

What is a Politicized Somatics?

Somatics is a path, a methodology, and a change theory, by which we can embody transformation, individually and collectively. **Embodied transformation is foundational change that shows in our actions, ways of being, relating, and perceiving.** It is transformation that sustains over time. Somatics pragmatically supports us to align our values and actions. It helps us to develop depth and the capacity to feel ourselves, each other, and life around us. Somatics builds in us the ability to act from strategy and empathy, and teaches us to be able to assess conditions and “what is” clearly. Somatics is a practice-able theory of change that can move us toward individual, community, and collective liberation. Somatics works through the body, engaging us in our thinking, emotions, commitments, vision and action.

WHAT SOMATICS IS & IS NOT

SOMATICS IS a holistic change theory that understands both personal and collective transformation from a radically different paradigm. Somatics understands both the individual and collective as a combination of biological, evolutionary, emotional, and psychological aspects, shaped by social and historical norms and adaptive to a wide array of both resilient and oppressive forces. All of this gets embodied through both resilience and survival strategies, and social and cultural practices become “shapes” or embodied worldviews, habits, ways of relating, automatic actions and non-action. What we embody becomes familiar, “normal,” and habitual, even “feels” right...even when what we embody may not match up with our values or vision. Then, what we embody connects to our identity and how we see ourselves.

SOMATICS IS NOT adding a “body-based” exercise to psycho-therapy or organizational settings, or solely “bringing your attention to your bodily sensations.” In the mainstream West we fundamentally live in a disembodied set of cultural practices, and the distinctions around body-based work can get rather sloppy. Anything that has to do with the body can get called “somatics.”

IN MORE DEPTH

The word Somatics comes from the Greek root *soma*, which means "the living organism in its wholeness." Although it can be cumbersome, it is the best word we have in English to understand human beings as an integrated mind/body/spirit, and as social, relational beings. In somatic speak, we call this embodiment, “shape,” and the collective “body” or collective psycho-biology.

While we have inherited a Cartesian worldview and an objectifying scientific framework in the West, we are not mind over matter (if only I think differently I will be different), nor matter over mind or spirit (a change in chemistry or medication will wholly change my experience). **Rather, we are all of these things combined—we are thinking and conceptual, we are emotional, we are biological, we are spiritual, we are relational and we are social.** Somatics approaches people as this integrated whole, working with these interdependent aspects of who we are. Somatics also introduces us to an understanding of the self as a compilation of practices. These practices are embodied or have been trained into our psycho-biology over time. They are our habits or competencies—some useful and others not.

Somatics asks, "What are you practicing?" Given we are always practicing something, we look, "Is what you are practicing aligned with what you most care about?" Embodied practices are mostly unconscious to us – we have been doing them so long that we no longer have to think about them. Some practices we learned purposefully, like riding a bike or driving a car, and others we modeled from our environment (family, culture and society). Still others were driven out of survival and safety. Many embodied practices or automatic reactions are derived from stress responses to loss, hurt, trauma, need for safety, etc., from very personal to social experiences. Embodied practices are both individual and collective or social.

Perhaps what is most unique about somatics is that it integrates the body as an essential place of change, learning and transformation. You can think of it as muscles having memory and the tissues having intelligence. We have learned a more objectifying or dissociated view of the body as a pile of bones and tendons we think of as a science project. Somatics looks at the body as a place of evolutionary intelligence and learning. Somatics sees the "self," or who we are, as inseparable from the body. When we reconnect the vast intelligence of the body with the mind and spirit, powerful change and healing are available.

To transform, to create sustainable change, we need to feel and perceive our individual and collective "old shapes." We need to increase our awareness of the default shapes we have embodied. Then, we get to open or deconstruct these shapes, often healing and developing a much more substantial capacity through the opening. This somatic opening allows for new ways of acting, feeling, relating and knowing. It is the pragmatic process of deep transformation, shedding to change. Somatics then moves us toward embodying new ways of being and action that align our values, longings and actions. Often our social conditions and our family and community experiences do not teach us the embodied skills we need. This focus on developing embodied skills, whether it's centered accountability and liberatory use of power, building deeper trust through conflict, or the capacity to be with the unknown or love more deeply, is essential to sustainable change.

The bad news, from a social justice perspective, is that we inadvertently embody societal norms we don't believe in, and often don't embody the values we do believe in. From a somatic vantage point, this is completely understandable and there is a lot we can do about it. **A politicized somatic theory understands the need for deep personal transformation, aligned with liberatory community/collective practices, connected to transformative systemic change.** One is inseparable from the next, and each should serve the other. We need all three to generate strong and grounded strategy, to build compelling alternatives and to mend the deep impact of oppression and violence. We need all three to build collective power that has wisdom and to act and organize in accordance with liberatory values.

Many of the current somatic approaches are being institutionalized within Western psycho-therapeutic traditions and university departments. If you research somatics, you will see that most schools do not assess the social conditions in which we live and how we embody oppressive and individualistic ways of being, even when somaticists are well meaning. **While somatics has much to offer to healing and many Western therapeutic distinctions are useful to transformational work, a somatic approach without a political analysis of social**

institutions, unequal distribution of power and use of violence and force, leave out some of the largest forces that shape us. Without a political analysis much of the trauma that folks withstand is either left unnamed (racism, gender oppression, homophobia, class oppression) or only partially addressed. **A politicized somatics can act as a fundamental collective practice of building power, deepening presence and capacity, and developing the embodied skills we need to generate large-scale change.** Without a political analysis, this doesn't get leveraged.

GENERATIVE SOMATICS: BREAKING IT DOWN

generative somatics is a transformative change theory and praxis using Somatic Awareness, Somatic Opening and Somatic Practices inside of a social analysis to forward individual, community, and systemic transformation. This approach comes from the lineage of Strozzi Somatics and Richard Strozzi-Heckler, and continues as a living lineage. generative somatics has integrated an overt political analysis as well as a trauma and healing lens to continue to evolve the work and its reach.

SOMATIC AWARENESS involves learning to listen to and live inside of our sensations and aliveness (feelings, movement, body, etc.). Through somatic awareness sensations such as temperature, pressure and movement become sources of information and a deep way of connecting with ourselves, our values and commitments, and our aliveness. You can think of sensations as the foundational language of life. From sensations, emotions are felt and understood, and then the stories and interpretations we have of life. Dissociation, minimization and numbing are normal responses to trauma, oppression, and difficult life experiences. Being connected to sensation brings one back into contact with oneself, or helps you to re-connect. Being present and able to "allow for" sensations and emotions, produces more choice and less reaction. So often what we are fundamentally reacting to is not being able to feel or tolerate what is happening in our own sensations, emotions and experience. **Somatic awareness and embodiment (living inside your own skin, body and aliveness) grows more choice in our responses and actions.** Somatic awareness often re-introduces us to what we most care about—what's in "our hearts" or "gut feelings." People often speak of reconnecting with purpose and aliveness.

SOMATIC OPENING changes or deconstructs an old embodied "shape" allowing change to root. Our deep reactions and ways of being live in our somatic structures and most often cannot be changed through conversation or thought alone. **Somatic opening works through the body to access and transform survival reactions, experiences that have shaped us, and emotions or numbing that has become automatic.** Our bodies tell stories. Our muscles hold memories. Somatic opening allows us to listen to and transform these stories.

There are many practices that support somatic opening. Somatic bodywork is one. Somatic bodywork allows us to work directly with the places in the psycho-biology that have held traumatic experiences or are hyper-vigilant or numb. Somatic bodywork uses touch, conversation, imagination and emotional processes to support the shift from contraction and dissociation to openness and embodiment. Practically, this means processing the experiences stored in the psycho-biology through the emotions and body. Massage can temporarily relax a muscle or contraction, but the "shaping" or "armoring" in a body will not shift unless the concern that contraction is taking care of (safety, love, protection, shame) is worked through. From a

neuroscience perspective, the body is the easiest doorway into working with those reactions, emotions, and memories that are primarily run by the reptilian brain, and the limbic and stress centers in the brain.

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

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

SOCIAL CONTEXT. We are always living inside of a social context. The institutions and social norms we are surrounded by are currently and have historically shaped us. We are both in a historical moment, and strongly shaped by the flow of history before us. **We embody our social contexts, just as we are shaped by and embody our family contexts, communities and the land/environments that influence us.** When we are looking at transformation, social context is one of the most influential forces, whether we are focused on personal, community or systemic change.

Social context in the U.S. is based on domination, histories of colonization, slavery, and manifest destiny, and institutions and norms that destroy the earth while systematically oppressing some groups and privileging others. Individualism is held as paramount and interdependence underrated. There are a strong ongoing set of contradictions between the national narrative of freedom and democracy, and the ongoing institutions of war, oppression, and corporatization. We live in an increasingly commodified capitalist system, where profit is the fundamental measure of success, not happiness, not collective wellbeing, not the sustainability of life. All of this touches us, affects us and strangely enough "shapes" us all the way down to our bodies (not to mention our worldview and actions).

Any of us organizing for social and environmental justice, for collective healing and empowerment, are working to change these social conditions. Really, we are changing both our internal and external worlds simultaneously, because this social context has shaped us too. Who we are as we organize and build movement, and how we develop ourselves individually and collectively deeply affects our relations, creativity, how we can assess our conditions and opportunities and what visions and strategies we imagine. Often those of us moved to do liberation work have been deeply hurt by oppression or violence. This can be a strong calling to

movement work, and leave us with scars that need tending. Internal and external transformation matters deeply for our long-term goals.

SPIRIT AND LANDSCAPE. Forces that are beyond humans shape and affect us deeply, as well. These forces are more lasting than what humans can do or create. Even as we are degrading essential parts of our natural environmental, and collectively becoming less connected to sources of our food and water, we are completely dependent on the earth for our existence. The atmosphere, the global weather systems, the water cycle—these allow us life. It is very recent in human evolution that we are not centrally connected to land and landscape. The jury is out as to whether this is a good thing or not, and whether this will be sustainable. No matter what, however, whether we are in a wilderness, rural or cityscape, landscape shapes us. Nature and land show over and over to be a central resilience factor.

By Spirit, we mean the larger forces of energy, the vastness of the cosmos and unknown, and the harmonizing forces of nature. The 2011 winner of the Nobel Prize in astro-physics said that what we can see in the universe (stars, planets, nebula, etc.) is under 4% of what is out there. Meaning that over 96% is made of an unknown “dark matter” and we have no idea what it is. Spirit or a larger force is also cited as an experience that builds resilience.

RESILIENCE: A SOMATIC DEFINITION

Resilience is the ability to somatically, holistically renew ourselves during and after oppressive or traumatic experiences. **It is the ability to shift ourselves from a traumatic alert response to a calmed, cohesive state with a positive imagination for the future.** Resilience allows for both safety and connection to be re-established. We are fundamentally resilient and creative beings. There are both individual and community practices that support resilience.

There is a lot of interesting and useful research on resilience. Some “resilience factors” include: connection to nature, spirituality (not necessarily religion), art, music, creativity, connection to animals, the ability to help others, and the ability to stay connected and not isolate. Making a difference for others and making greater meaning from tragedy.

Somatics asks:

- How would our work be different if we oriented to cultivate and support our own, other people’s, and communities’ resilience?
- How can we purposefully support each other’s resilience and practice collectively?

TRAUMA: A SOMATIC DEFINITION

Traumatic experiences cause a somatic contraction and "shaping" that becomes non-responsive to current time experience. This shaping impacts identity, relationship, physiology, emotions, behavior, thinking/interpretation, place and belonging. Trauma breaks safety and betrays relatedness, on the levels of mind, body, and spirit and alters one's connection to community. generative somatics approaches trauma as both an individual and collective experience. Individuals can experience specific incidences of trauma that deeply impact them and

the people they are in relationship with for years. We are also living amidst family and community practices, public and private institutions and broader social norms that support and perpetuate violence and domination. In this work we look toward both individual experiences of trauma and the social context in which we are living to understand, heal, and transform.

Working with trauma through the psycho-biology is a powerful way to move from managing traumatic symptoms to transforming trauma and our lives. **Transforming trauma includes being able to change the deep reactions that linger long after a traumatic experience—the fight, flight, freeze and dissociation responses which emerge automatically to protect us.** While they are initially life saving responses they tend to create havoc over time. Through somatics we are able to learn presence and boundaries, re-establish connection with yourself, others and community, connect to what makes you life meaningful and garner your resilience and courage to live that.

SOMATICS: THE FIELD

We are in an institutionalizing phase in the field of somatics. Within the last 10 years, numerous universities and programs have begun to offer graduate degrees in somatic psychology. However, the majority of foundational somatic training institutes are still independent of the university setting. There are a variety of quality somatic approaches. As many of these somatic approaches are being integrated into the institution of Psychology, an "attention-based" somatics is being prioritized. This is a somatic approach that attends to the sensations in the body, through conversation and cognition. Through tracking sensations, it uses the body as a base of knowledge and change. **Because of the historical bias in the institution of psychology away from the body and touch, essential aspects of an integrative somatic approach—including somatic practices and somatic bodywork—are being missed.** In this, the full potency of somatics is being missed. There is a debate within somatic psychology circles about the ethics of not using touch when it is such a powerful tool for healing and transformation.

The mainstreaming of somatics is, for the most part without social context and a political analysis. It is being forwarded inside of an individual healing framework. Much of the current research is focused around the use of somatics in healing trauma, which it is very effective at. But the question of why there is so much trauma and oppression to heal, and what somatics can do about it, is left unasked. Somatics has a powerful and relevant use at a larger scale—in community, for leadership development, alliance building, and more. **Our hope is that the use of a politicized somatics by social justice movements and healing practitioners will help to advance large-scale systemic change that integrates personal and collective transformation.**