

Somáticas na Terra dos Outros

By Bailey Anderson and Rosely Conz

[\(click here for soundtrack and video excerpt\)](#)

Oh, say can you see all the flour in white
Why so proudly are we so hard to be feeding?
Gluten used to be the staples of our lives,
O'er the Proteins we watch were so gallantly Spitting.

And the flour is now like bombs bursting in air,
Wheat banned through the night, a new fad is still there,
Oh, say does that starch will be banned as well,
Now that all is gluten-free at the home of the kale...



Image: Bailey Anderson and Rosely Conz in The Otherland by Daniel Beahm

The Otherland - Terra dos Outros

We make proposals to each other, here Rosely proposes writing. I agree. We begin to work together. I write here, Rosely over there. We reflect on what has been, to understand what will be.

The Otherland, an evening-length show, premiered in 2015 at the University of Colorado at Boulder as part of our Master of Fine Arts in dance final thesis for both of us. We envisioned it as a way to address the intersection(alities) between foreignness and disability, without flattening the differences, without saying they are the same. After 4 years, The Otherland is still relevant as we continue to look for strategies to work together across distances (Rosely is currently in Michigan and Bailey in Philadelphia) and borders; to find words to describe what we did and do.

As we propose our working definition of somatics, words once again seem to fail us. After years of working as artists and educators, there are some common practices and principles we adopt for this paper.

1. Somatics can be understood as a way of seeing and working through movement, using a different sense of timing.
2. Somatics holds the (temporary/or permanent) suspension of the focus on product for an emphasis on process.
3. Somatics offers a (westernized) holistic approach to mindbody connection.
4. Somatics suggests the need for critical reflection on oneself, others, and the environment.
5. Somatics offers a non-abstract body
6. Somatics supports self-perception and the first-person subjective experience as frameworks of truth.

More than methods, strategies, and exercises, we suggest that somatics is a way to (un)frame the soma, the living body, and all its contradictions and multitudes, nuances, desires, sexualities, fears, and strengths. It should support and encourage experimentation, discoveries, frustrations, and failures.

Words being foreigner / having disability

Our initial relationship was constructed around words, and the myriad of ways they failed us. Being a foreigner and having a disability. *Antropofagia* (cultural cannibalism, possibility - even utopian - of choosing who/what you are going to ingest.) Holding words inside, inability to express with words, homonyms, roots and

routes of the nervous system and roadways. Somatics is part of our experience, but not always intentionally present in the creative process.

Rosely: As I think back to *The Otherland*, somatics had no established place in there for me. At least not intentionally. Maybe as a foundation that supported my artistic and performative choices but not as a way to discuss the main themes of this concert: being a foreigner, translating, being disoriented. I used to think about somatics as this a-political, conflict-free territory, not related to the struggles of me being an immigrant, or my difficulty to dominate English words.

Bailey: I might agree. I know that I was not intentionally engaging with somatics within my dance making. I think it was impacting my choices though. I would think, discuss, and practice somatic ideas within rehearsal practices and encourage dancers in an attempt to support self-care. So, does our definition of somatics require an intentional engagement with it? Or, might it still have influenced our choices? Or, does our awareness of somatics, make it somatic? Who does that privilege?

Rosely: Is a dance somatic if I say so?

In one part of the performance, we both asked the audience to translate what they were seeing into words. We then wrote them on the paper which covered the floor, and stuck the little pieces of papers into onions before taking a bite, chewing, and attempting to swallow. Later, we held scrabble pieces (a metaphor for searching for words) and flour in our mouths while dancing.

The sourness of the onion made people in the audience cringe. Onion, flour, and scrabble pieces created a kinesthetic experience for us, and the audience. They acted as a bridge to our experience.

Jorge Larrosa Bondía, Professor at the University of Barcelona, reminds us that

The word experience has the ex of exterior, of foreigner (*extranjero*), of exile, of stranger, and also the ex of existence. Experience is the passage of existence, the passage of a being who has no essence or

reason or foundation, but who simply exists in an ever singular manner, finite, immanent, contingent. (21)

Experience is something that you need to savor, having in(side) your body, in your mouth and taste it. Savoring the onion, a sour, bitter reminder of roots as metaphors and realities of one's existence.

Experience is, therefore, only possible in first-person. It is non-transferable but it can be relatable. Can a somatic experience happen through watching someone else's body?



Image: Rosely Conz and Bailey Anderson in *The Otherland* photo by Daniel Beahm

A Mouth Full of Translations

Translation - *Tradução* - trying to understand something that was not written in one's own language. Component of words, and what words mean, and the power that they have in constructing. We examined the pieces to construct discourse. The shared struggle to dominate those little bricks in academia.

Both in our relationship and dancing, we are often translating, asking each other what something meant for that person, and how we were deciding to construct meaning. We are collaborating, finding the words, creating language, defying meaning, refining meaning, refining language, redefining listening.

According to Margarida DeGato: "...The main goal of translation is no longer to communicate the original but to reinvent it, and it takes editing liberties to do so, relying on fragmentation and montage" (44).

While Rosely included in her thesis the translations she looked up while writing, Bailey navigated the impulse to automatically (or auto-correct) the spelling of words ultimately using the riki-rack red lines aesthetically. The little line underlining the words in red and green. Red in blood, in belonging, in beets, in roots that attach to nowhere. They grew inside our mouths, through a mattress, creating the tail of a dress.

The founders of the discipline of somatics are many. F.M. Alexander, Irmgard Bartenieff, Gerda Alexander, Moshe Feldenkrais, Mabel Todd, to name a few (Eddy 2016). Even those that were non-native English speakers and immigrants themselves published about their work in English, making their methods known in that language. Therefore, the need to translate. To find in collage and montage the strategies to define somatics under less colonized lenses. What happens when one cannot (or will not) speak the language of the practices that will allow for the finding of one's inner voice?

I remember counting in English during one of my Alexander Technique private lessons. Nothing was happening and Inhibition felt far away. Then, my instructor asked me to count in Portuguese (she knew it was my native language). As I began, my body suddenly stopped trying. Trying to speak "right", trying to Inhibit, trying to avoid an accent. The support of my mother tongue was what I needed in order to feel safe and secure.

What is the language of somatics? Maybe there is something important about the inability to translate words to words, or movement from body to body, sometimes translation is impossible. How can somatics develop a holistic terminology using a language that was created under the dichotomy of mind versus body? How can somatics become more decolonized when the language of the colonizers is the founders' language? The Otherland is still an English word.



Image: Rosely Conz and Bailey Anderson (center) Sophia Hernandez and Bonnie Cox seated performing in *The Otherland* photo by Daniel Beahm

Somatics and Abstraction

Our study of somatic practices has also informed our understanding of the body and abstraction. Our definition of somatics argues that the body cannot be abstract. There is nothing more concrete than flesh, bones, organs, feelings, and sensations. Subjective is not the same as abstract. This is ignored, though, when some somatic methods and discourses tend to universalize anatomical features, abstracting the body and the information that comes from movement. Dance (can) in general underscore this reality repeatedly.

This is your body in particular, and detail.

Throughout our work, Rosely has explored how the word “alien” is associated with foreigners for tax purposes, for documentation and social benefits, and for visa application. In pop-culture, the alien's body is always “kind of human”, but not really; and it is always an efficient one, an injury-free body as well. We recognize that some discourses of freedom and choice can be used to oppress. Our alien

bodies exist together in a new kind of future...one that we continually invent, reinvent, and unravel. The somatic “monster” is what we aim for.

Somatic knowledge in and of itself is not inherently good or bad. The mistake that can be made, however, is aiming for universality in the rules that govern somatic principles. Generally, somatic theory delves into personal subjective ways of knowing the world without looking at inner bodily experiences as a socio-cultural construction. Somaticists tend to look at somatic experience as real and universal. (Green 69)

By universalizing, somatics run the risk of proposing an abstract approach to movement. The ascribed cannon, whose bodies were not marked as Other, whose disabilities were temporary and overcome through their own methods, were able to position their methods as universal and atemporal.

The article, “Does Abstraction Belong to White People?” by [Miguel Gutierrez](#) and the subsequent conversation published on Movement Research’s website series “Critical Correspondence” On Whiteness and Abstraction: [Anh Vo with Juliana F. May](#) has come out since our production of *The Otherland* and has informed the way we are currently talking about our work and process, including our engagement with somatics.

Anh Vo: Do you think abstraction belongs to white people?

Juliana F. May: I think white people think that it does belong to them, but they actually wouldn’t admit that. I don’t think white people are in the practice of admitting that because of how the 60s postmodernism came about and how it’s been carried out over the last 50+ years. It operates as neutrality, as a given. That white people focus so much on the form of their art and that their bodies can mean anything and be anything. It’s something that people are just waking up to. That a given body is a neutral body, which is obviously problematic and situates the work that comes out of that thinking as deeply unconscious. It has thorns and holes and is vulnerable to critique now. It has always been, but I think right now it’s being deeply critiqued, as it should be.

By emphasizing a neutral body, a body flexible enough, that can do any kinds of dance, somatics reinforces a fallacy that anybody can be neutral, that dances and dancers can be neutral by associating them with abstraction. Bodies always carry meaning and political power. Bodies are living realities, both on stage and in

somatic practices, that can/may be temporarily ignored but not erased. Whose bodies are ignored or seen as neutral tells us a lot about our society and prejudice.

We see privilege in (some forms of) abstraction. The expense of making dance in the current political climate can be disingenuous and privileged. Bodies that are not abstract engage in these forms of “abstraction” (dance and somatics) disconnected from all the current situations immigrants and people with disabilities face. We recognize that our bodies are differently implicated in the current political situation. Rosely’s inability to leave or come back to the USA has affected our work repeatedly. Our decision to parody the Star-Spangled Banner (at the start of this paper) was interjected with research on the legality and potential fines for doing so, and the differences for a U.S. citizen and a graduate student on a student Visa. The fear of being deported or unwanted are very concrete for those who have experienced them.

How can somatics and dance engage in concrete embodied dialogues through different languages that dismantle and unsettle privilege? How does language itself create barriers and as a structure upholding privilege? We created a temporary place for our dancers, through *The Otherland*, to experience their foreignness (without saying they were all foreigners) and experience disability identity and culture as empowering.

Net and Knitting



Image: Bailey Anderson, Rosely Conz, Sophia Hernandez, and Bonnie Cox performed in *The Otherland* photo by Daniel Beahm

Our contents intersected in a way that they became a net. Not a melting pot, not homogenized. If you pull one line, you can still trace... we are still interwoven.

Thoughtful. We didn't put something within the dance without thought and reflection. What am I doing? How am I doing it? Why am I doing it? - These were the questions guiding our exploration, composition and final show. Questions that were/are inspired by the self-reflection, embodied metacognition that somatics (can, should) live by.

An action, gesture, a prop, a sound might have had meaning for us, and was doing something particular within the context of the performance. It was all doing something, when one pulled back the thread to specific scenes, or costumes, setting, and people. We were attentive to what we were doing, to the dancers, and sometimes to the audience (acknowledging of the impossibility of knowing the audience's response or absorption).

Collaboration: Yours/Mine/Ours

We point to the "common" without saying that it is the same. It was never about us mimicking each other but rather finding intersections on embodiment, content, and sensation. We nodded our heads to the power dynamics and complex ways privilege was a part of our unmarked bodies.

There are several aspects of revealing and invisibility that is further implicated in dancing. We are both able to, in specific times and spaces, pass. Our being a foreigner and having a disability operate such that they can be hidden, or revealed, or erupt out depending on the situations, instances, and words. Some people and contexts see through our passing. We somehow know that the borders are there. Visible or invisible. The little red line under words or the papers and documents. Or accents...

We played at this edge too, sometimes hiding scrabble pieces and flour, or perhaps accents, to reveal them in specific places and locations. We acknowledge this as a privilege, the sometimes-ability-to-pass, and also examine when these aspects of our identities emerge and disorient or reorient our interactions.

The edge of the margin held a dance too. A solo that began before the audience entered, choreographed to not be seen, an invisible dance. Some of the audience

noticed the dancer (our dear friend Amanda Benzin) in the margin, but many did not. People that live right in front of us, but are unseen.

Our intersections included:

- The concept of Home - Redefinition/destabilization of the idea of home, spaces that shift, of not belonging
- Disorientation
- The failure of words
- The ways that roots and routes might be blocked pathways, or ways of grounding and being uprooted, and the concepts of the nervous system as roots and routes

We shared in the process of discovering the nuances of these feelings, experiences, and sensations. Not essentializing the other, *each* other, but rather a curiosity on what, how, why, and of detailed particularity. Or, not explaining - sharing an OK-ness with not knowing and trusting each other.

Allowing failure to be within the dance and dance making process created space for us both to be real. Tropes of disability identities (and other historically marginalized identities) include overcoming some obstacle and reduce the person and group to a singular identity. Rather than overcoming, or attempting to be "right", we existed in the unknown and disorientation. Somatics supports us in this, asking us to attend to the present.

Trusting that disorientation was part of the process, as Sarah Ahmed points out:

Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence ... Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis. Or the feeling itself might pass as the ground returns or as we return to the ground. (157)

We embraced them. Embodied them. Chewed and swallowed and let the tears flow upside down inside out. Both the ones that came with onions or with vertigo.

How do we end the piece?
How do we end an ongoing investigation?
Maybe with a series of questions?

BOTH BITE ONION



Image: Rosely Conz and Bailey Anderson from The Otherland photo by Daniel Beahm



NO MANIFESTO OF SOMATICS

- No to universalizing
- No to white-washed eastern practices
- No to re-mechanization of the body
- No to solely focusing on joints and organs
- No normalizing
- No essentializing
- No to cultural appropriation
- No to pathology
- No to validation of statistics over people
- No to being quiet
- No to “should” look
- No to being (always) soft
- No to having to say “yes”
- No to “positive” feelings
- No overcoming narratives
- No to health
- No to good alignment
- No to efficiency

Citations

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Movement Research's website series "Critical Correspondence" On Whiteness and Abstraction: Anh Vo with Juliana F. May MAR 21, 2019

<https://movementresearch.org/publications/critical-correspondence/on-whiteness-and-abstraction-anh-vo-with-juliana-f-may>