

THE NATURAL BODY IN SOMATICS DANCE TRAINING



DORAN GEORGE edited by SUSAN LEIGH FOSTER

The Natural Body in Somatics Dance Training

The Natural Body in Somatics Dance Training

Doran George

Edited by

Susan Leigh Foster

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of Oxford University Press in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America.

© Oxford University Press 2020

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020016480

ISBN 978-0-19-753874-6 (pbk.)

ISBN 978-0-19-753873-9 (hbk.)

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Paperback printed by Marquis, Canada

Hardback printed by Bridgeport National Bindery, Inc., United States of America

Contents

Editor's Note

vii

Introduction: In Search of the Natural Body	1
1. Renewable Originality: Reaffirming the Natural Body throughout the Twentieth Century	12
Early Twentieth-Century Somatics and Its Conceptions of Nature	14
Midcentury Somatics and Its Construction of the Universal Individual	20
Displacing Aesthetics: Radical Inclusion in 1960s and 1970s Somatics	28
Individuality and Subjectivity in 1980s Somatics	38
Corporate Somatics: Recalibrating Critique for Commercialism	47
Conclusion	56
2. Contradictory Dissidence: Somatics and American Expansionism	58
New York Somatics: Innovation and Professionalism	61
New England Somatics: Artistic Respite	68
British Somatics: The Political and Socially Signifying Body	76
Dutch Somatics: The Body in Flux	83
Australian Somatics: The New Frontier	91
Conclusion	97
3. Somatics Bodies on the Concert Stage: Processing, Inventing, and Displaying	100
Processing: Choreographing Somatics Experience	102
Inventing: Somatics Sources of Novel Movement	114
Displaying: The Theatrical Effects of Somatics	125
Conclusion: Nature, Artistic Rigor, and Economics	135
Conclusion: Understanding the Focus on Authenticity	138
<i>Appendix: Brief Biographies of Some Key Somatics Practitioners</i>	<i>145</i>
<i>Notes</i>	<i>153</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>211</i>
<i>Doran George Biography</i>	<i>221</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>223</i>

Editor's Note

The loosely coordinated set of regimens known as Somatics emerged over the last half of the twentieth century as a dominant and highly influential training program for cultivating the dancing body. Now installed in the curricula of professional dance schools and university dance programs worldwide, Somatics is regularly envisioned as a central and essential practice for dancers. In many cases it has supplanted modern dance techniques such as Graham, Humphrey-Limon, and Cunningham, and it also frequently serves as an effective complement to other techniques that dancers may acquire, including ballet and hip-hop. Dancers trained exclusively in Somatics are also regularly seen on stages across the globe, and Somatics as an underlying influence on many different genres can now often be observed.

Given its pervasiveness and popularity, it is remarkable that so little scholarly attention has been paid to Somatics pedagogical philosophies and to its historical development. My former PhD student Doran George perceived this gap in the critical literature on dance, and specifically dance training, and wrote a dissertation tracing the development of Somatics that included an assessment of its ideological underpinnings. Prior to their untimely death, George had been revising the dissertation manuscript for publication as a book, and this edition reflects those efforts.

George was especially dedicated to examining the historical transformation of Somatics, a practice that in its early years had been largely implemented as an antidote to other dance techniques where dancers were incurring injuries. Particularly intrigued by the persistent appeal to the natural made by different generations of Somatics practitioners, George analyzed what a “natural way of moving” both enabled and repressed or excluded. They saw this critique as a way to enrich the practice and support its deeply valuable contributions to dance training and to understanding the body.

George's extensive transnational training and network of relationships with practitioners of various branches of Somatics provide an extraordinary window into this training practice and the artists and teachers who have specialized in and promoted it. Having studied Somatics in the United Kingdom, at the European Dance Development Center in the Netherlands, and at various schools and studios in the United States, George developed an intimate knowledge of the practices and forged strong alliances with many of

its students and teachers. As a result, this book brings into the historical record many heretofore neglected artists and teachers, and it offers fascinating portraits of the daily lives and concerns of dancers.

The book also offers a cogent analysis of the ways in which training regimens can inculcate an embodied politics as they guide and shape the experience of bodily sensation, construct forms of reflexive evaluation of bodily action, and summon bodies into relationship with one another. George continually aligns the development of the practice of Somatics with social and political changes occurring in the various locales where it took hold, showing how it assisted in defining community and furthering its political as well as aesthetic goals. As such, George's research gives us a model for how to integrate the process of dance training into the body politic.

Throughout the editing process, I received support and guidance from Lionel Popkin, and I thank him heartily for his wit and generosity. I also thank Doran's mother, Ann Gilbert, and life partner, Barry Shils, for their support of this project. In attempting to find photos for the volume, I made contact with a number of Somatics practitioners, photographers, and archivists who have generously given their time in providing images and many helpful comments. In particular, I would like to thank Eva Karczag, Nancy Stark Smith, Jennifer Monson, Chris Crickmay, Graham Greene, Ros Warby, Nanette Hassall, and Dona Ann McAdams. In some cases, these exchanges also pointed toward different interpretations of the significance and reception of Somatics that, as the editor of another author's text, I did not feel I could respond to fully. I did endeavor to "fact-check" as best I could, and I apologize to those who might continue to feel misrepresented in this text. Nonetheless, I believe strongly in the value of this scholarly project, and I hope that it will provoke debate and significant further scholarly interest in this vital topic.

This book would never have come into being without the considerable efforts of a superb team of graduate research assistants: Arushi Singh, Ryan Rockmore, Jingqiu Guan, Barry Brannum, and Jacqueline Davis. I am immensely grateful to them and also to the two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript who gave detailed and very constructive comments. The folks at Oxford, and in particular Norm Hirshy, were a joy to work with, and I thank them for their support of this work.

Introduction

In Search of the Natural Body

Under the influence of regimens broadly known as “Somatics,” late twentieth-century contemporary dancers revolutionized their training.¹ They instituted biological and mechanical constructs of the body as the guiding logic for dance classes, claiming to uncover a “natural” way of moving. In so doing, they drew upon early twentieth-century theories of postural and motional health, influenced by Darwinism and progressive education. Somatics used this conceit of naturalness to develop a new form of training designed to supersede Graham Technique and ballet training, which were thought to be harmful to the body because of their demand to fulfill specific aesthetic ideals.² Convinced of the importance of Somatics, practitioners initially worked with meager resources and through small, alternative venues and institutions, forging transnational alliances of pedagogies and aesthetics in the United States, Britain, The Netherlands, and Australia, among other locales. Yet by the end of the twentieth century, the training had found its way into many of the world’s most venerable dance education programs, and choreographers who initially experimented with Somatics in a small community began to be featured in the transnational circuit of large concert houses.

This book chronicles a history of Somatics, examining how dancers conceived of and sourced nature and the natural to overhaul training, performance, and choreography beginning in the 1960s and continuing up to the end of the century. The ideological underpinnings of Somatics changed dramatically over this period, affecting studio procedures and the look and aptitudes of the dancing body along with creative and choreographic processes. Yet despite these changes, dancers remained consistent in the language with which they represented essential truths of the body that they claimed to access. Combining scientific metaphors with ideas from non-Western practices that they represented as ancient and mystical, practitioners believed they were retrieving lost corporeal capacities that were nevertheless still evident in children, animals, and supposedly primitive peoples.

Implementing this rhetoric, a community of practitioners had consolidated by the 1970s, proposing that their comprehensively inclusive concept of the body engendered an antihierarchical collective dance culture. Along with other subcultures of the era that turned to nature as a source of liberation, Somatics purported to resist outdated gender ideals and authoritarian training by finding personal authenticity in the body's fundamental motility. Yet, as I will argue, the centrality within the training of individual creative freedom, which fueled the rapid transnational uptake of Somatics, instantiated key principles of American postwar liberalism. Along with their American colleagues, British, Dutch, and Australian dancers believed that by displacing modern and classical aesthetics with natural anatomical functioning, they were reclaiming an inherent right to individual creative freedom.

By the 1980s artists had largely jettisoned the emphasis on collectivism, yet as they became entrepreneurs in line with the new economic culture of staunch individualism, the rhetoric about nature endured. Using signature choreography and emphasizing the uniqueness of different Somatics-informed pedagogies, they pursued careerism, all the while contesting a variety of conservative cultural agendas. By the close of the twentieth century, Somatics had achieved institutional status, embodying a new corporate ethics. The creative autonomy that dancers had won in previous decades now transformed through demands made upon artists in education and the professional field to prove that dance is constituted by boundless innovation despite the diminishing arts resources in an age of austerity. Throughout all these changes, Somatics continued to cultivate and promote the idea of a natural body as an invisible yet essential category of nature, one that, while appearing to be inclusive, nonetheless marked difference and enacted exclusion from its supposedly universal purview.³

While these are some of the conclusions I reached following my research on Somatics, my inquiry was initially fueled by a contradiction that I continue to ponder. On the one hand, Somatics initially promised to liberate dancers from oppressive training by being more respectful of the body and nurturing the creativity of each dancer. On the other, as I slowly came to realize, the Somatics education I received instituted conservative and exclusionary values. In the early 1990s I began study at the Dutch European Dance Development Center (EDDC) because the school's ethos matched my leftist convictions. The modern and classical approaches I witnessed in conservatories in my home country of Britain corresponded with a dictatorial culture precipitated by Thatcher's conservative government. Under the instruction of seemingly imperious teachers, students painstakingly repeated and perfected codified vocabularies of steps. By strong contrast, EDDC students seemed to

research their own vocabularies based on an experiential understanding that they cultivated of anatomical functional imperatives. We believed we were working with culturally neutral “natural” kinetics that could engender artistic diversity, which I connected to values shaped by protesting against Thatcher’s right-wing agenda. As an economically disadvantaged genderqueer young adult, I allied myself with various minorities, women, and the working class, all under attack in 1980s Britain. Moreover, by disbanding from codified vocabulary, disabled and nondisabled dancers invented new movement, involving wheelchairs, for example.

Yet this same education also largely excluded non-Western dance aesthetics and configured transgender expression as artificial. My effeminate movement and pronounced assibilation of words containing “s” sounds seemed not to be culturally neutral because they challenged prevailing beliefs about natural gender. So when I was told my voice was unnaturally high and was encouraged to work with male teachers to connect with my masculinity, I believed my femininity resulted from my bodily nature somehow having been thwarted. Southern European and non-Western students faced similar problems by coming from cultures that are represented as especially passionate, sexual, and mystical in Anglo, Germanic, and Nordic contexts. Like me, these students found that the school’s dominant aesthetics marked them as nonnatural. Thus, despite its progressive intentions, the EDDC stratified bodies as being more or less authentically connected with nature, and although I (and others) questioned the pedagogy’s premise of neutrality, it was difficult to challenge because it was bolstered by generally accepted scientific metaphors.

To reveal distinct cultural values that Somatics embedded in the concept of nature, this study compares significantly different ways in which Somatics has been implemented over time in different locations. Distinct political, economic, and social factors affected Somatics practice, which resulted in contestations within each of its communities. However, dancers framed their disagreement through the discourse that movement’s physical principles that were inherent in the body were being discovered through various implementations of the training. In this way they resolved the conflict between the idea that they were accessing natural movement while at the same time cultivating diverse practices, based on the assumption that their experimentation gave rise to different possibilities.

To the degree that all practitioners invested in the regenerative potential of nature, they shared in dubious perspectives about cultural difference. Most practitioners claimed to heal the body by looking beyond the “modern West” to a largely undifferentiated ancient Orient, and inward to a lost, timeless, savage nobility still evident in children, animals, and vaguely defined

primitive societies. The ubiquity of naturalness overshadowed the political significance of such representations, erasing cultural differences and historical specificity.⁴ As I will discuss in chapter 1, practitioners swept away the memory of racist and eugenic rhetoric in early twentieth-century Somatics as if it were irrelevant to more enduring insights. They established unimpeachable bodily truth by virtue of its discovery in such distinct contexts as Zen Buddhism and martial arts, which each supposedly exhibited truths similar to Western physiology and evolutionary theory. In so doing, they felt they had recuperated a body from various traditions that provided comprehensive inclusivity. As the twentieth century progressed, artists contested the conceit of universality by emphasizing cultural difference. Yet by the new millennium, Somatics still manifested a canonical universal body as an ostensibly invisible category of nature that purported to account for human ontology even while it marked difference and enacted myriad exclusions from its supposedly universal purview.

In my research, I put to use an internal conflict in which I simultaneously identify with and reject Somatics. This arose because I grew as an artist through changes in my physicality and values as I embodied the training, even though the conceit of naturalness was oppressive. My experience in the studio, and the broader culture of which the EDDC was a part, has afforded me detailed insight into the meanings with which the training and choreography are infused. In the eighteen years since my graduation from the EDDC, I have continued to use Somatics as a dancer, choreographer, and teacher, and over the course of that time I have remained in contact with my teachers as well as forged connections with other artists working with the training. This has allowed me a greater appreciation of how physical aptitudes are cultivated in classes and represented in concert dances, all of which embody Somatics-related values. I have attuned myself to how the physical experiences and choreographic strategies associated with Somatics translate into the aesthetic and ideological convictions that form artistic and social identities.

This study therefore builds on questions I asked about the assumptions of the culture in which I participated. In this sense, I follow Cynthia Novack's method in *Sharing the Dance: Contact Improvisation and American Culture*. As a participant-observer, she analyzes a community that grew up around Contact Improvisation (CI) by ricocheting between distance and proximity to that culture. In a similar manner, I interrogate the aesthetics and ideology that are produced in Somatics classes, and that are evident in concerts. To verify my interpretations, I collected teachers' and students' written and spoken views on different methods, the labor they entail, the associated aesthetic effects, and the perceived benefits of Somatics. In addition to the use of

participant observation and oral history, I have drawn on publications that address the development of the field as reference materials. Beginning in the 1970s, dancers formed *Contact Quarterly* (CQ) and the *Movement Research Performance Journal* (MRPJ) in America, as well as the British *New Dance Magazine* (NDM) and the Australian *Writings on Dance*, which all had various regional, national, and transnational circulations. Along with other press, institutional and personal archives, articles, letters, reviews of concerts, and interviews, the journals document debate and commentary, offering insight into the range of perspectives about Somatics. These documents enhanced my understanding of how practitioners interpreted and applied Somatics ideas.

The Somatics network grew, in large part, because artists believed not only in the power of the regimens to train the body but also in their potential to fuel new choreography. Because dance establishes values in a symbolic exchange between performers and audiences that both confirms and diverges from artists' own understandings of their work, I have endeavored to identify these values as, in part, reflections of the various conditions, political and economic, as well as aesthetic, that impacted the way dancers were working. As I will show, these influences extended beyond the studio and the concert stage into the organizations and other activities through which artists developed and sustained their community. The considerable differences in the distinct historical and geographical communities, therefore, showed up in dance classes and company structures, venues, publications, institutions, and the dancing bodies themselves. To establish some sense of cohesion within such a dynamic and diverse community, I read the regimens as cultivating comparable physicalities that achieve contrasting meaning in different contexts, and I also identify differences in the way that artists choreographed common beliefs in Somatics about the nature of the body.

Explanations that configure the significance of the body as beyond culture, such as those proffered by Somatics, forfeit an understanding of how social forces are embodied through dance. To reveal the meaning that dancers construct through the idea of natural bodily capacity, I therefore position my research alongside dance scholarship that analyzes the symbolic significance of corporeality and its motion. Like many dance practitioners, some scholarly approaches insist that the value of Somatics lies precisely in its ability to connect dancers with precultural bodily dimensions and in so doing reinforce a commitment to "foundational" aspects of the body that contribute exceptional understanding to the humanities. I argue, however, that this eclipses the potential for a greater appreciation that comes from theorizing movement as a cultural site of meaning making. To challenge the exclusion and marginalization in which Somatics participates, scholarship needs to account for the

cultural biases embodied through and produced by the training. This is particularly urgent now that the regimens are so widely used in dance education.

Dancers have often bolstered the universality of their capacities, like kinaesthetic awareness, by projecting specificity, or that which appears to be culturally conspicuous and nonneutral, onto nonwhite and non-Western bodies. In many cases, they inherited this strategy from modern dance. Even as dancers rejected modernist master narratives by using the Somatics idea of nature, they formulated a concept of neutrality similar to that established by previous generations of white artists. In this sense, I position the regimens within an aesthetic tradition that Susan Manning identifies in *Modern Dance Negro Dance: Race in Motion*, where she exposes the previously uninterrogated racial investments in the universality staged in American modern concert dance. I agree with Manning that it was against the racialization of African American bodies that white dancers seemed to transcend cultural specificity, an insight I also bring to the role of Orientalism. Using research that celebrates modern and contemporary dancers' use of non-Western ideas, Somatics-based artists have projected cultural specificity onto the traditions from which they borrowed aesthetics and ideologies to achieve the universality of the body.

The projections in which Somatics participated, however, differed for bodies and practices associated with Africa compared with the East. I articulate this difference by building upon literature that aims to expose how racialization and whiteness work in dance through the construction of universality. Ananya Chatterjea, for example, delimits "postmodern" dance with the category "women of color" in *Butting Out: Reading Resistive Choreographies Through Works by Jawole Willa Jo Zollar and Chandralekha*. She argues that a white avant-garde configures African American and South Asian women as the custodians of history and culture to furnish themselves with access to the contemporary and the universal. Similarly, in *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance: Dance and Other Contexts*, Brenda Dixon Gottschild insists that postmodern dance erases the influence of black culture. Extending this argument to Somatics, I argue that the practices—in the process of claiming to "peel away" cultural imposition and "reveal" precultural aptitudes, many of which exhibit what Gottschild calls Africanist aesthetics—end up erasing the influence of black culture.⁵ Informed by Chatterjea's and Dixon Gottschild's combined frameworks, I remain attuned to how the regimens participate in the appropriation of traditions represented as Eastern, while erasing the influence of African traditions. At the same time, they mark and thus risk the exclusion of non-Western bodies and nonwhite bodies.

We gain greater appreciation of the political contradictions in artists' practice through a nuanced understanding of how dancers construct a

naturalized idea of the body and how artists use the concepts they have at hand to negotiate their historical exigencies. For example, Gay Morris elucidates the circumstances that shape discrepancies in the significance of Merce Cunningham's midcentury dances. Morris addresses the contradiction at the heart of my subject, because, while she argues that Cunningham resisted textual meaning through evocation of a seemingly universal body, she sees that the strategy was socially specific. Staging dance as meaning nothing more than corporeal movement, and therefore culturally neutral, seems to exhibit the potential of the body to contribute meaning not produced elsewhere. Yet, Morris clarifies that Cunningham addressed specific social circumstances and that his strategy cannot be universalized.⁶ She points out that in the 1950s and 1960s his approach only worked for white artists because of the way black artists were marked in modern dance, and she characterizes his approach as representing the flux of nature, for which he drew on Zen ideas. Like Morris, I identify the cultural labor in which Somatics practitioners engaged through their processes and beliefs, as well as the conditions that shaped their interventions. As they resisted obvious meaning, Somatics practitioners often disbanded polarized gender ideals still evident in classical and modern aesthetics, but they continued to marginalize nonwhite bodies, among others.

Thus, this project identifies the meaning making in dance, as it is intertwined with social circumstances, by building on scholarship that interrogates bodily kinetics and experiences as a means of constructing culture.⁷ Rather than situating the origin of meaning in a body to which language is external, or in a mind distinct from the body, I construct Somatics as a "movement culture" in which textual and physical significance are enmeshed along with dancers' social circumstances. Therefore, this study builds not only on Novack's methodology but also on her argument that social arrangements are embedded in and extend from the dancing body. Not only do the dancers produce, sustain, and transfer their values in and through the sensuous and physical dimensions of kinetic experiences, but also the patterns of social organization extend from and support the meaning constructed in the dancing. Economic and other social circumstances condition bodily significance, influencing dancers as they make sense of, and reach for, practices of living based on beliefs they cultivate in their dancing. Movement culture, then, represents a nexus of influences that cohere around a dance form. Yet the members of the community consciously draw upon some of them while denying or being unaware of others.

The complex nature of my subject has required a combination of ethnographic and semiotic analysis in which I establish tropes that underpin dynamic community values that simultaneously embody the broader social meaning through which corporeality is constructed. Defining a discursive

field necessitates a level of abstraction in which, as Novack puts it, “exceptions, contents, and nuances disappear in favor of generic characterization and hyperbolic categorization.”⁸ With the caution that she brings to identifying the values embedded in a dance practice, Novack models how to apprehend the nuances that give shared values meaning. She insists on applying her insights to “a multiplicity of ethnographic realities [that] shape the unique and historical occasion of any dance,” and therefore questions “the transmission and transformation of dance from one cultural setting to another, as well as from one historical period to another.”⁹ By moving between abstraction and specificity, she reveals meaningful change in CI, and I follow her approach to reveal comparable distinct uses of Somatics.¹⁰

By articulating community values in and subject to changing circumstances, I also build upon scholarship that traces rapid change in late twentieth-century dance. For example, Emilyn Claid, in *Yes, No, Maybe . . . Seductive Ambiguity in Contemporary Dance*, chronicles dancers’ rejection, in the 1970s, and re-engagement, in the 1990s, of theatrical display. Claid contrasts the changes in artistic values introduced, in part, through Somatics with an intransigent “theatrical economy” that demands the artists seduce their audience, and this elucidates how broader political questions interface with dance through ideology that is specific to the art form. The community of artists upon whom she focuses overlaps with my subject. To build upon her insights, I analyze the aesthetic developments as affecting, and as intertwined with, shifts in the social field in which they occur. Somatics develops alongside changes in educational institutions and concert houses as part of a dynamic social field.

Tracing the broader sociohistorical processes in which dance is embroiled helps to account for the conundrum in which Somatics exhibits substantial variance while sustaining a consistent theory of the body. As referred to earlier, the regimens extend a mid-twentieth-century liberal ideal of universal individual freedom through the diversity with which artists implement a theory of the natural body. This thesis depends on analyzing the art form and bodily significance within broader social change. In this sense my project applies to Somatics an art historical framework developed by Serge Gilbaut in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*. He links the global success of American painting to the post-World War II ascension of liberalism, thereby departing from the tendency in his field to treat aesthetics independently from social change. Adapting Gilbaut’s lens, I draw on theories that align cultural change with economic development; scholars have shown that the arrangement and categorization of working practices entail symbolic schema that affect how people see themselves.¹¹ Translating this argument to dance, I argue that Somatics rhetoric

has manifested the idealization of universal individual freedom exhibited in both postwar American foreign policy and the late twentieth-century economic cultures that emerged in the Western hubs I address.

By insisting that the contextual conditions in which Somatics develops are integral to the body that dancers construct, my project differs from most writing on the subject. Commentators largely tell the story of a particular pioneer and/or the regimen in recognition of what has been achieved,¹² or they explain how Somatics processes work to promote the value of the regimens for dance education.¹³ In all these cases, by accepting the basic presumptions of Somatics, writers conceal the cultural labor of the artists they address. In contrast with these approaches, I have attempted to recognize what artists achieve by conceiving of the body as natural or beyond textual meaning, and yet I contest their belief that they are uniquely accessing natural capacity in their dancing, and thereby reveal some of the cultural biases that are obscured within the rhetoric.

Each of the three chapters that make up this study traces a different dimension of the history of the development of Somatics in relation to political, cultural, and aesthetic contexts. Despite the fact that enormous uniformity in the conception and philosophy of the body went largely unchallenged, training and concert dance in different decades manifested and produced significantly different meanings. Between the 1960s and the end of the twentieth century, the dominant values within the community using Somatics transitioned from emphasizing collective spirit to individual self-representation and, ultimately, began to embody workforce compliance, all of which depended on the development of a transnational community of practitioners. Chapter 1 traces the development of Somatics as an approach to training as it began to develop in the United States at midcentury. Focusing first on the foundational teachings of F. M. Alexander, Margaret H'Doubler, and Mabel Elsworth Todd, I then examine the work of Joan Skinner, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Susan Klein, Elaine Summers, and others to show how these teachers and artists, as they overhauled the cultivation of dancing bodies through the regimens, established a confluence between individuality and universality. In oppositional response to protocols that were institutionalized in modern dance, these teachers sought autonomy over their bodies and individual creative freedom. They claimed that by recovering universal principles of human movement, they could achieve bodily authenticity and thereby resist aesthetic imposition. To conceive of a transhistorical and precultural body, they constructed a lineage that consolidated Progressive Era and midcentury ideals that they believed were the discovery of bodily truths. Focusing on texts and on studio-based directives and pedagogies, the chapter chronicles how the training

continued to exhibit the confluence of individuality and universality, even as Somatics pedagogies and the contexts in which they were utilized transformed substantially. By focusing exclusively on the US context, I hope to show how the pedagogies were repeatedly rejuvenated by generations of practitioners through recourse to an overriding discourse governed by the logic of the natural.

Chapter 2 then examines the transnational dissemination of Somatics training, returning to the 1970s and 1980s to show how the pedagogies began to be exported. Practically and ideologically underpinned by postwar American expansionism, Somatics pedagogies initially rode upon the coattails of the earlier American export of modern dance. In this sense we see how, in its confluence of individuality and universality, the training embodied the liberal ideals of the US expansionist project. Artists disseminated Somatics as a set of universal bodily truths accessed through the regimens that would provide a foundation for individual creative freedom. By instituting the regimens in various regional and national contexts, they verified the universality of Somatics. At the same time the American origins of liberal ideals disappeared because dancers developed unique local approaches as they tackled distinct conditions and even critiqued some tendencies in Somatics that were associated with American cultural dominance. Artists also patched together transnational support at a time when establishments were hostile to Somatics, so their liberalism seemed independent of transnational flows of culture through powerful institutions. Meanwhile, an essentialized natural corporeality proved its use in galvanizing creative freedom as the synthesis of locally specific Somatics bodies that were interconnected by a transnational discourse of geographical significance. New York established a professional and innovative Somatics body at the network center; a Somatics body of respite emerged in New England, one that escaped New York commercialism; British dancers constructed a Somatics body of political and social significance against what they saw as apolitical American dance; Dutch educators synthesized a Somatics body in flux, resisting a relationship to any single dance context; and Australian dancers asserted a Somatics body as a new frontier in a postcolonial cultural independence movement. The process of transnational expansion established the veracity of Somatics universality, yet dancers also asserted individual creative freedom as central to the training because they contested the disapproval with which they were met by local modern dance establishments.

Chapter 3 then analyzes the concert-stage choreography produced with Somatics-trained bodies and ideas, focusing specifically on its development in New York City. Based on the theory that the natural body brings together

individuality and universality, choreographers represented postwar liberal ideals through the way they framed the dancers' identity in the artistic process. Concert dance fueled the interest in Somatics because artists argued that the training liberated the dancer from the authoritarian grasp of ballet and modern dance, producing new possibilities for choreography. I return to the three phases of development in training identified in chapter 1 and analyze three corresponding approaches to choreographic strategy defined by distinct dancer-choreographer relationships. These exhibit change over time as well as some regional variations. The first strategy, "processing," exemplifies antihierarchical collectivism because artists first developed the approach to collapse choreographic authority into the dancers' experiences of moving based on natural functional imperatives. A second strategy, "inventing," drew from the Somatics body new vocabulary with which choreographers established an individual artistic signature. They did this by collaborating with Somatics-trained dancers who contributed creative autonomy to the making of dance. A third strategy, "displaying," restored the choreographer's authority but still extended liberal ideals by staging "newly liberated subjects." This third approach emphasized the choreographer's signature as an artist, which manifested in valuing dancers for the appearance of the movement they performed. Because this approach recapitulates the ideas in modern and classical dance that Somatics initially rejected, the strategy represents the cessation of an experimental community.

I begin the book by looking at training to emphasize the role that constructing bodies in the studio plays in the formation of contemporary dance culture. The second chapter focusing on the dissemination of Somatics is intended to emphasize how the character of a technique is specific to the circumstances in which it is practiced. Yet, despite such specificity, my analysis reveals that American expansionism shapes the transnational context as an overarching ideology. Liberalism calls forth the local differences to verify its ideals. By articulating the temporal conditions that impact training in chapter 1 and the effect of geosocial dynamics in chapter 2, I provide a foundation for the analysis of representation in concerts in chapter 3. Throughout, I maintain a focus on the "natural," as a posture, a way of moving, and a way of being in the world, that enabled Somatics to both liberate and exclude, to encompass local and transnational social conditions, and to embed itself in movement and in artists' perceptions about aesthetic development.

1

Renewable Originality

Reaffirming the Natural Body throughout the Twentieth Century

As New York approached the end of the twentieth century, the front page of *Movement Research Performance Journal*, the premier publication for the dance community in which Somatics had been so central, declared:

You can't fake release. You just copy what someone's body's doing when they're releasing and you can make your body look like that. The implications of that are that something will break down. . . . [I]t's not an evil thing—they're doing what their teacher's [*sic*] want them to do. They're reproducing. Dancers are trained to reproduce what they're seeing what is correct or desirable, but when it comes to release, that's one thing you can't fake. You can try but unless you're really releasing you're not releasing.¹

In this claim for the exceptional status of release, Leslie Kaminoff references the deep-seated belief that Somatics, and specifically its practice of release, had revolutionized training. Kaminoff maintains that releasing cannot be copied because, along with the majority of her community, she believes in the training's ability to restore an innate natural capacity that other approaches bypass because they focus only on the way movement looks. Yet her focus on fakery also reveals that, by 1999, a style associated with Somatics that could be copied, called "release technique," had established prominence. This raised deep concern within her community. For four decades, dancers had believed that artistic authenticity, achieved by accessing the natural body, had protected them from pollution by institutional and commercial forces. Kaminoff's sentiment exemplifies a broader desire to protect the value of Somatics against what the community saw as the institutionalized pedagogies in modern dance and ballet, regimens that emphasized copying and perfecting specific movement patterns. Rejection of these training regimens underpinned the justification for Somatics and informed the choreography that its practitioners created.

Despite Kaminoff's belief in the natural foundations of the training, this chapter reveals how Somatics, although certainly marginal to other approaches for most of the late twentieth century, had always embodied specific styles. I hope to show that beginning in the 1960s, artists constructed a narrative of the lineage for their pedagogy that reached back to the early twentieth century. Building on early texts on bodily health and their attendant practices, artists at midcentury focused on the concept of nature that the earlier pioneers had developed with its implications for a natural posture and motion. Whereas the earlier texts contained within them certain assumptions about racial, cultural, and class categories that determined who could benefit from natural capacity, artists in the 1960s accorded natural capacity to every body. Nature thus achieved a new inclusivity at midcentury as dancers shifted the body's essence from being defined by aggregate social categories to one that was individual and universal. By emphasizing scientific rhetoric in the regimens, midcentury dancers focused on what they saw as precultural bodily dimensions, thereby divesting the training of troubling social and evolutionary theory. Moreover, based on their understanding of Eastern ideas, they validated receptivity to nature as a critique of the Western ego, a new orientation that empowered individual dancers as they struggled to overcome authoritarian dimensions of culture. Later generations of Somatics practitioners perpetuated the naturalization of individual receptivity, thereby continuing to universalize early twentieth-century ideas, establishing a prediscursive and transcendent corporeality as a source of inspiration and as a form of critical response to other training regimens.

In what follows, I focus on three distinct reconstructions of nature undertaken within US-based Somatics that reinvented its universal principles and their capacity to manifest individually. These shifts occurred between the 1960s and the end of the twentieth century. Prior to that I examine some of the early and midcentury epistemological foundations that established key ideas as touchstones to which dancers returned again and again. These foundations, based in early twentieth-century ideologies with their racial, cultural, and class prejudices, profoundly influenced Somatics, even though midcentury theories attempted to endow Somatics with a newly minted conception of the natural body as both universal and individual.

To trace these changes in Somatics training, and the impact on its community of practitioners, I analyze how the studio procedures, through which dancers felt they accessed nature, transformed to respond to the artistic challenges that arose in different decades. By examining the historical development of Somatics and its correlation with broader social issues, a process of sedimentation is revealed in which certain principles withstand the

transitions in the training and thereby achieve natural status. At the same time, it becomes possible to track how the regimens themselves are not stable sets of ideas but instead develop their significance through the contexts in which they are used.

Early Twentieth-Century Somatics and Its Conceptions of Nature

To probe the ways in which the Somatics construction of a universally inclusive natural body originated in exclusionary theories, I first look at three Progressive Era educators whose ideas developed when nature was linked to social difference. Late twentieth-century practitioners reframed the ideas of F. M. Alexander, Margaret H'Doubler, and Mabel Elsworth Todd, who, beginning in the late nineteenth century, all participated in an American intellectual movement that explained racial, cultural, and class differences in evolutionary terms. Their theories emerged in the context of discourses that evaluated the proximity of different social groups to humanity's natural origins, and the value of such proximity for the process of civilization. Like late twentieth-century Somatics constructions of nature, the theories claimed to be universal, but rather than applying equally to all humans, they stratified social groups as either biologically distinct or having achieved a different level of evolutionary development. Within this historical context, Alexander, H'Doubler, and Todd theorized human physical form and function as related to learning and consciousness.

The training that Alexander developed was based in a prevailing distinction and stratification of the mind and body. Alexander insisted that by privileging intellectual over corporeal volition, the goal-oriented behavior in which Western epistemology was invested overrode natural physical capacity, which he argued is crucial to optimum functioning. For continuing human evolution, capacities intrinsic to the human body needed to be integrated with Enlightenment rationality; nature (the primitive) and reason (the civilized) needed to be conjoined.² Dancers were encouraged to reconceive the body-self in their training using his ideas. Specifically, Alexander argued that various "others" to a canonical white Western subject failed to embody "Man's Supreme Inheritance," the title of his first publication.³ The fallen glory of ancient empires resulted from their failure to bring natural instincts under conscious control, according to Alexander, who thereby aligned his ideas with the logic used to justify colonial rule. At the same time, preindustrial agricultural workers living in Alexander's homeland demonstrated the loss

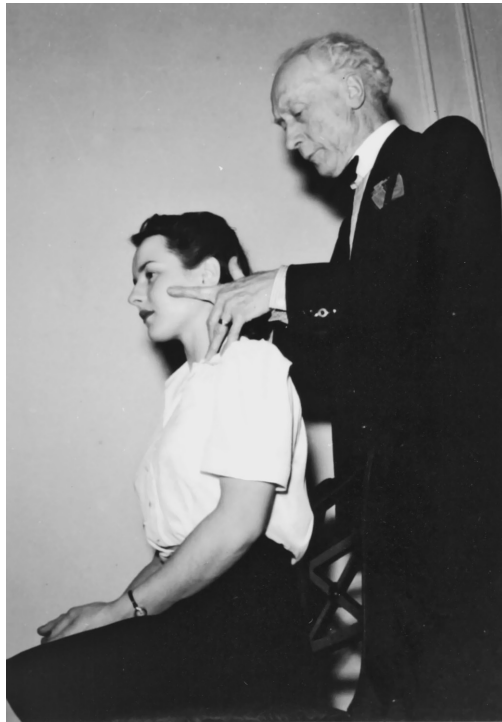


Figure 1.1. F. M. Alexander at work adjusting one of his patients (a journalist who interviewed him on occasion of his eightieth birthday) and encouraging awareness of certain muscles key to postural integrity.

Photograph by Australia News Information Bureau 1949. © The Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique Archives, UK.

of mental capacity that results from reverting to nature.⁴ He further argued that Africans could be approximated to animals that rely on base instincts, suggesting that their physical evolution extended beyond their mental capacity and lack of moral consciousness.⁵ Civilization could supposedly only avoid the debauchery of antiquated empires, avert lower-class ignorance, advance above inferior races, and access its supreme inheritance through a new bodily consciousness to which posture training was integral.

Alexander ultimately ceased to stratify human groups in his theory of advancement, which probably reflects changing social mores and the mutually influencing intellectual relationship he enjoyed with progressive education pioneer John Dewey.⁶ However, to grasp the cultural work that the technique does, we must appreciate its dependence on Progressive Era ideas about the “primitive” and “civilized” mind. The construction of nature through social categories, which later practitioners erased with an individualized postrace,

postclass concept, remains embedded in ideas that Alexander shared with Dewey. Opposed to conservative interpretations of evolutionary theory that proposed innate limitations of the primitive mind as an explanation of economic and other disadvantages, Dewey argued that social ills like poverty could be solved with pedagogy that integrated Darwin's insights about natural development.⁷ Dewey insisted upon the universality of intellectual capacity and the role of the social environment in its development.⁸ Every human being could expand beyond the primitive mind, but Dewey agreed with Alexander that the body represented a crucial component of consciousness and, hence, of that process. In the same way that Alexander insisted on the importance of connecting with motor capacities, Dewey argued that intellectual development and social advancement depended on marshaling essential primitive capabilities.⁹ He explained social differences as a linear progression between primitive and advanced cultures, which mirrored the evolution of the species, but accorded all human beings equal potential for improvement.¹⁰ Although intrinsic to everyone, the primitive mind, which Dewey and Alexander agreed must be utilized in education, nonetheless accrued its definition from the kinds of distinctions between social groups articulated in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*.

Michael Gelb's *Body Learning: An Introduction to the Alexander Technique* exemplifies the enduring impact of Alexander's theory of nature, and it remains a widely used text on Alexander's approach. Published in 1981, the book configures children, animals, and non-Western tribal people as unfettered by the culture that robs white Western adults of their natural physical capacity.¹¹ While he seems to resist biological racism by idealizing rather than denigrating Africans, Gelb locks noncanonical and non-Western bodies in nature (the primitive), where they either remain as romantic visions of the past or wait to evolve so that rationality and culture (the civilized) can be integrated. The way that Gelb reconfigures Alexander's work is instructive because it demonstrates how practitioners isolated the idea of physical principles from racial theory. Gelb attributes his understanding of the postural training technique to Alexander's work and even makes reference to *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, and he sustains the conceit that an understanding of evolutionary theory provides insight about the central role of posture in constructing consciousness. However, Alexander's participation in early twentieth-century racial theories is never mentioned.

Influenced by Alexander's theory of posture as a universal constant and potential for human salvation,¹² a second movement educator, H'Doubler, began to apply Dewey's and Alexander's ideas in a way that established a foothold for modern dance in the university in the 1920s. Her teaching profoundly