

# REFORM IN SOMATICS

by Nicole Perry (she/her)

*Note to Readers: This is an examination of my participation in somatic practices as a white, thin, middle-class, middle-aged cis het woman in America, who makes her living as a dance instructor and choreographer. I have no assumptions about what your positionalities are, but hope that those with experiences similar to mine find this a helpful lens for self-examination. I know that Black, Brown, and Indigenous dancers and teachers have embodied experiences that are different, and that this piece may not speak to your experiences.*

*I'd like to include a note of gratitude for the work of Martha Eddy and others, who have been documenting somatic lineages for decades. It is time to have this conversation.*

Somatic practices have been a part of modern dance training for several decades. Somatics, named by Thomas Hanna in the 1960s to describe a way of bodily knowing and an integration of the mind and body, is touted as a way for dancers to be able to “listen to their bodies.” The somatic approach to modern dance, as well as supporting somatic methods such as Laban/Bartenieff, Alexander, Feldenkries, Rolfing, and others, are ways that dancers might better know their own form and body.

I teach several somatics-based Modern classes, as well as a somatics-based stretching and conditioning class at the university level. I teach more students of color than I teach white students. Prior to entering my class, many have not been introduced to the concept of somatics, even though they may be familiar with some somatic practices. The first day I introduce somatics, I always say, “Somatic practices have been named, packaged, marketed, certified, and often taught by folks who look like me.” I follow it with “However, these practices have been created by Asian, African and Indigenous folks, and those roots need to be honored.” From their journals, I know that for many students, this is the first time that movement lineage has been discussed and appropriation has been considered as a bodily practice.

Again, from their journals, I know that the offering of radical transparency around somatic lineages and appropriation helps them see their embodied experiences as valid, in a world that so often white-washes somatics to sell “fitness” or “wellness.” By honoring the roots and lineages of the somatic methods I teach, I welcome my students’ bodies, not just to class, but back to practices that already belong to them.

The emphasis in somatics is on personal knowing, through the body. If an embodied practice benefits me—for example, yoga makes me calm and more flexible—it must be something I should

continue doing. However, that line of thinking can lead quickly to the appropriation of practices that do not belong to me or my culture. This is a hallmark of appropriation— I am concerned about what it does for me (makes me feel better, makes me look good, makes me money), not what the practice does for its culture of origin, then or now.



Chavar Montano  
photographed by Loy Lyon

The practice of appropriation holds a lot of interest to me as a teacher, choreographer, and someone who enjoyed yoga. It shows up most obviously in my work as Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analyst. Laban had a huge influence from Sufi whirling from a childhood tutor and Egyptian occultic practices through Rosicrucianism. These other cultures are rarely mentioned in learning the System that bears his name.

Just as Laban was influenced by other cultures, so were other “somatics pioneers.” Many discussions of their methods do not offer students a history of the form beyond the founder. Yoga, tai chi, and chi gong, ancient Asian and African practices, are influences of Alexander, Rolf, and Bartenieff. Feldenkreis was influenced by judo. Bainbridge-Cohen gives credit to her aikido training, but rarely is this mentioned in overviews of Body-Mind Centering. Cranio-sacral work has been well-documented as descended from Indigenous American healing practices.

Why are these original practices not considered part of “Somatics” in our 21st-century understanding, but are only occasionally-mentioned precursors? Why are bodies and practices of color erased from our discussions of somatics? What is our obligation to history and culture as teachers? As practitioners? As people who love, enjoy, and appreciate bodies?

We enter into our somatics practice with curiosity, eager to learn about ourselves and how we might change our relationship to the world. Yet, I rarely hear the conversations happening that will

actually affect change—conversations that ask the hard questions regarding white-washing, erasure, and appropriation of cultural traditions.

I am not asking anyone to give up their yoga practice. (I actually did, after reading [this piece](#), and it was the right choice for me. As I worked to disrupt my participation in white supremacy, I found myself increasingly uncomfortable in a space that was mainly white, with mainly white teachers and owners profiting off the bodies and traditions of people of color. I could no longer justify my participation in that system.) I am also not asking you to stop teaching the method that has brought you physical and/or emotional healing, or that you've seen do the same for others.

I do invite you to examine how your silence in these conversations upholds white supremacy and erasure of bodies and traditions of color. I invite you to reflect on what your somatics practice has offered you, and then do a bit of research to discover its culture of origin. The stakes are high—we are affecting people's relationships with their bodies and therefore how they approach their world.

Just like in a [Land Acknowledgement](#), the first step is to know that we are benefiting from the presence of ancestors and other cultures. Who are your movement ancestors, and how can you honor them? The next step is taking action—what can we do to live in right relationships with our world, now?

Here are the questions I am asking myself as I teach and participate in somatics, and offer you for self-examination:

Where must I call out appropriation, erasure, and/or colonization in my somatic work?

Where do movement practices and/or cultural traditions of African, Asian, or Indigenous people get called by the name of a white practitioner, or represented by mainly white bodies?

What is the historical/cultural lineage of the method I am affiliated with?

How can I support the work of leaders from the culture of origin? What might need to change in my practice to follow their lead?

Who has been left out of the method that I teach/practice?

For me, this means acknowledging that while the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System only bears two names, that many other students of Laban had influence and developmental power over the work. Many of those missing names are women, and there is photographic proof of women of color being part of his cohort at Ascona. I must also mention the African and Middle Eastern influences on Laban.

It also means acknowledging that the System was created in a particular time and place. It is not, as is so often claimed, universal.

How am I making the work that I do honoring or accessible to the people of that history/culture, without tokenizing their participation?

This is one of the criticisms of yoga, in particular, in the US, that South Asian and African people are rarely represented in yoga studios.

If I am financially benefiting from the work of cultures that are not my own, how am I financially supporting that culture, or making sure that money is going to continue the original culture's practice of the work?

What was the original purpose of the method? How has that changed in its passing on?

Additionally, we might ask what aspects of its original culture and meaning have been lost because of that change?

How has this method been used to oppress? Where does this method uphold "norms" that are actually white, Eurocentric preferences?

Appropriation and erasure, claims of universality, ableism, etc.

And most importantly, how do I not continue the oppression in my practice or my teaching?

How do I take action to live in right relationships?

I am not interested in perpetuating methods of knowing my body, and teaching others to do the same, in ways that erase the bodies of others. I am interested in imagining a world of "what if...?"

What if you stopped teaching the method you do/in the way that you do? What new possibilities might open up for you? For others?

What if your practice honored its ancestors and culture, in words, finances, and actions?

What if our bodies brought us into right relationships with each other, instead of allowing us to continue in oppressive ones?

What if that world existed now?

What if you turn this into a somatic practice, not just a mental one? Can you create a gesture for "what if" that somatically opens you to possibilities? Can these questions become synced to your breath as you practice? How will you embody change?



Brinda Guha  
photographed by Lory Lyon

Form/Reform in Somatics  
Nicole Perry for *DanceGeist*  
Published Oct. 2021

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The emphasis in somatics is on personal knowing, through the body. If an embodied practice benefits me, for example yoga makes me feel calm and be more flexible, it must be something I should continue doing. However, that line of thinking can lead quickly to the appropriation of

practices that do not belong to me or my culture, simply because they offer me something. This is a hallmark of appropriation— I am concerned about what it does for me (makes me feel better, makes me look good, makes me money), not what the practice does for its culture of origin, then or now.

The practice of appropriation holds a lot of interest to me as a teacher, choreographer, and someone who enjoyed yoga. It shows up most obviously in my work as Laban/Bartenieff Movement Analyst. Laban had a huge influence from Sufi whirling from a childhood tutor and Egyptian occultic practices through Rosicrucianism. These other cultures are rarely mentioned in learning the System that bears his name.

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- What is the historical/cultural lineage of the method I am affiliated with?
  - How can I support the work of leaders from the culture of origin? What might need to change in my practice to follow their lead?
- Who has been left out of the method that I teach/practice?
  - For me, this means acknowledging that while the Laban/Bartenieff Movement System only bears two names, that many other students of Laban had influence and developmental power over the work. Many of those missing names are women, and there is photographic proof of women of color being part of his cohort at Ascona. I must also mention the African and Middle Eastern influences on Laban.
  - It also means acknowledging that the System was created in a particular time and place. It is not, as is so often claimed, universal.
- How am I making the work that I do honoring or accessible to the people of that history/culture, without tokenizing their participation?
  - This is one of the criticisms of yoga, in particular, in the US, that South Asian and African people are rarely represented in yoga studios.
  - If I am financially benefiting from the work of cultures that are not my own, how am I financially supporting that culture, or making sure that money is going to continue the original culture's practice of the work?
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