

Full Body Free Body:  
Somatic Cultural Praxis in United States Dance Forms

by

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## **Introduction**

### **Pursuit of the Self: Somatic Cultural Praxis in United States Dance Forms**

#### **The Synthesis of Self**

Self-knowledge enables all self-perception. Our needs and desires, our pain and our strength, our love and forgiveness are accessible only by listening inwardly. The more we are able to communicate between our inner life and our outer life, the more we can live without conflict (Fortin 2009, 48). Self-knowledge is cultivated by holistic engagement. The mind, body, spirit gather and create knowledge in tandem. No one part makes up a larger portion of one's identity. Holistic self-understanding has been practiced in Buddhist teachings, Asian martial arts, and African spiritual culture for hundreds of years (Eddy 2002, 46-62). Recently, in the last hundred years, the powers for healing and wellbeing that can be achieved through holistic self-knowledge have begun to be recognized in the West, particularly among those who work with the body- healers, therapists, yogis, and dancers. In the 1980s Thomas Hanna, body therapists and scholar, termed the word 'somatic' to represent holistic self-knowing. The etymology of the word somatic is sourced from the root 'soma': "Soma is a Greek word that, from Hesiod onward, has meant 'living body.'"

Somatic understanding therefore is from the “inside out, where one is aware of feelings, movements, and intentions , rather than looking objectively from the outside in” (Hanna 1988, 20). Another term that is used more commonly than somatic awareness, but has a similar meaning is ‘embodiment’. Though embodiment seems to exclusively refer to the experience of the physical body, it can be understood to be quite expansive. For the purposes of this work, to be embodied or to attain somatic awareness is to be holistically connected with one’s emotional, spiritual, intellectual, and kinesthetic knowledge dwelling within the “living body”. In this work, I plan to examine how specific dance forms throughout United States history have offered Americans the experience to cultivate and express their inner knowledge promoting presence, connectedness, and peace. I call this type of dance experience somatic praxis. Within somatic praxis four operational definitions can be named. Somatic culture: “the total sum of ways of living” that advocate for the integration of mind, body, and spirit, “built up by a group of human beings transmitted from one generation to the next” (“culture”). Somatic performance: “the act of performing a ceremony,” or dance in which the content of the performance encourages holistic integration of performers and witnesses (“performance”). Somatic healing: “to make healthy, whole, or sound; restore to health; free from ailment” by mending the disparities between body, mind, and spirit that cause numbness and pain (“healing”). And somatic pedagogy: “the principles, or practice of teaching” that impart wellbeing of the full self to students (“pedagogy”). Though all of these somatic terms interact and intertwine with one another, as I analyze somatic dance praxis in this work, these definitions will help to describe the specific facets of the case studies.

Hanna's concept of the "living body", which is fundamental to somatic theory, must be understood as distinct from the objective body. It is from within the "living body" that we gain a first-person understanding of human experience. Hanna writes: "Humans are self-sensing, self-moving subjects while, at the same time, they are observable and manipulatable objects" (Hanna 1988, 20). The possibility of dual existence described by Hanna sets up the major binary of my work: As beings who can live with dynamic subjectivity or inanimate objectivity, how can we acknowledge and nurture the knowledge of the living body while operating within a culture so imbued with objectification? Hanna and French philosopher Merleau-Ponty advocate the importance of cultural recognition of the body as the home of consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's 1945 *Phénoménologie de la Perception*, translated into English in 1962, philosophizes the basic phenomenology of consciousness. His work has become one of the most influential texts on embodied living because of its systematic articulation of the entire body as the home of consciousness. In his discussion of motility as the premise for life he states: "These elucidations enable us clearly to understand motility as basic intentionality. Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can'... Consciousness is being-towards-the-thing through the intermediary of the body" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 137-138). Merleau-Ponty asserts that the body locates us in the world, and houses our intention and ability to navigate through the world, and therefore is our means of conscious life. From this proposal of motility as consciousness, it becomes clear why dance, as an art form based on intentioned moving bodies through space, can be a fertile site of exploration into human existence.

Though somatic awareness may focus on the inner living body, the self does not exist in a vacuum: “I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but on the contrary, by being this body and this situation and through them, all the rest” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 452). This work will explore the features of a somatic experience within the living body, but also how the somatic praxis of the body is inherently culturally constructed. Cynthia Novak, one of the seminal contemporary dance scholars explains in her 1990 book *Sharing the Dance: An Ethnography of Contact Improvisation* how she understands bodies, and particularly dancing bodies to be representative of culture:

The body and movement are not purely natural phenomena but are constructed, in concept and practice...Culture is embodied...A primary means of understanding, knowing, making sense of the world comes through the movement experiences society offers to us. Movement constitutes an ever-present reality in which we constantly participate. We perform movement, invent it, interpret it, and reinterpret it, on conscious and unconscious levels. In these actions, we participate in and reinforce culture, and we also create it. To the degree that we can grasp the nature of our experience of movement, both the movement itself and the contexts in which it occurs, we learn more about who we are and about the possibilities for knowingly shaping our lives (Novack 1990, 9).

If “movement constitutes reality”, as Novak suggests, what is the United States reality created by movement? In Chapter One of this work I carefully consider this question taking into account the affects of capitalism and discrimination upon the somatic body and its possibility for movement. Americans take great pride in being hard workers fighting to stay at the top of the world economy, therefore it is the movement (or stillness) of work that majorly defines the bodily vocabulary of the United States. Equally important as what is the dominant cultural movement, is who are the dominant performers of the movement? In the United States the most wealthy, successful, and understood therefore to be the most hard working are white

heterosexual men. However, this group is not commonly associated with physical work movements in modern times. Instead, vigorous movements of the body in work and play are associated with women and racial minorities. For example, although the lavish lifestyle that cotton plantations offered American whites was considered desirable, to actually do the manual labor that produced the lifestyle was not worthy of white Americans. African people were stripped of their freedom and shipped to the United States to do the movements of work for wealthy whites. It is this point of deconstruction that reveals that though hard work is valued in dominant American culture, physical engagement with the modern body is not. Therefore movement is not a respected part of dominant United States cultural reality, but is looked down upon as an activity to be carried out by the subservient. As the actions of the body are seen as inferior, the body itself is dubbed inferior. Through my research of somatic cultural praxes in this work, I make a case for the powers, intelligence, agency of the free somatic body, as well as for the invaluable movements that it is capable. I also discuss how women and African-Americans reclaim their bodies from negative associations with the objectified body through their subversive somatic movement praxes.

It is important to recognize that American cultural movement vocabulary is not confined only to the motions work. As human beings in physical bodies, motility, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, allows us to navigate the world. In protest to the objectification that riddles much of capitalist labor, a person can bring somatic awareness into all the of their daily movements. Somatic cultural praxis can be found in walking, soccer practice, aikido, meditation, and building houses. Inner self-

knowledge is formed in the how we embrace our romantic partner, when we take a shower, and in the ways we fall asleep. But dance, which can be considered creative movement, in the classroom, on the stage, in the club, on the streets, and in our bedroom mirrors can be one of the most powerful forms of somatic self-investigation and self-expression. Dance ideally can offer the intentioned mover agency, freedom and self-knowledge (Fraleigh 1993, 102-111). Because of the art form's powerful ability to connect mind, body, and spirit, this work will track the somatic cultural praxis in the United States with emphasis on its dance tradition.

I specifically study somatic cultural praxis as it manifests within American modern and postmodern dance and African-American social dance in Chapters Two, Three, and Four. In order to contextualize my case studies, in Chapter One I explore the history and theory of embodiment in the United States that influenced the creation of the somatic cultural praxes. By investigating the role of the body in the United States as the object of labor, sexism, racism, and the subject of somatic dance praxes, I hope to bring light to the powerful knowledge that exists within the living body, and the widespread consequences of objectification. The somatic cultural, performative, healing and pedagogical praxes of modern and postmodern dance and African-American social dance offer valuable examples of how inner self-awareness can help us as humans be more healthy, understanding, and appreciative of our bodies, communities and environments. Though these dance genres are not distinctly isolated from each other, for the purpose of this work, I am interested in identifying the cultural construction that makes each of these dance forms unique. In the conclusion of this paper, I discuss how the pedagogical overlap of modern and postmodern

dance and African-American social dance can create more space for students, performers, and dance makers to experience deep somatic awareness. I examine how my practice as a dance educator strives to combine the somatic wisdoms of the dancing communities that have influenced me to make somatic education and healing more accessible to the public at large.

In the following sections of this introduction, I lay some of the theoretical and practical groundwork for the somatic discourse as to introduce the reader to my point of view to be developed in the rest of the work.

### **The Reality of Segmentation**

To a western reader the holistic paradigm of the self may seem disconnected from lived experience. With the constant bombardment of information on a walk down a city street, to be fully in touch with our minds, bodies, and spirits in all moments could lead to an overwhelmed collapse. We have been trained to dull our somatic sensors, so that we can successfully navigate the demanding environments that surround us. Furthermore, most days that we spend at our jobs and at school are dominated by intellectual priorities. Our minds do most of the work, get the most attention, and are in charge of most of decisions that we make. When the body and spirit are segmented from the mind, pain, anxiety, and inner conflict surface. Our bodies ache from slumping over computers, or are hard and knotted from high tension deadlines and expectations (Hanna 1988, 49, 55). We do not usually concentrate on the ease of breathing when we have somewhere to go, or the softness of our neck muscles when we something to do. This fracture between the spirit, body and mind

was conceptualized primarily by Plato and later Descartes, which is why it is term the Platonic-Cartesian split. Plato states: “And indeed the soul reasons best when none of these senses troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in its search for reality” (Plato 1906, 14). And Descartes statement is: “Thus this self—that is, the soul by which I am what I am—is completely distinct from the body and is even easier to know than it, and even if the body did not exist the soul would still be everything that it is” (Descartes, 1999, 24-25). Both philosophers sever the soul, and the thinking self, or mind, from the body as if they exist in complete independence from one another. Platonic-Cartesian dualism has greatly influenced Western culture and enabled the prioritization of immaterial mind and soul over the material body.

Jill Green dance scholar, and Brenda Farnell, anthropologist unpack the Cartesian split and its effects on our cultural understanding of self:

Western culture creates the myth of a body/mind split. This split does not simply separate our minds from our bodies and favor the mind over body. Rather, there is an active obsession with the body as an objective, mechanical entity. However, according to these [somatic] theorists, this split removes us from the experiences of our bodies and often results in disconnecting us from our own inner proprioceptive signals from our somas as living processes (Green 2007, 1122).

Farnell elaborates,

Generally speaking, the Western model of person provides a conception of mind as the internal, nonmaterial locus of rationality, thought, language, and knowledge. In opposition to this, the body is regarded as the mechanical, sensate, material locus of irrationality and feeling...In Western academia, this bifurcation has led to valorization of spoken and written signs as “real” knowledge...(Farnell 1999,345-346).

When we reduce “real knowledge” to only that which is created by the “nonmaterial” mind, we deny that the brain is in fact a material organ and the processes of receiving, processing, and acting occur through the sensory-motor relationship between body and mind. The mind is as physical as any other part of our being. Though thoughts themselves are immaterial, they are not born from nothing. The ways in which thoughts are created is through the physical firing of neuron’s receiving information from bodily senses (Hanna 1988, xiii). Thoughts do not exist outside of the human self; they are housed like all other components of being inside the living inner body. To discredit the physical, material, and sensory capacities of the body, is to in turn discredit the functions of the mind. This bias that “real knowledge” is only a product of the mind is extremely detrimental to our cultural recognition of the holistic knowledge of the body. By ideologically simplifying the body as a “objective, mechanical entity” and treating it as such, cultural belief systems change the reality of our relationships to our bodies and the bodies of others. It is because of the Platonic-Cartesian split that segments the self into separate pieces, prioritizing the mind and discriminating against the body, that U.S. history is so plagued with oppression of the somatic body in the form of objectification. I address objectification at length in Chapter One where I discuss oppression of the somatic body in the capitalist work place, as well as a driving force of sexism and racism.

One of the major ideologies that has allowed for the such profound objectification of the body in American cultural history is that of white Protestant industrial capitalism. Embodiment is barely acknowledged in the greater public value system of the American capitalist environment. The capitalist viewpoint expresses

that each individual will only reach economic and general success through hard work.

In Max Weber's book *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism*, he looks to the sermons of Benjamin Franklin as the seeds to American capitalist ideology.

Weber analyzes Franklin's biblical inspiration:

"Seeest thou a man active *in his calling* [Beruf], he shall stand before kings"[24] Moneymaking-provided it is done legally-is, within the modern economic order, the result and the expression of diligence *in one's calling* and *this diligence* is, it is not difficult to recognize, the real alpha and omega of Franklin's morality, as we find it in the passage quoted and throughout his writings. (Original Emphasis. Weber 2002, 13).

The desire for material success has powerfully influenced this country because it historically offers economic and religious reward. All factors that could deter from *one's calling* should be canceled out. The "irrational" "feelings" associated with the body are understood as unproductive impediments to a mind set on capitalist success. The wholeness of body, mind and spirit is segmented deeming the mind the keeper of "real knowledge" as the only guide to success, and excluding the body as an agent in decision making. This segmentation allows capitalism to exhaust and harm the bodies whose only objective is to work in overdrive to achieve success. In Marx's manuscript "Estranged Labour" he states: "the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker" (Marx, "Estranged Labour"). The body becomes a causality of "success".

Concise examples of how the segmentation of capitalism has poorly affected the health of American bodies can be noted. Many American's lower backs arch forwards and chests protrude out implying confidence and preparation to meet a challenge. They are literally posed for progress. But this posture, indicative of industrial capitalism, has caused chronic lower back pain to ail "up to three-quarters

of the population over 45” (Hanna 1988, 9). On the other hand, many people’s foreheads, jaws, necks, shoulders, and stomachs clench with constant tension as a reaction to their high stress environments eventually collapsing them forward into an uncomfortable hunch portraying fear (Hanna 1988, 49). Capitalism not only effects the laboring body, but the aesthetics of the sexualized body. A sexy body is one that looks as though it works hard: muscular and thin. As a result of a singular aesthetic of sexual attractiveness, many Americans do not breathe deeply into their diaphragms to keep their stomachs from bulging to create the appearance of a permanently flat stomach. This behavior brings less oxygen to the lungs, and in turn to the heart and blood. By not living within their sensing feeling bodies, capitalist Americans have bypassed their health for the sake of capitalist production and prescribed definitions of sexual attractiveness. This results in debilitating pain, collapsed older bodies, and heart problems (Hanna 1988).

Further segmentation from the body occurs because we are simply ashamed as a culture of our bodies: “Turner (1984) suggests that the Platonic-Cartesian legacy has been bolstered by the Christian distain for the flesh as a locus of corrupting appetite, sinful desire, and private irrationality (see also Bottomly 1979, Brown 1988, Bynum 1991, Onians 1954)” (Farnell 1999, 346). Andrea Olsen, in her workbook of emotional and physical wellbeing entitled, *BodyStories, An Experiential Guide to Anatomy*, continues to explain cultural “distain for the flesh”:

The lack of information about the human body in our years of education is startling since it is our home for our entire lifetime. It seems we either think that the body is too simple and too “physical” to warrant attention or that is so complex that is reserved for medical students... One is supposed to gain control over the body as soon as possible to avoid anything embarrassing or terrible in a social context... There is confusion around all digestive functions,

from eating to stomach growls to elimination, and generalized “hush” about what is going on in the organs and emotional centers of the body (Olsen 2004, 11-12).

Within the overarching capitalist economy that we all share as Americans, much harm has been done to our holistic sense of self. Dominant religious ideology, and other practices that have marked the body as the site of cultural taboo adds to the segmentation that has crippled the reputation of embodied living within American culture at large.

Against the odds, somatic praxis continues to exist in the United States in the surviving “living bodies”. In resistance to the oppressive forces of segmentation somatic cultures create a space for the integration of mind, body and spirit emancipating the body from numbness, pain, and objectification. In this work, I focus on the somatic cultural praxes created within modern and postmodern dance and African-American social dance though any person engaged in a careful breath can be a participant in somatic praxis. In the following section I provide a basic description for how a body may feel and look within the somatic experience pursued by holistic praxes. This description can act as reference point for the complexities of experience discussed throughout the rest of work.

It should be noted that this thesis paper as a written document is primarily an intellectual product of my mind, and therefore a segmented product of myself. In this next section, and in others I have asked myself, “What is the essence of somatic writing?” and proceeded to write from this voice.

### **The Somatic Imprint upon the Body**

Let us remember that somatic knowledge is holistic knowledge. It is not the practice of tenderly attending to one part of the self and disregarding the remaining pieces. A misconception of the term somatic is that it only applies the physical body, but it truly encompasses all the experiences of existence that occur within the home of the body. Sondra Horton Fraleigh writes, “‘Holism’[or somatic integration] is the theory that whole entities, as fundamental components of reality, have an existence other than as the mere sum of their parts” (Fraleigh 2004, 64). However, when we do begin to consider the entirety of self, we loudly hear the voices of the parts that have been so adamantly silenced by our Western lifestyles. The body becomes a great focus of somatic practice because we need to begin to cultivate intimacy and trust in the relationship we have to our bodies that we have already overly developed with our minds. The spiritual self is the last piece to be incorporated into our reintegration because the ontology of the spirit has been represented to be the most different from the systematic factual mind. Hegel, offers a definition of the spirit which I would like to take up for this work: “Spirit, being the *substance* and the universal, self-identical, and abiding essence, is the unmoved solid *ground* and *starting point* for the action of all, and it is the purpose and goal, the in-itself of every self-consciousness expressed in thought...As *substance*, Spirit is unshaken righteous self-identity” (Original Emphasis. Hegel 1977, 264). What I glean from this discussion is that spirit is the starting point from which all self-conscious decisions are made. It is the essential “substance” of our self-identity. Notice that Hegel does not describe the spirit as immaterial, like Plato and Descartes, but instead emphasizes that it is a physical

“substantial” part of our being. Once we are reintroduced to this concept we realize the spirit has been within our minds and bodies all along.

To be within a somatic moment is a rich and human experience of emancipation; freedom from segmented living, pain, blockage, judgment, objectification, and oppression. It cycles in a pattern of self-awareness, self-identification, and self-expansion. First we become at once aware of the smallest details and changes of our being as well as a wider understanding of the self located in the human and nonhuman environment. From this state of awareness we can take in full sensation of the inner life systems working within our bodies, of our emotional landscape, and of our thoughts, which allow us to admire their curves and pathways, instead of pushing us into productivity. This awareness allows for us to experience a whole self that can be located with distinction within a place. We feel a detailed connection to the place, the land, the building, the people that surround us. We are able to acknowledge their presence with as much lushness as we are acknowledging our own.

In order to be in such a heightened state of awareness, the senses, from which all information is filtering through to allow for such careful immediate knowing, feel as though they are operating at their climax. We can see the pores in our skin and we can see the sky. We can hear the breath, we can smell the sweat of our body and the bodies around us, we can touch the hair on a partner’s arm, and we can feel with clarity what it is to move within our own unique subjective body.

What we are able to distinguish through the highways of our senses are the particularities of the our present self. We are able to identify tension, pain, flow, and

glory in our body. We are able to locate the sites of strength and weakness. We are able to feel the wellbeing of our digestive system, circulatory system, and respiratory system.

The next impulse within somatic experience is to take action with this new information. By connecting so fully with human existence, we are moved to respond and express our findings. This response is self-expansion.

The somatic experience can be perceived by an onlooker at this moment of release of the self. Radiating from the self out into the world, the somatic release can take many forms. One release is the release of tension, pain, and blockage. This is a soft, gentle collapse in which the self spreads slowly until all the fluid self has settled. Release also can be bursting out, where the body is racked with directed tension. This is a powerful pushing out and away bringing heat and circulation to the surrounding environment. Another manifestation of release is play. The self free of judgment and tension is able to explore with pleasure the possibilities of their creative somatic self in space. In all of these manifestations of release, the aura around the self expands into the world. Somatic experiences allow us to connect to larger portions of our inner self and outer surroundings. As we release the internal self out into the world through movement our inner knowledge manifests into embodied experience that others can witness. Dancing as a whole being, we are able to discover the meaning of our presence in the outer world:

Such moments provide the basis for a certain kind of self-knowledge, immediately perceived knowledge, an awareness that can nevertheless be described as something known by the dancer through experience. The self known in dance is the self perceived through kinesthetic flow with respect to intent, the self present in the immediate environment, the self orientated in the present time, or the “ecological self” (Fraleigh 1993, 104).

A somatic experience feels and looks like moment of self-significance.

In the following section I elaborate on how the dancing somatic experience can become praxis.

### **Dance as a site of Somatic Praxis**

Dance as an art form is conducive to the somatic experience because it can encourage the participant to engage with the living body through movement.

Dancing with intention and presence, with a nurturing focus on the self enables self-realization, self-healing, and self-expression. Sondra Horton Fraleigh in her essay “Good Intentions and Dancing Moments: Agency, Freedom, and Self-Knowledge in Dance”, writes about the moment when dance movements become embodied and lead to self-knowing:

Finally, I feel free in them. In other words, I embody the motion. When I make a movement truly mine, I embody it. And in this, I experience what I would like to call “pure presence”, a radiant power of feeling completely present to myself and connected to the world. This could also be described in other ways, but I think dancing moment can be named. These are those moments when our intentions toward dance are realized (Fraleigh 1993, 103). Though all dance has the possibility for the somatic emancipation described by

Fraleigh, many forms continue to replicate the segmentation and objectification of the body that is found in oppressive capitalist culture. Only the forms that create emancipatory experiences for participants and witnesses can be included in somatic dance praxis. Within pockets of modern and postmodern dance and African-American social dance somatic culture, performance, healing, and pedagogy can be found.

In the chapters to follow I will discuss how each of these forms have created a unique somatic praxis. I focus on how the historical context of socio-economics, gender, and race have informed the creation of somatic praxes as a form of dancing resistance against forces that oppress the holistic living body. The somatic cultural praxis of modern and postmodern dance claims the dancing body as one of self-defined self-expression, in which the segmented demands of ballet could be replaced by real weight, real time, and real movements from pedestrian life. These somatic Western dance styles pursue tension free, holistic, presence through movement.

From the origins of African-American social dance, dancing enabled African slaves to resist the somatic oppression of white slave masters. The dances became living archives of African culture threatened by slave owners. Dancing was always considered dangerous by slave owners because it brought many slaves together partaking in energetically powerful movement:

Yet slaveholders were well aware that dance could function as a form of social intercourse, cultural expression, assimilation mechanism, and political expression. Because it was a means of solidifying the slave community, dance could threaten white dominance. Indeed, slaves used dance to camouflage insurrectionary activity (Hazard-Gordon 1990, 22). Dance provided enslaved bodies with the moments of embodied freedom discussed by Fraleigh. African-American social dance today continues to resist oppression in its physical loudness, full-bodiedness, and exploding power. Improvisation is highly valued in African-American social dance as a way of composing movement. This type of dancing ‘on the fly’ calls for deep self-knowing and inner listening in order to perform at individualized peak ability. As a dance form motivated by embodied

freedom and individual self-knowledge, African-American social dance is an excellent example of somatic cultural praxis.

In the concluding sections of this introduction I offer a brief description of the values of modern and postmodern dance and African-American social dance to give context to unfamiliar readers. I also address how each dance form can be susceptible to fear and weakness. It is important to hold dance traditions accountable for their influence on culture, and also grant them the understanding that dance communities suffer from oppressive social structures that have the power to corrupt. Within these basic descriptions I begin to further discuss how these forms enact somatic cultural praxis, but I will go into great detail on this topic in Chapters Two, Three, and Four.

### **Artistic and Social Project of American Modern and Postmodern Dance**

The modern dance tradition is categorized by the twentieth century fissure in the Western dance landscape previously dominated by the rigid movement vocabulary and social structure of classical ballet. Somatic methodologies like Feldenkrais Method and Alexander Technique, emerged in the discourse of physical health at the same moment of modern dance, “They are both body-based forms that value the whole human being” (Mangione 1991: 27 as cited in Eddy 2009 9,10). The modern philosophical shift proposed originally by artists like Isadora Duncan and Rudolf von Laban suggested that the dancing body could perform self-expression free of tension, and in doing so pioneered new territory of expressive movement for the Western theatrical stage. To understand the somatic revolution of modern dance, we must first understand the objectifying environment of classical ballet.

Classical ballet is a movement style based upon airy ephemeral beauty achieved by training the body to employ tension to gather all weight from the ground up, transforming the body into a straight line. Mark Franko, in his essay “Writing Dance, 1573”, describes the change in Ballet history in 1573 French courts when the geometrical dance became a valued principle of choreography:

The choreographic impersonation of characters was interspersed with physical lightness and postural erectness typical of courtly social dance. Yet by dancing, the body was engaged in a process that eliminated the exhibition of an individual’s intent or personal message (Franko 2001, 191). He continues, “Each body became transformed into a point in space at the most fundamental visual level: the body loses its human resonance when it becomes a maker of geometrical position” (Franko 2001, 193). This geometrical version of visual movement philosophy continues to dominate ballet culture as does the convention that dance is made by one choreographer who is believed to have the best and most visionary understanding of the dance making. The dancing individual lost when she becomes an objective visual point in space, continues to be erased because her possible contribution as a dancer inside the actual physical experience of the dance is never acknowledged by the choreographer, audience, or even by herself. As a silent point in space, the experience of the ballet dancer is far from somatic. Her movements deny her full organic self, as does her objective role in a piece. The choreographer also denies his own somatic experience as the dance maker because he segments his own mind, body, and spirit to create dances that are merely geometrical and without the holistic collaboration of his dancing community. Today ballet companies still are organized in hierarchical systems that dance the choreography of

single person's vision, and only allow a few dancers primary roles while the others dance for aesthetic support.

Many forms of modern dance techniques also are based on tense bodies and hierarchy, but the somatic advocates within modern dance provide a counter movement striving to make dance a nurturing and explorative experience of the whole body, mind, and spirit. Different movement vocabularies developed based on a greater realm of expressivity that include release of muscular tension, a grounded sense of weight, and the use of inner knowledge as source material for choreography (Laban 1980, 4-7; Halprin 1989, 58; Novack 1990, 115). These choices for movement can inspire the full presence of self and invite the somatic experience. I consider the choreographic work of Isadora Duncan to be a prime example of the somatic cultural praxis of modern dance in the United States.

Much of the postmodern dance philosophy values risk-taking, encourages movement invention promoting new architectures of meaning. This kind of dancing has been understood as postmodern because the artists consider truth to be discovered from many of point of views. They believe "all knowledge is constructed and value-laden" and therefore all knowledge expressed by the body through movement can be culturally "constructed and value-laden" (Green 2007, 1125). Postmodernism as a concept has the potential to be somatically inclusive. One way in which the postmodern dance community enacts their concept that knowledge equally is derived from all things is by participating in collaborative dance making with a community of artistic peers. Dancers and choreographers, musicians, and designers all actively participate in creating a piece, which adds to a greater sense of group ownership of

the work produced. One model of collaboration has the performers make the movements that are to be performed, instead of having the choreographer be the only generating body to which all other bodies must conform. Postmodern dance collaborators operate under the assumption that if a dancer performs movements conceived and physicalized by her own body, the movements will be injected with more personal significance and deep understanding. This profound connection between mover and performed movement makes for more powerful and communicative dance. The job of the choreographer is to facilitate the movement making, assist in composing the movements together, and in many cases the original source material for the dance is the vision of the choreographer (Kolcio, Composition II). This model of collaboration nurtures a healing experience for the dancers and choreographers because they are encouraged to connect deeply with their inner selves and share through their art form. This type of release enables a somatic experience. Besides somatic principles being folded into the experimental modern and postmodern traditions, health and wellbeing are also explicitly articulated in the classroom and in the dance making process. Toes are not deformed from dancing on pointe, bodies are encouraged to be the healthy weight for each dancer, and class and rehearsal can offer a place to regenerate and release. Whereas some dance forms ask the body to continually move at a peak of virtuosic intensity, the somatic postmodern praxis considers a dancer resting, slowly rolling on the floor, or barely moving at all to have just as much potential as leaps, kicks, and turns (Eddy 2003, 23). This regard for all the possibilities of the moving self to be nurtured and supported further connects postmodern dance tradition to somatic praxis. As primary case studies of

postmodern dance participating in the elements of somatic praxis mentioned above, I explore the work of Anna Halprin, and Contact Improvisation.

One of the fears of the modern and postmodern dance community is that Western dance audiences who are accustomed to watching ballet, or highly virtuosic modern dance companies, will not be able to appreciate or understand the validity and skill of release, pedestrian movements, speaking while dancing, following the spiral pathways through the body, or proposals of absurdity (Banes 1980, 16). These fears culminate into the modern/postmodern community not always practicing their somatic philosophies of democratic collaboration, health, and self-acceptance in order to claim space in the competitive dance world. The failures and successes of the modern and postmodern dance tradition to engage in somatic praxis will be further discussed in Chapters Two and Three.

### **Artistic and Social Project of African-American Social Dance**

African-American social dance forms do not conventionally perform in concert settings, like the modern/postmodern tradition. Another large difference, is that these forms' represent the cultural work of low income African-Americans. The modern and postmodern traditions on the other hand are dominated by Euro-Americans. African-American social dances primarily take place in communal social spaces, like church, the night club, and the house party. African-American social dance forms began to establish a recognizable coherence during the era of slavery. Hazzard-Gordon in her essay, "African-American Vernacular Dance: Core Cultures and Meaning Operatives", asserts that African-American vernacular dances embody

“identity, cultural integrity, ingroup-outgroup, and political resistance...The dance is imbued with individual, sociopsychological, cultural, and political meaning” (Hazzard-Gordon 1985, 428, 441). She cites Malcom X’s value of African-American dance in identity politics: “I’d also acquired all the other fashionable ghetto adornments—the zoot suits and conk that I have described, liquor, cigarettes, then reefers—all to erase my embarrassing background. But I still harbored one secret humiliation: I could not dance” (Hazzard-Gordon 1985, 430). Here Malcom X attests that an important part of participating in black culture is to know how to dance, and dance well. She proposes: “Dance becomes a litmus test for cultural identity” (Hazzard Gordon 1985, 431). She later quotes an interview with Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*, who maintains that his dancing protects his integrity as a black man, and as a part of the in crowd: “Part of my pride in being what I am is that as a dancer, as a physical man...I bet you I can outdance, outriff most of those intellectuals who’re supposed to have come back” (Hazzard-Gordon 1985, 433). The dances themselves are formulated alongside current musical concepts, both of which reflect the current cultural environment. Beginning with African slavery and continuing through the Civil Rights Movement, into today’s black ghettos, historically the African-American in the United States has been under constant oppression (Lui, 2006). The cultural embodiment therefore within these dance forms is the story of the resistance against that oppression.

An important way in which African-American social dance resisted racist oppression was by protecting Africanist aesthetic from elimination. Some of these Africanist characteristics include: the power of youthful vital dancing, “getting-

down”, dancing with polyrhythm, showing off, call-and-response structure, and always performing with an air of coolness (Thompson 1974, 1-45). Many of these features of African dance remain highly present in many African-American social dance forms have been constructed by cultural values in a somatic relation to self, community, and the earth. For example coolness is described as a state of deep presence and ownership of the body, “In Africa coolness is an all-embracing positive attribute which combines notions of composure, silence, vitality, healing, and social purification” (Thompson 1974, 43). We see clearly the somatic experience is deeply ingrained in African and African-American coolness, as a state of intentioned embodiment.

Another somatic value of African-American vernacular dance is improvisation:

Marshal and Jean Sterns explain that dance in the African diaspora “places great importance upon improvisation, satirical and otherwise, allowing freedom for individual expression; this characteristic makes for flexibility and aids the evolution and diffusion of other African characteristics” (1968, 15), Jacqui Malone notes that black vernacular dancing is “an additive process...a way of experimenting with new ideas: that mindset is Africa’s most important contribution to the Western Hemisphere” (1996, 33) (Jackson 2001, 40).

Improvisation encourages presence, self knowing, and clear connection between mind and body in order to perform in a dancing moment. In the reality of African-American oppression, the somatic self has been both maimed and attuned. Adaptability and instantaneous response demand somatic self-understanding and alertness. Through improvisation, African-American social dancers take great advantage of the moments that can provide emancipation of the body. When the moment comes, the dancer must cease it. The constructs of a improvisational life

have lead to the improvisational African-American social dance creating a permanent niche for somatic awareness.

Improvisational contexts allow for African-American social dances to have minimal if no cost to learn, and perform. They are part of the cultural trade and cultural identity. They happen whenever and with whom ever is around for a dancing moment. The dances foster space for community interaction through physicality, relaxation, spirituality, and recreation. They act as a release of pent up energy, aggression, and emotion which is a crucial element of somatic experience (Hazzard Gordon 1999). As prime examples of somatic praxis demonstrated by African-American social dance I have chosen the Ring Shout and Underground-House dancing for their dedication to release, freedom, wholeness, and the connected individual. However, not all African-American social dances uphold pure somatic principles. Many are fraught by the oppressive forces of sexism, discrimination, and other damaging behaviors to the body.

The major fear of the African-American vernacular dancing community is cultural appropriation of their dances into the white U.S. mainstream.

The primary effect of such cultural appropriation is the denial of the dancing's traditional cultural context and a misnaming of the ways in which the dancing evolves by the people who originate the traditions. Other effects include devaluation of the dancing as "low culture" (or as fads) and the concomitant rejection of rich cultural meaning and aesthetic intelligence" (Jackson 2001, 42).

Appropriation is subjective. A dance can be appropriated as a harmful action as stated above, or it can be shared and germinate in the larger U.S. culture in the flow of information over time. The underlying fear of this form is racism against African-Americans. Throughout history African-Americans dance has been feared by white

authorities because of its communal energetic force. Drums have been confiscated, dancing has been outlawed, jook joints have been broken up, and competitive street forms have been considered violent and unacceptable (Hazzard-Gordon 1990). The major fear of African-American social dancers is that white supremacy will appropriate their dances and diminish their power as a means of resistance.

Other fears of the African-American social dance community include fear that the negative elements within the environment will surpass the virtues. Degradation of women as sexual objects, violence, greed and substance abuse put the cultural integrity and social resistance at risk of collapse. African-American social dance forms are entrenched in their cultural environments meaning that the somatic praxis can suffer deeply when the forces of hierarchy, abuse, and numbness become dominate. In Chapter Four I will elaborate in detail on the strengths and weakness of the somatic cultural praxis of African-American social dance.

Described above are the ways in which these two dance forms function within and inform the cultures in which they operate . The body of this paper deciphers how these forms cultivate a strong sense of self-awareness through somatic cultural praxis. Each group performs somatic knowledge through different embodiments and attains self-knowledge through different pedagogies. At points the somatic practices will overlap, depart, support, and silence each other. In the final chapter of this work, I discuss what I have learned from the wisdoms and limitations of both somatic cultural praxes in order to imagine and practice a more accessible somatic pedagogy of the future.

The following chapter offers a discussion of the theory of the somatic history in the United States in order piece together the contexts of the somatic cultural praxis of modern postmodern dance and African-American social dance forms.

# Chapter One

## The Segmented Self

In this chapter, I contextualize somatic cultural praxes in modern and postmodern dance and African-American social dance. To do this, I must discuss the root causes of oppression of the body in the United States. This chapter begins by exploring the cultural ideologies and structures of oppression used to restrict life and the living body, and then it surveys how they unfold historically. I demonstrate the effect of these oppressive structures focusing particularly upon the bodies of women and African-Americans as case studies. Recognizing that sexism and racism are large forces that affect many lives in a variety of ways, for the purpose of this work, however, I want to focus on how white male supremacy as situated within a capitalist economy targets female and African-American bodies. This chapter will provide the groundwork to discuss feminist somatic cultural praxis of modern and postmodern dance, and the anti-racist somatic culture praxis of African-American social dance in the following chapters.

### **High Stakes: Somatic Engagement and Freedom**

It is important to understand somatic experience as akin to the feeling of emancipation in order to comprehend what is at risk when the somatic body is oppressed. Freedom is attained when the self is in full control of his or her own person. This control or ownership of self is cultivated by a somatic praxis where in a person is encouraged to listen and respond to the whole entity of mind, body, and spirit. Sondra Horton Fraleigh believes our humanity depends on our ability to heal the segmented self: “The body becomes truly human when the distinction between spirit, mind, and body disappears” (Fraleigh 2004, 28). Fraleigh understands that our freedom to pursue the full subjective human experience fulcrums on our primary freedom to embrace the unity of our inner beings. Before we can act as free agents in the world, we must understand our own intentions and dreams, the specifics of our own subjectivity. To achieve freedom of mind and body, it is crucial to examine one’s own spirit, that unique ground upon which we each build our person (Hegel 1977, 264). To know the inner self to the extent where body, mind, and spirit can coordinate in unison, is to take part in somatic being. It is in searching to know our somatic selves that we search for our own particular manifestation of freedom. But self-understanding is not a process that can occur under any conditions. Inner knowledge does not pour from a body racked with tension, short of breath, or consumed by numbness. We must feel safe enough to breathe deeply, quiet enough to locate tension, and love the self enough to release that tension in order to experience the lushness of inner sensations, and relish in our presence on the earth. If we are deprived of safety, peace, and self-respect, somatic being cannot be achieved, and in turn the body will never be free. Throughout American history the possibility

for all individuals to realize somatic being has been denied by refusing to respect the importance of the body and the bodies of others. In this chapter, I track how the exploitative nature of capitalism provoked by self-destructive greed and competition created the cultural environment enabling the somatic oppression that defines racism and sexism. I offer here some tangible examples of the consequences of oppression of the somatic being and a life without freedom.

### **Manifestations of Objectification: Segmenting the Somatic Self**

One of the most powerful means of oppression involves the process of stripping a person of her sentient powers, reducing her below her status of human being. This tactic is a direct assault upon the holistic being. By refusing to recognize a human being as a full person, citizen, or agent, members of the dominant group are capable of transforming targeted individuals into less-than-humans: objectified persons who possess only partial human rights. The processes of objectification can result in the most extreme version of segmentation between mind, body, and spirit. If the rich, complex fullness of subjectivity is severed, silenced, and disembodied, the body can be reduced to mere objective material at the disposal of an oppressor. Here, subjectivity can be understood as a somatically intact status of being, and an objectified existence as a life shut off from somatic awareness. While each group has their own interpretation of segmentation, women experience objectification in a direct relationship to their sexual bodies, and those parts that identify them as women, like breasts. Iris Marion Young, author of the essay “Throwing Like a Girl” writes about breasts as the “primary thing” of female

objectification (Young 2005, 78). Young defines an object, and a view of the female breast as such,

The object is passive, inert matter, having no self moving capacity, its movement all externally and mechanically caused. The object is what can be handled, manipulated, constructed, built up and broken down, with clear accountability of matter gained and lost...The object is what is had, owned, with clear boundaries of right. Objects are precisely countable, so that owners can keep accounts of their property. They attain their full weight as commodities, objects for exchange on the market, in a circulation of power where precise accounting of equivalents and contract is the source of locus and power (Young 2005, 78).

When female human anatomy is converted into objective inert matter to be handled, her living body is silenced. She is stripped of her dynamic inner life, which defines her as a individual subject, and of the possibility for somatic living. Her body parts become as inanimate as tennis balls. Though many women strive to cultivate self wholeness in the face of objectification by sexual oppressors, part of somatic living is connecting with one's community and environment. If that environment is one of oppressive segmentation, how can the somatic subject survive intact? When hegemonic sexual interactions reduce breasts to lifeless objects, a woman's somatic subjectivity is taken from her.

Young's definition describing the objectified female harks to another group of objectified people: African slaves. During slavery in the United States, African people were institutionally reduced to property and commodity, therefore being forced into a status of objecthood. Commodified objects, like tractors for example, have no inner life, no mind, no spirit, and no sensing body. The tractor, as a numb, dead object only serves the purpose of its owner to work the fields. By denying Africans the freedom to control their own bodies, slave masters were able to legally

severe the bodies, minds and spirits of their slaves and replace that which makes them sentient beings with lifeless mechanistic innards of a tractor. Slavery objectified the African body into a mechanized farm worker. Life as a slave is in direct opposition to somatic being. A person must be in full use of their powers, rights, and bodily control to be constituted as a whole somatic self. The *Slavery in America* website has an archive of slave statements describing life without somatic agency and freedom. Below is the account of a slave women Silvia King, as she is thrust into her new life as an objectified body:

De ship it come to dis country to New Orleans. Dar I wuz put on de block an' sold. All de blacks wuz chained an' all deir close wuz ripped off w'en dey wuz gittin' 'em ready fer de block. Dey all--chillun, women, an' men--had ter stan' on a big wooden block, lak de butcher chops an' saws his meat on now-a-days. De folks what wuz gwine ter buy de slaves, dey come 'roun' an' pinch you, an' feel your body all ober, an' look fer scars an' sees you got any broken bones 'fore dey buy you. Effen any ob de slaves don' want ter take deir close off, de oberseer he git a long, black whip an' cut 'em up hard ("Slavery in America").

Silvia King explains how slave traders implemented their tactics of oppressive segmentation by treating their bodies as if they were merely "meat". In order to reconstitute a human body as meat, as carnal physical matter, all intelligence, creativity, free thinking, and self-control must be extracted. To be meat, is to lie dead and still until a outside agent purchases and moves the object to serve his purpose. A slave can be a mechanistic tractor, or a lifeless hunk of meat, but the slave is not a free and somatic human being. Without the powers to act in the interest of their own wellbeing, slaves were forced in many parts of their lives to forgo somatic life, and endure objectification. The segmentation carried out upon the somas of the peoples of African descent during the era of American Slavery is one of the most horrific examples of objectification in our history. Though slavery itself was abolished, the

legacy of such bodily harm lives on today in American society toward all minorities, women, new immigrants, and the poor. The effects of objectification and segmentation are strongly experienced in the embodied lives of women and African-Americans. However, sexism and racism are the visible manifestations of deeper underlying causes. Where does our impulse to oppress the somatic wholeness of the bodies of others and even our own bodies come from? And how did this instinct against somatic living take root in early American culture in order to spawn the enslavement of Africans and the oppression of women?

### **The Death Instinct**

Sigmund Freud, the seminal psychologist who forever changed how the human psyche would be understood in the West, put forth his controversial concept of the “death instinct” in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud 1950, 51):. In this small yet groundbreaking work, Freud offered that all acts against the wellbeing of the body are inspired by the “death instinct”:

“The hypothesis of self-preservative instincts, such as we attribute to all living beings, stands in marked opposition to the idea that instinctual life as a whole serves to bring about death. Seen in this light the theoretical importance of the instincts of self-preservation, of self-assertion and of mastery are greatly diminished. They are component instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death, and to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself” (Freud 1950, 51).

Freud proposes that working in tandem with our instinct to pursue life, is our instinct to insure that we die. Freud claims that the life instinct and the death instincts are innate within all organisms; their influence manifests in all of the choices we make in

the world. Each instinct encourages beings to attain power and control over their destinies. The life instinct, or somatic instinct supports choices that nurture the holistic self and acknowledge the sensational intelligence of the body. The life instinct is that inner voice that promotes restorative practices like rest, eating nutritious and delicious food, sex, and somatic self-expression in the form of art and exercise. The death instinct's definition of power and control is the opposite. To listen to the death instinct, is to understand death, the return to the inorganic, the inert, and the objectified body as the most important event in existence. This point of view encourages objectified living and numbness. When a person pursues a segmenting occupation that only utilizes one part of the his being, labors for many hours with little rest, ignores pain in the body, mind, and spirit, and rarely participates in restorative practices, he is acting primarily from his death instinct.

Freud suggests that the equal balance of these two instincts is "vital" to all organisms:

"According to E. Hering's theory, two kinds of processes are constantly at work in living substance, operation in contrary directions, one constructive or assimilatory and the other destructive or dissimilatory. May we venture to recognize in these two directions taken by the vital processes the activity of our two instinctual impulses, the life instincts and the death instincts?" (Freud 1950, 67)

If humans only listened to our life instinct, we would ever do anything that did not nurture our somatic beings, and in modern societal structures this could mean that not enough work would be accomplished. However, if we only listened to our death instinct, society would be fraught with sick and twisted bodies insensitive to one another that would find more comfort in the numbness of death than in the sensations of living. The balance of the instincts is essential for survival in the modern Western

world. But the balance has indeed been disrupted. The people of the United States are not a well rested, well fed, content, safe, and present. The majority of people in the U.S. are stressed, malnourished, over-worked, unsatisfied, and would rather not be present in their body, mind, and spirit or compassionate to others in fear of under productivity.

The death instinct explains psychologically how segmentation and objectification came to be enacted in our lives. Freud's theory of the death instinct accounts for the possibility of the objectifying behavior against women and African-Americans. But what forces actually perpetuated the death instinct in order to disrupt the balance of life and death, somatic and objectified so drastically? The reality is that we have been culturally indoctrinated to greatly decrease the volume of our life instinct originally by Platonic-Cartesian dualism which separates the mind and dismisses body, colonization, and more recently by our modern capitalist market. The modern United States capitalist drive for material success is the loudest ideological advocate for the death instinct in today's culture. By prioritizing productivity and monetary gain, the death instinct takes over unchecked by the suppressed life instinct to convert living breathing sensing beings into numb objects of the market.

### **Capitalism: A Force of Segmentation and Objectification**

With the death instinct's potential havoc inside of all organisms, it is the specific cultural beliefs of the United States that spread segmentation and objectification into mass phenomena. The forces of modern capitalism enabled the

death instinct to escape the confines of the singular organism making it possible for the objectified individual to objectify others, otherwise known as the cycle of oppression. The goals, lifestyle, and culture created by capitalism can be found guilty of instigating oppression of the somatic body. In order to understand the somatic oppression of sexism and racism in the United States, we must first consider capitalist ideology as the overarching social structure proliferating oppression of the body. For theoretical support, I look to Max Weber's study of capitalism in the United States, *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*, to historically trace how the phenomenon of objectification in United States came to be.

From its inception, the United States has founded its identity on the capitalist motto of self-interest. Because capitalism is one of the most predominant ideologies in American discourse, to understand the trajectory of self-interest in the United States, is to understand the ideological roots of slavery and sexism. Weber uses Benjamin Franklin's call to duty to work hard to explain this early Christian white wealthy American mindset:

The idea, so familiar to us today and yet in reality far from obvious, that one's duty consists in pursuing one's calling [Berufspflicht], and that the individual should have a commitment to his "professional" [beruflichen] activity, whatever it may consist of, irrespective of whether it appears to the detached observer as nothing but utilization of his labor or even of his property (as "capital"), this idea is a characteristic feature of the "social ethic" of capitalist culture. Indeed, in a certain sense it constitutes an essential element (Weber 2002, 13).

Weber states that within the capitalist culture it is our human right as free citizens to work for our own profit. Theoretically, the right to be in control of one's own person, as well as the right to nurture, heal, and respect the self put capitalist values in line

with somatic philosophy. Somatic philosophy is also based on self-interest, in the context of self-value, self-respect, and freedom. But this essential “social ethic” of capitalism has become corrupt pitting it against somatic praxis. Modern workers within a capitalist structure have been denied the right to their own bodily energies to care for themselves making it impossible to fulfill the somatic definition of self-interest. Forceful examples like slavery in which all rights to the profits of one’s labor are revoked, and in less extreme examples like the exploitation of a factory worker, demonstrate the corruption upon the social ethic to the rights of one’s own labor. The outcome of this manipulated “social ethic” are objectified beings who have lost their agency, self-value, and somatic subjectivity. But what has caused this corruption in the capitalist system?

Weber describes how capitalism is supposed to work in favor of the somatic self by promoting self-care of the individual- that self-growth is our American duty-, but Weber also admits how capitalism has in fact developed into a force that hinders somatic being. In his famous critique, Weber writes of the modern day capitalist not as a free human, but as born inside of an “immutable shell”:

Today’s capitalist economic order is a monstrous cosmos, into which the individual is born and which in practice is for him, at least, as an individual, simply given an immutable shell [Gehäuse], in which he is obliged to live. It forces on the individual, to the extent that he is caught up in relationships of “market,” the norms of its economic activity. The manufacturer who consistently defies these norms will just as surely be forced out business as the worker who cannot or will not conform will be thrown out of work (Weber 2002, 13).

The immutable shell has been translated by other scholars as the “iron cage” upon the capitalist body. Translators Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells offer an explanation for their choice to use “immutable shell”:

We were guided in this choice by the thought that a shell has an organic quality and symbolizes something that has not just been externally imposed but has become integral to human existence. Whereas a cage confines human agents but leaves their powers otherwise intact, a shell suggests that modern capitalism has created a new kind of being (Baehr; Wells as quoted in Weber 2002, lxxi).

This “new kind of being” in fact is a being that is not whole. The organic shell of the capitalist economic system is indeed an encasement created by man that restricts the ability of his holistic self to care for his whole being. It is because we have transformed our economy from a market that promotes a balanced psyche to an “immutable shell” that stops us from protesting unjust norms that prevent the success of each and every individual. Instead of pursuing self-growth, we have forgotten our whole, dynamic, integrated selves in order to serve the economy.

The economy, though man-made, is without senses and unmoving. It is designed not to understand the hardships of those inside of it, nor is it malleable to individual needs. The shell of the economy that capitalists wear on their backs has the capacity to trap somatic impulses to nurture the body, spiritual life, and intellectual interests, and let only the ability to stimulate the economy remain free to grow. This lifeless, immutable shell of a market, without conscience, compassion, agency or freedom sets the tone for all the people who exist under it.

Individuals with more resources, wealth, status, race, legacy, are able to take the call to duty of the corrupted economy to the furthest extreme. The elite are capable of getting the most of out the capitalist economy because they are able to put

more resources into it. But one must remember that there is no concept of satisfaction or total success within capitalism. The call of duty to work hard will forever grind on. Throughout history the powerful and successful have dedicated their lives to attain more power and success. This full dedication to work itself is not a dedication to nurturing the wholeness of self, community, and environment. The process of segmentation is at work even at the top of the hierarchy.

When one's duty to profit becomes the only goal in life, the self segments into a prioritized money making mind, and a silenced body and spirit. These CEOs, bosses, and business moguls start the domino effect of segmented beings. The mega-mind CEO has the power to exploit the people with fewer resources below him to help him achieve more success. When the money making mind is the only voice directing a person of power, his ability to be compassionate and caring towards others is blocked by denying the voices and emotions of the body and spirit. With all inner guides silenced except for the voice of self-interest, the CEO sees it in his best interest to create a workforce to help him achieve high profits. The most effective worker is a worker who has no complaints about spending most, if not all, of his energy on the profit of his employer. And so the process of segmentation is implemented further, but not in the image of the mega-mind CEO because more isolated minds would pose competition. What is desired is the compliant purely physical body of the worker with no power to pursue his own self-interest. The lifeless market encases the CEO and the worker forcing both to submit to an existence which denies them life as whole humans. The capitalist shell provokes the process of segmentation remaking man into a "deformed object" (Marx "Estranged Labour").

Karl Marx most famously describes how humans are maimed by capitalism. In his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes on “Estranged Labor.” His theory of estranged labor is that capitalist lifestyle collapses the laborer into a mutation that is different from himself:

This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces – labor’s product – confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labor is labor which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the *objectification* of labor. Labor’s realization is its objectification (Original Emphasis. Marx, “Estranged Labour”).

Capitalist labor creates objectification of its people. When we spend the entirety of our time and faculties on the creation of a commodified object, our subjectivity is drained into the object we produce. From the point of view of the mega-mind CEO, this transformation is desirable. Without the subjective somatic awareness informing the worker that he or she is not in a nurturing environment that must be protested, the CEO is able to treat the worker however he wants. To become an object is to become numb and silent.

Marx continues with his argument of objectification:

So much does the labor’s realization appear as loss of realization that the worker loses realization to the point of starving to death. So much does objectification appear as loss of the object that the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for his life but for his work. Indeed, labor itself becomes an object which he can obtain only with the greatest effort and with the most irregular interruptions. So much does the appropriation of the object appear as estrangement that the more objects the worker produces the less he can possess and the more he falls under the sway of his product, capital (Marx, “Estranged Labour”).

Here Marx speaks directly to the somatic body under the grasp of capitalist production. When the body is starving for rest, recreation, and bodily pleasure in the

forms of sex, dance, and other physical activities that restore one's somatic wellbeing, the self-knowing body's sensors become numb and fail to pursue wellbeing. Under a regime of objectification, the somatic self of agency, vitality, and care is completely diminished. Marx believes,

(...the estrangement of the worker in his object is expressed thus:...the better formed his product, the more deformed becomes the worker; the more civilized his object, the more barbarous becomes the worker; the more powerful labor becomes, the more powerless becomes the worker...) (Marx, "Estranged Labour").

In effect, the laborer forgoes all positive constructions of self, and loses contact with his body and his somatic being. He or she is left "starving", "deformed", "impoverished", "valueless", and "objectified". These harmful defects to the body can be understood as devolving in Darwinian terms.

As Darwin explained his theory of Natural Selection, in *On the Origin of Species*, evolution takes place when an individual is able to survive because they take advantage of their full unique subjectivity. When we are free to live to our fullest to succeed in "the struggle to survive" it is because an individual is capable of pursuing their full somatic potential: "This preservation of favorable variations and the rejection of injurious variations, I call Natural Selection" (Darwin, "On Origins the Origin of Species, Chapter 4"). Darwin ends his chapter on "The Struggle for Survival" as if he were the first somatic scientific methodologist, advocating for a life of wellbeing. He states "that the vigorous, the healthy, and the happy survive and multiply (Darwin, "On the Origins of Species, Chapter 3"). Therefore, when the worker continues to deny his personal subjective capabilities and his "favorable variations", he is forced to pursue a life of "injurious variations". He is pitted against

the survival intelligence and wisdom of his body or soma, never to fulfill a “vigorous”, “happy” or “healthy” life. Instead of cultivating a balanced healthy body working in an occupation that promotes wellbeing, the choices offered to a body oppressed by poor economic opportunities and social injustice are fraught with physical, mental, and spiritual peril. The body of the economically disenfranchised becomes warped from continuous heavy lifting, blind from endless hours of weaving, and cancerous from a life inside a coal mine. Instead of pursuing individualized intellectual stimulation, the mind goes dead from hours of mechanistic repetition imposed by factory work. And instead of forging spiritual connections with the world, under conditions designed to destroy the spirit, the spirit will inevitably flicker and die.

### **Theoretical Synthesis**

Out of all the scholars mentioned above, it is Nietzsche who captures the feelings of anger, sadness, and loss that I feel after revealing the reality strangled by the segmenting and objectifying forces of the unchecked death instinct and the corrupted modern capitalist economy. In, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* written at the end of the seventeenth century, Nietzsche discusses the importance of choosing a life lived through the experience of the whole body. In the volume, Nietzsche proclaims in the form of aphorism and parable his critique of Protestant capitalism’s crusade against the body. Nietzsche confronts his opposition directly: “I want to speak to the despisers of the body. I would not have them learn and teach differently, but merely say farewell to their own bodies- and thus become silent” (Nietzsche 1954, 150).

Nietzsche's no patience attitude is refreshing. He seems to understand that if a person is over taken by Freud's death instinct, then he has become a lost cause. Nietzsche would rather dismiss this group of body despising, death obsessed individuals, then try to convert them to followers of the life instinct.

Nietzsche describes his understanding of the self-interested attitude of the "despisers of the body": "Even in your folly and contempt, you despisers of the body, you serve your self. I say unto you: your self itself wants to die and turns away from life. It is no longer capable of what it would do above all else: to create beyond itself" (Nietzsche 1954, 151). These body despisers obviously suffer from the desire to return to inorganic matter- to become dead objects. And also to be completely self-serving, like the corrupted capitalist. This point "to create beyond itself" which Nietzsche implies is a value for lovers of the body is the expression of somatic experience. A person who hates their body and would rather be numb or dead has no capacity to share her inner sensory experience with others. But a person who loves and appreciates the wisdom of their body would be inspired to share their somatic experience. For example, some dancers understood as lovers of the body, want nothing more but to live and grow in order to recreate their inner wonderment in the exterior world. To create a dance is to recreate the somatic self with enough care that it may reach beyond the self and into the world. In order for dancers to give this much energy and care to their work they must give that care to their own lives and to the wholeness of themselves.

Nietzsche sets the capitalists in direct opposition to dancers as the despisers of the body and lovers of death: "And you, too, for whom life is furious work and

unrest-are you not very weary of life? Are you not very ripe for the preaching of death?" (Nietzsche, 1954 158). Here Nietzsche's words recall Marx's understanding of the harm of the immutable shell: No rest, only work. No efforts for happiness and wellness of self and others, work only for the unending duty to pursue success. With impatience and disgust, Nietzsche sees dedication to "furious work" as a faith to death, faith to destruction of the body, faith to ending somatic consciousness. Nietzsche, by contrast, must embrace the life instinct, and join the dancers as a lover of the body because like Merleau-Ponty, he believes that the body is the home to all consciousness. His aphorisms state:

"Body am I, and soul"- thus speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children?/ But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body... There is more reason in your body than in best wisdom. And who knows why your body needs precisely your best wisdom? (Nietzsche 1954, 150-151)

Here Nietzsche speaks like a true somatic scholar. He gives power and intelligence to the body and praises its wholeness. I am moved by his poetic dedication to body. He joins with Hanna, Merleau-Ponty, Marx, and Darwin: To love the body is to love life. All somatic principles are based upon cultivating this love of life and the whole body.

With a critical eye like Nietzsche's, I will move into the next section to discuss how cultural patterns of objectification are crafted into bodies through systems of repetition and discipline. I have described the process of Weber's "immutable shell" encasing all beings under the capitalist market into the life of "starving""deformity" of Marx's objectified laborers. I have identified this phenomena's longevity accountable to Freud's death instinct "to return to the inorganic" as a somewhat addictive masochistic behavior that capitalists partake. Finally I have cited Nietzsche as a final truth sayer, as he names "the despisers of the

body” posing great threat to the vitality and survival of a happy and healthy society. In the following sections, I will go into detail on the harm done to American bodies under a regime of objectification, numbness, and death.

### **Oppression of the Somatic Female Body**

The white heterosexual male has dominated throughout American history. Gender roles developed in Europe were reestablished in the British colonies. When the Constitution, including the Bill of Rights, was drafted in 1776, it stated, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all *men* are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Emphasis added. “Declaration of Independence”). There is no mention of women in this declarative document of United States identity. From the birth of the nation, women have been considered unworthy of mention, as lesser-than men. Though this feminist argument has been stated and restated throughout United States history, I would like to call attention to the impact upon the holistic being when one’s body is institutionally denied.

In Iris Marion Young’s essay “Throwing Like a Girl”, she deconstructs why exactly a girl’s throw is weaker than a boy’s. She begins by stating that “women in sexist society are physically handicapped. Insofar as we learn to live out our existence in accordance with the definition that patriarchal culture assigns to us, we are physically inhibited, confined, positioned, and objectified” (Young 2005, 42). To understand how woman have become “handicapped” by “patriarchal culture” I will break down each of these markers that have objectified the somatic beings of women.

We have discussed economic objectification in detail in the section above, but have not yet fully unpacked sexual objectification. Sexual objectification can be manifested in institutional segregation of rights: women historically were not allowed to own property, be active members of the workforce, serve in juries, run as politicians, or attain higher education, and most importantly women were not permitted to vote. In the Declaration of Sentiments, drafted in 1848 as the first document expressing the demands of women's rights, the women insist: "Having deprived her of this first right as a citizen, the elective franchise, thereby leaving her without representation in the halls of legislation, he has oppressed her on all sides" ("Declaration of Sentiments"). All that is left is for women in patriarchal society to do is get married and have children. This singular path forced women to become the object of male sexuality.

Life goals were merely to make oneself eligible for marriage and child rearing. But within marriage the woman still did not have equal power. The Declaration of Sentiments describes how women became the objects of the men once in wedlock, "He has made her, if married, in the eye of the law, civilly dead. He has taken from her all right in property, even to the wages she earns." Further, "In the covenant of marriage, she is compelled to promise obedience to her husband, he becoming, to all intents and purposes, her master-the law giving him power to deprive her of her liberty and to administer chastisement ("Declaration of Sentiments"). There was no choice but marriage, but marriage offered women no choice. Subjectivity and somatic life are deprived when the body is diminished to an obedient sexual object.

In modern times, the concept that women are objects of sexuality has not changed, though many more opportunities are now open to women:

The source of this is that patriarchal society defines woman as object, as a mere body, and that in sexist society women are in fact frequently regarded by others as objects and mere bodies. An essential part of the situation of being a woman is that of living the ever-present possibility that one will be gazed upon as a mere body, as shape and flesh that presents itself as potential object of another subject's intentions and manipulations, rather than living as a living manifestation of action and intention (Young 2005, 44).

The "living manifestation of action and intention" can be understood as somatic engagement; a way of being in which women can never participate if they are forcefully segmented. When a woman is reduced to a "mere body," she is not encouraged to be strong-minded, spiritually connected, or least of all full of holistic "action and intention". Similar to Marx's idea that the laborer drains his subjectivity into the object he produces, the female is made into an object by a sexist society and the demeaning gaze: her subjectivity as an agent is submitted to the objectification.

The next feature of the female body's oppression as stated by Young is that women are inhibited, confined, and positioned by heterosexual male supremacy. Here again I cite the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments as a document that spells out the historical legacy of female embodiment in the United States: "He has endeavored, in every way that he could, to destroy her confidence in her own powers, to lessen her self-respect, and to make her willing to lead a dependent and abject life" ("Declaration of Sentiments"). Not only does the female somatic body have been segmented by sexual objectification, but the objectification has been powerful enough to restrict women to an inanimate life. By means of social expectations that have been drilled into women for generations, a woman is understood to be dainty, quiet, and controllable: "The girl learns actively to hamper her movements. She is told that

she must be careful not to get hurt, not to get dirty, not to tear her clothes, that the things she desires to do are dangerous for her (Young 2005, 43). Fragility is not genetic. It is cultural doctrine. Women are to be contained so that they provide their sexual service.

In “Throwing Like a Girl”, Young explains why and how it came to be that female bodies do not throw a ball with full body exertion; they only throw by moving their arm, while boys on the other hand are observed from a very young age to engage the torso, legs, as well as the arm to throw a ball (Young 2005, 27). Young explains that this is not just because girls are weaker than boys, but it is because of the social conditioning of the oppressed female body that she does not engage fully with her body:

“For the most part, girls and women are not given the opportunity to use their full bodily capacities in free and open engagement with the world, nor are they encouraged as much as boys are to develop specific bodily skills...Finally, girls are not often asked to perform tasks demanding physical effort and strength, while as the boys grow older they are asked to do so more and more” (Young 2005, 43).

Even in the simplest of physical tasks we can see how oppression of the female body has taken its toll. Segmentation is so clearly demonstrated in this example; girls only use one part of their body resulting in less powerful interaction in the world. Through body language of other women, from their parents, and from the environment of dominant men, information that surrounds girls hampers their ability to somatically connect with themselves and the world.

This less-than-whole engagement with physical activity speaks to the shutdown of the somatic self. There is a cultural lack of permission given to women to take up space, be bold and strong. This low self-confidence leads to gaps in self-

awareness because the self is not encouraged to be fully explored. Many women never find that they are just as physically, emotionally, intellectually strong, bold, and expansive as men.

They are not invited to fully engage in somatic learning because their physical selves are either too concerned with looking “pretty” or they are too shy. Young continues,

This objectified bodily existence accounts for the self-consciousness of the feminine relation to her body and resulting distance she takes from her body...The objectifying regard that “keeps her in her in her place” can also account for the spatial modality of being positioned and for why women frequently tend not to move openly, keeping their limbs closed around themselves. To open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward directedness is for a woman to invite objectification (Young 4005, 45).

The last thing that a woman wants is to “invite objectification”, so she complies with the forced relationship she has with her body, her community, and her world. The female body has become a visible maker of larger historical somatic denial. But as documents like the Declaration of Sentiments, and Young’s essay “Throwing like a Girl” provide a voice for these silenced bodies, the forces of feminism continue to fight for freedom of women’s segmented beings. One of the most prominent ways in which female bodies have experienced this liberation is within the somatic cultural praxis of modern and postmodern dance. In the next chapters I will discuss in detail how “opening their bodies freely” is the mission of the somatic modern and postmodern dance communities. As masters of the female image, the women of the modern and postmodern dance movements welcomed the challenge of objectification. Their female bodies constructed new performative identities for women that are

indeed powerful, bold, spacious, commanding, and strong achieved by engaging the full and somatic physical, mental, and spiritual self.

In the next section I will discuss the harm of racial objectification upon the segmented African-American body in order to discuss the power of somatic resistance of African-American social dance in Chapter Four.

### **Oppression of the Somatic African-American Body**

Racism, like sexism, was already imbued within American culture before the country even declared independence. The Atlantic Slave Trade was in full operation at the time of the country's birth. Africans were captured from their homes, chained, and forced to endure the passage from Africa to the United States. Slavery immediately can be understood as enslavement of the body: forced by violence into submission, and then used as an object of commerce and economic gain of the oppressor. To be beaten, chained, and enslaved forces the subjective somatic self to expire. But for what reason were the people of Africa deemed unworthy of freedom? It is as Linda Alcoff titles her book *Visible Identities*; because of the visible difference of the blackness of their skin, that black Africans were found to be different and inferior others suitable for slave labor. Fanon writes in *Black Skin, White Masks*, his poetic memoir of black experience, "I am the slave not of the "idea" that others have of me but of my own appearance" (Fanon 1967, 116). Race as a part of somatic composition of the African body was stigmatized by white Europeans, in turn the somatic being of the African stigmatized and oppressed.

Linda Alcoff's book describes the ways in which race is visually embodied. She explains in her chapter "The Phenomenology of Racial Embodiment" how racial differentiation began:

In this era, Foucault suggests, the newly emerging sciences understood knowledge primarily as a practice of ordering and classifying on the basis of essential differences... Thus labeling and mapping of conquered terrain, the naturalist classifications of the life forms of all types, and the typologies of "natural races" were all practices that enjoyed an analogical similarity and emerged in the first period of European conquest, no doubt motivated by Europeans' need to comprehend and manage their suddenly enlarging world... the application of natural history techniques to the study of the human species produced a comparative analysis "*based on visible, especially physical characteristics* [which] permit one to discern identity and difference, equality, and inequality, beauty and ugliness among animals and human bodies" (Alcoff 2006, 180).

As the colonizers, European white scientists had a subjective sense of self, meaning that all others were under objective examination. This is the origin of racism. Fanon exclaims, "Let us have the courage to say it outright: *It is the racist who creates his inferior*" (Fanon 1967, 93). Objectivity is inferior to subjectivity. Therefore in early racial construction, black is inferior to white making African slavery an acceptable practice in the eyes of white oppressors.

To further discuss the trajectory of the white supremacy rationale, white slave holders continually treated slaves as objects on as many occasions as possible. The block at which slaves were sold once they reached the United States is a clear example of the setting of objectification. I recall Young' definition of an object discussed at the opening of this chapter:

The object is what is had, owned, with clear boundaries of right. Objects are precisely countable, so that owners can keep accounts of their property. They attain their full weight as commodities, objects for exchange on the market, in

a circulation of power where precise accounting of equivalents and contract is the source of locus and power (Young 2005, 78).

On the block slaves are evaluated as if they were meat. They are put in direct comparison with dead inanimate flesh of the butcher transforming their status as human agent to something that can be exactly measured, priced, and sold. The immeasurability of the human spirit is discarded once placed on the block. One of the tactics used to further objectify African slaves was to separate them from their families, and make them breed with whomever was seen as a fit breeding partner. This solidifies the slave's identity in the power structures of the slave master as commodity, or chattel by breaking the most important interpersonal human emotional ties. In her account of losing her family Elle Belle Ramsey says:

When Mr. Inskip say dat he had got 'nough of looking at me an' my brudher an' siser an' brought a man to de jail to look us over an' see if he wanted to buy us. De man say he wouldn't buy nobody but me. He didn' want my sister an' brudher 'cause dey was too little. He needed a nurse for his chilluns an' I was de right size, so he bought me. I ain't never seen or heard from my mudher or my brudher or sister from that day to dis one. I don' know what happen to 'em. I don' even know if dey is alive or not. I don't know nothing 'bout 'em. My name is Ella Belle Ramsey (“Slavery in America”).

By isolating slaves from their families, slave holders are able to further their superiority by making slaves feel alone and less likely to struggle against their servitude. The African slave is objectified in the process of sale, displaced from all sources of comfort and support by being torn from one's family, and then reduced to chattel, the property of another. The somatic self can only exist if free in the world.

As chattel, the holistic pursuit of self and wellbeing is null. Fanon puts it:

“Consciousness of the body is solely a negative activity” (Fanon 1967, 110). White people, in hope of doing away with black positive self-esteem all together, institutionalized whiteness as superior and blackness as inferior.

In her essay “Whiteness as Property” Cheryl Harris discusses how race can be considered property:

Thus, Locke’s famous pronouncement, “every man has a ‘property’ in his own ‘person,’” undergirded the assertion that one’s physical self was one’s property. From this premise, one’s labor “the work of his hands,” combined with those things found in common to form property over which one could exercise ownership, control, and domination (Harris 1988, 111).

In the United States, whiteness is considered a very different kind of property than the property of blackness, for blackness is made into the property of white slaveholders. Blackness is considered a property of submissive objecthood dooming a black African to inferiority, whereas whiteness exists as a property of powerful subjectivity that allows a white person to act with agency and superiority in the world.

After slavery was abolished and African-Americans were given the right to vote, the status of the black body did not change in America. There had been too much serious denial of African-American personhood to suddenly consider black bodies as equal to white men’s bodies. The process of objectification continued, only now blackness was not only tied with African objectivity, but also the history of life as a slave. The inferiority of the freed slave could never catch up to the white man. Fanon describes his personal experience:

I was responsible at the same time for my body, my race, for my ancestors. I subjected myself to an objective examination, I discovered my blackness, my ethnic characteristics; and I was battered down by tom-toms, cannibalism, intellectual deficiency, fetishism, racial defects, slave-ships, and above all “Sho’ good eatin’”... On that day completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood. But I did not want this revision, this

thematization. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. (Fanon 1967, 112)  
 But equality is a difficult and still unrealized dream. Objectification is a self-perpetuating device that is hard to stop once it has begun. The objectified body can continually be repainted upon once it has been forced to lie flat. Then at a certain point the images forced upon the object begin to blur together until there is nothing distinguishable left.

At a certain point the black body begins to disappear altogether. Fanon writes of this departure: “Then assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema...I moved toward the other...and the evanescent other, hostile but not opaque, transparent, not there, disappeared” (Fanon 1967, 112). This disappearing act is the height of white supremacy’s power: to totally dominate to the point where the inferior almost doesn’t exist, except to allow the white man context for his success. This also is the highest act of oppression of the somatic being. The subjectivity of self has already been taken, but the material object now is also crumbling and fading. This disappearance was the goal of the Jim Crow laws in the South almost a hundred years after slavery was abolished. The Jim Crow Laws institutionalized segregation in the South, meaning they institutionalized the erasure of the African-American bodies from white American sight. Here are some examples of the Jim Crow laws:

**Florida:** Any negro man and white woman, or any white man and negro woman, who are not married to each other, who habitually live in and occupy in the nighttime the same room, shall each be punished by imprisonment not exceeding 12 months, or by fine not exceeding five hundred dollars.

**Mississippi:** Any person guilty of printing, publishing or circulating matter urging or presenting arguments in favor of social equality or of intermarriage between whites and negroes, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.

**Georgia:** It shall be unlawful for any amateur white baseball team to play on any vacant lot or baseball diamond within two blocks of a playground devoted to the Negro race, and it shall be unlawful for any amateur colored baseball team to play baseball within two blocks of any playground devoted to the white race (“Remembering Jim Crow”).

By segregating blacks from whites, white policy was able to make African-Americans virtually invisible.

The of resistance against the oppressed body in a somatic cultural praxis created by African-Americans is profound. The social dances of African-Americans function as a reclamation. These dances take power and strength back from the constraints of corporate mechanicity enforced on all bodies after colonization by excavating the somatic self from under all the layers of chains, enslavement, objectification, and erasure created by militarized slavery. These dances have the ability to transform bodies and communities over and over again into improvisationally charged vehicles of social control. The dances are proud, cool, and demand that the spectator see the performer. The dances of the African-American social dance that are considered somatic cultural praxis strive for freedom.

## Chapter Two

### **Modern Dance as Feminist Somatic Cultural Praxis: Historical Segmentation and Resistance**

Modern and Postmodern dance were forged as critical responses to the social, aesthetic, and political oppression of the female body in American culture. These dance forms, created in tandem with Somatic methodologies, have provided the space, community, and tools to resist objectification and segmentation of female bodies. Though there are many powerful feminist responses in literature, visual arts, music, and even theater to the injustices done against women, dance is the only medium that prioritizes the female body over all else. In dance, the body is conceived as a vessel for biological, cultural, and historical information. Theatrical dance, as Anne Daly, dance historian and feminist scholar, understands, perpetuates “our culture’s most potent symbols of femininity” (Daly 1991, 2). Because it is a carefully crafted art form, Daly suggests “western theatrical dance provides feminist analysis with its potentially richest material” (ibid). When Daly says, “Dance is an art form of the body, and the body is where gender is generally understood to originate” she reminds us that we gender the body by crafting the movements chosen to be performed, applying costumes, staging relationships between dancers, and framing

productions in relationship to the current cultural environment (ibid). “Dance, which is, after all, a kind of living laboratory,” writes Daly, “for the study of the body -its training, its stories, its way of being and being seen in the world” (ibid).

Dance is never the performance of isolated physicality. All movement derives from and exists within a biological and cultural context (Novak 1990, 8; Fortin 2009, 48), or as Sondra Fraleigh writes, “Dance bears our body’s nature and its culture on a bumpy continuum. In bodily matters of movement and meaning, dance shows how culture reflects or extends nature, how nature lives in our senses and speaks from our flesh” (Fraleigh 2004, 51). The record of dancing female bodies in theatrical dance in the United States documents the cultural and biological realities- of the ‘speaking flesh’ of U.S. women:

feminism imagined the human body as itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containments and control- from foot-binding and corseting to rape and battering to compulsory heterosexuality, forced sterilization, unwanted pregnancy, and (in the case of the African American slave woman) explicit commodification (Bordo 1993, 22).

By analyzing the identities, movements, and frameworks of the women in dance we will discover the historical basis of somatic oppression. We will also discover the journey to somatic emancipation lead by feminist dance makers.

Though all dance is connected in one way or another to the cultural and biological present, not all dance can be considered somatically driven. When a dance continues to segment or objectify the dancers instead of liberating their inner selves, then it cannot be considered a performative site of somatic cultural praxis. Somatic theory and practice must be in line in order for somatic cultural praxis to occur. For the purpose of this chapter, I want to tease out the characteristics that constitute

somatically driven dance, and specifically where feminist dancing and somatic culture, performance, healing, and pedagogy intersect. I consider feminist dance to be any dance where men and women make an effort to perform on an equal playing field by resisting oppressive forces that divide them kinesthetically, economically, socially, aesthetically, and politically. It is important to note that somatic dance engages feminist core values, but not all feminist dance is somatically focused (Banes 1980, 50). In the next two chapters I will highlight what I understand to be prime examples of the praxis of somatic feminist modern and postmodern dance through the work of Isadora Duncan, Anna Halprin, and Contact Improvisation developed by Steve Paxton. To conclude, I offer a critique of where somatic cultural theory in modern/postmodern fails to become praxis by citing experiences within my own position inside of this dancing community.

Feminist and somatic praxis share the common demand to emancipate the body from the segmentation and discrimination. In order to revitalize the body from numbness of somatic oppression dance makers engage in the practice of careful and thorough sensation. When the living body can fully sense mind, body, and spirit in unity and relation to the world, agency and emancipation can be achieved. I have found Duncan, Halprin, and Paxton to share an understanding of emancipatory dance as based in sensory information. The artistic mission to honor sensory material from the inner self, community, and outside environment includes these dance makers as creators of somatic culture in the United States. Duncan's performance of the "natural" movements sensed from the "soul", Halprin's autobiographical dances that use personal internal sensations as source material for choreography, and

Paxton's emphasis on improvisational freedom guided through the sensations of contacting skin categorize these artists somatic pioneers of sensation based modern and postmodern dance (Laban 1980 4-7; Halprin 1989, 58; Novack 1990, 115). In honoring the knowledge of the body, these dance makers address the negative connotations of the body that are so commonly associated with women:

as a consequence of our infantile experience of woman as caretakers of our bodies , "the mucky, humbling, limitations of the flesh" become province of the female; on the other side stands "an innocent and dignified 'he' ...to represent the part of the person who wants to stand clear of the flesh, to maintain perspective on it" (Bordo1993, 5)

In the work of Duncan, Halprin, and Paxton sensory information derived from the body is privileged as valuable artistic material reclaiming the body's knowledge as feminine "limitations of the flesh". The concept "dignified he" who "stands clear of the flesh to maintain perspective on it" is considered harmful and ignorant to the somatic artistic process.

Unfortunately, art that is sourced from individual inner sensation runs the risk of becoming self-indulgent and inappropriate for a public art setting. However, Duncan, Halprin, and Paxton as true somatic artists understood that healing and emancipation can only take place in the performative space if the community of witnesses are somatically activated as well (Eddy 2000, 7).

By acknowledging the generative cyclicity of nature through movement vocabulary or site-specific performance and creating choreography relevant to current community issues and interests in which the audience can participant, these artists created somatic modes of representation to frame their work. The solo dances of Isadora Duncan, the urban rituals of Anna Halprin, and the Contact Improvisation Jams did not recreate personal rituals, but connect and inspire audience members to

their own self-awareness. The somatic cultural, performative, healing, and pedagogical praxis of modern and postmodern dance creates an embodied experience that demands that the body be liberated from the numbing and segmenting imprint of capitalism and sexism.

### **The Segmented Ballerina**

The dancing body of the classical ballerina, itself segmented, alienated from its own bodily sensations, and cut-off from its inherent strength, must be analyzed in order to understand the somatic revolution established by modern and postmodern dance feminism. Recalling the institutionally disregarded, confined, sexually objectified female body described by Iris Young in Chapter One, here I reapply her qualifiers to describe the somatic oppression of the classical ballerina.

Ballet, as one of the West's oldest living dance forms, has been through many transformations over the centuries, but from its inception in the 1400s, ballet has relied on aesthetic tradition of linearity, symmetry, and tension established in ancient classical Greek art (Daly 1997, 113). Over time classical ballet was institutionalized to keep this aesthetic tradition intact. The strict codification of the form has made it somewhat impervious against the changing times. As Ann Daly writes in her essay "*Classical Ballet: A Discourse of Difference*" (1997), "Although there have been obvious historical changes in women's lives during three centuries of ballet, Woman's place in representation has never really changed because its ideology has never really changed" (Daly 1997, 113). Proof that ballet has been carefully

embalmed is found in instructional books like *The Principles of Classical Dance*, which meticulously lay out the *rules* of ballet.

The modern ballerina must adhere to the ancient principles of classical arts:

Classicism in the arts...signifies an ideal human body. Each work must show a strict sense of balance and formal design, which is serene and generalised rather than individual...Thus the lines and angles of head, body, arms, and legs must be suitably related to each other and to the central line of balance in order to display a perfectly balanced pose....” (Lawson 1980, 9).

Though all societies have ideals for the aesthetics of beauty, the classical terms of beauty demand a “perfectly balanced” body meaning a form of total symmetry in space. In addition, “the lines and angles of head, body, arms and legs must be suitably related to each other and to the central line of balance,” as noted by Lawson. Woman in particular, baring breasts, hips, and fatty stores, are encouraged as ballet dancers to reshape their natural forms into hard idealized lines. The concept of the central line guides all other aesthetic features of bodily behavior in choreographic/movement technique in western art (Alejandro, “The Line in Western Aesthetic Practice”).

While West African societies find individuality on the other hand to be beautiful (Thompson 1973, 41), the Western European classical tradition crafts stone, painting, and ballet dancing bodies into the images of “serene” “lines” of “perfect balance”.

The actual human body blooming with variations and asymmetries, when practicing ballet, must attempt to erase those things that make dancers individual, and striving instead to become a singular, unattainable definition of unified perfection.

Ballet dancers striving for classical perfection not only practice tensing their soft irregular bodies into lines, but also amass internal muscular and psychological tension by attempting the impossibility of linear perfection. Hanna, in his book

Somatics, offers the results of a laboratory experiment exploring the correlation between failure to execute a task and body tension:

Tension built up during any human task involving fear of failure will not drop at its completion if there is no sense of completion. The concept can be quite subtle. If, at the end of a task laboratory subjects are praised by the experimenter for their performance, their muscular tension drops. But if they are criticized muscle tension remains. This is called “residual tension” (Hanna 1988, 55)

Ballerina’s can never be praised for achieving perfect unified linearity, therefore they will greatly suffer from “residual tension”. This perseverance to attain the unattainable is parallel to the behavior of capitalists who never are satisfied with their fortunes because of the ever turning "wheels which political economy sets in motion” of “*greed, and the war amongst the greedy – competition*” (Marx “Estranged Labour”). Like the capitalist manufacturer losses his body to the tension of unending greed and competition, ballerina loses her body to unending linear demands. A tense dance form, leads to a tense dancer, leads to a tense being blocked from the full sensation of humanness.

*The Principles of Classical Dance*, a manual to tension and unachievable tasks, records twenty rules dictating how each part of the body is permitted to move in order to strive for classical beauty. For example, “The head leads the movement and is always in control. The eyes must be trained to find the directions to be followed before the movement begins...” (Lawson 1980, 27). Here we see the prioritization of the mind over the body. The mind at the top of the body is dubbed much more “intelligent” then for example the tail or the viscera, the spirit, or kinesthetic feelings. When in reality, the body can move with precision with the eyes closed. If practiced, vision is not the only sense that can guide understanding.

However in order to train the body to behave with severe precision described in instruction manuals, ballerinas must devote all of their energy to class and rehearsal to be chosen for performance.

Akin to the overworked capitalist laborer who strains his body, the ballerina at very young age must begin to train for hours a day deforming her feet, her spine, and her muscles turning the soft round body of the woman into a tense clean line. Ballet dancers starve themselves to eliminate fat from the body which blurs the edged of a linear body (Thomas 2003, 162). Marx comments when workers cease to eat in order to be efficient “the worker is robbed of the objects most necessary not only for his work but for his life”. By sacrificing sustenance and the natural strength of the structures of the individual body, ballet dancers create their own demise to “the tyranny of slenderness” (Chernin as quoted by Bordo 193, 141). In many cases ballerina are moved by passion, much like capitalist duty to work towards perfection. In doing so they deny themselves somatic wellbeing of the whole self in exchange for success. Not unlike the cry against numbness embedded in Marx’s manuscript against the estranged and objectified worker, the ballerina’s inner voices cry out against the silenced oppression of mind, spirit, and kinesthetic sensation caused by ballet’s treatment of the body. Segmented from her inner sensations, the ballerina cannot make contact with her somatic forces that protect her from pain, tension, and discord. Overtime, the classical ballerina’s body will deteriorate owing greatly to her attempt at eliminating the biological asymmetries from her body to meet the aesthetic demands of a form that denies them. At age twenty-five she will have reached

her career's peak and by thirty-five she will need to retire due to injury, weakness, or prejudice against older bodies on the ballet stage (Thomas 2003, 163).

It is not only the long hours of practice that deteriorate the body of the ballerina, it is the content of her practice. In classical ballet training it is the devotion to the ideal linear archetype of beauty that is so destructive to somatic being. Beginning in the late 1500s dance was not seen as the powers of individual self-expression, but instead understood to be “nothing more than the art of displaying beautiful shapes in graceful positions and the development from them of lines agreeable to the eye” (Daly 1997, 113). When beauty is equivalent to linear shapes, and grace is equivalent to imposed positions, there is no conception of inner dynamic fullness of individual human experience, only sterile geometry.

As I have mentioned, all cultures have archetypes, but not all archetypes hinder somatic being. In the late 1500s in Italy and France, the geometric ballet that became prominent in the Baroque courts of Louis the XIV, began to take shape. Ballerinas danced not as their individual human selves, but as “nymphs, knights, or celestial bodies, dancers portrayed pure and elevated beings” (Franko 2001, 192). These archetypes of “perfectly balanced”, “pure and elevated beings” endangered the unbalanced humanness of the somatic being. When a human woman is engaged in a dance form that expects her to banish her own body to try to imitate that of total purity and divinity, her somatic self is becomes valueless to a dance master, an audience and in turn to herself.

At once the ballerina is a nymph striving for an ephemerality which her human form will never accomplish, her body is also being reduced to be a mere point

in space. She may be given the role of a celestial body, but how she is instructed to perform this role is by moving with “physical repose or relative stillness rather than motion” (Franko 2001, 192). Her main purpose is to serve as a crisp linear visual in space, so that a visual geometrical display may be communicated to the audience. As a mere point in space “the body loses its human resonance when it becomes a marker of geometrical position” (Franko 2001, 193), and can never become a dancing somatic human: “by dancing, the body was engaged in a process that eliminated the exhibition of an individual’s intent or personal message” (Franko 2001, 191). Bordo says that this heavy inatimacy portrays the female body with “passive materiality, its lack of agency, art of even consciousness” (Bordo 1993, 11). This intense linear confinement of female movement to become still markers in space is an extreme example of how Young understands the somatic oppression of the female body.

The male dancers on stage in comparison the female ballerinas were permitted to move with much more energy, strength, and life: “The male on stage- the primary term against which the ballerina can only be compared- is not inscribed as a form, but rather as an active principle... The celebrated danseur Igor Youskevitch wrote only twenty-seven years ago (1970) , “Once mastered [ballet] provided him with the opportunity to display his strength, skill, and endurance, as well as with the vocabulary and means to achieve creativity.” (Daly 1997, 111). But Youskevitch writes of the ballerina that her dance is not meant to be a creative demonstration of skill, rather “The inborn feminine tendency to show herself physically, combined with the natural feminine movements that are the cornerstone of her dance vocabulary, is to me the golden key to feminine dance” (Daly 1997, 111). What

Youskevitch is implying is the most desirable way a classical ballerina can dance is to combine her in dainty, confined “feminine movements” with a level of sexual flirtation to invite the male dancer to engage her with his bold strength and the male spectator to gaze upon her.

The end product of intuitional discrimination and confinement of the somatic female is to mold her into a docile sexual object that the male on stage can manipulate, and the male in the audience may fantasize over. As Daly puts it, “the integral role of Woman in ballet ideology [is] in its inscription of pleasure” (Daly 1997, 117). The movement vocabulary that is seen as particularly sexually implicating is “with the legs, calves, and feet exposed.” (Franko 2001, 193). The short skirt of the tutu allows for all the large gestures of the legs to expose the vaginal area. This sexual sequencing serves not the sexuality of the ballerina but the pleasure of the men on stage and in the audience. She becomes the object of the male gaze (Mulvey 1989):

Even though women’s newfound pointe work monopolized the balletomanes’ attention, the men on stage retained dominance in the representation by presenting and displaying (and “creating”) these object-forms as their own possessions. And by identifying with these figures, the male gaze of the spectators was active in creating and possessing-and “ogling” - these female creatures...[who] embodied desires” (Daly 1997, 114).

When a women loses the power to move her own body on her own without the handling of a man she becomes an object. When her sexuality is choreographed not for her own pleasure, but for the men in the audience, her sexual inner agency is disregarded and she is objectified. When a women denies her own body in order to become a human imitation of a line in space, she becomes not female dancer but the

linear object of her labor (Marx, “Estranged Labour”). The classical ballerina is so deeply objectified she can only dance as a segmented woman far from somatic praxis.

### **Isadora Duncan: Breaking the Line**

Isadora Duncan (1878-1927) was the first successful American dancer to deviate from classical ballet, and in doing so she remade Western theatrical dance (Thomas 2003, 167). Her work is known as the seeds for modern dance, to be cultivated greatly by the work of Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey in the early twentieth century. Duncan’s dances and dance philosophy were monumental because they began the process of emancipation for the female somatic being and in doing so founded the somatic cultural praxis of modern and postmodern dance in the United States. Duncan’s European peer Rudolf von Laban, another important somatic pioneer in the dance world, was inspired greatly by her work as an expressive protest against industrial colonization of the human body in the workplace and in narrative ballet forms. Laban recalls:

It was in industry that the new movement research was inaugurated...[Movement researchers] aim was, of course, to increase the efficiency of workmen operating machines, without ever thinking of the aesthetical values which their movements might have...Today’s industrial worker is specialised...in a particular function of job, frequently in one relatively simple movement sequence which he has to perform from morning till evening throughout his lifetime...Isadora Duncan reawakened the sense of the poetry of movement in modern man” (Laban 1980, 4-7).

By demonstrating the dancing body as capable of many free and creative movements outside of repetitive work activities, Laban could see that Duncan was calling for freedom. Freedom for the worker, and also freedom for the female dancer who was caught in the repetitive narratives of the ballet that also limited expressive freedom:

... she reawakened a form of dance expression which could be called dance lyrics, in contrast to the mainly dramatic dance forms of the ballet. There was no story behind her dances, which were, as she herself termed it, the expression of the life of her "soul." At a time when science...endeavored to abolish radically any notion of the "soul," this dancer had the courage to demonstrate successfully that there exists in the flow of man's movement some ordering principle which cannot be explained in the usual rationalistic manner" (Laban 1980, 4-7).

Laban credits Isadora Duncan's dance as proof of the soul, proof of inner being, proof of somatic engagement. He acknowledges that it is this deeply resistive yet abstract artwork of life and soul that has the power to fight the somatic oppression of the mind, body, and spirit imposed by capitalism, ballet, and Western science. Laban and Duncan agreed that movement was not to be used to destroy the wellbeing of the somatic being, but to heighten our enjoyment of creative expression.

Duncan believed the sexualized, confined dance of ballerinas was preventing women from inhabiting their bodies and enjoying their "natural movements": "Isadora Duncan started out by stripping the female body away from the colonizing discourses of classical ballet into which it was framed, in order to reveal the 'natural' body and release the potential for expressing human emotion and feeling through new modes of 'writing' the female body in dance" (Thomas 2003, 165). Though the term 'natural' can be a dangerous descriptor because it carries idealized concepts of the body, in this work I take up "natural movements" to describe a individualized softening approach to movement as opposed to the conformity dictated by the ballet line. Isadora's natural rewriting was in the language of liberation; "Duncan's dancing 'seemed to her spectators a vision of freedom, her tunic as alive as her body, the garment's light silk catching the force of her curving, swaying, onrushing movement' (Daly 1995, p.64), "She refused to be co-opted by the gaze" (Thomas

2003, 171). To Duncan, the female dancing body needed to be free of the unnatural restrictions imposed upon it by ballet's symmetry and linearity in order to rediscover the natural body, or somatic body.

Duncan's first tactic in deconstructing ballet was to soften the linear movements into the soft circular movements of the waves and wind in the trees. A fundamental somatic cultural principle states that the self must be present and receptive to the greater environment surrounding the self. When Duncan insisted that contact between body and nature was relevant artistic commentary, she was making a political statement about the isolation and segmentation of industrial capitalist nations from nature. By embracing the full, round movements inspired by nature Duncan believed that she was dancing out the round, fleshy, expressive softness of her natural female body. She found that the confined, generalized movements of ballet prevented the dancer from coming into meaningful contact with her free somatic being, "or as Simone de Beauvoir puts it: 'In order for the idea of liberation to have concrete meaning, the joy of existence must be asserted in each one, at every instant; the movement toward freedom assumes its real, flesh and blood figure in the world by thickening into pleasure, into happiness'" (Fraleigh 2004, 49). When the dancer's only objective was to recreate unattainable linear perfection, she was not encouraged to move from the individual impulses within the inner being and discover her own "thick pleasure" or "happiness" from moving freely. Duncan strived to embody Freud's life principle in her dances by embracing the life of her soul, and the natural life around her as the foundations of her dance. Instead ballet movements which despised the natural body.

Duncan's soft, circular movements inspired by natural life were not the only changes she made to classical ballet vocabulary to revitalize the performance of somatic living. She also advocated for the performance of the true weight of a dancer on stage. Duncan writes in her memoir, "The school of ballet today, vainly striving against the natural laws of gravitation or the natural will of the individual, and working in discord in its form and movement with the form and movement of nature, produces sterile movement, which gives no birth to future movements, but dies as it is made (Duncan 1983, p.283)" (As cited by Thomas 2003, 170). This concept of the female dancer performing the actual force of gravity upon the body on the stage is revolutionary. Before Isadora Duncan, the female ballerina could only fight against the pull of gravity to lengthen her line and appear light and ephemeral like a nymph or celestial body. According to classical ballet, women should never engage their full weight into the ground because they will become heavy and difficult for men to lift into the air, making them fat and therefore unattractive to the male gaze (Bordo 1993, 155). Duncan had no intention of being lifted into the air to deny that she was not made of muscles, organs, and fat. Instead she carefully sensed the actual container of her living body, and performed a grounded sense of true weight.

Duncan's free circular motions performed with grounded sense of weight already had broken the somatic female dancing body from confinement, but Duncan did not stop there. She insisted on performing solo shows for evening length performances (Thomas 2003, 171). No single ballerina had ever performed alone on the stage for an entire evening, because rarely according to classical ballet standards would the ballerina be permitted to display the endurance, strength or virtuosity that it

would require to dance all evening; she was to be still, graceful, and seductive while the men on stage manipulated her (Lawson 1980, 81). There were no men on stage with Isadora Duncan's female form to be compared. She had total control over the image that she wanted to give her audience of a dancing female body, which was one of freedom, naturalness, and somatic engagement.

As a solo dancer/choreographer, she was able to create the movements that she would perform. Very few ballerinas danced their own material, and the material that they were instructed to perform did not connect with their inner personal creative self. Duncan made her own material inspired from her somatic experience. She would listen to her inner emotional, spiritual voices and create movement inspired from what she heard. She found that this process of movement invention created dances that connected with the emotion and spirit of her audience as well: "Duncan believed that movement could not only reveal emotions but can also induce them. Moreover, 'what is expressed by the dancer (whether it be an emotion, a mood, a thought, an allegory) is not imposed by a single ego it was acquired by merging the soul with the universe' (Daly 1995, p19). 'By reconstructing the body as an expression of the soul, Duncan thus transformed her dancing into a means of prayer and effectively consecrated an art form' (Daly 1995, 137)" (Thomas 2003, 172). By following the somatic framework of including the environment community, and whole being into the dance, Duncan was able to remake the Western theatrical dance experience from one-way spectatorship to an encompassing somatic experience for all present. She invited the minds, bodies, and spirits of the earth, the audience, and the female dancer to commune.

By creating her own movement material, sourced from within the somatic self, Duncan was able to disband the sexist restrictions that trapped the ballerina. Duncan did not dance for the pleasure of the male gaze: she danced for freedom. She engaged her whole being, grounded deeply into her weight, and in doing so did away with the sexual leg gestures of the ballerina: “Dance was no longer about the spectator display of the legs for entertainment’s sake; it was about the self’s inner impulses made manifest through the rhythmic, dynamic expression of the whole body” (Manning 1997, 159). By freeing the dancer of the confined bodily possibilities of the acceptable female movement, casting off the sexual objectification of the male gaze, and reintegrating the full body, mind, and spirit into theatrical dance, Duncan was a seminal somatic pioneer for the emancipated sensing female being on the stage and in the United States.

By breaking the conventions of classical ballet that oppressed somatic freedom of the female dancer, Duncan was able to ignite the somatic intervention of Euro-American theatrical dance in the United States. In the next chapter I will discuss how classical ballet continued to be dismantled by the postmodern dance participants in somatic cultural praxis, and how Isadora Duncan work remained a potent source of inspiration.

## Chapter Three

### Postmodern Dance as Feminist Somatic Cultural Praxis:

#### Improvisational Healing

Isadora Duncan inspired choreographers like Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey to continue to liberate the dancing bodies of women in the solidification of modern dance in the United States. However, many modern dance choreographers, including these two women, returned to narrative dramatic performance and the embodiment of archetypes instead of performing the “life of their human soul” like the abstract work of Duncan. It wasn't until the early 1960s that Merce Cunningham and Anna Halprin returned to the powers of abstraction, and in doing so fueled the genre that would become postmodern dance. Like postmodern philosophy, postmodern dance adheres to the mantra “all knowledge is constructed and value-laden” (Green 2007, 1125). This ideological principle that truth can be derived from anywhere encouraged the early postmodern dancer/choreographers and those engaged in this genre today to produce choreography that strives to create original experimental works that speak of each individual’s artistic creativity (Banes 1980, 17). In theory this postmodern shift is a huge philosophical departure from classical ballet that believes perfectly balanced symmetry is the only mode to achieving beauty

and grace in dance. The postmoderns' goal became not to recreate the colonization of the body on the stage through objectifying narrative, but to redefine beauty and grace by performing new individual abstract expressions of emancipation (Banes 1980, 15). This dynamic political shift in dance theory encouraged some choreographers to embrace the powers of the individual by turning inward and listening to the human somatic being. In many cases this process of returning to the inner self revealed that there was still much work to be done in dance to free the somatic female body. It is these choreographers, dedicated to the importance of sensation of the holistic self, and the elimination of sexism (and discrimination in general) that create the feminist somatic cultural, performative, healing, and pedagogical praxis of postmodern dance. I find the work and artistic life of Anna Halprin to be exemplary of this way of making work and existing in the world.

It is important to note that postmodern dance can support somatic engagement of the dancer as means to uncovering individual inner truth, or employ feminist ideology to further free the dancing bodies on stage in creating artistic realities, but not all postmodern dance can be considered feminist or participating somatic praxis. In fact some postmodern feminist dancers, like Yvonne Rainer rebelled so strongly against over-emotional characterization performed by female dancers in the modern dance works of Martha Graham that she intentionally cut all emotional tones out of her work in order to reclaim the female dancer from being synonymous with emotive performance (Banes 1980, 50). Though Rainer is deeply committed to performance of the ordinary human and is an inspiring feminist choreographer and film maker, her stance is only pseudo-somatic because emotion- or

the sharing of inner kinesthetic, spiritual, or mental feelings is not included in her performance philosophy.

As it is crucial not to generalize all postmodern dance as part of feminist somatic praxis, it is also important to not credit all postmodern dance to fully differentiating itself from classical ballet in practice. Susan Foster categorizes two types of postmodern dance into reactionary, and resistive:

In his introduction Foster distinguishes between a reactionary postmodernism, which indiscriminately employs a heterogeneous array of styles and compositional methods in the name of rebellion; and a resistive postmodernism which undertakes a sustained and systematic examination of its own production. Whereas a reactionary postmodernism mines the forms of the past for their nostalgic and novel impact, resistive postmodernism offers an ongoing inquiry into the implications of any choice of form. The reactionary approach reaffirms the traditional role of the viewer as admiring spectator, while the resistive includes its viewer in the formulation and critique of its own meaning (Foster 1985, 47).

In order to push dance to continually redefine reality, a choreographer cannot be a reactionary by feeding off of the work of others and not contributing. She cannot recreate hierarchical relationships between dancers and choreographers established in the empire culture of Baroque dance without understanding the consequences. She cannot allow for objectification to go unquestioned. To fully redefine the world we live in through dance, a choreographer must be resistive, always striving to be critically aware of one's own work and its effect in the world. By engaging so deeply in the discourse of anti-sexist feminist ideology and the anti-capitalist, anti-discrimination, anti-objectification, and anti-segmentation notions of somatic ideology, I find the work of Anna Halprin to be particularly resistive. Her work is a powerful testament to the fruits of constant inquiry into the inner self, and the possibilities of dance as a vehicle for social justice.

### **Anna Halprin: Real Presence, Real Healing**

Anna Halprin has been called the mother of postmodern dance, even though she herself is not fond of labels (*Breath Made Visible*). Titles aside, Halprin's dance deck in the redwoods of the San Francisco Bay Area were the spawning grounds for the most popular postmodern choreographers, like Simone Forti, Trisha Brown, and Yvonne Rainer (Banes 1980, 8). She is a powerful teacher and revolutionary dance maker because of her unwavering commitment to individual somatic emancipation and its relation to greater social justice. Halprin was one of the first choreographers to directly take up social issues of the 1960s in United States theatrical dance and site-specific dance work. Among other things, Halprin formed the first multi-racial company in the country after the Watts Riots in Los Angeles, protested the Vietnam war by performing nude dances in the streets, and created a work about and performed by gay men with AIDS,

The chief intention of these works was to understand how the process of creation and performance could be used to accomplish concrete results: social change, personal growth, physical alignment, and spiritual attunement... In other words, developing an integrated life/art process (Halprin 1989, 56). At the focus of all of Halprin's work is holism. Guided by the knowledge of the body, Halprin strives to integrate, connect, and cultivate compassion for ourselves, for others, and for the planet by making artwork that is relevant to an authentic experience of life. Her dances, artistic philosophy, and practices as a teacher and healer are simultaneously focused on the larger political and the personal: "I search for real-life-as-art. I want the personalized self-body to become the metaphor for the big collective body" (Schechner 1989, 67). "Real-life-as-art" is a fundamental

principle of most postmodern work (Banes 1980, 17). Pretending to be anything that the dancer is not, be it a nymph, knight, or a Grecian deity, a person without weight or breath, either wholly submissive or dominant reinforces untrue and unhealthy myths about the body in society and negates the individual somatic being of the dancer. This commitment to real-life-as-art is a somatic and feminist notion at the same time. In Halprin's work, women do not pretend as ballerinas do that they are divine and pure weightless beings that strive for balanced perfection. Neither are women controlled and manipulated by men. Instead both sexes complete all the physical tasks suggested by Halprin with the same amount of agency while inviting their inner maleness and femaleness to be present at once: "I want to see that balance and the ability to embody both male and female" (Schechner 1989, 69). In her works women and men are themselves on stage performing their gender and sexuality as they understand it, not according to strictly gendered narratives of ballets and modern dances. Though Halprin is not usually cited as a feminist dance maker, she is categorized as an advocate for social justice and freedom. I give her credit here as an important feminist postmodern choreographer because Halprin was making a radical statement about gender politics of the dance of her time by not segregating the roles and movements by gender but allowing each performer to create their own definition of self (Ross 2003, 31).

The "real" performance of biological and cultural identity construction is directly related to the intact somatic being. Halprin's "real-life-as-art" requires that the somatic connection between the bodies, minds, and spirits of her dancers are present in her works. Halprin trains any dancer that she works with to release their

excess tension, habits, and lifestyle choices that could be preventing the dancer from sensing their whole inner being; training her performers to call upon tension when it is called for and release it when it is not. She does this by having dancers focus on their breath and a inner organ driven movement that can access and release tension in the body. They practice the skill to only contract a muscle when they choose, and otherwise allow the released body to move with flow and unity. As we have seen in the analysis of capitalism in Chapter One, when we are numb with tension we are unable to sense the world inside of us and around us. Halprin believes full sensory perception is at the heart of creativity: “I have a tremendous faith in the process of a human mechanism, and in creativity as an essential attribute of all human beings. This creativity is stimulated only when the sense organs are brought to life” (Maletic 1998, 147). What is creativity if not the imaginative interplay with sensory input and inner self? For Halprin, not only is the process of making contact with the inner self fertile for dance making, if the dancer is able to access their own inner truth she will be able to empathize with “the big collective body” of her fellow performers, the audience, and the greater community. In this way, Halprin is a master of the difficult balance of both turning inward enough to glean tender somatic information, but knowing how to return to an outward presence in order to share this information effectively.

In order for the somatic dancer to make contact with the “big collective body,” however, the audience members cannot be objectifying the performers with their gaze, rather they must engaged in the process of witnessing the dance , as much as the dancers are engaged in performing:

I don't want spectators. Spectators imply a spectacle that takes place to entertain and amuse and perhaps stimulate them. I want witnesses who realize that we are dancing for a purpose-to accomplish something in ourselves and in the world. We are performing our best attempts to create authentic contemporary theatre rituals (Schechner 1989, 71).

The male gaze, or any objectifying gaze, is detrimental and unacceptable to Halprin. Her performers, men and women, were to be engaged with as full beings, not to be treated as objects of entertainment, sexual or otherwise. Halprin does not settle for the somatic engagement of her company. She insists that her audience also partake in the somatic exchange of sensing their inner selves in response to the performance at hand. As in a ceremonial ritual, in Halprin's "urban rituals", all present, those performing the ritual and those witnessing it, are involved in the experience.

One of Halprin's first feminist and somatic interventions into dance theory was her encouragement of her dancers to not conform to stylized movement of ballet or modern dance vocabularies, "which kept me separate from the reality of myself as an artist. For me the concern was always how to get rid of this armor" (Ross 2003, 31). Walking, eating, undressing, resting were all considered to be perfectly acceptable and valuable movements to Halprin who understood these actions as performances that were neither "bigger nor grander than life, but life-size [movements of] real people" (Ross 2003, 25). By default, when Halprin stripped her dancers of balletic movements, a more somatic version of their beings became free to emerge. In turn her female performers were not held to any ballet or modern dance standards of beauty and feminine. The women were free to create their own personal definitions of beauty that could change each time they danced.

Halprin saw any movements that had been created and codified by another person's body, as "armor" to personal movements that exist beneath. To empower her dancers to create and perform personalized movements, Halprin gave her dancers what she termed "scores" to fulfill with their own movements. Scoring enabled, "an emphasis on individuals' exercise of personal power...the rehearsal score described the dancers' general tasks in functional terms like "'tear paper making long and short sounds', but the precise physical actions to accomplish this were left up to the performer" (Ross 2003, 33). Halprin says, "I prefer to have people told what to do but not how to do it. Certainly there are many ways to find our commonalities and to explore the basic principles of movement" (Schechner 1989, 71). This open ended way of creating dances allowed the dancers to bring their present somatic selves into the movement. There would be no grinding repetition of the same movements over and over with each rehearsal or performance because the whole goal was to have whatever movement choices were somatically relevant for the dancer in the present moment become the content of the performance. This mode of performance enabled the somatic being to be in charge of the movement, instead of fulfilling the aesthetic, emotional, physical desires of an external choreographer.

As Halprin's career progressed into dance as a form somatic healing, or what has been termed expressive arts therapy, instead of creating scores out of physical tasks, she began to build scores based on somatic autobiographical material: "More and more, in both workshops and public rituals, I encouraged people to work with their own lives as material, to use real-life issues so that the transforming power of dance would have the opportunity to effect real-life changes for them" (Halprin 1989,

58). This tactic was a choreographic device that directly channeled the inner somatic self. Halprin had created this mode of dance making when she had suffered from cancer at the end of the 1970s. Searching for healing and peace, Halprin danced out her cancer. Connecting deeply within her inner self and the sickness inside, she grabbed hold of the disease and rid it from her body by performing the dance that her body told her she needed to do in order to heal. Halprin was able to turn this incredible experience of deep somatic knowing and translate it into her dance teaching:

On a personal level my experience in ridding myself of cancer showed me that it was possible to use the power of dance for a higher purpose, that we could channel the power to experience interconnection with a life force, and that this experience was nourishing and necessary-the right of all living beings, not just artists (Halprin 1989, 58).

Halprin had managed to wield the deepest power of dance, as a force that can literally heal the self and heal others. The audience who had once been a witness to her rituals were inspired to get up and dance out their own sickness and joy. To include larger populations in her somatic inquiry, Halprin began creating dance workshops and scores for non-dancers. What she found was that trained or untrained, all people are capable of connecting with their inner selves through movement because we all have a body with a body story. The culmination of this large group somatic experience that encompasses the individual, community, and earth is called the *Planetary Dance*, which Halprin continues to facilitate today.

*The Planetary Dance* is annual dance score, developed by Halprin in 1987, that invites participants from all over the world to join together in dance at the same time with the same intention: world peace. Peace, when considered through a somatic lens of personal peace, community peace, and environmental peace, in a time

of ongoing violence, and environmental destruction continues to be a crucial topic for artists. *The Planetary Dance* has a located emphasis on ending violence against the earth because the dance is always sited out in the natural world. This is not a mere transposition of a dance from inside to outside, but a dance that is for, about, and within the earth. Halprin became particularly committed to including nature as a crucial element of human life into her dance scores as the undeveloped natural space of her home in the redwoods became more and more of an anomaly in the developing Bay Area. Her solo site-specific explorations in the woods, in the ocean, and on the mountain led her to site more of her group workshops outside. Just as we all have a body, all people exist inside the body of the earth: “The body is our home, as is the larger body of the earth. When these two bodies move in harmony, a dance unfolds. Both are made whole” (“Returning Home”). Halprin acknowledges that her home in the redwoods has inspired her dance and healing practice as much as the wisdoms of her own body. In fact, when carefully explored, Halprin finds that nature allows for us to look inwardly into our humanness, and the interiority of our humanness reveals nature:

I think that the word is ecology and I think that there is something so vital about our natural surroundings that we have become, perhaps unconscious to... How can you live in this kind of landscape, with an ocean, with the cliffs, with the vital forces of nature at your feet all the time, and not be affected by the so-called nature-oriented point of view? You become vitally concerned with the materials, the sensual materials of our lives, and with the almost primitive naiveness of being an extension of your environment. This begins to free you to start coming out again. And when you start coming out and relaxing, you are working in a sort of nonintellectual way (Maletic 1998, 147).

For Halprin, nature is an enabler for somatic engagement, and “nonintellectual” presence which is required to access our creative selves and make dance that can remake and heal the dancer and the witnesses. A connection to nature allows for the flow of natural movement.

Halprin was able to destabilize the ballet and modern dancer’s conventional construction of self by emancipating the body and its movement possibilities through feminist and somatic intervention early in her work. However, there was a philosophical shift from the first portion of her work, which broke cultural norms regarding human treatment of other humans, to her later work, which attempts to address not only human interaction but our treatment of the earth and its tangible response. This awareness of the constant feedback loop of nature and humans, choreographically proposes the concept of the organic or natural movement. As Fraleigh puts it,

Organic means functional , coordinated, and organized. Natural movement is organically whole, simple, and functional for that body. In this case, everyone can be graceful, and there is no one model for grace, for we all have individualized structures and gifts. Beyond received models, that of the airborne ballet, for instance, we can at least identify a common aesthetic thread: grace is not a matter of weightlessness, nor does it rest in any particular kind of movement; it is a much broader concept predicated on *care*. Care signals attentiveness, to self and is also a matter of consciousness in our relationships to others and the world... *Natural movement feels good* (Fraleigh 2004, 67).

When we prescribe unnatural movements onto the body that only offer one idealized possibility for grace and beauty, we deny our individual structures that make up our unique bodies, and their critical connection to the unique and ever changing design of nature. We deny what “feels good”. In turn, if a woman’s body does not look or

move with a typical ballerina grace, she may be discouraged to try to dance preventing herself from partaking in the possibilities of somatically engaged dance. Natural movement “predicated on care” offers a postmodern definition of grace, enabling all careful people to be graceful, and therefore somatically in touch with themselves, other people and the natural world. Natural movement is the connecting element that synthesizes the trajectory of self, community, and earth into a full somatic cycle: “to perceive the world is to copercieve oneself.” (Fraleigh 2004, 55). A dancer is at once caring for nature, the “big collective body”, and her inner world when performing natural/somatic movements. In the case of Halprin’s *Planetary Dance* and her other large community scores, it is her ability to bring people who do not consider themselves dancers in touch with their natural movements that makes these dances so powerful and effective for the participants and witnesses.

Halprin found with the very first *Planetary Dance* in which “75 groups in 35 countries took part” that through community dancing world peace could be a tangible achieved (Halprin 1989, 65). Each dance scored like a moving mandala somatically connects the people present by creating actualized peaceful collaboration and hope through the practice of natural movements:

When enough people moved together in a common pulse with a common purpose, an amazing force, an ecstatic rhythm took over. People began to move as if they were parts of a single body, not in uniform motion, but in deeply interrelated ways. This recurrence of spatial and interrelated movement is no accident. It is an external version of the geometry and biology of our inner life-our bodies extended in space. In this sense, such movement is contained within us (Halprin 1989, 57).

Here Halprin offers a visual of what natural movement means to her. Notice that it is not the particular movement vocabulary that she cites as important in natural movement, but more that it is the connective possibility of dance that is important.

This phenomenon of inner presence happening all over the world at the same time literally connects humans to one another's inner selves to create collaborative beauty and joy. When hundreds of people's inner intentions over the face of the globe are being expressed through the connective powers of dance, in those moments the world changes. Halprin explains,

In this seemingly magical way, we are able to connect as planetary citizens and use dance as way to feel our connection and our yearning to be connected to people in a non-partisan, non nationalistic dimension. With this dance, we come together to pray for the world, for all people everywhere who are suffering, to be able to heal, and to express a concern about the planet itself (Serlin 1996, 120).

Somatic connection to ourselves, other people, and the planet becomes a world priority in the annual performance Halprin's *Planetary Dance*. Halprin believes:

Art and dance can take a lead. It is necessary for art to express visions that political systems resist. In a world where war has become a national science, peacemaking must become a community art, and even more importantly, a planetary art in the deepest sense of the word: An exemplification of our ability to cooperate in creation, an expression of our best collective aspirations, and a powerful act of magic (Halprin 1989, 66).

Halprin foregrounds the somatic being so powerfully in her work that she invokes global magic.

Today most of Halprin's artistic energetic work as a 92 year old woman go to training others to pass down her knowledge to people in need of the healing powers of dance. At the Tamalpa Institute majorly run out of her home in Marin County in the Bay Area of San Francisco the staff believe:

Our focus on the body, movement and the expressive arts as a healing approach is based on the premise that the imprints of life events are housed in the body. When remaining at the unconscious level, these imprints may lead to imbalance and conflict; when explored and expressed consciously and creatively, the connection between body, mind, and emotion makes a vital

contribution to the artful development of the self (Tamalpa Institute 2001)  
(Eddy 2002 49, 50).

Unlike psychotherapy that only addresses the mind and negates the body, by grounding her healing in the dwelling place of mind, kinesthetic sensation, and spirit, Halprin's work is dedicated to holism. For Halprin, somatic healing does not stop at the self, and neither does the influence of dance:

When I think of dance, I think of it as a holistic experience... Hopefully, it can take you to another level where you would feel the universality of your experience and how that universality connects you to the context of everything around you, whether it is elements in nature, or human compassion, or the sadness or grief you feel not only for yourself but for the larger world (Serlin 1996, 115-116).

Without Anna Halprin, this definition of dance and its possible function would not exist in the United States. She is one of the seminal founders and participants in the postmodern somatic cultural praxis in the U.S. Her dedication to the voices inside the body as rich informants for dance making has helped to heal the Earth and those that live upon it. She continues to make work, heal the terminally ill, and teach weekly dance class on her dance deck at her home.

### **Introduction to Feminist Somatic Postmodern Improvisation**

With the seeds of scoring planted by Anna Halprin into the postmodern dance faculties, improvisation as a mode of performance began to take root in the sixties and seventies, and continues today. Though African-American social dance has been based in an improvisational mode all along, white Western theatrical dance did not consider improvisation a valid and significant form of live performance until the postmodern time period. In classical ballet and the work of modern choreographers like Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, all movement was meticulously set

before hand and constantly rehearsed to achieve the choreographer's intentions (Banes 1980, 5). During a somatically focused improvisational score, or a set of guidelines within which a dancer improvises, the dancer chooses what movements will be performed, and in what way, and at what time. Though the score may have an over-arching design by an outside choreographer or score maker, the dance itself is made and remade only by the dancers who perform it. Susan Foster elaborates on the phenomenology of improvisation:

During this playful labor, consciousness shifts from self in relation to group, to body in relation to body, to movement in relation to space and time, to past in relation to present, and to fragment in relation to developing whole. Shared by all improvisers in a given performance, this embodied consciousness enables the making of the dance and the dance's making of itself (Foster 2003, 7-8).

The emphasis on the subjective individual in a deeply embodied state is a component of improvisational work and somatic culture. This way of dancing values the first person experience of self and gender as significant artistic material. For postmodern choreographers to establish improvisation as an acceptable and powerful means of public art was a anti-capitalist, anti-discriminatory somatic and feminist statement about the value of the subjective individual and each person's equal agency in making and creating the world around us. However, as all dance is not considered to be somatically or feminist driven, improvisational work can diverge from its emancipatory potential. Scores can be created that objectify or segment the dancers by choosing not to nurture wholeness, collaboration, awareness, or presence. For the purpose of this section I am interested in those facets of improvisational performance that highlight feminist somatic praxis. To best exemplify these ideologies in action, I have chosen the postmodern dance form Contact Improvisation as developed by

Steve Paxton. Before I begin my analysis of Contact Improvisation, I want to make clear the ideologies at work in any somatic improvisation.

What was fascinating to Steve Paxton and many other early postmodern choreographers like Richard Bull and the members of Grand Union was not only the artistic potential of an individual improviser, but how the individual agent exists in immediate relation to a community of dancing bodies in a particular place and time. For this reason, somatically driven improvisational dance, as Susan Foster describes, is in direct opposition to capitalist framework that revokes agency from the individual and isolates him or her from community wellbeing:

Theories [that] invest the state and capital with the power to transform the body/self into a desiring machine whose every impulse only enhances the growth of capital and the all-consuming power of the state. In these models all individual choices merely maintain the appearance of independence. On closer scrutiny, however, the structuring of individual initiatives reveals their prior co-optation by governmental or capitalist channels through which power exercises control.

In either of these models of human agency, where the self tells the body what to do, or where both the self and body are subsumed by larger political and economic forces, the body is relegated to the status of instrumental object. Robbed of all vitality, much less the capacity for agency, it endures as a mute, dumb thing. The experience of improvising, however, established the possibility of an alternate theory of bodily agency, one that refutes the body's mere instrumentality and suggests alternative formulations of individual and collective agency. Improvisation provides an experience of body in which it initiates, creates, and probes playfully its own physical and semantic potential. The thinking and creating body engages in action (Foster 2003, 7).

Subsumed by the numbing, objectified living inside of the workplace or classical ballet studio, working does not amount to somatic self benefit. Inside of an improvisational dance experience work turns into play turns into action, which entails

a sense of holistic accomplishment. The body of the dancer has been empowered and changed by the improvisation, as well as the bodies of those dancing and witnessing the experience.

Improvisation has the power to subvert capitalist forces, not only by refusing to have the body restricted and controlled by outside forces, but also by disrupting the power dynamics of economic hierarchy and allowing power to flow freely through the dancers, audience, and the body itself:

Power circulates through the collective actions of such improvisation. It never has the opportunity to dwell in a specific joint of the body, or alight at the site of a particular individual, or hunker down among a portion of the group.

Power is repeatedly “taken by surprise” so that it can never embed itself within a static structural element that would allow it flex into hierarchies of domination and control (Foster 2003, 8).

In a power sharing mode of improvisation the body is democratized. In a somatic postmodern improvisation, no one body part is more beautiful or more powerful than the others. It is admired if a performer can utilize all body parts with equal expressive virtuosity. There is no way an individual can reach her highest point of creative activity if she can only gesture her legs and arms while the rest of her body remains in a strict line, or if men are always manipulating her body parts around the stage. Through the feminist equal distribution of power to each dancer, male or female, and spreading that power throughout the whole body, a dancer can achieve her highest potential as improvisational mover. This grassroots approach to power spreads beyond the individual body, and into the all the elements present for a somatic improvisation. In a collaborative postmodern improvisation the alternation of leadership and power from dancer to dancer, dancer to audience, dancer to music, dancer to bird flying past dismantles capitalist and sexist notions that the most

resourceful men should always hold the most power. What is created to replace the stiff hierarchy is a fully activated energetic space, where the most important part of the dance could be happening at any moment by anyone or anything present. From this position of free flowing power, improvisational dance can be a feminist somatic mode for collaborative agency and freedom.

In order to fully activate the individual, his community, and his environment in a fleeting dancing moment, improvisation more than any other way of dancing demands somatic engagement with the self. To be a successful improviser in somatic terms means that the dancer can perform the real time process of creating an engaging dance by simultaneously receiving and composing material from the inner self and external inputs. This feedback loop of inward perceiving and external expression is inherently a somatic process. One's mind, body, and spirit must be dancing together to respond quickly enough to each moment: "improvisation's bodily mindfulness summons up a kind of hyperawareness of relation between action and overall shape, between that which is about to take place or is taking place and that which has and will take place... improvisation pivots both mind and body into a new apprehension of relationalities"(Foster 2003, 7). If a dancer is suffering from numbness, objectification, and denial of body, she will not be able to achieve the integration of body and mind that is required for instantaneous art form of improvisational dance composition. Without close communication between mind, body, and spirit, as well as an extended somatic awareness to the other people in the room and the place that they are moving in, a dancer will not be able to feel and immediately respond to the energetic bursts or lulls inside her, the gentle or powerful touch of a partner, or the

sun coming out from behind a cloud. Somatic being is crucial to an improvisational dance.

The postmodern improvisation that can be considered feminist and somatic is created by empowered dancers who are engaged in power sharing dynamic whose bodies, minds, and spirits are nurtured and integrated. The last feature that makes up this mode of improvisational dancing requires that the dancers pursue somatic natural movement. As we have seen in the work of Anna Halprin, and Isadora Duncan natural movement is not externally oriented, concerned with trying to please any greater aesthetic of beauty and grace, but the natural dancer tries to learn her own individual structure and dance from this understanding. What occurs when a dancer bases their movement on their biological actualities (including the spirit), their naturalness is free to emerge: “Improvisation is a form of research, a way of peering into the complex natural system that is the human being” (De Spain 2003, 27). Improvisation allows dancers to both learn their natural structures and dance from them. What is enabled by this dancing body that does not try to be anything that it is not, is that flow can emerge. There are no lapses caused by tension or anxiety when dancing from natural somatic impulses, instead the dancer can react instantaneously to his dance partner, a change in music, a large gust of wind, and thread each movement to the next by following her natural movement flowing freely and continuously.

### **Contact Improvisation: Dynamic Sensing**

Contact Improvisation, developed in the early seventies by Steve Paxton, started as physical experiment with male college students in duets:

dancing together in ways that might avoid aggression and embrace tenderness. But soon it become a gender-integrated form that allowed both men and women to investigate various means of moving in one-on-one or small group encounters: giving and taking weight, lifting, carrying, leading, following, wrestling, and partnering in myriad ways, finding movement templates in social dancing, sports, and martial arts, such as Aikido (Banes 2003, 78).

Cynthia Novack explains in her book *Sharing the Dance*, an ethnography of Contact Improvisation, the key descriptors of the form, the first of which is “*Generating movement through the changing points of the contact between bodies*” (Novack 1990, 115). The most basic premise of the improvisational score in Contact Improvisation is to remain in at least one point of contact at all times with one’s partner. To make physical contact with another person while improvisationally creating a dance together requires active somatic engagement with the self and openness to the partner. The next criteria is “*Sensing through the skin*”, which describes the sensory state of the dancer (Novack 1990 115). In order to keep dynamic contact, the entirety of the skin organ must be activated to sense subtle changes in pressure, heat, etc. Next Novack describes the aesthetics of the movement vocabulary that define Contact Improvisation: “*Rolling through the body; focus on segmenting the body and moving in several directions... Using 360-degree space... Going with momentum, emphasizing weight and flow*” (Novack 1990, 115, 120, 121). Once the whole surface of the skin is actively sensing the point or points of contact, the inside of the body can respond to the skin sensations. A sequential three-dimensional body is necessary to keep in contact as partners move around, over, and under one another. Unlike the classical ballerina who is only instructed to move within clean geometrical

planes, a Contact Improviser must be able to embrace the full spaciality of the body. The ability to take weight, give weight or initiate movement from any part of the body moving in any direction is essential to the improvisational nature of the dance. This sequential, 360-degree use of the body creates a flow in the body. When the entire body is an open channel for energetic movement, the flow of momentous weight is enabled. By following the momentum of weight through a sequential pathway in the body, Contacters can engage each other in a natural movement pattern that they both understand. Though this way of moving takes training and practice, this common palate of body engagement provides improvisers a place to start and grow their dance.

In the fully activated body of the Contact Improviser power is equally given to all parts of the body, and weight and space are wholly engaged in a deeply somatic understanding of the body. This bodily presence is what allows for the improvisational component of the form to be successful. In order to immediately respond to internal and external sensory information, the somatic self must be intact. Any moments of inner disconnection with one's present self will cause a break in the contact or even injury. In order to successfully move supplely through changing points of contact that develop into lifts, spirals, grazing, and smashing, a dancer's mind, body, and spirit must be in fluid communication. Novack says it herself, Contact Improvisation is a somatic praxis of,

*“Experiencing movement from the inside: Orientation or focus inward, sensing the internal space of the body; secondary attention (depending on the performer) to shaping the body in space. Contact improvisers have this internal focus a good deal of the time in order to perceive subtle weight changes and not endanger themselves or others”* (Novack 1990, 119).

Contact Improvisation's practice of somatic being departs from classical ballet's shape-oriented negation of the dancer, and instead values the total presence of being.

Contact Improvisation is a dance that allows dancers to play with their presence.

Along with somatic presence, an open attitude to play is vital to fertile improvisation. When we play with a partner in Contact Improvisation, we allow creative flow to come from the body without external judgment. In Contact Improvisation dancers practice "*Letting the dance happen*" through play (Novack 1990, 123). Paxton describes his aesthetic, "I like it when bodies are free and when the emotional state is open and accepting and sensitive...I like it when people do things that surprise themselves... Where it comes from is just human play, human exchange- and animal play. It's like horseplay or kitten play or child's play as well" (Banes 2003, 78-79). Unfortunately, from the imprint of our somatically oppressed lives, play is not encouraged past childhood though playfulness is regenerative form of somatic release. To mend this disparity, Contact Improvisation reminds its dancers how to play again. In order to generate a playful attitude and somatic connectivity, Paxton made simple games or exercises to engage both dancers' whole bodies in sensitive emancipated play. Ann Cooper Albright describes one such exercise of somatic pedagogy:

One of the first themes introduced to beginning students of Contact Improvisation is the articulation of the point of contact. Facing a partner, one presses a forefinger against that of their partner. Attending to how the energy of their whole bodies can move through their spines and out their arms and into their fingers, the partners wait. They wait and listen to that point of contact that will eventually move. The point created by the joining of two energies is sometimes referred to as a "third mind," and it is that which

becomes the focus of their mutual attention. The partners endeavor to follow the spatial and rhythmic journey” (Albright 2003, 263). We see that this exercise both cultivates “ears” for somatic voices, and playful action once sensory information has been received. The point of contact for practiced somatic Contact Improviser acts as a two way antenna that can receive information from inside the body and transmit to a partner, and also take in sensory information from a partner into the body. In order to have a functioning antenna, the whole body of both partners must be open without blockages or blind spots inside the body, and project as little judgmental gaze outside the body that could prevent playful discovery. With somatic openness to play, two way sensory information can flow smoothly through and out the point of contact. By practicing contact improvisation with simple points of contact like the forefinger, a partnership’s playful vocabulary can develop into more complex contact points.

One skill that makes one’s antenna acutely sensitive, and is often practiced during contact improvisational somatic training, is ability to witnessing oneself. The act of witnessing oneself is a crucial connective practice, one which locates the self in relation to time, space, and other beings. To witness or observe oneself is to alter one’s perspective so that it is at once inward and outward. In this state we have access not only to our inner being, but how this inner being effects and is effected by our surroundings. To somatically engage with self, community, and earth we must have self-reflective capabilities to observe how these entities interconnect. Once a dancer is a proficient self-witness she will be able to name her sensory feelings and put them into action. She also will have a larger understanding of the developing

whole of the dance. Paxton was well aware that self-witnessing was a key to successful somatic improvisation:

Paxton's early investigation and safety training in Contact Improvisation focused participants on becoming better witnesses to their own reflexive actions. Contact improvisers develop sensory awareness through preliminary exercises like the "small dance" in which they observe minute weight shifts of postural sway while standing. This practice expands their ability to stay present to sensation even when they experience fear during a fall in a Contact duet, for example. Highly developed sensory awareness offers the body more options during a fall—more time to adjust the weight and shift to outcome from something injurious to something workable. This "extra" time creates magical moments in a Contact duet when time almost seems to stand still for the dancer. Suddenly, as if on the other side of a looking glass, a Contacter may observe his or her own freefall tumble in slow motion, with precision, decision, and clarity (Buckwalter 2010, 66).

Buckwalter explains how important it is to have some perspective on one's self, movement, and engagement with a partner to avoid injury. Without the cushion of awareness that self-witnessing provides, not only can a dance be dangerous, but it can be ill performed. If we are not able to sense and release tension blockage or numb blind spots in the body, a contact duet can be extremely disconnected making it difficult, uncomfortable, and dangerous for performers and witnesses. One way that Contacters engage with the process of witnessing while dancing, is that they do not project their gaze or attention out into the audience, like we see in hyperperformative ballets or modern dances. Instead Contacters simultaneously have an inward gaze and peripheral gaze that enables them to witness themselves and the action in the room around them. If mastered, a self-witnessing somatic awareness can engage a dancer in exciting suspenseful lifts, sensuous touch, and dynamic cause and effect

interplay. Contact Improvisation can be an incredible outlet for the emancipated body (Novack 1990, 119).

To allow for a more liberating experience, originally Contact Improvisation was never performed in theaters. It was a social dance that happened in studios, community centers, and other informal spaces. Similar to the work of Anna Halprin that existed outside of the theater as an urban ritual, Contact Improvisation is just as much about the dancers as the witnesses who can transform into dancers in a momentary invitation: or “*Tactic inclusion of the audience; conscious informality or presentation modeled on a practice of jam*” (Novack 1990, 122). Like urban rituals, Contact Improvisation jams do not have tickets or programs; one does not sit in a theater seat to watch the performance. In most cases, Contact Improvisation is performed in the round, meaning that the audience sits in an connective circle around the dancers creating a shared space in which the improvisation can happen. By displacing Contact Improvisation from the stage all vestiges of classical ballet or modern dance are dispelled. There is not a strict separation between dancer and witness giving all present the opportunity to participate in a somatic emancipated dancing moment. Also the extraordinary lighting, set, costumes of the stage are eliminated in informal spaces where the performance is not a spectacle for an audience but a freeing experience for the dancers and witnesses. “The contact improvisers’ anticostumes of “work clothes,” usually sweatpants and T-shirts, tend to obscure the outline of the bodies. The bagginess and sometimes even padded quality of this clothing camouflage breasts, hips, and musculature, to some degree” (Novak 1990, 132). With the audience incorporated into the dancing experience, and the

bodies of the dancers concealed by their costumes, as if to say “Not on display,” an equal transference of power between performers and witnesses could take place. The dancer is not an object of the gaze, but “*The dancer is just a person*” (Novack 1990, 122). Dancers are engaged in their natural movements, as defined by Halprin and Duncan, embracing the possibilities of their own bodies and not trying to force movement that does not feel good or empowering. By undoing the conventions of the theater, new conventions could be made and accepted more readily without the stage walling in the possibilities.

Though Isadora Duncan and Anna Halprin liberated the female dancing body in important and lasting ways, Contact Improvisation as a social duet form has the ability to break sexist conventions of Western dance in every dancing moment: “*Everyone should be equally important*” (Novack 1990, 123). Duets in Contact Improvisation can be comprised of two men, two women, transgender individuals, or a man and women. The contacting homosexual and transgender duets allow for alternate ways of gender interaction than the heterosexual norm that we are accustomed to in ballet and modern dance (Novack 1990, 126). Contact Improvisation “created situations in which men could partner one another in gentle, nonmacho ways, harking back to the origins of the form” (Banes 2003,79), and women could interact with each other exploring all the facets of their womanhood together, not only sexual, dainty or confined movements of classical ballet. In the heterosexual duets, women can lift, throw, and carry men, and men can do the same to women (Novack 1990, 128). As we have seen in classical ballet, the lift as a movement has become associated with lightness and submissiveness. Not only do

Contact partnerships trade of submissive and dominant roles, but they trouble the airiness of the lift and the stableness of the lifting (Novack 1990, 127). Each dancer is able to be his or her strongest most powerful self, or his or her quietest most gentle self, regardless of gender or gendered movement. What is valued in a Contact duet is that both partners can be equally responsive to how the improvisational contact point changes and develops. There is no leader and no follower in a well developed contact partnership: “At first, it may seem clear who is leading and who is following; eventually, however, with time and practice, the shifting back and forth evolves into such rapid and subtle exchange that the categories of leader and follower begin to lose their oppositional meaning. The binary is subverted as the attention shifts onto the play of space and touch between the two movers” (Albright 2003, 263). Just as leader and follower disintegrate in Contact Improvisation, so do gendered body types:

Any kind of male or female body is acceptable, because the form depends on sensing momentum and changing from active to passive weight at the right movements; a large person who knows how to move his or her weight may seem much lighter than a small person who does not. That a person is man or woman, smaller or larger, is not a central concern of the dancers (Novack 1990, 128).

What is important is that the dancers, male, female, or other, fat, skinny, or in between can somatically engage their most capable and creative dancing selves.

Because somatic dance is action as Foster put it, and action is what reshapes the world, when a Contact Improvisation duet offers other possibilities of relationality than heteronormative constructions of gender roles, the actual range of ways of being in the world increase for the dancers and witnesses. In turn, the inward and peripheral engagement of the somatic Contact Improviser provide our culture tangible examples of how powerful, creative, and connected humans can be when they

integrate their holistic selves with the dynamic community environment. The feminist somatic praxis of Contact Improvisation helps to create a freer world of greater human possibility.

However, though modern and postmodern feminist somatic cultural dance praxis strives to be an oasis for emancipated body, there exist some hypocritical discrepancies. In the final section of this chapter I would like to discuss how modern postmodern feminist somatic cultural praxis has not yet reached its greatest potential, in order to provide a balanced analysis of the research. The purpose of this section is not to disregard the revolutionary praxis that indeed achieves the mission to free the somatic being, but to discuss how the praxis can be strengthened in the future.

### **To be Considered Engaged with Praxis, We Must Practice What We Preach:**

Though the entire culture in the United States suffers from somatic oppression under the capitalist “immutable shell” or as a victim of discrimination, not all people have access to the modern and postmodern dance somatic praxis. What is important to note about all the dancers that I have used for my prime examples for creating and engaging in the modern and postmodern dance somatic praxis is that they are all white, all upper class, and received higher education. It cannot be over-looked that it is these socioeconomic markers that enabled these people to have the time, energy, and resources to create these practices that are focused on healing the body, community, and nature. The majority of this exclusion is due to the economic disparity that exists in this country. Though all people undergo the disconnection,

pain, and loss of self that is enforced by somatic oppression, not all people have the socioeconomic assets to overcome these afflictions.

Martha Eddy, one of the only Somatic dance teachers directly addressing this issue states:

I have found myself arguing the importance of “fighting for” Time, Space, Quiet, and Understandable Language. I also make a case for the importance of... the Body and Education in the life growth process. These are all treasures; critical to somatic awareness and social change and especially in order for more people to have access to the somatic experience. They all are expensive in our culture (Eddy 2000, 3).

Though the dance of Isadora Duncan, Anna Halprin, and the Contact Improvisation community claim to offer an opportunity for all people to discover the somatic healing processes of dance either as witness or dancer, the populations that attend and perform in these dances do not represent all people. Instead only those who can afford, as Eddy says, to take time out of their days to relax, breathe, and play in a safe, clean, and quiet room will be able to experience somatic emancipation. Indeed the conditions that are required for somatic engagement can be costly. If a person does manage to attend a somatic experience, be it a dance concert, a class, or a dance jam, there are still more hurdles to cross to fully participate. As Eddy mentions, the language used in somatic based dance experiences like “let your viscera relax and bulge as your diaphragm pushes it in and out of the abdominal cavity” is an extremely elitist way of speaking that favors only those who are educated in anatomy or the practice of relaxing and releasing the organs which one learns in a somatic dance class. Both anatomical terms and somatic release are not yet formally taught in this country anywhere besides colleges and universities. Unfortunately, not all young people in the U.S. can afford higher education, and those that can are not culturally

encouraged to major in dance because of the study's association with the "irrational body" (Green 2002, 1122). This way of speaking, though precise to those who understand, can ostracize a person who is not privy to the vocabulary, when in fact all that is being asked to do "Is take deep relaxed breaths." Though somatic praxis promotes the wellbeing of everyone, in the end those who are actually somatically emancipated are the wealthy, white, and educated (Eddy 2000, 3).

It is important to note that it is not the fault of the people engaged in the somatic praxis of modern/postmodern dance that the economy does not give people equal opportunity to participate. But they are culpable for having a mission statement that wants to emancipate all people from somatic oppression through dance, and not being more creative about how all people can in fact participate. Isadora Duncan charged top fee for her concerts, only permitting the wealthy to experience her natural freedom: "In Duncan's dancing and verbal discourse, the natural body turns out to the civilised body" (Thomas 2003, 171). Duncan looked down on groups that were not connected to her version of white, wealthy naturalness:

"On one hand she espoused a Whitmanesque libertarian view of the American body, for all people, regardless of class, race or creed. On the other hand, the body she cultivated was one which was marked by class distinction, social status and racial superiority, and which she equated increasingly with 'America'. She hated ragtime or 'jazz dancing' which she identified with primitivism and excess, and a denial of 'culture and civilisation'. Daly argues that by 'defining her artistic practice in opposition to "primitive" modern [jazz inspired] dance, Duncan was effectively constructing a genre of American dance as whiteness' (p. 219)" (Thomas 2003, 172).

With Duncan as the founding mother of the feminist somatic modern dance praxis, racism and classism continued to infect the work.

It is hard to criticize Halprin as a part of the hypocrisy of the postmodern feminist somatic praxis because she was one of the revolutionaries who broke class

and race boundaries as well as redefined dance training as an active engagement with the embodied self. She was able to see outside of the racial norm of modern and postmodern dance groups when she created the first multiracial company in the country (*Breath Made Visible*). She also solved the cost issue by making somatic dance experiences like *the Planetary Dance* open to everyone free of charge and outside of the theater or dance studio. However, as a student of hers at the Tamalpa Institute in the summer of 2010, it was important for me to understand first hand that there is a distinction between somatic dance praxis, and somatic therapy praxis. What I encountered at the Tamalpa Institute was the later.

When I signed up for a class called “Empowering Creativity through Movement, Metaphor and Dance” I assumed I would be partaking in a group dance experience. I learned rather quickly that I was one of the only people not suffering from of a terminal illness and that the majority of the participants had come to Anna for therapeutic healing. Although I believe that all somatic dance can be therapeutic because it mends the mind, body and spirit into union with self and community, there is a difference between moving for the sake of creative metaphor, and moving for therapy. As a healthy young person who tried to arrive each day open to Halprin, myself, and my dancing community, I found that I was not feeling the somatic emancipation I was looking for from a dance experience, but was being bombarded by the physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering that was happening all around me from those engaged in a therapeutic experience. What I learned from my experience at Tamalpa Institute was not that somatic

dance experiences are better than somatic therapy, but that they should remain relatively separate because they value different goals. A therapeutic dance goal is to create ritual for the self that can help the healing process, and an artistic dance goal is to create an expressive experience not only for the dancers but for the witnesses. Eddy comments on the care that somatic dance makers need to take in creating their work:

“Dancing-making from a somatic source often gets lost in personal experience and only grows to the level of personal ritual. We are creative in developing venues for the sharing of personal rituals. Furthermore we strive to differentiate between what is appropriate for intimate audiences and what must be crafted and cultivated to have meaning, albeit derived from deep bodily knowing, across a wider range of individuals” (Eddy 2000 7).

The heaviness and personal intensity of somatic therapy masked as art can prevent community connection and the production of somatic artworks to be effectively performed for the public.

Contact Improvisation does not usually veer into the therapeutic realm because it is so actively engaged in immediate response to the physical sensations of partner work. It is important to notice within the Contact Improvisational framework that Novak lays out that there is a discrepancy between theory and practice. If the “*The dancer is just a person*” and “*Everyone should be equally important*” why is it that the demographic at any give contact jam around the country is overwhelmingly dominated by white, wealthy, educated dancers, and why do they all move in the such a similar way? As I carefully look through the 109 photos in Novak’s *Sharing the Dance*, the only African-American body I can find participating in the form

in Bill T. Jones, one of the most famous African-American postmodern choreographers. When I attend jams on my college campus at Wesleyan University, or at Contact Improvisation hubs like Earthdance in Plainsfield, Massachusetts, usually zero to five percent of participants engaged in the form are people of color. This could be subjective to my experience, and most likely more diverse Contact Jams are happening in the United States, however, I recognize that in the seminal texts and sites of postmodern somatic cultural praxis, Contact Improvisation has a specific limited demographic. Though the white dancers should not be looked down upon for creating this dance form, it is important when implementing egalitarian language, such as “*Everyone should be equally important,*” as theory to describe the form, to strive to put it into practice on as many levels possible.

As well as a low population of other ethnicities, there are almost always more women than men at contact jams. Perhaps this phenomenon can be correlated with the fact that woman and men experience somatic oppression in different ways. Though women are oppressed into sexualized physical objects, they remain connected the feeling sensual body in cultural stereotypes (Young 2005, 81). Men, however, in Western culture are disassociated from the feelings of the body, and their emotions. They are either considered work horses or mega-minds (Young 2005, 81). These cultural stereotypes make it more difficult for men to participate in somatic integration because it is seen as weak or feminine to be connected to body, mind, and spirit. Contact Improvisation embraces all people to enact

whatever gender definition they chose, however, there is a cultural filter on the Contact jams, preventing many men from experiencing the emancipation of the form. Contact Improvisation is not at fault for this unevenness in the population, but its power does suffer when men do not also perform the many ways gender can exist in dance and in the world.

My final criticism, according to the framework that all individuals are equal in Contact Improvisation, is to question why most Contacters adhere to a singular definition of aesthetic based on flow as constant rolling sequentiality. Though Contacters have questioned this principle of flow as limiting the possibilities of the form, it continues to reign as the major way of moving (Banes 2003). Of course there are benefits to a common bodily organization to unify the form, but care needs to be taken when identifying Contact Improvisation as fully engaged somatic praxis with theory that values individual movement invention but all dancers move alike. Again, Contact Improvisation should not be devalued for having a common aesthetic, which in fact is quite effective, powerful, and integrative, but if “everything goes is” a considered a defining principle, the Contact community should continue to push themselves for a more inclusive diverse future.

In my discussion of the modern and postmodern dance feminist somatic cultural praxis I hope to have described how Isadora Duncan, Anna Halprin, and the form of Contact Improvisation have made revolutionary progress against somatic oppression through dance in the United States. I also described how the form can continue to become a more solid and effective praxis in the future with greater care of

sweeping egalitarianism and more creative initiative to create a more widely accessible praxis. In the next chapter I follow the same descriptive historical framework of the African-American social dance as anti-racist somatic cultural praxis pointing out how the praxes are culturally different, and how and when their wisdoms and pitfalls overlap.

## Chapter Four

### **The Anti-racist Somatic Praxis of African American Social Dance:**

#### **The Powers of Letting Loose**

For the peoples of African descent in the United States of America, social dance has never been a simple afterhours recreational activity, or a meaningless demonstration of “letting loose.” On the contrary,

According to Murray...dance movement has nothing to do with sensual abandonment...Like all good dancers, practitioners of this style do not throw their bodies around they do not cut completely loose. When the musical break comes, it is not a matter of “letting it all hang out”, but a matter of proceeding in terms of “ a very specific technology of stylization.” A loss of control and a loss of coolness places one *squarely* outside of the tradition (Original emphasis. Malone 1996, 34).

To participate within the tradition of somatic praxis within African-American social dance, one must never treat the self with reckless carnal frivolity; instead, care, respect, and power must be given to the performing living body and its ability to transform cultural reality. Many African-American social dances dating from slavery to today have been the site of major resistance against the oppression of the African-American somatic being. As I have discussed in the previous chapters, the somatic self cannot exist under oppressive cultural conditions. Therefore somatic

dances must create experiences in which the participants strive for emancipation of self and others. When we reframe “letting loose” through these social dances as a political and somatic mission for freedom, we see that the holistic and highly virtuosic, stylized release that characterizes these dances classify their movements as far from meaningless physical activity. Instead:

Albert Murray calls African American public dances a ritual of purification, affirmation, and celebration. It helps drive the blues away and provides rich opportunities to symbolically challenge societal hierarchies by offering powers and freedoms that are impossible in ordinary life (Malone 1996, 1). the African-American social dances discussed in this chapter include the spiritual dance the Ring Shout from the slavery era and Underground-House dancing that began in the 1970s and continues today. These dances reveal the embodied lineage of resistance against discrimination, and in turn against the oppression of the somatic body. Under the stifling oppressive forces of slavery and racism, the somatic African-American being has been at risk of segmentation and objectification since relocation to the United States. And though white supremacist actions have attempted to deny their somatic being by dehumanizing African-Americans through inhumane work-conditions and brutal discrimination, these dances are brazen testaments to the failure of oppressors’ efforts.

The Ring Shout and Underground-House were selected from a wide variety of African-American social dances because they so strongly exemplify somatic praxis. Not all African-American social dances share the somatic and resistive qualities that characterize the dances chosen for this chapter. Many African-American dances that have been infiltrated by the forces of segmentation and objectification, and other dances that are centered more on resistance than somatic balance. It is important not

to generalize the values of an entire genre of dance, for within every genre there are individual pockets of ideology and practice. For the purpose of this chapter, I define social dances of the African-American somatic praxis as dances that refuse to display the African-American somatic being under oppressive forces. Never do these dances portray the African-American as an inferior race (Hegel 1956, 96), or engage with negative stereotypes unless in the jest of political commentary, and instead, demonstrate virtuosity, creativity, and skill. Nor do these dances succumb to the objectification of the participants or witnesses because they emphasize the subjective somatic agent through avid use of improvisation as well as positive communal participation. Though sexuality plays a part in all dances in one way or another, the sexual being is not the focus of these dances. Instead, it is the somatic being who houses the sexual being, spiritual being, intellectual being, and physical being that is invited on to the dance floor. Finally, these dances boldly fight against the invisibility of American black bodies in American culture. Through their social nature, these dances gather many people together engaging in dynamic full-bodied movement all for the similar intention of defining the terms of their visibility. By prioritizing inner embodied knowledge of African sensibilities like polyrhythms, community emphasis, improvisation, and coolness in relation to the diasporic culture and environment of African-American life, the dances explored in this chapter provide unique examples of somatic cultural praxis in the United States.

### **Somatic Inheritance of African Ontology**

Unlike the history of the somatic praxis of modern and postmodern dance, where the somatic body had to be reclaimed from stifling classical ballet conventions, the somatic praxis of African-American dance originates from the vibrant somatic tradition of Central and West African culture. Jacqui Malone, in her synthesis of African-American dance called *Steppin on the Blues* explains the major African groups that made up the slave population in the United States: “Bantu-speaking peoples constituted the largest culturally related group brought to North America: 41 percent of those arriving between 1701 and 1810. During that same period, western Africans comprised 59 percent of the newly arrived slaves” (Malone 1996, 26). Based on her figures, it is safe to associate Central African and West African cultures as the dominant influences of African-American cultural formation. African sensibility has survived in many ways within African-American culture, but as Katrina Hazard-Gordon states: “Social dancing links African-Americans to their African past more strongly than any other aspect of their culture (Hazard-Gordon 1990, 3). Hazard-Gordon can make this statement with such confidence not only because dancing is done with the body, which can serve as a vessel for deep embodied knowledge, but because social dancing is continually practiced within the African-American community, whose collective cultural memory has proven to have the profound power to preserve cultural values many hundreds of years old from across the ocean.

Malone continues to list some of the African characteristics that have survived in the dances through the passage to slavery:

American dance serves some of the same purposes as traditional dances in western and central African cultures: on both continents black dance is a

source of energy, joy, inspiration; a spiritual antidote to oppression; and a way to lighten work, teach social values, and strengthen institutions. It also teaches unity of mind and body and regenerates mental and physical power. ... 'We sing different songs, and then we'd dance a while to rest ourselves'" (Malone 1996, 24).

Here Malone provides us with ample evidence of the praxis of somatic healing and performance in African social dance that lived on in African-American social dance. Malone describes the dance of both continents as utilizing creative movement to resist oppressive conditions by emphasizing positivity and wellbeing of the community, as well as wholeness of the inner self. Malone suggests that the happiness and somatic wholeness cultivated in social dancing are mutually related: "The attainment of wholeness, rather than the amassing of power, is what ultimately makes people happy, and the goal of art is help achieve that wholeness by providing humanity with basic 'equipment for living'" (Malone 1996, 23). Malone describes dance not as a frivolous unimportant act that has no effect on the self or world, but as a means of attaining somatic "equipment for living". And though much of the somatic praxis of African-American social dance has developed in response to the cultural circumstances in the United States, it is African sensibilities that make up the foundation of the "equipment for living" practiced in African-American social dance.

Robert Farris Thompson is one of the seminal anthropologists of African dance. In *African Art in Motion*, Thompson, describes the visual, musical, and performance art of African regions and the cultural systems that inspire the artwork. Though not all of his research points to a somatically engaged continent of dancers, he notes some important characteristics that provide the basis of the somatic cultural praxis of African-American social dance. The first notable somatic characteristic is "Multiple Meter" or polyrhythmic engagement with the body (Thompson 1974, 14).

The physical practice of polyrhythmic moving entails having the skill to separate the body into different sections, each of which carry their own rhythm: “The dancer must impart equal life, equal autonomy, to every dancing portion of his frame” (Thompson 1974, 9). The same phenomenon can be seen in African drumming where each drum plays a separate rhythm, but all played in tandem create polyrhythmic synthesis. This asymmetrical means of balance is ideologically opposed to Western classical symmetrical balance. There exists no rigid line from which all movement replicates in African and African-American social dance, instead there exist multiple centers of movement simultaneously complimenting and contradicting one another. To “dance many drums” within one body, a dancer must have an intimate knowledge and control of their own bodies (Thompson 1974, 14). This knowledge and control is made possible by intense yet widespread inner listening which enables the hips, hands, feet, and head to all move in precise but colliding rhythms. To be a polyrhythmic performer, there can be no blocks between body, mind, and spirit. The mind cannot ‘think too hard’ during polyrhythmic movement because the kinesthetic feeling conjured through a connection with the polyrhythmic drumming will be broken. To be a polyrhythmic dancer, one must be present within himself, allowing the knowledge of the body to emerge without force, as well as cultivate a presence of interaction between the self and the community of dancers, witnesses, musicians, and the earth. The embodiment of complex polyrhythmicity offers the mover a profound experience of somatic interconnection with the world. By allowing the rhythms of music, community, and planet to enter into our soma, we are able to spiritually engage with the world:

Rhythm, asserts Leopold Senghor, is “the architecture or being, the inner dynamic that gives it form, the pure expression of life force. Rhythm is the vibratory shock, the force which throughout sense, grips us at the root of our being. It is expressed through corporeal and sensual means, through lines, and surfaces, colours, and volumes in architecture, sculpture and painting; through accents in poetry and music, through movements in dance... In the degree to which rhythm is sensual embodied, it illuminates the spirit” (Malone 1996, 32).

Rhythm is one of the most essential somatic characteristics of the African and African-American dance, which is why music, as the aural medium of rhythm and the spirit, is always a crucial element of African-American dance.

The next somatic characteristic described by Thompson is “Getting down” (Thompson 1974, 14). This term applies to both music and dance and is related to cultural respect for the earth. In a climactic moment of skill, the dancer slowly descends to the ground in an act of strength. By coming in close proximity to the earth the dancer honors the ground with their body. This somatic notion of including the environment as vitally connected to our wellbeing is clearly demonstrated in the somatic statement of getting down, “Getting down is honoring with virtuosic art and total presence” (Thompson 1974, 14). “Getting down” opposes the rigid line that the classical ballerina attempts to erect in her body that requires all of the natural weight of the body to be withheld from gravity. Rather, the African and African-American somatic emphasis of downwardness not only allows for the natural weight of the body to participate in dance, but it regards this weighted relationship to gravity as “honoring” the earth. While the ballerina denies the weight of her physical body and in doing so segments her relationship to herself, the African/African-American dancer indulges in the full somatic composition of self in relation to gravitational pull of the earth resulting in wellbeing and “total presence”.

The next African dance characteristic that was inherited into the somatic praxis of African-American dance is “Call-and-Response”. This component also seen in music and dance is a structure in which leaders of dance or song put out a call, and a chorus responds (Thompson 1974, 27). The caller/callers must at once anchor the chorus while determining the creative dynamics of dance. The responding community must react with rhythmic precision to the caller, as well as form a dynamic and lively community voice within their repetitive response. This model can be understood as a somatic model for dancing. It thwarts capitalist structures in which each individual tries to ascend a hierarchy, instead it offers to share power with both the individual and the community to achieve greatness. In many cases, call-and-response manifests as a soloist within a circle. The circle itself is a resonant somatic shape where all beings involved in the circle are connected. As the soloists go in and out of the middle of the circle, each dancer has the opportunity to offer their strengths to the community: “Thus call-and-response and solo-and-circle, far from solely constituting matter of structure, are in actuality levels of perfected social intention. The canon is a danced judgment of qualities of social integration and cohesion” (Thompson 1974, 28). Call-and-response fulcrums on connectivity, sharing, individual opportunity, and the strength of community.

The final African characteristic researched by Thompson that I would like to discuss in this section as a elemental component of African-American social dance is “coolness” (Thompson 1974, 44). Coolness as Thompson defines:

The primary metaphorical extension of this term in most of these cultures seems to be *control*, having the value of *composure* in the individual context, *social stability* in the context of the group...as powers which purify men and

women by return to freshness, to immaculate concentration of mind, to the artistic shaping of matter and societal happening (Thompson 1973,41). Although coolness can come off as aloofness, or pretention, in its most somatic terms it is related to a state of embodied presence in which no difficult or oppressive forces are capable of distracting the dancer from their creative task at hand. To move with coolness, to “metaphorically to include composure under fire”, is to retain the wholeness of self no matter how straining the circumstance (Thompson 1973, 41): “In other words, mastery of self enables a person to transcend time and elude preoccupation. He can concentrate or she can concentrate upon truly important matters of social balance and aesthetic substance, creative matters, full motion and brilliance” (Thompson 1973, 41). Here Thompson qualifies what is truly important to an African dancer- that which is “full”, “balanced”, and “creative” in order to bring about “brilliance”. Coolness in dance, a state of controlled cleansing enables the self to take in the creative resources at hand and respond with his greatest ability. Coolness is not in a somatic context a means to make others feel less cool or put down. Thompson proposes that coolness is dependent on imparting this calm and powerful state to others: “coolness is achieved where one person restores another to serenity” (Thompson 1973, 41). We see that coolness, though perceived by those who do not understand the goals this of attitude can come off as unwelcoming or cold, is actually a regenerative somatic state wherein the dancer can connect fully to her inner self, her community, and her environment: “In Africa coolness is an all-embracing positive attribute which combines notions of composure, silence, vitality, healing, and social purification” (Thompson 1974, 43). Coolness is one of the most potent and misunderstood qualities of African-American social dance. It is this

composed, self-knowing, self-sensing, cool quality that colors all parts of the somatic praxis of African-American social dance.

One of the most important somatic characteristics of African-American dance, which encompasses all of the attributes mentioned above, is improvisation.

Improvisation is the most foundational element of African-American social dance, and as I have discussed in relation to improvisation in postmodern somatic praxis, it is also somatic ontology. In the next section I survey improvisation in African-American social dance as discussed by scholars of African-American dance. I will include some analysis of the overlap with postmodern dance improvisation, but it is extremely important to the development of this paper that modern and postmodern dance are not considered predecessors to African-American improvisational dance. Improvisation in music and dance was incorporated in United States culture via African-American influence.

### **Introduction of Improvisation in Africa-American Social Dance**

Improvisation as demonstrated in African-American social dance is “an additive process....a way of experimenting with new ideas: that mindset is Africa’s most important contribution to the Western Hemisphere (1996, 33)” (Malone as quotes by Jackson 2001, 40). Though improvisational capacity exists in Western culture, it is not an inherent part of life and art like it is always has been in Africa and the African diaspora. It was not until improvisational structures in music and dance from African-American culture began to be appropriated by white Americans that improvisational art making become prevalent in Euro-American culture.

Improvisation for Africans and African-Americans is not only a philosophy for art making but an instantaneous “additive” and “experimental” way of life. It was improvisation, the ability to react quickly and skillfully in adverse situations, that enabled the survival of African people once they arrived in the United States into lives of slavery and racism. Improvisation, or “riff-style” as Albert Murray calls it, offers more than the means for survival at the most basic objectified level, but for survival of the full subjective body, mind, and spirit: “riff-style flexibility and an open disposition towards the vernacular underlie the incomparable endurance of black soulfulness or humanity” (Malone 1996 27). As I have cited Fraleigh earlier in this work, “The body becomes truly human when the distinction between spirit, mind, and body disappears”(Fraleigh 2004, 28). The “black of soulfulness or humanity” that Malone refers to could not have endured without the preservation of the somatic integration of the black living body. Through this line of logic, it becomes clear that improvisation as a mode of living and art making allowed African-Americans to retain their humane somatic selves against the inhumanity of their oppression. Though many characteristics of postmodern dance improvisation overlap with African-American improvisation in performance and practice, the cultural context that situates African-American improvisation is unique and definitive to their history.

Improvisation functions in African-American social dance for a specific goal, “to provide rich opportunities to symbolically challenge societal hierarchies by offering powers and freedoms that are impossible in ordinary life” (Malone 1996, 1). Improvisation offers power and freedom to the embodied dancer. Like in Jazz music, and Anna Halprin’s dances, African- American improvisational dance follows a set

score from which power and freedom can be ascertained. These scores provide the structure or pattern that is to be transformed:

The African American aesthetic encourages exploration and freedom in composition. Originality and individuality are not just admired, they are expected. But creativity must be balanced between the artist's conception of what is good and the audience's idea of what is good. The point is to add to the tradition and extend it without straying too far from it (Malone 1996, 35).

Improvisation in a cultural or performative setting is not a meaningless "letting loose", but a balanced dialog between a structure created by collaborative community sourcing and an individual responding to that structure. This responsive system of choreography allows for participants to feel supported and challenged to release into the emancipated state of play:

That is we learn the ethics of a culture and we learn to identify good play, which is similar to learning how to recognize good performance. The determining factors have to do with personal creativity, styling, and aesthetics.

Thus play becomes performance" (Malone 1996, 28).

In order to achieve this state of freedom of "play becomes performance", a dancer must be cued into her own inner creative sources coming from body, mind, and spirit, as well as into details of the community-designed score within which she dances.

This playful somatic way of composing dance connects inner choreographic material to outer community and environmental established material.

The ultimate score in African-American improvisational dance is the constant rhythm provided from the music from which the dancer can "riff" off, "The jazz dancer James Berry comments: 'You feel free to do what you want and you can't get lost, because you can always come in, you can dance with abandon but still you are encased within the beat. That is the heart of dancing'" (Malone 1996, 33). In African-American dance the beat, or rhythmic play in the music, is fundamental to a

dance experience: “One of the most important aesthetics of black music and dance is an understanding of the inseparability between sound and movement...Rather, black vernacular music and dance are conceptual and experiential partners that feed on the same processes for invention” (Jackson 2001, 45). Music provides aural sensory input to all dancers present, connecting the dancers to each other through a common pulse, the dancers to the musicians, and the dancers to the inner biological pulses of their heart and lungs. Rhythmic music provides a somatic improvisational score in which “invention”, integration, connection, and awareness are cultivated.

Cohesion of self, community, environment, and music, as well as polyrhythmic moving, getting down, call-and-response, solo-circle, and coolness all share one important prerequisite that makes each possible: sensing. The commitment to sensory awareness is fundamental to somatic praxis as a healing as well as performance model. Dancers must heal segmentation by fully sensing their entire beings as connected to their outside world. This high-sensory state allows dancers to retrieve and perform inner bodily knowledge at rapid speed. By sensing themselves and their surroundings, they can move the body with articulation and variation, feel the earth beneath their feet, know when it is right to enter into the center of the circle for a solo, and retain a calm and collected demeanor. Sensing as a somatic practice makes it possible for break dancers to do a back flip and land on their feet. Sensing enables club dancers to move sharply without hitting a neighboring dancer. Sensing is what makes social improvisational dance, the act of creative instantaneous choreography within a group, possible. Jackson speaks at length on the subject:

Delineating improvisation as choreography in black vernacular dancing reveals the intrinsic value... of sensing in the dancing...By sensing, I mean

the valorization of emotion as a path toward intelligent knowing. Sensing also signifies a heightened, in-the-moment, understanding of one's relationship to forces in the environment around the body (like gravity and the weighted pull of the ground) and the acknowledgment of psychosomatic forces that embrace unknowable, mystical forces perceivable by faith. These values—especially the understanding of emotional and physical experience as intelligent endeavor—challenges us to rethink the “pervasive influence of the Platonic-Cartesian notion of person” ...The dancing of specific communities like African Americans contains fascinating strategies that embody this resistance [against the Platonic-Cartesian model] (Jackson 2001, 43).

Jackson upholds that it is heightened sensory awareness in African-American improvisational social dance, that allows the “intelligence” of the body to be in dialog with gravity, as well as encouraging the powers of the spirit to emerge during performance. Any split between mind and body could endanger the dancer's wellness and reputation. The complexities of African-American improvisational dance require full sensory attention to achieve such thorough somatic engagement with the self and surroundings. A mastery of the sensory capacity enables a dancer to achieve their highest potential as an individual and communal improvisational dancer.

African-American improvisational dance resists Weber's capitalist notions that individual success matters over all else. Their somatic cultural model depends on individuals offering their best selves to the community while supporting and enabling others to do the same. Duke Ellington explains the meaning a solo performance in jazz: “each solo flight, or improvisation, represents...a definition of his identity: as an individual, as member of the collectivity and as a link in the chain of tradition” (Malone 1996, 33). Individuality, or flair is highly valued within this somatic cultural praxis. Opposed to capitalist individuality where the self is forced to succeed within an oppressive structure, improvisational scores are designed to free the individual

dancer within a supportive community environment; “‘DO YOUR OWN THING,’ explains the playwright Paul Carter Harrison, ‘is an invitation to bring YOUR OWN THING into complementary relations with the mode, so that we all might benefit from it power’” (Malone 1996, 36). “Doing your own thing” during a solo improvisational moment implies moving according to the highest potential of one’s own structure, or engaging in one’s “natural movements” as Fraleigh would say. Do not try to look like anyone else to “prevent the performer from delivering static reproductions of familiar patterns or imitation of someone else’s hard-earned style” (Malone 1996, 35). The goal of somatic African-American improvisation is to create regenerative forms of freedom that can benefit the whole. As a participant in group dancing, it is not important to be the best, but to contribute to the strength and solidarity of the group. To follow the ebbs and flows of group improvisation is just as challenging and rewarding as it is to perform a solo. Within a solo performance, the “power” is not generated from selfishness, but the dancer’s ability to share the subjectivity of his individual body, mind, and spirit with his community.

In the next section I discuss my first case study of the somatic cultural praxis of African-American improvisational social dance, the Ring Shout. This dance of the slave era offers an excellent example of how somatic African characteristics survived and adapted in the new African-American dance, and how the powers of improvisation in life and dance provided tools for resistance against the Euro-American oppression of slaves’ somatic beings.

### **The Ring Shout: Somatic Roots of African-American Dance**

Shut off from their somatic faculties including compassion, wellbeing, and interconnectivity by the capitalist greed for material success, Euro-American businessmen and plantation owners imported African bodies, enslaved them, and through a regime of violence and discrimination forced them to continuously work the fields to increase United States production and profit. In order to keep slaves under the control of their masters, white Euro-Americans understood that they had to segment the African somatic self, who is a powerful and free agent, and segment African people from each other in order to prevent dangerous congregation and revolt. However, the African peoples refused to be splintered. African culture valued wholeness and subversive improvisation too greatly to succumb to the treatment of objectification. Improvisational dance was one of most effective means for retaining African identity, strength of community, and somatic living. In fact, many slave revolts were planned during dance celebrations that occurred over the Christmas holidays:

Indeed, ample evidence indicates that slave insurrections were either plotted at dances or scheduled to take place on occasions that involved dancing. One analysis revealed that 35 percent of rebellions in British Caribbean were either planned for or took place in late December (Hazard-Gordon 1990, 34). The Ring Shout, a spiritual dance that took place during weekly and celebratory religious gatherings, is one of the oldest and most subversive African-American dances dating back to pre-revolutionary times.

Though Shouts, as they are commonly called, happened all over the United States in different slave communities over a large span of time, the dance has some basic characteristics that remain intact throughout the variations:

All share basic similarities: (1) the song is “danced: with the whole body, with hands, feet, belly, and hips; (2) the worship is basically, a dancing-singing phenomenon; (3) the dancers always move counter-clockwise around the ring; (4) the song was the leader-chorus form, with much repetition, with a focus on rhythm and rather than on melody, that is with a form that invited and ultimately enforces cooperative group activity; (5) the song continues to be repeated sometimes more than an hour; steadily increasing in intensity and gradually accelerating, until a sort of mass hypnosis ensues” (Glass 2007, 38-38).

I would like to analyze and elaborate on each of these characteristics of the Ring Shout through a somatic lens in order to show how the dance retains somatic African identity as well as serves a subversive event for emancipation.

First, we are told that when participating in the Ring Shout “the song is danced”. This can be understood to mean that sensory awareness is allowing music to flow into the body, have an effect within, and then flow out through expressive embodiment. In many cases, the lyrics of the songs were pantomimed by the dancers (Glass 2007, 45). This harmonious relationship between body and music not only mends disconnections between body, mind, and spirit but avidly connects the body to an outside source. Furthermore, it is danced “with the whole body”. The African/African-American skilled somatic body is capable of moving all parts separately while in concert. This holistic connectivity to the full body requires that there are no blind spots or “sensory motor amnesia” within the body (Hanna 1988, xiii). The entire body must have full sensation in order to engage the whole body in polyrhythmicity.

Second, the dance is a form of “worship”. As a religious dance, the Ring Shout’s primary purpose is spiritual embodiment. This integration of spirit and body through song and dance fosters cultural and performative somatic praxis. In the

origins of the dance, the content focused on African religious worship, but as slaves were converted to Christianity, “the shout was remade to fit the new religion, allowing them to continue to worship in a traditional African way” (Glass 2007, 35). The dances most commonly took place in makeshift churches after the sermon, creating a weekly practice to gather together to dance. Once converted to Christianity, slave owners did not want to deter their slaves from worship, but they knew that these weekly spiritual energetic congregations could be potentially threatening to white control.

slaveholders were well aware that dance could function as a form of social intercourse, cultural expression, assimilation mechanism, and political expression. Because it was a means of solidifying the slave community, dance could threaten white dominance. Indeed, slaves used dance to camouflage insurrectionary activity (Hazard-Gordon 1990, 22). The Ring Shout acted as “camouflage” for African spiritual practice under the guise of Christian worship. It enabled slaves retain spiritual, cultural, and embodied wholeness, and in doing so made their communities strong enough to withstand the brutalities of slavery. It was not only the weekly gatherings that strengthened slave communities, but the somatic content of dancing worship, like full-bodied moving and musical interaction, that added to the dance’s power.

The third and fourth characteristics described above by spectators of the dance further strengthen the Ring Shout as a somatic form. The Ring Shout is termed as such because it occurs in a moving ring. This circle formation is linked to the special formation of many West African dances. The spatial pattern of the circle enables connectivity among the dancers’ bodies in space, as well as unites the participants within a shared spiritual intention. Within the circle, dancers adhere the

improvisational score to shuffle around the circle moving counterclockwise. Each dancer/singer/worshiper is encouraged to move with their own individual nuance: the “kinesthetic and verbal ‘ways of moving together’ spur the participants on to greater artistic heights while simultaneously creating a spirit of kinship and solidarity” (Malone 1996, 5).

Next, the research on the dance informs us that it is called a shout, because of the call-and-response shouting or singing. A caller sings out an improvised hymn and the chorus of circling dancers and singers respond. This format encourages cultural somatic praxis by emphasizing collaboration, connectivity, and improvisational response. The caller, also referred to as the “sticker”, keeps the beat by banging a steady rhythm into the floor with a broomstick (Glass 2007, 43). It can be assumed that the “sticker” in these dancing singing worships emerged as a figure because drums were banned by whites in many slave communities: “Slave communication through drums was implicated in the revolt, and as a result drums were widely banned” (Glass 2007, 44). The broomstick as an improvised drum demonstrates the creative resistance against attempts to oppress African identity and solidarity.

The last characteristic used to describe the Ring Shout describes the ecstatic state that the long repetitive score brings out in its participants.

the altered states of consciousness...which may be called “getting happy” or “getting the spirit” to the repetitive rhythms of the shout, which produce emotional catharsis. Many black Christians, on the other hand, saw this as a salvation experience or a time of spiritual beauty in closeness to God (Glass 2007 50).

Much like the possession by a deity that occurs in traditional Orisha dancing, “getting happy” is the result of profound somatic awareness to the degree where the antennae of the body becomes so refined in receiving information from the energy of community and environment that the body transforms into a conduit for that energy (Alejandro “Telegraphic Shamanism”; Glass 2007, 51). The subjectivity of the dancer becomes so fused with her surroundings that the control of the body is “abandoned for a personal yet communal merging of the self with the deity” (Glass 2007, 51). This ecstatic state of being was not a practical permanent level of consciousness for slaves within their difficult conditions because it requires great vulnerability. However, to go into this type of trance is to participate in one of the most somatic levels of being that can be achieved by a human. That slaves could drop into this state of high sensitivity even under the regime of segmenting oppression is testimony to the strength of the somatic African-American self.

The Ring Shout survived through slavery, the Civil War, the Reconstruction, and is still practiced today in the Georgia Sea Islands (Glass 2007, 32). As a means for protecting African heritage through “circular formation, percussion, pantomime, polyrhythms, orientation to the earth, improvisation, and centrality of the community (Glass 2007 45), the Ring Shout is an embodied relic of Africa in America. As cultural and performative, and healing somatic praxis, the Ring Shout gives societal value to integration and wellbeing of the self, individual and communal improvisation, and deep somatic connectivity to the energy of the self, community, and earth:

In the dark years of slavery and post-bellum economic oppression, the shout offered nurturing and spiritual fulfillment to a people whose lives were

otherwise shadowed by pain and deprivation. Lawernee McKiver captured some of this feeling when he said, “if they set that song right, and I get my blood sort of warm, I can shout. It makes you feel good, you can get something out of it.” The survival of the shout was no accident, but happened because of personal and spiritual value of the experience (Glass 2007, 52). The Ring Shout’s ability to nurture its participants while providing a platform for resistance against oppression makes it an undeniable dance of the African-American somatic praxis. Today its polyrhythmic, communal, holistic characteristics have lived on in dance and music forms like jazz, rock and roll, and Underground-House (Glass 2007, 54).

### **Underground-House: Creating the Vibe**

Underground-House dancing is an African-American social dance that became popular in the 1970s in New York City and has since then spread across the United States. Just as the Ring Shout acted as a political cultural stronghold for the African-American somatic being, post slavery social dances like Underground-House offer African-Americans the opportunity to attain a level of somatic emancipation that is oppressed in everyday life. However, unlike the Ring Shout which was practiced primarily by African-American slaves (though whites were frequently invited to participate), House parties warmly invite all races and sexual orientations to participate in somatic emancipation (Sommer 2001, 76). I categorize Underground-House, more commonly referred to as simply House, in this paper as African-American social dance because in form: call-and-response, improvisation, interdependence on music, and function: a communal spiritual celebration of the holistic self, the dance is clearly an extension of the African Diaspora and more specifically an extension of the Ring Shout (Thompson 1974; Glass 2007). Though

many bodies are welcome to the House experience, House dancing is an embodiment of African-American somatic dance tradition.

Some of the somatic traits of Africa-American somatic praxis that I have previously discussed to describe the Ring Shout, namely improvisation, call-and-response, and interaction between dance and music, remain prevalent in Underground-House. These characteristics constitute cultural, healing, and performative somatic engagement. Improvisation is a key element of any house party. It “keeps the floor alive” (Sommer 2001, 81). There is no set choreography a head a time; dancers are make instantaneous movement decisions based on their individual response to the other dancers around them and the music. This type of improvisation requires the dancer be in close contact with his inner being and aware of the details of his surroundings. In order to successfully execute “the body dives and the sweeping floor work, the dancer must be able to judge speed, distance, and attack within millimeters”, a dancer must be somatically present at all times (Sommer 2001, 71). Sommer reinforces that House’s somatic improvisation “is manifested in acute attentiveness” (Sommer 2001, 81). This somatically attuned interactive state, inherent in the improvisational dancer, demands an equally holistic score.

The call-and-response or solo-circle acts as one of the major scores that takes place in House dancing. The circle, called a cipher, is spontaneously formed around an acknowledged soloist. If the soloist is able to attain the witnesses attention, then the cipher members will clap, yell, and slap the floor for the soloist, “Then, without a break, another dancer would enter and the cipher would continue” (Sommer 2001, 82). This call-and-response format allows for each member to bring their best dancing

self to the floor as well support fellow dancers in their emancipated moments. In doing so, House dancers creates a political system of somatic wellbeing and interconnection. Thompson, describes the score:

Thus call-and-response, and solo-and-circle, far from solely constituting matters of structure are, in actuality, levels of perfected social interaction. The canon is danced judgment of qualities of social integration and cohesion (Thompson 1974, 28).

The togetherness ascribed in the cipher score creates a psychological landscape of ease and support. Though the cipher comes in and out through the night its “perfected social interaction” influences all interactions including couples dancing, the whole club dancing together, or a single dancer “zoning” into her own personal dancing moment (Sommer 2001, 81).

The larger score that encompasses the cipher and the improvisational dancing is the vital interaction between dancers and the rhythmic music. House music “has been specifically created as dance music-nonstop music drives nonstop dancing” (Sommer 2001, 74). It is grounded by an ever present beat which is slower than the speed dancing of Rave and faster than hip hop. Riding the beat are vocals, which can either create another layer of supportive sound or a provide clear uplifting lyrics. But House music, like all African-American music forms, is not created to for disembodied listening, “to be fully realized, house music must be danced to” (Sommer 2001, 74). In fact the music is designed to resonate in the body: “The sound has been engineered (“equalized”) so that some of the deep bass lines are not heard but felt as vibrations in the sternum, so that the dancer literally embodies the music” (Sommer 2001, 73). Like the deep vibrations felt by African drums, the booming base of House beat brings dancer and music into union. Through the form’s emphatic

use of rhythmic music, solo-circle structures, and improvisation, we can see the lineage of African-American somatic praxis alive and well in House dancing.

The term 'Underground' was borrowed to both signify, "after dark, out of sight, and has its own codes and transactions" as well as, "The 'underground railroad' [which] was the secret path of escape for slaves seeking freedom" (Sommer 2001, 75). Post slavery dance spaces, like jook joints and later night clubs, became subversive "after dark" sites where African-Americans could be free of oppressive forces. Dance spaces acted in opposition to capitalist work spaces. As remedy to the monotonous damaging activity that segmented the somatic self described in Marxian analysis of capitalist work environments, jook joints and dance clubs allowed for the dynamic living body to emerge. Underground-House night clubs like the Loft, popular in the 1970s, were less interested in the drinking and sexual encounters which can further numb and segment the self, and more interested in the somatic goal to create a freeing and generative space for the mind, body and spirit (Sommer 2001, 73). In order to create this subversive somatic space, House scenes had to pursue the emancipated body in their mission. Just as the underground railroad was a powerful collaboration between whites and blacks in pursuit of freedom, Underground-House clubs are spaces where all races and sexual orientations come together in bold physical displays of strength, endurance, and freedom; "House is some freedom dancing, that's what House is!" (Wilson 1994)" (Sommer 2001, 75, 76). Along with the connotations of the term 'Underground', the word 'House' was also chosen to imply concepts of emancipatory community .

The term 'House' conjures the ideal image of a home, a place where a family can be together and create together:

"The club is family. The club is safe haven. The club is everything home is not. It's the kind of family you wish you had" (Green 1996). Well-known House DJ Tony Humphries, states, "When I spin music at the club [it] should be as comfortable for you as being at my house" (Humphries 1995) (Sommer 2001, 75).

Like the jook joint, the Underground-House club created opportunities for African-Americans and other marginalized groups to have their own cultural space which was not dictated by oppressive outside sources. House music and dancing should make the participant feel "comfortable" or at ease. The House club, unlike other dance clubs is not an objectifying space. Dancers do not dress in a sexual seductive manner, nor are the movements hypersexualized. Instead House dancers come together like the ideal family to support one another's creativity. According to anthropologist Sally Sommer, House is a:

redemption of total body sensuality without rampant sexuality fostered by hard dancing that engages body and mind; the redemption of the vital aliveness of playfulness and fun. In Underground-House, playfulness and fun cannot be overemphasized (Sommer 2001, 74).

Though consensual sexual activity can offer a powerful somatic experience, when the sexuality of a dancer's body becomes a commodity on the dance floor, like that of the classical ballerina, the dancer ceases to be a powerful agent who is at once a sexual being, a spiritual being, a creative being, and an intelligent being, but an object of the gaze. With the pressures to conquer a sexual partner on the dance floor relinquished from the family environment of the House club, a dancer is able to experience their somatic "total body sensuality".

It is a combined pursuit of freedom, family values, and respect for somatic engagement that allows for Underground-House to celebrate such success as a multi-

racial disruption of heteronormativity. The Loft was “cool” according to House dancer Archie Burnett because it was, “‘Not too white, not too black, not too straight, not too gay, you know truly cool’ (Burnett 2000). Unlike the Garage, the House dancers Loft was not a place to display, to dress up and pick up. ‘You came to dance your brains out’(Sommer 2001, 76). Dancers did not gather to judge one another on who they were or how they lived their lives outside of the club: “No one is assessed on outside accomplishment, no expectations transfer from the outside world. The only worthy thing is what one can add to the party”(Sommer 2001, 73). This attempt to even the playing field for all types of people allowed dancers who would not be seen interacting outside the club to be a part of the same family for the night. House’s emphasis on connectivity and the wholeness of self and others makes this social dance form an outstanding example of the somatic praxis of African-American social dance.

The cumulative element of Underground-House that encompasses all of the somatic characteristics discussed thus far is called the “vibe”:

The vibe is an active communal force, a feeling, a rhythm that is created by the mix of dancers, the balance of loud music, the effects of darkness and light, the energy. Everything interlocks to produce a powerful sense of liberation. The vibe is an active, exhilarating feeling of "now-ness" that everything is coming together-that a good party is in the making. The vibe is constructive; it is a distinctive rhythm, the groove that carries the party psychically and physically (Sommer 2001, 73).

This energetic phenomenon is the height of achievement in somatic praxis.

Responsive and supple improvisers interact with each other, the DJ, and their somatic selves in order to shape and preserve the vibe. The exhilarating and healing nature of the vibe creates an extremely dedicated dance scene. House parties with a strong vibe last from around mid night until the early hours of the morning. Some dancers find

the vibe to such a source of spiritual fulfillment that Saturday night parties turn into Sunday morning dancing worship (Sommer 2001, 81). In order to “hit the physical rapture of hard dancing” for hours and ride to vibe for as long as possible, serious House dancers do not do drugs or drink alcohol, which “are viewed as ‘very expensive dehydration’ (Burnett 1998)” (Sommer 2001, 73). House dancers who partied at the Loft were known to carry “duffel bags with a change of clothes, a towel, and baby powder (to speed up the floor or dry the body), signifying they were in for the long haul and big sweat” (Sommer 2001, 76). The reward of the vibe was not given by abandonment of the self through substances or the surface participation: the vibe is attained through somatic dedication.

The interconnective use of music helps create a good vibe. When the music is loud, and the bass is strong the bodies and room physically respond to the beat “The beat means safety. It pulses through bodies, causes the floor to bound and rebound; because everyone is moving in synchrony, it avoids disharmony, eschews collisions and fights” (Sommer 2001, 73). The music triangulates the self with others, with the space, and with their inner rhythms of blood flow and breath. The pre-recorded electronic music is orchestrated by the DJ in a House setting. The DJ as a sentient human agent organically constructing the vibe along with the dancers and environment. Kai Fikentscher, House DJ describes her role as she understands it:

[T]he response from the dance floor, in the form of the sum of individual responses, is continually evaluated by a DJ who, for hours on end, is involved in structuring his or her musical program. Thus, the uniqueness of underground dance music lies not only in a particular combination of musical mediation and musical immediacy, but also in the positioning of mediated music at the heart of a complex whole in which music and dance, performance and reception, production and consumption are inextricably intertwined, and

simultaneously, and often spontaneously, enacted (Fikentscher 2000, 79-80) (Sommer 2001, 74).

Fikentscher describes how the “immediate” DJ dancer interaction, dancer interaction, and personal interaction with the inner self create a “performance or reception” that requires all participants to be vividly engaged with the “intertwined” “complex whole” of the vibe.

The House vibe is an exterior energy created from somatic interiors of the DJ, music, dancers, and space. In order to harmonize all bodies in the club under the same energetic power, participants must be sensitive antennas capable of sensing subtle changes in the beat or movement proposition from a dance partner. Only from a shared state of somatic emancipation can the vibe embody the whole club; “In this subculture, winning space within and against hegemonic order is articulated in the symbolic challenges of dancing”(Sommer 2001, 83).

This is not a display of the person, clothes, or status, but of movement and imagination. They gather to dance, and Underground-House provides them with a redemptive social space in which to attain individual and communal harmony (Sommer 2001, 84).

Underground-House succeeds to free oppressed bodies from confinement and numbness, to destroy racial and homophobic segmentation, and create a familial vibe where the peaceful are invited to dance into rapture. To participate in Underground-House is to enter into the healing cultural performative realms of African-American somatic praxis.

### **The Capitalist Shadow Over African-American Somatic Praxis**

The healing experiences that African-American somatic dances like the Ring Shout and Underground-House offer cultural performative bodies is remarkable.

Bodies once enslaved submitted to forces of objectification and segmentation find strength and freedom for body, mind, and spirit in these dance forms. Unfortunately presence, peace, wellness, and connectivity are not cultural values of the larger United States capitalist system. Instead, the goal is to acquire individual wealth and power at whatever costs to the body, mind, and spirit. For this reason popular culture controlled by economic structures does not promote House music on popular radio stations or on TV. House music and dance is not valued as worthy as popular cultural material because of its dangerous anti-capitalist family vibe. One type of music that is endorsed on top 40 radio stations is Gangsta Rap. Though by no means is all of hip hop culture anti-somatic because many strains of hip hop music, dance, and culture fight for freedom, peace, and respect, Gangsta Rap lyrics, dance styles, and culture invoke violence, sexual objectification of women, and greed (Brennan 2007). Though Gangsta Rap accurately describes an African-American reality in the United States today, it does not define all African-American cultural experience. The somatic praxes of the Ring Shout and Underground-House hold that the African-American body is not only a site of the disadvantaged segmented self, but a perseverant dynamic entity of wholeness. In order to reverse the national amnesia of our dynamic living bodies, a valid first step would be to get the uplifting beats of House onto more radio stations. Instead of miming guns as we dance in our cars to the radio, we could ride on the somatic powers of the vibe.

## Conclusion

### Greater Implications of Somatic Praxis into United States Culture

Throughout this work I have explored a history of somatic oppression and resistive somatic praxis in the United States. I have discussed how the segmenting and objectifying forces of capitalism and discrimination have attempted to numb the dynamic inner body into less-than-human submission. Dance forms like the Ring Shout, Underground-House, and Contact Improvisation, as well as the choreography of Isadora Duncan and Anna Halprin, triumphantly combat segmented existence and revitalize dancers and witnesses into their somatic beings. I examine in this conclusion how the value systems exemplified by these dance forms and dance makers can serve as a foundation for accessible somatic pedagogy.

Most people in the United States do not share the somatic cultural values akin to the dance discussed in this paper. Instead, under the effect of somatic oppression, the majority of Americans suffer from segmentation and objectification manifesting in internal pain, numbness to the inner happenings of the self, and disconnection with others and the environment, resulting in cruel behavior. Dance has proven to be a powerful means of somatic intervention into cultural behaviors, not only because the form can encourage embodiment of body, mind, and spirit, but because dance is art form. Art spaces, as designated creative realms, allow humans to trouble normative

paradigms (Alejandro “Ordinary and Extraordinary Movement”). The freedom that can be achieved in a dance would be much more difficult to aspire to outside of a creative, performative setting. The power of metaphor, symbol, and formal kinesthetic engagement that creates infinite imaginative possibilities are not at play in quotidian life. The pantomime of fieldwork that occurs in the Ring Shout empowers its dancers as means of artistic commentary. Actual slave fieldwork is exhausting and oppressive. The subversive quality of the art space is made possible precisely because it does not have to be constricted to the norms of the ordinary world but can reclaim, remake and revolutionize because it exists in an extraordinary world. Somatic living has a higher chance of survival within an extraordinary art space like the Underground-House party, or a performance on Anna Halprin’s dance deck, than on the sidewalk in a chaotic city. The advocacy of more art spaces in the United States, in schools, in community centers, and more funding to artists is one crucial step to integrating somatic praxes into United States culture. My question for this final section is how can somatic praxis be accessed not only in extraordinary art spaces, but in the hybridized ordinary and extraordinary space that is the classroom? How can education train people not to “leave their bodies behind”, but incorporate holistic engagement into everyday living (Ulysse, “Interdisciplinary Theory”)? Can the content learned in somatic dance class offered to school children or community members train people to change a busy walk to work into a moment to focus on deep breathing? After learning improvisational skills, can a day of segmenting work be transformed into rejuvenating experience engaged in call-and-response and sustainable patterning? How can the valuable somatic engagement embodied through

the somatic dance praxes discussed in this work be translated into educational curriculum?

What makes somatic education so difficult to implement is the general lack of cultural support. Capitalist business as well as institutional education regards the holistic approach to work under productive. There is no monetary value within capitalist ideology in cultivating presence, connectivity within the self and to others and the environment, releasing tension, or creatively expressing the inner self. However, somatic education does exist in the form of private classes in somatic methodologies like Body-Mind Centering, Alexander Method, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Feldenkrais Awareness through Movement, or Laban Movement Analysis. These forms concentrate on slow, controlled movement of the body that develops awareness and sensation in order to repattern the body for sustainable wellness (Eddy 2009, 6). These classes can be very costly making them inaccessible to those economic groups that cannot afford them. In the United States, where class is historically linked with race, the expensive fee of these classes also block out minority racial groups from attending (Lui 2006). “Time, Space, and Quiet”, fundamental conditions to somatic learning according to somatics educator Martha Eddy, are extremely difficult to achieve for the hard working lower-class person. To pay for time to rest in a clean, spacious, quiet room to move slowly and carefully is a luxury that only the wealthy can afford. Though discrimination of matriculation is not “philosophically driven” within the somatic methodologies, which theorize that all bodies have the right to somatic emancipation, Somatics methodology classes are

dominated by wealthy white people. Because these classes succumb to capitalist economic hierarchy, I do not consider them active participants in somatic praxis.

Martha Eddy continues to critique the current somatic educational model because the language implemented to instruct many Somatics methodologies courses would further alienate participants who are unfamiliar with the esoteric terminology.

Somatic language needs to be learned through experiences, which takes time. Language that hasn't been "experienced" and accepted can be alienating. Language needs translation to make concepts or principles accessible in varying settings. Concepts need to be checked within distinct cultural context to determine if they are appropriate and still empowering in different venues (Eddy 2000, 3).

Eddy calls for pedagogical language that caters to the community that it serves. To jump right into discussions of proprioception, breathing through the pelvic floor, and initiating movement from the lymph could cause a beginning student unversed in advanced somatic terminology to feel ostracized or doubt the legitimacy of the exercises. The word somatic itself, a term created and used by Euro-American somatic practitioners, is not always useful in classroom situations where more everyday language like "sensing inside yourself" could be more effective. In order to make somatics classes more accessible, teachers need to participate in call-and-response improvisation to create a common vocabulary that is most effective to the community in which they are engaged. Also somatics instructors, as guides to emancipation and healing, must be more creative about economic models of their classes in order to engage in a praxis in which no willing participant is turned away because of economic reasons. To have a meaningful connection with one's body, mind, and spirit should not be a luxury for the privileged or artistic. One of the most

direct ways that somatic concepts can be shared outside of the art space and brought out of the private classroom is by creating curriculum for young people in school.

As a practical example of how the knowledge gained from my research in somatic praxis can be applied in the children's dance classroom, I will describe the design and implementation of the dance course for preschoolers "Creative Movement: Dance, Anatomy and Fun" I created this year in fulfillment of the Wesleyan course Dancing Teaching Workshop. I was able to create a somatic dance class that inspired wellness, inner knowledge, play, growth, and connectivity of self and others. I created material that was engaging and relevant to my preschool population by developing a language and movement vocabulary that was age appropriate. My goal was that the information given in the dance class to my young students could be practiced outside the classroom (Laban 1980, 18).

As a student volunteer, I was able to give one hour a week for eight weeks to offer what I have to share as a beginning dance teacher in my community. I was informed by professor Katja Kolcio that the neighborhood preschool parents could not afford to enroll their students in dance class because private preschool tuition was already so expensive. If I had not volunteered, many of the children in my class would not have had this opportunity to dance, much less engage in somatic dance education. As a busy student writing a thesis and working two part time jobs on campus, this one hour a week donation of my time did not "reduce my productivity level" or my compliant participation in capitalist economy and institutional education. Rather, volunteering for my community rejuvenated my personal productivity because the somatic experience of sharing emancipation of the body with children

lowered my own stress and tension, allowing me to do my own work with more care and longevity.

The main capabilities that I tried impart to my students were a sense of confidence in their own natural movements, improvisational call-and-response dancing, and basic knowledge of the inner structures of their bodies and how they inform movement. Each exercise attempted to integrate body and mind by challenging them physically and mentally to fulfill the tasks or game at hand. Inspired by Isadora Duncan and Anna Halprin's exploration of natural movement that released the body of stress and tension, each of the movement exercises that I designed allowed students to dance in a way that was natural to the structure and abilities of their individual bodies. We began with developmental movement games, as recommended by Laban, pioneer modern dance teacher:

In working out the best way in which to begin dance training for young children, we can base the choice of movement on those which the baby uses instructively to move. At first the child does not imitate, but reacts to stimuli, so the teacher should not ask children to copy at the beginning, but guide them through suggestion. They should be encouraged to use their own ideas and efforts, without being corrected to comply with the adult standards of movement, which are conditioned by convention, and therefore unnatural (Laban 1980, 20-21).

I used animal role-play as a way to engage the preschoolers in developmental movements. I would ask: "What type of animal moves low to the ground?" One student responded: "Lizards!" Each student, in whichever way he or she creatively played lizard was appropriate for the exercise as long as they stayed low to the ground. Then we imagined animals that crawled on hands and knees, "Tigers!" then "T-Rex" to stand up right, and "Dragonflies!" to practice jumping in the higher level.

After practicing this developmental progression from lowest to highest, we did an improvisational score called Freeze Dance incorporating the movements that we had learned that day. Laban says:

At this early stage the use of repetition is valuable and natural. Movements should involve the whole body...and the teacher should not demand precision or concentration on one aspect of dance training, such as footwork, or circles or lines, as the child is not ready for these restrictions on his individuality. The child should be given every opportunity to develop his own expression of efforts of his own choosing (Laban 1980, 21).

In a scattered clump in the room, the little dancers embodied any of the full-bodied developmental movements that we had learned that day, as well as responding to the music that stopped and started, causing them to freeze and go. Much like the Underground-House vibe created by the DJ and dancers, freeze dancing requires students to respond to one another, and the music to create a dance. Role-play games and freeze dance were so successful with the three-year old kids on the first day of class that I decided to try and incorporate them into every class. They shrieked with pleasure as they raced across the floor as dragon flies and created beautiful dynamic freeze dances, where some dancers were flying others were crawling and others taking their time were still frozen in place.

As the course continued, I wanted to bring in experiential anatomy as a way to inspire creative movement. I had been trained by Susan Bauer in her “Experiential Anatomy for Teens” course the previous summer, and was greatly influenced by her mission to “nourish students’ primary relationship to themselves, [in order to] cultivate their broader relationship with others and their environments” (Bauer 1999, 41). She has implemented her curriculum as a supplement to physical education courses in middle schools, a training module for young athletes, and as an

independent course in middle school, high school, and college. The course is an integration of somatic methodologies like Body-Mind Centering and Ideokinesis, which work with bodily sensation and control through imagery and practice, and Experiential Anatomy- a method of teaching anatomical structures and functions through embodied movement (Bauer 1999, 39).

Bauer's course combines inner sensing valued by all somatic dancers, as well as the benefits of touch as explored by Contact Improvisation. Students learn to hone inner listening by practicing a "body scan" in which they close their eyes, focus on their breathing, and to begin to sense and release tension in the body (Bauer 1994, 49). From this practice of inner listening, students are able to connect with individual structures within the body in order to repattern habits that have caused numbness or pain. For example when they learn about the form, function, and possibility for creative and healthy movement in the spine, they are encouraged not to attempt to have rigidly straight spines that we recognize from the classical ballet body, but long mobile spines with healthy dynamic curves. Students also learn how to give directed touch to their classmates as a tool for learning about structures of their bodies. Bauer, greatly influenced by Deane Juhan's book *Touched by the Goddess: The Physical, Physiological, and Spiritual Powers of Bodywork*, which teaches touch as positive sensory experience without sexual implications that can reinforce students' three-dimensional understanding of their bodies. Students help each other understand the nature of their spines by touching each spinous processes in succession (Bauer 1994, 80).

Bauer also insists that the manner in which a somatics movement education course is taught must bypass oppressive hierarchical teaching models. Curriculum must be improvisationally based upon student interest. In order for students to have a committed attitude to course material that may feel strange and unfamiliar to them compared to their other classes, Bauer tries to relate experiential anatomy and the value of inner knowledge to her student's everyday lives:

“Putting experiential anatomy into contexts to which they can relate, such as methods of warm-up, injury prevention, and the development of focus and concentration, further engages students in the curriculum and helps them find immediate, practical applications for their discoveries” (Bauer 1999, 42). This method of putting somatic concepts like inner bodily awareness, wellness, and balance between mental and physical activity into daily life of young people is crucial to making somatic ideas more accessible. Besides working to make these classes relevant to young people's everyday lives, Bauer's cumulative curriculum develops a set of shared vocabulary throughout the course, so all students have ownership over the terms used in the classroom. Part of what she tried to teach to her students in the ways they spoke about the body, was to refer to body parts and the body in general in the subjective possessive: “your leg”, instead of “the leg” or “my body” instead of “it”.

Though I could not directly apply these more focused explorations designed for students at least ten years old with my three-year olds, much of what I learned from the teacher training of Bauer's “Experiential Anatomy for Teens” influenced the experiential anatomy exercises in my course. I created dancing role-play games that could translate Bauer's explorations into appropriate movement games for young children. We learned about our spines and our head to tail connection by wiggling

like snakes, arching like cats, shaking our tails like squirrels and moving our heads like lions. We danced from our breath, rising up high with our inhales like balloons and deflating down to the ground with our exhale. We jumped quickly and then stopped suddenly and felt our pounding hearts. Then we stomped around the room like soldiers in rhythm with our heart beats. After learning the basic anatomy of each part of the body and we learned how we could expressively move from it. Finally we began to make soft shapes and strong shapes by engaging our muscles (Joyce 1980).

I waited to play with shapes until the very end of the course because classical dance is so muscularly oriented that I wanted to encourage young dancers that muscle-initiated movement was not the best or only way to make interesting dance. We repeated our developmental progression this time emphasizing natural low, medium, high, and now adding upside down and twisting shapes. They quickly mastered this, so I was able to add contact and interaction to shape making. Paired with a partner, the little dancers moved across the floor in a genuine Contact Improvisation duet following the score to travel across the floor making a high contacting shape, a low shape, and an upside down shape. By cooperating with their classmate, listening to their inner creative impulses and making direct contact, the students were able to participate in somatic sensing and connectivity. With very young children, touch is generally well received because it is a more regular part of their lives than older students and adults. However, if students did not want to make contact shapes for any reason -misunderstanding or discomfort with a partner - I did not correct them. I wanted to cultivate a positive and empowering relationship to touch in the classroom.

At the end of each class we worked on our group phrase. Each class I would ask three students to show us their favorite move. The whole class would learn the movement and we would add it to our compiling sequence. I would ask the students to be specific about the placement of their body during their movement asking them to sense their own bodies and learn to communicate its organization to their peers. This practice helps the dance students hone their understandings of their own bodies as well as their communication skills about how their personal understandings. I gave each movement the name of the student who created it: "Do the Conor. Now the Silus Slide." This systems gives each student feeling of being special, unique, and valid contributor to our community. When I forgot which movement comes next, the Conor always reminded me, "It mine, and it goes like this!" Based on community devised vocabulary and the solo-circle model from African-American improvisational social forms, as we made the phrase we created a movement language that included each of their bodies' voices. I hope that this healing somatic skill can remain with them outside of the classroom.

After four classes each of the twelve students had offered a movement, and we had strung them all together. We practiced this phrase made up of each of their individual movements as danced by the community three times a class. By the end of the eight weeks the young dancers could remember the phrase, as well as recall the developmental and experiential anatomy movements we had been practicing. They were ready to perform.

For a culminating experience on our last day of class I invited parents and friends to watch the young dancers perform the skills they had learned. I devised an

improvisational score that ordered all the movement ideas that we had practiced throughout the eight weeks. By having the beginning dancers show their new skills of sensing themselves and each other, moving in natural and freeing patterns that engage the whole self, we were able to translate somatic learning into somatic performance. Because the score was created from movements that we had all made together be it our 'names phrase' or improvisational role-play, every student was able to embody the movement to their fullest potential. As a closing gesture, the neighboring preschoolers who had been invited to the show were asked to participate in the final freeze dance just like in an Anna Halprin urban ritual, Ring Shout, Contact Jam, or House party. The dancers I had been working with were excited to help their friends learn to play the game. In this short, ten- minute performance, I was able to see how the students had already begun to share their somatic learning with others. To watch them jump and scream, and spin, and roll, laugh, grab hands and twist gave me as a witness a feeling of freedom.

Throughout the course of this study of somatic praxis in the United States, I have advocated for the merger of body, mind, and spirit as well as self, community, and environment. The rich cultural, performative, and healing praxes created within modern and postmodern dance and African-American social dance have proven to be artistic ontologies that successfully emancipate the human being from oppressive segmenting forces promoting somatic living. The inner knowledge cultivated and expressed in the work of Isadora Duncan, Anna Halprin, and through the practice of the Contact Improvisation, the Ring Shout, and Underground-House has empowered participants, witnesses, and followers to combat objectification, prejudice, and abuse

with the dynamic powers of connectivity, compassion, and vitality. The examples set by somatic dance praxes can inspire the desperate need for cultural change regarding the living body. Only when improvisational holistic education based on the work of somatic advocates is implemented not only in the dance classroom but in math class, the work place, the home, and in the Oval Office will the bodies, psyches, and spirits of Americans be free of pain and numbness, will sexist and racist behavior be dismantled, and climate change be addressed. If the future of this planet is to include the human being, we must mend and treasure the body, mind, and spirit that make us truly human.

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