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Somatics and Political Change: Ukraine’s Revolution of Dignity

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As a college professor, I have mostly taught somatic practices in the context of the American college campus. I use movement as a way for students to establish a personal sense of place, a sense of belonging in one’s own body—something that I think is critical for students who are away from home for the first time, encountering world-shifting ideas. We actively engage with our environment. Through bodily practices, we work together to generate a physical sense of being—weight, volume, sensory awareness—to ground them as they undergo the process of transformation that college requires. I myself have counted on dance to ground me through the stages of my own life and in the various places I’ve lived. It feels more substantial than any house, any neighborhood or community, any state or region or country. It is more grounding even than ancestry and so-called roots. It is the way that I orient myself in the world. Body is home. However, most of my somatics work has happened in academic environments. What about somatics in relation to other places and contexts?

At the end of one of my workshops in 2014, a college student approached me, aware of my Ukrainian roots, and asked, “Did you hear that Russia just invaded Ukraine?” The situation, which had erupted in Ukraine during the winter of 2013–14, hit me on a bodily level—not only because I have family, friends, and colleagues there. The developments in Ukraine raised issues specifically concerning place, groundedness, and mobility, issues that pertain to the way we orient ourselves in the world. As the situation escalated into an international conflict with Russia, I kept in email contact with Oles, a family friend in Artemivsk, Ukraine, near the eastern border—the site of the greatest violence. His emails are vivid accounts of place and displacement:

20 February 2015, Artemivsk, Ukraine
Subject: We Are Alive!
Dear Friends,
Thank you for your worried inquiries.
We are alive and this is a lot to be grateful for! Yes,
it is true that at the moment our city is in terrible condition. After the retreat of the Ukrainian Army from Debaltseve, our small city received an influx of almost 3,000 soldiers with rifles, tanks, artillery and other dangerous arms. This was a horror to see; they are all blackened from explosions and look as if they have been through hell and back. They are tired to the point of exhaustion and there is an endless number of wounded. The tanks and armored carriers are parked in the courtyards of buildings, in the city square, and in the streets, with soldiers sleeping inside of them from lack of lodging. They are cold and hungry in the freezing winter temperatures. In the space of an hour, our city has turned into an army camp. People are bringing them blankets, hot tea, coffee, food, whatever they possibly can. The immediate problem is where to house them. Some of them have moved to the army base, many have been taken into homes, people are calling each other to ask if they have an extra mattress or if they can take someone in to sleep on the floor of their apartment... simply awful. Soldiers are anxious, desperately looking for their friends to see if they made it out, sometimes finding them, and other times learning they did not make it.

The Maidan Demonstrations

What has become a full-scale war on the border between Ukraine and Russia began as a winter-long peaceful protest. The march on the Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) in Kyiv (Kiev) began as a protest against the top-down decisions made by incumbent president Yanukovych, who desired closer ties to Russia. But the demonstration rapidly took on a broader ethos. As if of a collective mind, participants exchanged nationalist priorities for a new and inclusive global sensibility. It was an assembly of people, numbering over one million, unlike any other in Ukraine’s history, bridging historically divisive communities toward a common goal.

Ukraine is situated at the crossroads of three worlds—European, Russian, and Asian—bringing Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities into close and interdependent proximity. Ukraine has seen some of the greatest ethnic and ideological battles play out on its grounds. This experience of historical conflict in the region has embedded itself in the consciousness of the people there. In a direct response, the Maidan protest was based on the lofty and unifying idea that tolerance and liberties be based on civil—not ethnic, political, or religious—grounds. The Maidan demonstration became known as the “Revolution of Dignity,” seeking a new political model of social engagement and collaboration. Participants included ethnic Ukrainians as well as Poles, Tatars, Belorussians, and Russians. There were Catholic, Orthodox, and Baptist Christians; Jews; Muslims; and atheists. Historically divided groups supported one another, and together they persevered. They marched to reject the hegemonic model of politics that Russia and the Cold War represented. It was a movement committed to exchanging the us-versus-them mentality for an inclusive vision of the future—hoping to forge an altogether new world.

On the center of the Maidan, in the midst of the demonstrations in the winter of 2014, a library was constructed with donated books and a volunteer staff.

In response to recent political changes in Crimea, I made the multimedia work To Not Forget Crimea: Uncertain Quiet of Indigenous Crimean Tatars (2014). The work explored issues of historical memory, cultural narrative, and the quest for human rights, as they relate to the history of Tatars, native inhabitants of Crimea, and their complex relationships with Ukraine and Russia. The performance, created in collaboration with the New York Crimean Tatar Ensemble Musical Director and the Yevshan Ukrainian Vocal Ensemble Conductor incorporated live music and dance performed by both ensembles and students from Wesleyan University.

Wesleyan’s Writing about Dance seminar documented the event as a class project for which they conducted interviews, observed rehearsals, drew scores for dances, and photographed the performance. They archived their work on a Facebook page so that people in Crimea and Ukraine would have access to the material and see that something was being done to raise awareness about the situation at a major educational institution in the U.S. Many likes were received including that of the de facto leader of the Crimean Tatars: https://www.facebook.com/crimeaproject/

[K.K.]
The library operated on an honor system and was the site of poetry readings, performances, and talks. Its motto was posted: "The goal of our library is to restore the invisible balance of power of the Maidan. Let us not forget, that our main enemy is not the person wearing a Berkut uniform [Ukrainian military police force]. Our primary enemy is fear, and its derivative—apathy. The front line is in the mind, rather than in a physical space. The library is a symbol of our readiness for dialogue—first, with oneself, and then with one another. Please come and converse, read and reflect, speak and share your thoughts. This is important."

The intense optimism and peaceful collaboration of the first three months did not make international news. However, it was taken very seriously by the incumbent Yanukovych regime, which had announced its pro-Russian stance, and also by the Russian government, which saw the demonstrations as a direct threat to its already precarious power hold on its previous colonies, including Ukraine, Georgia, and Belarus. The Ukrainian government suddenly turned violently on the demonstrators, with government snipers killing a hundred protesters. Shortly afterwards, Russia invaded Ukraine, annexing the peninsula of Crimea and triggering fighting on the border between Ukraine and Russia. Ukraine now made international headlines. The media revived the language of the Cold War and the bipolar political model of us-versus-them. This moment is significant as a failed attempt at peaceful change, yet another example of the human proclivity for violence. It is a vivid demonstration of the challenging factors that play into an orientation toward a new paradigm. The tendency is to cling to established models and habits even after circumstances change. The Maidan demonstrated a new model of political orientation defined by collaboration rather than polarization. Unfortunately, the familiar polarized narrative was more compelling, or at least more secure, to the international community—as represented by both the Western and Russian media and governments—than venturing into uncharted territory.

29 June 2015, Artemivsk, Ukraine

Dear Friends, I want you to have an idea of the scale of the social crisis of refugees and displaced persons from the occupied cities of Donbas and especially the cities neighboring Artemivsk—Gorlovka, Yenakiyevo, Donetsk, as well as the number of victims who come to our city daily.... [Refugees] who actually lived in the DNR [occupied territories] signed up with relatives or friends in Artemivsk and come in almost daily for Ukrainian food, pensions, social benefits, UN humani-
tarian aid—many of them men who co-operate with separatists. Now, the state has begun to monitor the complicated boundary crossing. As a consequence, a 5km long queue of people suffer—the guilty and the innocent.

Place, Displacement, and Somatics

The issue as of March 2016 in Ukraine is largely one of forced motion. People are being forcibly moved from their homes, evacuating the occupied territories, and fleeing areas of shelling. In other cases, it is not the people but the political boundaries that are moving. The Ukrainian Crimean Peninsula became Russian practically overnight. People were being threatened and displaced, moving from here to there but having no place to go. Families, communities, soldiers, national borders—all in constant motion.

I work in somatics, mind-body practices that combine physical activity and motion with deep reflection. They are sometimes called self-awareness practices because they involve noticing subtleties of feeling and experience that are typically overlooked. One goal of somatics is to become more aware of subtle physical indications of dis-ease before they become acute or chronic issues. Somatics is also a practice of "sense-making"—of integrating internal experiences with the external environment in order to become more conscious in the present moment. One’s environment, or place, is an important component in this practice of presence or orientation.

It may be that I was drawn to this field because place, or more specifically displacement, has had such a profound impact on my life. For my parents and everyone in my immediate community, displacement was a formative reality. Their entire generation had fled, migrated, been displaced, and sought refuge during World War II. It was the context into which I was born and that characterized my parents and their world. Displacement causes disorientation; it impacts one’s sense of presence, of belonging in the world.

The current conflict in Ukraine no longer hinges on ethnic identity. It remains a conflict of identity but of a different sort. As I see it, this time the issue is not about ethnicity but about orienting oneself in a new global context.

I found my way back to Ukraine in June 2015. I was invited by two separate organizations involved in the war relief effort to lead workshops in somatics in the capital city Kyiv and in the western city Lviv for the many volunteers working with displaced refugee families and injured soldiers. Bodywork. I planned workshops that focus on breath and connecting to one’s physical self—basic physical practices that help people survive difficult circumstances. Humans are phenomenally adept at surviving. At times we are deliberate; we strategize. And when that is beyond our capacity, the intuitive wisdom of our bodies guides us. Post-traumatic stress disorder is, in a sense, a strategy for surviving experiences of great trauma. Somatic practices are premised on the integral wisdom of the body.

I entered the room in which my workshop would take place in the public library in Lviv. The war was in its second year. My hosts Christina and Marta had participated in the demonstrations in Kyiv. Christina is a health coach and somatics practitioner outside Kyiv. Marta has a private practice in psychotherapy and founded a nonprofit NGO that helps train volunteers in the war relief effort. During the Maidan protests, both worked in a makeshift medical facility, a temporary set-up in the McDonald’s, following the sniper shootings. Recognized for their extraordinary efforts, they were chosen to be part of a group invited by Yale Medical School to attend a seminar in New Haven, Connecticut, in September 2014 on the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder. As a member of the local Ukrainian community, I went to welcome these guests and, as a result, met Marta and Christina.

Now, in the library in Lviv, we pushed the tables apart and pulled the carpet runner to the side of the room to
clear space on the floor. Attending this workshop was a group of thirty-five Ukrainians who were volunteering their time to help refugee families and soldiers injured in the war in the East. They were from cities and towns across Ukraine and had traveled to Lviv for the weekend workshop. Most of them were actively involved in the Maidan protests in Kyiv. They were not accustomed to working on the floor, but they were willing. Everyone removed their shoes and sat on the ground. I read an introduction that I had prepared in advance in Ukrainian. Somatic teaching often relies on poetic description. Teaching in a somewhat shaky second language is freeing in that it can impart some welcome space between the words and didactic meaning. But I wanted to be sure to get certain points across clearly and specifically. I told them the workshop would include individual, partner, and group methods. I emphasized two points: we will work with awareness and with creativity.

We began with breath. Breathing happens unconsciously. Normally our lungs and heart function without us controlling or thinking about them, but now we focused our attention on the act of breathing. A full inhale requires a release of tension. We tried tensing our bodies and noticed that tension restricts breath. We placed our hands on a partner’s back and practiced listening to the breath with our hands—the back expands, the muscles vary in tension.

We listened carefully. We discussed what it means to listen not only with our ears. We practiced describing the sensation of breath in ourselves and in our partner. Tension acts as a defensive strategy. While a heightened sense of attention protects us from unexpected danger, the feeling of safety allows the release of tension. How do we assess when it is safe enough to take a deep breath? It is a serious question for those at war. And it is a serious question in any context, whether crossing a street or traveling in an unfamiliar area, or even in a familiar one. What causes fear, tension? What contributes to a sense of safety? This led us to think about our environment and our relationship to it. We began a process of consciously orienting ourselves in the world, at once felt and real. In the process of doing so, it became evident that there is no one right way to go about this. We have choices of what to pay attention to, an infinite array of ways to describe or make sense of things, to conceive of our environment, to imagine our physical selves. Breathing invokes imagination.

Generally in my somatic workshops, as in this one in Ukraine, we aim to orient ourselves in and through our bodily experiences. We work on building a map of sorts by tracking sensory awareness. We begin by drawing attention to our breathing, to notice the infinite possibilities available even in this simple action—to notice that awareness itself is a creative act. We have choices.

We continue the mapping process. Now we focus attention on the sensation of our weight. We practice releasing tension in our shoulders to better feel the weight of our arms. We release bodily tension to feel the full weight of ourselves. We try to describe what it means to “feel one’s weight” in the world. It is not only a metaphor—it is a real visceral experience.

I end my workshops with group activities that I call games. As the group follows some basic set of preliminary instructions, we incrementally begin to establish a common set of unstated rules and understandings among ourselves. Surprisingly quickly, our temporary community develops its own culture, norms, rules, values. At the end of the game, we review, often in awe, the microculture that emerged through our interactions. We are aware of the power we hold in creating or, potentially, re-creating our world. These somatic practices not only orient us to ourselves and our environments but also demonstrate that we can make an impact on those environments.

Orienting Self for Action

Social change requires a sense of orientation, a sense of direction from which to act. It might be oriented in relation to an enemy—an other. The Cold War, for instance, oriented the United States in relation to the Soviet Union. When the Soviet Union fell, the United States suffered somewhat of a crisis of purpose. One might orient oneself in relation to a territory, a nation, or a political entity. Nationalism and the fight for political sovereignty is constructed as such.

Extending a somatic perspective to the social realm, one might ask, How else could we orient ourselves in the
world? How might it look and what might it mean if we dedicate time and attention to the practice of orientation? Is it possible to imagine a wholly new way of orienting both personally and politically in the world?

The demonstrations on the Maidan began as a protest against Yanukovych, and the subsequent war threatens to orient Ukraine again against a cogent identifiable enemy and historic oppressor, Russia. But the Revolution of Dignity left indelible traces of another kind of orientation, one that seemed intent on superseding ethnic, national, and religious definitions. I believe this is why my somatic workshops are being embraced here. People are seeking new ways of making sense of the world. Through somatic practices we seek to orient ourselves. The conversations during the workshop shifted seamlessly between the topic of responsibility to oneself and responsibility to one’s community and world. This working with creative processes allows us the space to imagine a world we wish to live in. Awareness fosters engagement. We discuss our relationship and roles in consciously enacting such a world. Somatics is an individual practice; I also see it as a social movement.

I returned to Lviv in September 2015. Marta invited me to a press conference in the mayor’s office announcing a new mission for her organization. In addition to serving as a network for volunteers, its aim now is to foster broader social action, offering resources, advice, legal counsel, and other assistance. Marta hopes to create an infrastructure for building civic engagement in Ukraine, to help people connect to and activate their communities. This is an extension of the somatic practices—a creative act of conscious engagement—with one’s environment. By extending her organization’s mission to include civic engagement, Marta connects individual wellness with community wellness.

Orientation is a physical and creative act. What if individual and political orientation were treated as a fluid practice, not determined by territory, state, or ethnicity? In somatics, we change habitual movement by repatterning our actions. We explore both physical and social possibilities by focusing in different ways and on different aspects of experience: breath, weight, environment, and interactions with other people. Something that feels stuck is freed up. What if we treated social-political orientation in the way we approach awareness in a somatic workshop? The revolution in Ukraine was attempting a similar shift in awareness. Theirs is a battle for a new orientation, not against a cogent enemy but against the fear, intolerance, discrimination, and oppression that is globally pervasive in the twenty-first century. This is a battle for hope—an effort to create a wholly new world.

Link to a talk on Katja’s work in Crimea and her family background: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Lf_qrPatdag

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Author’s Note

News outlets in Ukraine in 2013 were strictly controlled and censored by the Yanukovych regime. Accurate accounts of the protests and subsequent revolution were made available through Hromadske.TV (http://www.hromadske.tv), a civic initiative and joint project of Ukrainian journalists to provide objective information about events in Ukraine; and Ukraine Today (http://uatoday.tv), created in Ukraine as an international news outlet to represent the voices of the protesters and civic society. Social media platforms such as YouTube and Facebook were also used extensively by the public in an effort to correct what they felt was misrepresentation in the international media.

Mustafa Nayyem, an independent journalist in Ukraine who is credited for helping to catalyze and coordinate the protests, used his Facebook page as a source of information. Espresso TV broadcast a live video-stream of the Maidan (Independence Square) during the demonstrations and revolution.

In this essay, I seek to present a perspective consistent with the sources cited here. [K.K.]