain our nervous systems, and develop ourselves.

Lastly, somatics can remind us that we are human, connected to a much wider fabric of life. Objectification of others and disconnection from the land and our living environments require us to numb, separate, and dissociate. Sadly, we as a species are fairly good at this. Not feeling ourselves allows us to not feel others. Opening to our own senses, perceiving, and aliveness allows us to develop and remember our empathy and interdependence.

Let's dive in.

What Is Somatics?

Somatics is a holistic methodology and theory of change that understand both personal and collective transformation through a radically different paradigm.

It differs from approaches to change that might say a change in your thinking will change your life, or a change in your framing and language is all you need, or even adding a mindfulness practice alone will transform you.

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Somatics understands both the individual and collective as a combination of biological, evolutionary, emotional, and psychological aspects, shaped by social and historical norms, and adaptive to a wide array of both resilient and oppressive forces.

Somatics is an intentional change process by which we can embody transformation, individually and collectively. Embodied transformation is foundational change that shows in our actions, ways of being, relating, and perceiving. It is transformation that sustains over time.

Any transformation happens within a social context. We are shaped by and embody the social conditions we live in. This is so, whether we believe in these conditions or not. The social conditions include the political, economic, and historical systems, as well as the cultural norms, beliefs, and practices by which we are surrounded. The impact of the shaping from these broader forces is often what we are looking to heal from and transform, individually and collectively.

Most psychological and somatic approaches focus on individual healing and do not integrate a social analysis into their understanding of how we are shaped and what needs changing. This is a limitation that, I propose, perpetuates the oppression and trauma that we are trying to heal.

First let's clear up a common misunderstanding. Somatics is *not* adding a "body-based" exercise to psychotherapy or leadership development. It is not a workout class, or even a yoga class. It is not solely bringing your attention to your bodily sensations and following these—although this can be a powerful part of somatics. In Western(ized) cultural and economic systems, we fundamentally live within a disembodied set of social beliefs and practices. This means we have learned to hold the body as an object separate from the self, rather than a living organic process inseparable from the self. Thus, the distinctions around body-based work can get unclear and sloppy. Anything that has to do with the body can be called "somatics." I'd like to get more nuanced to make this grounded and useful.

The word *somatics* comes from the Greek root *soma*, which means "the living organism in its wholeness." Although it can be cumbersome,

it is the best word we have in English to understand human beings as integrated mind, body, spirit, and social, relational beings. In somatic speak, we call this embodiment “shape.” One’s shape is one’s current embodiment of beliefs, resilience and survival strategies, habits, and actions. We can somatically perceive an individual’s shape, or the collective shape of a group. In a group this is the embodied and practiced culture, norms, and dynamics, especially those that you see when the group is under pressure.

Somatics essentially sees the self as indistinguishable from the body. The body is an essential place of change, learning, and transformation. You can think of it as muscles having memory and tissues having intelligence. We often can forget that the brain is an organ within our bodies. It is not a hard drive with software. We don’t work like that.

Our embodiment, our shape, is developed in interaction with our experiences and environments. Our adaptations to these experiences and environments—both resilience and survival strategies as well as social and cultural practices—become embodied and then automatic. We think and act, relate and imagine from a certain embodiment. This opens some choices and reduces others. Once something is embodied, it is familiar and feels “normal.” It can also seem permanent or “just the way we are.” What we embody deeply connects to our identity and how we see ourselves.

Lastly, somatics understands people as a compilation of practices. Embodied practices are mostly unconscious to us—we have been doing them so long that we no longer have to think about them. Most of our practices are inherited through our families, communities, and social systems. Some practices we learned purposefully, like riding a bike or how to greet a new person, and others were driven out of survival and safety. They are then trained into our psychobiology over time. They become habits or skills—some useful and others not. Embodied practices are both individual and collective.

Because of how we are built, we *can’t not* practice something, be it the pattern of our breathing or our response to a new love. Somatics

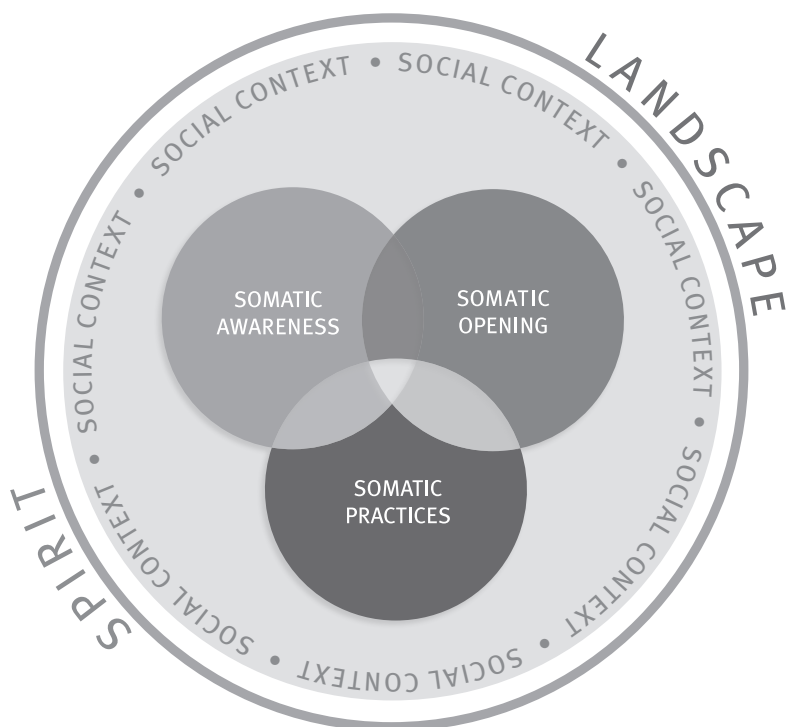
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asks, “What are you practicing? And, is what you are practicing aligned with what you most care about?”

The good news is that we have an incredible capacity for change. As the neuroscientist might say, we have an “incredible neuroplasticity.” As the meditation or aikido teacher might say, “Through embodied practice, we can deeply cultivate ourselves.”

Somatics pragmatically supports our values and actions becoming aligned. Somatics works through the body, engaging us in our thinking, emotions, commitments, vision, and action.

Somatic Transformation



generative somatics | Diagram designs: Querido Galdo, www.queridomundo.com

It helps us to develop depth and the capacity to feel ourselves, each other, and the life around us. It builds in us the ability to act from strategy and empathy. It teaches us to be able to assess conditions and “what is” clearly. Somatics is a practicable theory of change that can move us toward individual, community, and collective liberation.

What Makes Somatics, Somatics?

The key aspects of somatic methodology include: somatic awareness, somatic opening, and somatic practices, within a social context and connected to land and spirit. For spirit, please use whatever word works for you. By spirit I mean the vast unknown, the ever-expanding universe, the energies, beyond human, that we are living within.

These aspects of somatics are used interdependently to create a shift in embodiment. In somatic speak, this is a shift from your *current shape* to a *new shape*. The ground for the change is your vision and longings. What do you want? What do you want to become skilled in, or cultivate in yourself? What needs healing or change? We ask these same questions of a group as well, whether it is a collective, an organization, or a community. What do we want? What creates more justice, connection, and freedom? What allows us to have the impact we want to have? The body learns on “Yes.” This is the guide for transformation.

Here’s more about each aspect of the somatic methodology.

Somatic Awareness

Somatic awareness involves learning to both pay attention to, and live inside of, our sensations and aliveness. This means connecting to sensations like temperature, movement, and pressure, in an ongoing way. Through increased somatic awareness, sensations become sources of information. You can think of sensations as the foundational language of life. Overriding or numbing sensations, while a good survival strategy, leaves us disconnected from a key source of information and

satisfaction. Feeling our organic aliveness lets us connect with ourselves; feel what we care about and long for; build empathy and connection with others; and feel what needs to be attended to, acted upon, or healed.

There are levels to how we experience and interpret life. Sensations are the building blocks of our experiences—meaning, at the base of every internal experience is sensation. Understanding sensations as a foundational language, we can then feel emotions. For example, I may feel sad, and I can feel the sensations of pressure in my chest, warmth in my throat, and wetness in my eyes. I then experience all this as sadness. Emotions are deeply meaningful to us and can also act as guides to our commitments, connections, healing, and growth.

Since many of us have needed to turn away from our sensations because of trauma and oppression, or have been trained out of paying attention to them, here are some things you can pay attention to, to feel more of them: temperatures—more warm or more cool; movement—pulsing (heart, pulses), breath (in and out), tingling, streaming, twitching; and pressure—places you feel more contracted and places you feel more relaxed. When you notice your sensations try and be inside of them, rather than being an outside observer.

We also have internal narratives—or stories and interpretations of the world that run through us. Some are inherited; others habitual; others have wisdom and information for us to better understand, create, and navigate by. Language is a very powerful aspect of being human. Research of children born deaf shows that when we are not exposed to language early on, certain aspects of our brain do not develop (Sacks 1989). This is one reason it is important to assess deafness early, and expose deaf and hard of hearing children to sign language. Thinking and language are also bodily phenomena, although we can often remove ourselves from our sensations through language. What I mean here is that we can separate ourselves from sensations and bodily experiences by talking ourselves out of them, thus denying other information.

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Lastly, we also perceive others and things that are happening around us. This happens through various senses from visual and auditory to kinesthetic and sensing. When we feel our sensations and emotions, we can also perceive the aliveness in others, or a situation. Many of us can relate to feeling tension in a room, or between people, even when everything “looks fine.” We can also feel the effect of peacefulness or ease in a person, space, or in nature.

Somatic awareness invites us to attend to all of these sources of information—sensation, emotion, thinking, and external perception. It asks us to learn to feel ourselves, others, and the environment, at the same time. We can develop our skill to feel deeply, and assess what is needed internally and externally. We can then have conversations and take actions that serve what is needed based on what we, and others, care about.

Dissociation, minimization, and numbing are normal responses to trauma, oppression, and difficult life experiences. These are all ways to remove ourselves, or aspects of ourselves, from feeling. In turn, being connected to sensation helps to bring us back into contact with ourselves. It also brings us back to what we have been avoiding or protecting ourselves from. This can mean feeling physical and emotional pain that made us want to leave or numb in the first place. Thus, returning to sensing and feeling can also require support, training, and/or purposeful healing.

I know this may sound strange, but so often what we are reacting to is not being able to tolerate what is happening in our own sensations, emotions, and experience. We react to get rid of the feeling, to push away the sensations, because they are associated with something intolerable, painful, and uneasy. Increasing our ability to “allow for” sensations and emotions gives us more choice and decreases our reactivity.

Somatic awareness and ongoing *embodiment*—living inside our own body and aliveness—give us more choice. They grow our ability to be present in more and more situations. They help us act connected to what matters to us rather than react to get away from something.

Somatic awareness often reintroduces us to what we most care about ... what's in our hearts or our gut feelings.

A group can practice this as well, together attending to the sensations in the body and the information it brings, in our conversations, coordination, and collective action.

Somatic Opening

Somatic opening is another core aspect of somatic transformation. In many ways, somatic transformation is not possible without somatic opening. We can increase our somatic awareness and take on new somatic practices, yet if we do not open and process the contractions that have held a certain embodiment in place, transformation does not happen. This is true for individuals and groups. A level of disorganization happens in moving from one shape to another, one embodiment to another.

Somatic opening helps to deconstruct embodied shapes and habits that no longer serve us. This means disorganizing habitual ideas and beliefs, emotional patterns or avoidance, and reactive ways of being. While this all sounds good, somatic opening can be ... well, disorganizing of what's familiar. Even when what is familiar isn't working, it's still familiar. We tend to gravitate toward homeostasis. Somatic opening places us in unbounded terrain, where we can find ourselves between known self-concepts. Between known ways of being. Between known ways of interacting or coordinating.

We need a strong purpose and vision for change during somatic opening. In this disorganized place, we—as people or as groups—can feel unmoored. People can often grab onto the familiar, the habitual, and revert to what no longer works.

Our deep patterns, survival strategies, beliefs, and reactions live in our somatic structures. By this I mean, live in our tissues, muscles, and organs in patterning that includes, but is not limited to, our well-traveled neuronal pathways. These embodied patterns are supported

by our habitual practices and are often reinforced by the structures and systems in which we operate; organizations as well as the broader social structures. The embodied or survival-based habits cannot be changed through conversation or thought alone. The language centers in the brain have very little influence over the survival centers in the nervous system and brain. At the same time, language and thought are important. In the big picture we want to align the head, heart, gut, and actions.

Somatic opening works through the body to access and transform survival reactions, experiences that have shaped us, and emotions or numbing that has become automatic. Our bodies tell stories. Our muscles hold memories. Somatic opening allows us to listen to, somatically process, and transform these stories. Somatic opening allows more aliveness, purpose, love, and power.

A very cool sign of somatic transformation is when you find yourself responding to something in a way that's not at all like "you." Or you find yourself taking actions and making moves you were not able to before. One of my favorites is when I find myself having new thoughts and interpretations that I did not intend or learn.

Groups that are focused on transforming also go through somatic opening. This too is a disorganization of the group's norm and embodied patterns. This deconstruction is guided by the group's commitment to something more transformative and effective or toward more choices.

Let me offer an example:

A progressive social change organization recently confronted a very difficult situation of sexual harassment amidst its leaders. The cis-male leader fired the cis-female coworker when she confronted him about his behaviors. Within the organization, all agreed ideologically on an intersectional analysis of structural power—meaning they shared values about equity and an analysis about how different forms of oppression can be challenged and changed. Like many organizations, they did not have the collective embodied skills to deal with the

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situation in a way that was aligned with their vision, analysis, and values. The processes, the collective practices, the conversations were not in place to find a way through that took care of the organization and the leaders within it.

Overall, this situation required the organization to reorganize its ways—meaning they had to engage in a deep level of collective change. They had to confront the fact that they did not have the collective know-how to respond, they did not have the processes in place, to handle this situation. It asked them as an organization to change, deal with their reactions, and restructure to be aligned with their values, vision, and analysis.

There are many somatic processes that support somatic opening. The processes are based on the “rules of the soma,” or how embodiment works, not how we think it should. The shaping in the soma has its own deep intelligence. As we understand these adaptations and shaping on their own terms, there are many ways to work toward change. Three key principles in somatic opening are: supporting the contraction, or blending; connecting more resilient places in the soma with more stressed or numb places; and allowing more aliveness to move through the soma connected to purpose, which includes opening the tissues to allow for this aliveness and sensation to flow.

Let’s unpack these principles.

Blending is the principle of joining with. This is joining with a contraction or habituated shaping in the soma, rather than trying to break it up or unlock it. The assumption behind this blending is that there is intelligence in the protective patterning. We want to be curious in our conversations and touch. What has this somatic contraction been taking care of? What has it served? When did it get established, or how long has it been around? How does it work? In supporting the contraction, slackness, or numbness—physically and verbally—the soma will begin to tell its story. We can discover how the somatic pattern works and what its key purpose has been.

The second principle is connecting more resilient places or states in the soma with those more numbed or contracted. The resilient places and states are usually more relaxed, allow for more aliveness to be felt and moved, and tend to have more flexibility and possibility. Connecting these places in the soma with places that are more numb, terrified, contracted, etc. allows an introduction to other possibilities at the feeling level—like the unconscious mind getting to talk to itself.

The last principle of somatic opening is about reminding the tissues how to allow for more aliveness and sensation to flow. This can happen through practices, using various breath patterns combined with particular somatic bodywork points. More detail on each of these is in chapter 10, the chapter on Somatic Opening.

Somatic bodywork is a powerful process for somatic opening. In this approach to somatic bodywork, we include conversation, touch, breathing patterns, gesture, and emotional processing. The bodywork is on a mat or massage table and fully clothed. Somatic bodywork allows us to work directly with the places in the soma that have held traumatic experiences or patterns for safety or are hypervigilant or numb.

Practically, this means processing the experiences stored in the soma *through* the emotions and body. Massage can temporarily relax a muscle or contraction, but the “shaping” or “armoring” in a body will not shift unless the concern that contraction is taking care of (safety, love, protection, shame, terror) is worked through. From a neuroscience perspective, the body is the easiest doorway into working with those reactions, emotions, and memories that are primarily run by the reptilian brain, and the limbic and stress centers in the brain. This is an integral part of the somatic transformation process.

Through somatic opening, change is revealed from the body up, not from thinking down. New thinking appears from changes within embodied patterns. Trying to use new thinking alone to change embodied patterns tends to be unsuccessful and unsustainable.

Somatic Practices

Somatic practices help to build new skills and competencies that are relevant to what we care about. Somatic practices allow these new skills to become embodied, so that we can count on them, even under pressure. We can ask ourselves what skills and options do we, or the groups we are a part of, need to embody to align with our callings, our vision and values? To make the impact and difference we want? The answers to these questions show us the purposeful practices we need to do.

Both individuals and groups already have default embodied practices. These may or may not be aligned with the purpose of the group. A group can also shift into purposeful collective practices that serve their joint aims.

At generative somatics, we worked with a social justice organization whose overall commitment was to be bold in their work. Being bolder would allow them to take bigger risks, attempt different strategies, and organize larger numbers of people. Being bold is a great idea, and HOW do we do that? Part of the embodied collective shape at this organization was to hold back, take care, perform well, not be messy, etc. Much of this was shaped through internalized oppression and culture. So, just saying “we are going to be bold,” while important, did not shift into new actions and ways of being. New individual and collective practices were needed. These practices were both exciting and uncomfortable, given that they invited folks out of their comfort zone. As we took on these practices, other things needed to be faced as well—certain strategies of appeasing and agreeing that historically had taken care of safety, belonging, and dignity; and protecting oneself and community from targeting. These were now getting in the way of being bold, and required change.

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Embodied practices are mostly unconscious to us—we have been doing them for so long that we no longer have to think about them. Some practices we learned purposefully and others we modeled from our environment (family, culture, and society). Still others were driven out of survival and safety. Many embodied practices or automatic reactions are derived from stress responses to loss, hurt, trauma, and the need for safety. These experiences can range from very personal experiences to the impact of our social, economic, and environmental conditions.

New practices tend to invite somatic opening. As we develop new skills, often previous embodied strategies may need to be shifted. What we do know is that adding new practices on top of an older embodied strategy won't work. Given enough pressure, the older embodied habit will emerge, unless it has been resolved or processed through somatic opening.

Given our community and family experiences, and because of oppressive social conditions, there are fundamental skills that many of us don't learn to embody, such as: having boundaries that take care of yourself and others, mutual contact and intimacy, moving toward what is important to you, or building trust amidst conflict. Other survival skills become embodied, including: hypervigilance and distrust, appeasing, and aggression. Trauma and oppression can leave people with a deep sense of powerlessness, isolation, and shame that you can't "talk" someone out of.

New skills are developed somatically so that they become more than good ideas—they become natural actions and habits. We want to not only know about boundaries, but be able to take the action of having boundaries in the course of our days, relationships, and work. We don't want to leave centered accountability as a good theory, but rather embody it and be able to act from this place under pressure. Somatic practices allow us to begin to build a "new shape" aligned with our values and purpose.

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There are many embodied practices that are useful to a person, community, or organization. To develop a new embodied practice it takes:

- Meaningful narrative or purpose—what are you looking to embody and why?
- The practice needs to be based in the soma, or holistically engage the sensations, tissues, muscles, organs, emotions, and thinking.
- Somatic opening so that the new practice can root.
- Repetition of the new somatic practices—three hundred times creates muscle memory and three thousand times creates embodiment.
- The practice shows up as change in your actions and life, and others notice.

Again, not every physical practice is a somatic practice. In fact, some physical practices can be training us to dissociate rather than develop a new embodied skill. All of the screens and places to go virtually that have been added to gyms are an example of these invitations to a practice of dissociation rather than embodiment.

Some of the foundational embodied practices that we have found vital to healing from trauma and oppression, and to building powerful organizations for justice are:

- **Presence and Embodiment:** being able to feel and engage with a wide range of sensations and emotions
- **Generativity:** creativity, vision, possibility, chosen values, extending trust, holding complexity, and purposeful action
- **Setting Limits:** embodied boundaries with others and self, including saying “no,” insistence, and discipline
- **Mutual Connection:** presence with self and other simultaneously, felt sense of belonging, intimacy, and community
- **Impacting and Leading:** influencing, choosing, intending, and taking action based on chosen values

- **Centered Surrender:** trust of self, other, and Spirit; being influenced from center
- **Compassion and Love:** giving and receiving, permeability, and appreciation with self, others, and the world
- **Unknown and Contradiction:** being with death, change, contradictions, and unanswered questions
- **Centered Accountability:** being responsive to self, others, and wider community; able to differentiate intention from impact; apologize, repair, and forgive

We will dive into these more in chapter 12, on Embodying Change. Somatic practices, combined with somatic awareness and somatic opening, let us engage a holistic, sustainable transformation.

Social Context

Any transformation is happening within a social context or social conditions. We are shaped by and embody the social conditions in which we live. These conditions include the political, economic, and social systems as well as the cultural beliefs and practices we inherit, live, and function within daily. The institutions and social norms we are surrounded by are currently shaping and have historically shaped us. We embody these just as we are shaped by and embody our family practices and culture, those of our communities, and the land and environment. We are in both a current social and political moment, and strongly shaped by the flow of history before us.

When we are looking at transformation, social context is one of the most influential shaping forces, whether we are focused on personal, community, or systemic change. The impact of the shaping from these broader forces is often what we are looking to heal from and transform, individually and collectively.

Spirit and Landscape

Spirit and landscape are forces that are beyond humans, and shape us deeply, as well. These forces are more lasting than what humans can do or create. The earth was formed 4.5 billion years ago, the Milky Way galaxy 11–13 billion years ago. Six hundred million years ago the ozone layer formed. During the Cambrian explosion, 580–550 million years ago, the most modern phyla of animals began to appear in the fossil record. A hundred million years ago the earliest bees appeared, 80 million years ago came the ants, and 50 million years ago the first deer. *Homo sapiens* appeared in Africa 250,000 years ago. Around 50,000–100,000 years ago, they began moving to other continents, replacing the Neanderthals in Europe and other hominins in Asia. Time is vast compared to a human lifetime.

We can forget this in our modern and technological world, yet we are still shaped by these broader forces. Even as we are degrading essential parts of our natural environment and collectively becoming less connected to sources of our food, water, and energy, we are completely dependent on the earth for our existence. Land, the atmosphere, the global weather systems, the water cycle—these allow us life. It is only very recent in human evolution that many of us are not centrally connected to land and landscape. Throughout most of human history, our deep relatedness to the earth and stars was reflected in our cosmologies and social and religious practices. No matter what, however, whether we are in a wilderness, rural area, or cityscape, landscape shapes us.

Nature and land are repeatedly shown to be a central resilience factor for humans, as is our connection to something more vast, felt yet unknown, which here I am calling Spirit.

By Spirit, I mean the larger forces of energy, the vastness of the cosmos and unknown, and the harmonizing forces of nature. One of the 2011 winners of the Nobel Prize in astrophysics, Saul Perlmutter,

reports that what we can see in the universe (stars, planets, nebulae, etc.) is under 5% of what is out there. Roughly 68% of the universe is made up of antigravity dark energy, with dark matter making up the remaining 27%. Scientists know how much dark energy there is because of how it affects the universe's expansion. Other than that, it is a complete mystery.

People across cultures report direct experiences of this vastness as profound and meaningful. Across cultures and time, it is named in different ways and a variety of practices have been cultivated in connection with it. Religions have attached ideology to this sense of the unknown.

So, as we consider what shapes us, what we are made of, what resilience we can cultivate individually and collectively, it is vital to include land and spirit.

Embodied Transformation

This model—somatic awareness, somatic opening, somatic practices, within social context and landscape and spirit—helps us to see the methodology of somatics as a whole. Any one of these components alone or separated from the others does not allow for embodied transformation. When integrated, these components support deep and actionable change that lasts.

To transform, to create sustainable change, we need to perceive and come to know our individual and collective “shapes.” We need to increase our awareness of the automatic reactions and ways of being we have embodied. Then, we get to open or deconstruct these, often healing and developing a much more substantial capacity through the opening. This somatic opening allows for new ways of acting, feeling, relating, and knowing. It is the pragmatic process of deep transformation, of shedding in order to change.

Somatics then moves us toward embodying new ways of being and action that align our values, longings, and actions. Often our social

conditions and our family and community experiences do not teach us the embodied skills we need. This focus on developing embodied skills—whether it’s centered accountability and liberatory use of power, building deeper trust through conflict, or the capacity to be with the unknown or love more deeply—is essential to sustainable change.

The bad news, from a social justice perspective, is that we inadvertently embody societal norms we don’t believe in, and often don’t embody the values we do believe in. From a somatic vantage point, this is completely understandable and there is a lot we can do about it.

When we look at transformation from an embodied approach, we say: A person has transformed when their ways of being, acting, and relating are aligned with what they most care about—even under the same old pressures. This is also true for a group, collective, or organization. Embodied transformation is foundational change that shows in our actions and ways of being, relating, and perceiving. It is transformation that sustains over time.

Social transformation is a more complex beast. Social transformation requires many things—base building and organizing, leadership development, empowered democratic engagement, policy change and implementation, and much more. It requires a radical transformation of our economic system. We could say society, or the political economy, has transformed when the economic, social, and political systems (institutions, practices, and norms) are designed for equity for all people and sustainability with the planet. These are radically different economic, social, and political structures than what we currently have.

Since we are so deeply shaped by and embody the social and economic conditions in which we live, somatics would ask this question about social change: *What economic and political structures do we need to have masses of people embody cooperation, interdependence, and equity? This translates into systems that hold your well-being as mine, just as your demise is mine, and the well-being of the earth’s living systems the same destiny as our own.*

Soma

Throughout the book I will be using the word *soma*. I know it is a little weird, and I am trying to distinguish something more than our default associations with the word *body*.

When I say “soma,” here is what I mean: the soma is the interconnected thinking, emotions, actions, relating, and worldview, embodied. All of this lives in, through, and with the body. I tend to use the word *soma* instead of *body*, because *body* is generally defined in an objectified and utilitarian way. *Body* is mostly seen as a physicality and parts, separate from the self. It is seen as something to manage, steward, control, keep healthy, or feel ashamed about.

Somatics, instead, holds the body as inseparable from the Self and how we live, act, and relate.

Somatics is fascinated with embodiment—what is embodied, and is that working? Do we have the embodied options we want for love, boundaries, dealing with conflict in a life-affirming way, equity, and more? Somatics looks for aliveness—what allows for more life, more connection, more wisdom, more effective action, and relations? Somatics looks to increase choices—based in agency and empowerment—to becoming more individually and collectively whole and skilled at living.

There are rules of the soma. The soma will not let go of an embodied pattern that has been protecting safety, belonging, or dignity, if a better embodied option is not available. From the soma’s point of view, that would be abandoning survival. Bad move! The soma will release and process protective embodied patterns if healing is accessible, or if new embodied choices and moves become available that better take care of the original need. The soma responds to resilience, to an organic pace, rather than a sudden insight or breakthrough experience, and to practice with meaning and community. The soma responds to practice connected to purpose. The soma responds to support and core needs being met by opening, changing, and awakening. We get to learn from and follow the way the soma works.

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I also use *soma* to distinguish from the culturally defined “model” or normative “body.” This is the culturally defined idea of how a body should look, function, appear, and work. While every culture has a “normative body,” these norms vary greatly. Some cultures have lots of room for human variation, and others very little. The current Westernized and capitalized normative body, the “right” body, is white(r), European in build, cis-male, heterosexual, sporty, able-bodied, “attractive,” and wealthy. Or cis-female, thin, large-breasted, etc.

Somatics, with a social analysis, challenges this norm. It holds that all bodies, all people, have aliveness, form, a shape, the impulses to live, connect, and make meaning. That all bodies, all people, have adaptations to their experiences that leave them with more and less choice. The socially constructed objectified and narrowed idea of body leaves us with less aliveness and an attempt to adapt to a norm that is not possible for most people. This also leaves us with less of a sense—and for many, actual lived experience—of safety, belonging, and dignity.

Somatics works through the body, and has been influenced by ableist social conditions. Disability justice is a framework and set of principles, created by queer, disabled people of color, that challenge these notions and offer a vision for what else is possible. I am a student and learner here. The integration of these principles is vital for a politicized somatics.

Following are the 10 Principles of Disability Justice as written by Sins Invalid.

INTERSECTIONALITY “We do not live single issue lives.” –Audre Lorde. Ableism, coupled with white supremacy, supported by capitalism, underscored by heteropatriarchy, has rendered the vast majority of the world “invalid.”

LEADERSHIP OF THOSE MOST IMPACTED “We are led by those who most know these systems.” –Aurora Levins Morales

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ANTI-CAPITALIST POLITIC In an economy that sees land and humans as components of profit, we are anti-capitalist by the nature of having nonconforming body/minds.

COMMITMENT TO CROSS-MOVEMENT ORGANIZING Shifting how social justice movements understand disability and contextualize ableism, disability justice lends itself to politics of alliance.

RECOGNIZING WHOLENESS People have inherent worth outside of commodity relations and capitalist notions of productivity. Each person is full of history and life experience.

SUSTAINABILITY We pace ourselves, individually and collectively, to be sustained long term. Our embodied experiences guide us toward ongoing justice and liberation.

COMMITMENT TO CROSS-DISABILITY SOLIDARITY We honor the insights and participation of all of our community members, knowing that isolation undermines collective liberation.

INTERDEPENDENCE We meet each other's needs as we build toward liberation, knowing that state solutions inevitably extend into further control over lives.

COLLECTIVE ACCESS As brown, black and queer-bodied disabled people we bring flexibility and creative nuance that go beyond able-bodied/-minded normativity, to be in community with each other.

COLLECTIVE LIBERATION No body or mind can be left behind—only mobbing together can we accomplish the revolution we require.

The Objectified Body

Where did the idea of Body as Object come from? We, in the West, have inherited a deeply rationalistic and objectifying view of the

body, and therefore of ourselves and each other. It is an interpretation of the body as separate from the (more important) thinking mind. The body is seen as muscles, sinews, bones, and a series of functions that move the mind or the “Self” around. We are quick to objectify, productize, devalue, and try to manage the body as a “thing,” an “it.” Many of us have also inherited, whether Christian or not, a deep orientation toward the body as sinful, or as base and shameful. This sets us into a very complex and confusing relationship with the most intimate aspects of life, and the organism we and other humans actually *are*.

We are taught to distance from sensations and the body, rather than living inside them. This distancing from lived experience, from feeling aliveness, also prepares us to be quick to objectify others and other types of life (soil, air, trees, animals). The dismissal or degradation of sensing and feeling atrophies our empathy. Sensing comes with lots of information including impulses and needs, habits, current time experiences, historical patterns, deep cares, and wisdom. The disregard of sensing dismisses a realm of information that holds both evolutionary wisdom and interdependence.

There is a history within Western philosophical tradition that led us here, and a whole series of power-over/oppressive social conditions that this history serves.

The contemporary interpretation of the body that has led us to the marginalization of feeling has its roots in the work of the French philosopher René Descartes. Descartes was convinced that it was possible to alleviate (social and religious) chaos by providing certainty through rational means.... The Scientific Revolution—the essential distinction in the rationalistic tradition is the division of the universe between matter, which is governed entirely by mechanical laws, and the mind, whose lofty territory comprised thinking, ideas, and will. In an intellectual turf war whose reverberations we’re still riding, Descartes and his colleagues staked out mind, matter, and science, which included the body; and the Church claimed spirit and religion.

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In this interpretation mind and body, spirit and matter, are two separate worlds that are vaguely and mysteriously linked. This was the beginning of the Western model of mind, body, and spirit existing in separate compartments.

Once the notion of an inner animating principle was dismissed, a vigorous, reductionist quantification of the material world began. The operating metaphor is that the material world, which includes the body and nature, is machine-like, similar to a huge clock, and by understanding its mechanisms we can dominate it, oppress it, and control it to our advantage.

(RICHARD STROZZI-HECKLER, PhD, *The Art of Somatic Coaching*)

The Cartesian worldview and a rationalistic tradition are defining forces in our understanding of the self, others, the body, the earth, and even knowledge and *how* we know.

I took a college philosophy class called Subjectivity and Reality. The name of the class compelled and fascinated me. We proceeded to read Kant, Nietzsche, Descartes, and other white European and American male philosophers. In a discussion on how it is we experience knowing, I shared that knowing for me often came through images and sensing. An understanding would appear through feeling first. The professor proceeded to lecture me publicly on the impossibility of that. Thinking ONLY happens mentally and in words, was his stance. I did try again to explain my experiences of knowledge and thinking through other means. I was dismissed. I don't think I spoke up again that semester. I knew my experiences were real. I just had no idea how to validate my reality or explain it to unsympathetic ears.

Rationalism separates the self from the body, and the thinking or rational mind from the aliveness and experiences of the emotional and physical self. This philosophy moves us toward an objectifying view of

the body and the physical world as parts, devoid of or separate from a person's holistic and lived experience. This objectification, and mind-body split, have far-reaching consequences.

The rationalistic separation puts us at deep odds with ourselves. As we learn to dismiss our lived experience, to be rational instead of “too emotional,” we necessarily learn to numb, to dissociate, and to override the feelings of ourselves and others. This distancing truncates our ability to know what we deeply care about, how to relate within complexity, and how to feel and validate experiences—whether our own or those of another. Rationalism as a primary way of being tends to side with control when it comes to working skillfully with our biological/spiritual/social/psychological selves.

The mind-body split reifies a particular power-over system as well. We can consider who and what is associated with being rational—science, maleness, whiteness, education, and wealth—the “right people” to decide, advance, and rule. Consider also who and what is associated with body and feeling—sin, irrationality, emotions, “hysteria,” women, transgender, people of color, the exotic (read racist), indigenous, earth, desire—the “wrong” people to decide and lead. You can hear the multiple forms of oppression informing these and, in turn, how they are supported by rationalism.

This is not a vote dismissing rational thinking altogether or to rid us of science and scientific inquiry. Rather, it is to awaken to what is shaping us. What have been the costs of rationalism and who has repeatedly been thrown under the bus by its precepts? What of this do we want to question and change? What of rationalism as a cultural norm is deadening, disconnecting, or harmful?

The power-over economy will have us be consumers before people. Most anything we can think of to edit and manage the body is being sold to us—from a multibillion-dollar diet industry to chemicals to cover any smell. The traditional Church presents the body and human desires and sexuality as a sin. It is easier to control a person if you have made their inherent impulses toward life and contact shameful or punishable.

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All over the place, from the popular culture to the propaganda system, there is constant pressure to make people feel that they are helpless, that the only role they can have is to ratify decisions and to consume.

(NOAM CHOMSKY, *Manufacturing Consent*)

Lastly, a note about neuroscience and rationalism. There have been thousands of amazing findings within neuroscience over the last twenty years. In its current popularity, many people assume that because we can explain what happens in the brain, we understand behavior or how to change behavior. Many also interpret the brain as the most important organ—if we understand the brain, we understand humans. There are many organs without which we cannot live, like the heart, the lungs, and the large intestines. Interpretations of modern neuroscience can get caught in the same rationalistic tradition of objectifying the body as now merely carrying around the more important brain. It can also promote the idea that mental understanding alone lets us know how to change.

We like to think of the brain as this incredible computing device, that's designed for creativity and actualizing our purpose. The brain's primary function is to keep you breathing, keep you alive, and keep you safe. It evolved in order to predict danger, to predict threat... We need to hijack that machinery, and apply it in a deliberate and specific way. The good news is that your brain is a highly plastic device... We have planning and imagination. Practices to engage the neuroplasticity will truly rewire your brain and its ability to function, so that you are set in alignment with purpose.

(ANDREW HUBERMAN, neuroscientist and tenured professor in the Department of Neurobiology at the Stanford University School of Medicine, "Presence: Living and Working on Purpose")

A somatic understanding of the body/self is radically different. It holds the body, self, thinking, emotions, action, and relating as an

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interconnected whole. We, this human organism, have evolved for over three billion years. That's a long, long time, from a human point of view. We have many capacities that we inherit through this evolutionary history, through having a human body, and many we can learn and cultivate. Listed below is an amazing range of our human capacities. Asking us to deny or compartmentalize aspects of being full humans can leave us longing for our humanity.

The human organism, body/self has:

- Emotions: Inherent and foundational experiences that hold deep meaning for us. We can develop our emotional skills over a lifetime.
- Sensing and interpreting: We do this through our sense organs and through feeling. We sense ourselves, others, our environments, and the mystery (Spirit).
- Thinking, analysis, and the cultivation of critical thinking through learning and study.
- Touch and capacity to develop skilled touch: Touch is an inherent aspect of healing and bonding.
- Relating: We are social animals. We can develop our skills of relating over a lifetime. Much of how we relate is based on our own experiences of safety, belonging, and dignity—both personal and social—and the social, economic, and cultural systems we live within.
- Resilience: We have inherent resilience, and we can cultivate it.
- Presence: We have inherent presence, and we can cultivate it.
- Action: We can take action in many ways—from having conversations, to coordinating with others, to physical actions.
- Communication and language: Being exposed to and learning language is essential to our brain development. We can learn new languages throughout our lifetimes.

- Spirit: We can see this as consciousness or an animating force. This is interpreted in many ways across culture and time.

Somatics is not just an effective and potent set of tools by which to heal and transform deeply. It is also an invitation to mend a profound personal and social mind-body split, which has consequences that are more harmful than life affirming. I posit that returning or reintegrating into the life of our bodies allows us to return to a greater connection with each other, life, and land. It is a practice to help us deobjectify life. It lets us sense and feel life more readily.

Somatics: The Field

We are in an institutionalizing phase in the field of somatics. Within the last fifteen years, numerous universities have begun to offer graduate degrees in somatic psychology. However, the majority of the foundational development of somatics and somatic training institutes are still independent of the university setting. There are a variety of quality somatic approaches.

As many of these somatic approaches are being integrated into the discipline of Psychology, an *attention-based* somatics is being prioritized. This is a somatic approach that attends to the sensations in the body, through conversation, imaging, and cognition. Through tracking sensations, it uses the body as a base of knowledge and change. Because of the historical bias in the institution of psychology *away from the body and touch*, essential aspects of a holistic somatic approach—including somatic practices and somatic bodywork—are being deprioritized. In this, the full potency of somatics is being missed. There is a debate within somatic psychology circles about the ethics of *not* using touch when it is such a powerful tool for healing and transformation.

The mainstreaming of somatics is, for the most part, without a social analysis and does not acknowledge the deep shaping caused by social conditions. Somatics is primarily being understood and promoted inside of an individualized healing framework. Much of the current research is

focused around the use of somatics in healing trauma, at which it is very effective. But the question of why there is so much trauma and oppression to heal, and what somatics can do about it, is often left unasked. While somatics has much to offer in healing, a somatic approach without an analysis of social and economic institutions, unequal distribution of power, and use of violence and coercion, excludes some of the largest forces that shape us. Without a social analysis much of the trauma that people withstand is either left unnamed—racism, gender oppression, homophobia, class oppression—or only partially addressed.

Even when somaticists and somatic therapists are well meaning, without this analysis, we often do not explore how we too embody oppressive and individualistic ways of being, and can perpetuate this through the work.

A somatics with a social analysis can see the multiple experiences and systems that shape us, both individually and collectively. It is therefore more effective at supporting healing and change. A somatic trauma analysis can be applied to both personal and systemic violence, and give us a much deeper understanding of the violence as well as how we can effectively address it. A somatics with a social analysis can be used to build vision, strategy, and practices that serve systemic transformation, toward equity and sustainability. This is the somatics I would like to see institutionalized—somatics with its full contribution.

Somatics with a social analysis has powerful and relevant uses at a larger scale—in community, for leadership development, alliance-building, and more. Somatics can support collective practices of building power, deepening presence and capacity, increasing our emotional skills and range, and developing the embodied skills we need to generate large-scale change. Without a political analysis, this collective practice doesn't get leveraged.

The somatic methodology I am discussing here takes into account these social conditions, and also holds as its aim personal and collective equity and liberation, in interdependence with the earth and its living systems.

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I began training in somatics in 1997 with Richard Strozzi-Heckler and Robert Hall, in what was then the Lomi School. I continued studying and then began teaching at the Strozzi Institute with Richard. The focus on trauma healing and the integration of a social analysis into the work began in 2000 through generationFIVE. There, we integrated somatic principles and practices into transformative justice work, addressing child sexual abuse. Beginning in the same year, I developed and ran independent Somatics and Trauma programs. This politicized somatic methodology has continued to be experimented with, tested, and practiced within generative somatics since 2009.

A politicized somatic theory addresses the need for deep personal transformation, aligned with liberatory community and collective practices, connected to transformative systemic change. One is inseparable from the next, and each should serve the other. We need all three to generate strong and grounded strategy, to build compelling alternatives, and to mend the deep wounds of oppression and violence. We need all three to build collective power that has wisdom, and to act and organize in accordance with liberatory values. My hope is that the use of a politicized somatics by social and environmental justice movements and healing practitioners will help to advance large-scale systemic change.