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Exploring the Space Between:
The Effect of Somatic Education on Agency and Ownership
Within a Collaborative Dance-Making Process

by
Ray Eliot Schwartz, B.F.A., C.B.M.C.P.

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Approved by

Supervising Committee:

Kent DeSpain

Jill Dolan

David Justin

Kristen Neff

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By

Ray Eliot Schwartz, M.F.A.

University of Texas at Austin, 2006

Supervisor: Kent DeSpain

Somatic education values dialogue, respect for individual histories, and a sense of balance between body, mind, and spirit. Somatic education considers experience essential to learning, and it holds the student/client and the teacher/practitioner accountable to one another when co-constructing a learning process.

When somatic education and dance making intersect, opportunities arise for reflecting on how a value system based in collaboration, dialogue, and shared ownership affects creative practice. By adopting a somatically-influenced model in my dance-making, I set the stage for exploring anarchic ideals within socio-constructivist art making practices. The research presented in this thesis articulates a somatically-influenced model within a dance-making process and its effects on agency, ownership, and collaborative potentials with one group of dancers.

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Introduction

As a creative artist I enjoy working inside a process where there is more than one voice. I wish to work in an environment where the creation of original works of dance and dance-theater are built through dialogue, experimentation, and collaboration. In order to foster this environment of collaboration, I find it important to cultivate a sense of ownership and agency within the people with whom I work. I have found that making use of a somatically-influenced model in my approach to creative process aids this.

This paper has three goals:

- 1) To articulate the collaborative environment within which I wish to work.
- 2) To examine how I go about constructing such an environment.
- 3) To address the questions that arise from such an endeavor, i.e.:

Who frames the work? How does a vision proceed? How do I create the work I wish to make without constantly having to reinforce my own authority? How do my assumptions about my own process hold up when placed in the context of the experience of my collaborators? What does this inquiry suggest as a next step for research?

Dance is most often made from within a social context. By that, I mean that dances are made by people who work with other people. How groups of people come together, negotiate their interactions, and through relationship, construct their reality has an impact on the creative process. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the notion that various political models arise from these interactions. For example:

1) Dictatorships, in which one person sets the rules and holds the authority while others fall in line or suffer consequence.

2) Oligarchies, in which a small number of people share power and authority.

3) Democracies, where citizens vote in electoral contests to decide who among competing candidates will exercise authority in enacting the laws and regulations that will govern society.

4) Anarchism. Peter Kropotkin (1842-1921) defined anarchism in the following way:

The name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government - harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law, or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of the needs and aspirations of a civilized being. (918)

Alexander Berkman articulated the nature of anarchism in terms of what it is not when he wrote:

I must tell you, first of all, what anarchism is *not*. It is *not* bombs, disorder, or chaos. It is *not* robbery or murder. It is *not* a war of each against all. It is *not* a return to barbarianism or to the wild state of man. *Anarchism is the very opposite of all that.* (Chapter 1, Introduction)

As a dance artist who choreographs original works of movement art, I seek to map how these political processes influence the creative process. While trained in traditional models of dance education and choreographic process that reflect elements of

dictatorships and oligarchies, my current interests tend towards democracy and anarchism. I am drawn to explore the notion of anarchism as a sort of evolved democracy in which individuals within a social group take responsibility for their own lives, make choices, and in the best of circumstances contribute collectively towards the greatest common good. In considering these goals I turn to Somatic education as one method for supporting and fostering anarchic ideals in the dance-making process. I believe that the field of Somatics, built on models of embodied action in conversation and relation, has potential for achieving these ideals.

In terms of the practicalities of artistic creation, the theory of anarchism presents some difficulties within the historical context of art as a product of an individual creator. In an anarchic construct, where does the voice of the artist live? Who sets the aesthetic tone? In the end, whose work is it that is being created? How does one credit or assign intellectual ownership to a work of art? Ideally, I am interested in the work of dance as a collective outcome, based upon the contributions of all participants who have ownership stakes in a single project, an organization of artists, or a social network of artists.

The deconstruction of the notion of a work of art as a product of an individual creator, whose *tools* are the people he works with, is primarily achieved through the process of collaboration. While many collaborative models tend towards the democratic paradigm, I have – most recently – been exploring the possibilities of an anarchic construct. I am curious about the processes that a group of artists can engage in, over time, to develop true collaboration. Is there a developmental logic embedded in groups of people working together toward a common goal? Do we travel from the dictatorial towards the anarchic? Are these models of social order essential steps on a path towards a

philosophy of freedom, a freedom that by its nature assumes both individual responsibility and community accountability?

My research draws on my own professional experiences over the past 14 years. In that time I have been involved in the co-creation of four different dance organizations, each of which explored the collaborative process through different models. Steve's House Dance Collective, The Zen Monkey Project, THEM, and Sheep Army/Elsewhere Dance Theater have all shared, at base, an essential vision that reflects my above stated beliefs.

Noam Chomsky, as quoted in “Defining Anarchism” by Jason Justice, writes, “Anarchism isn't a doctrine. It's at most a historical tendency, a tendency of thought and action, which has many different ways of developing and progressing and which, I would think, will continue as a permanent strand of human history.” If we accept this theory, how does one use it to realize the anarchic ideal? What thoughts and actions inform an anarchic perspective in a creative process? I believe that in the case of movement arts and dance, the contributions of Somatics are a good place to begin an inquiry. Specifically, I intend to illustrate how Somatics can set a context that will facilitate people in choice-making. How do the processes of embodied action, holistic integration, and dialogic learning – all hallmarks of a somatic approach – contribute to an individual's ability to be in the artistic world as an empowered and actualized person? It is my belief that such an actualized individual will be able to work – in collaboration with his/her communities, professional networks, and environments – to create art and culture that is greater than any one individual can create alone.

Most of the projects in which I have been involved tend towards some form of increased participation rather than full anarchic actualization. Nevertheless, the ideal of a

truly shared effort informs the process. For the purposes of this thesis, I have chosen to look at one very specific project, "the narrows," a dance/theater work created by Sheep Army/Elsewhere Dance Theater in Austin, Texas. The methods used to create "the narrows"—an integration of somatically-influenced interactions and contemporary dance practices—did not fully embody or realize the ideals of an anarchic social contract. However, it was a key event in understanding the thoughts and actions that might lead towards a more completely realized vision of collaboration and collective creation.

"the narrows" uses movement, image, and music to address poetic responses to human conflict and war. While specific content forms the imagistic and conceptual base of "the narrows"—and the formal qualities of the dance are fundamental to its realization—this thesis will not address the aesthetic results of this process. My focus is on how somatically-influenced models can empower artists—traditionally working in a hierarchical relationship—to re-frame their roles, intentions, and communications in order to encourage agency, ownership, and collaboration in the studio. The specific "look" of a collaborative process can be better addressed in a research project of its own which, rather than looking at the political structures and methods used in realizing a creative process, focuses more on the aesthetics of collaboration—how the act of working together affects the image or content of a vision.

As this thesis is concerned primarily with interrogating a somatically-influenced model, I feel it is appropriate that the arguments and ideas contained within it are presented in a conversational manner. Since Somatics honors and acknowledges subjective experience as both an essential part of the learning process and a key ingredient in the construction of reality, I will adopt a first person voice throughout this

document. A fundamental element of a somatic experience is dialogue and conversation from a theoretical and experiential/embodied perspective. While I cite and refer to the work of other theorists and practitioners, I will also include my own story within the fabric of the work. I view the document as a conversation with you, the reader, and with the many individuals who have come before me in this field.

Background

“the narrows” is an investigation of conflict, in particular, its manifestation as war. I began this process with no agenda beyond trying to understand the nature of conflict, war, and the human responses to it. I read a great many books from multiple perspectives on the subject. I researched the work of photojournalists, visual artists, composers, and filmmakers who had been touched by the subject. Additionally, I lived through a historical period in which my birth nation, the United States of America, was engaged in several overt conflicts.

From these experiences, as well as from discussions with the members of the cast, a work of dance was constructed¹ that filtered and organized these influences into a poetic whole. I believe that the work draws from the aesthetic, emotional, mythological, and physical impulses that suffuse conflict with power and poignancy, but it does so in such a way that audience members feel free to interpret the experience in their own ways.

In considering how to deal with a subject as immense as conflict and war, I found the words of Gaston Bachelard helpful:

If we could analyze the impressions and image of immensity, or what immensity contributes to an image, we should soon enter into a region of the purest sort of phenomenology—a phenomenology without phenomena; or stated less paradoxically, one that, in order to know the productive flow

¹ I deliberately use the passive voice here in order to suggest that I was not the primary agent in creating “the narrows”. The work came about as a dialogue between my collaborators, my self, and the internal logic of the dance itself. See footnote #3 for more on the notion of a dance having agency.

of images, need not wait for the phenomena of the imagination to take form and become stabilized in completed images. (Bachelard 184)

This sense of the impossibility of an immense task and the freedom that its impossibility contains allowed me to move forward in the process while trusting that the images that arose would find their own logic and weight in the final design. I needn't fully understand the dance before delivering it forth from the studio.

While freed of the need to have stable and complete images and ideas, I did want to find a way to work with the dancers within what Fiona Bannon calls a “humanising pedagogy,” one which balanced both “skilling” and “innate sensitivity and intuitive feeling” (16). To achieve this I turned to both traditional methods of dance making—in which I took the role of an externalized expert authority – and also to collaborative models informed by improvisational practice and Somatics.

The goal was to facilitate dancers who had an ability to apply what Shannon Rose Riley calls “embodied perceptual practices” to the work of body-based creative process and performance. Ideally, a performer would be aware of his/her “perceptual images” comprised of the “perception of touch, and the movement of muscles and joints, called proprioception, the perception of the state of the organs and viscera, called interoception, and the perception of one’s relationship to their environment, or exteroception” while being “simultaneously aware of the various recalled images that constitute the role she is performing” (1).

I believe these skills and practices allow a dancer to better communicate the *livedness* at the heart of live, movement-based performance. By *livedness* I mean to

differentiate from the term *alive*. *Alive* is an adjective attributed to something from the perspective of an outside observer. *Lived*, and its noun formation, *livedness*, may also be described from the external perspective; there is implicit in *livedness* an agent doing the living. It is this agent and the application of his/her awareness and action to the work at hand that interests me.

In considering the sense of a dance's *livedness*², its embodied sense of immediacy, and its ability to transcend material constructs towards the ephemeral and often mysterious transmission that is live performance, what must we do to facilitate its presence? What does the work require of the performer; and, in turn, what does the performer require in order to meet the work's demands? In the case of "the narrows," I learned that the dance itself required fearless performers who were able to take physical risks and to allow themselves to be vulnerable, both to an audience and to one another. These dancers needed to be able to maintain a sense of internal focus on feeling and character while easily navigating an external focus on choreography and ensemble. All of these skills were required to give an intense and potentially chaotic work the sense of urgency and clarity it needed.

In order to construct this kind of dance I wanted to create an environment of collaboration in the studio. While I acknowledge my own role and implicit authority in setting the frame for the work, I also acknowledge that the topics I am interested in addressing are not relevant to my life alone. Much literature in the realm of the contemporary body arts, and, in truth, much of the literature of Somatics has a strong

² The question of whether a dance, in addition to the dancers, has its own *livedness* sits in relation to the notion of things having an agency within them-selves. Martin Buber addressed this notion in his influential

emphasis on “self”: self-awareness, and self-development. While I seek to cultivate self-knowledge and self-oriented practices as part of a holistic approach to art and life, I am equally intrigued by how these selves relate to other selves and to their world. In creating a work that addresses human conflict and war, I felt that the conversation in the studio should expand beyond my own ideas.

To make a work in this way requires trust. It requires the dancers to trust each other and remain open to the novel and authentic. It requires the director to trust the dancers to stay aware and invested in the creative process; and it requires that the dancers trust the director to carry them into the unknown with compassion, safety, and respect. In our process, the key to building that trust was a willingness to converse with one another so that that even within a professionalized/creative context, there would be time and space for individual voices to be heard. Whether celebratory or critical, we made time to share our opinions, to agree, and to agree to disagree.

This balance between being a director with an aesthetic to transmit and an artist with a desire for collaborative dialogue has been a curious trail to navigate. On one hand, it requires me to take the lead and own my history and abilities apart from the dancers. On the other hand, it requires me to remain humble and open to the experience and opinions of others who may have a different base from which to form their opinions. In attempting to negotiate these disparate personalities I often asked myself what my motivations were for working in this way. What attitudes and ideals were contained within my process?

work I and Thou, as did Sondra Fraleigh when she spoke with me of her work as a choreographer including the act of “listening to the dance itself” in order to determine its aesthetic and content.

In my teaching and in my art making I am working towards a model in which people act as responsible individuals – realized and recognized in their agency. The hope is that these same very individualized people are comfortable working together, however, towards common goals, and able to take ownership of a process and commit to its results. Their interactions–spiced with emotional availability, a willingness to take physical risk, to touch and be touched, and to conceptually embrace complex social, political, intellectual, spiritual, and aesthetic questions – can hopefully support their willingness to embrace the body as the vehicle for these explorations while being equally willing to question and challenge their relationship to their bodies in the process.

To achieve these lofty goals I, as a director, had to remain embodied throughout the experience. I do not say that I danced as much as the dancers, but I drew upon a history of somatic movement education to keep me in touch with my own *organismic intelligence* when making choices about where to guide the process, how much to push, and how much to sit back and let the process reveal itself.

In workshops with Nancy Stark Smith in 1999 I was introduced to the concept of checking in with my *organismic intelligence*, i.e. *somatic intuition*. It was presented in the form of a warm-up one morning when we were invited to ask ourselves if this moment, or this action, was in fact the right moment or action for the present. We turned our attention inwards and waited for some sense of a “yes” or “no” to rise from the depths. I was struck with the idea that the body has its own knowing and it is available

for dialogue if we allow ourselves to listen. This “body listening” involves an attention to sensory cues and feeling states that are often outside the frame of typical linguistics. Much of the training in Somatic practices is geared towards developing the tools and skills for identifying this “body language” and applying it to the practice of living in the world. I try to employ this somatic intuition in my work as a creative artist.

In approaching my role as a choreographer and director I often felt that I was not only an artist, but an educator as well. My pedagogical goals were as follows:

- Self-acknowledgement of my own expertise;
- Fostering of collaborators’ sense of personal authority and self-knowing;
- Furthering colleagues’ development of skills;
- Re-framing of evaluative processes;
- Facilitation of agency;
- Encouragement of the collaborative spirit through the application of Somatic movement education within a pedagogical and creative context.

In offering the dancers room for their own exploration I fostered the artistic temperament I desired in my own creative work. By modeling a space for listening, I tried to create a fertile ground for a multiplicity of perspectives to come into dialogue towards the goal of making a work of art.

Throughout my training and experience it has been made clear that the power of somatic methodology is contained within an emphasis on relationship and respect for the individual voices within that relationship. As Paul Linden writes:

A primary social effect of somatic education is an improved awareness of other people. Becoming aware of one's own body results in generally

greater sensitivity to the world around one, and in particular it results in greater sensitivity to what other people are doing and feeling in their bodies. This enhanced sensitivity leads to greater awareness of non-verbal communication and, consequently, to more effective social interaction. Greater awareness of other people increases sensitivity to and consideration of their needs. At the same time, greater awareness of oneself leads to increased awareness of appropriate boundary control, so other people's needs and one's own needs are more easily kept in balance. (Linden 18)

This concern for relational process and an embodied knowing are essential ingredients in the construction of my ideal working environment. They form the basis of what I call a somatically-influenced model and are the foundation of the process that resulted in "the narrows." At this juncture, it might be helpful to define Somatics and its relevance to the field of dance and dance education. What follows is a review of the literature as it relates to these points.

Literature Review

What is Somatics?

Somatic methodologies vary widely. Several practitioners and theorists have, over the years, attempted to find language that unifies these practices into a common field. What all definitions of Somatics have in common is a focus on both body and mind as an integrated process, and a respect for subjective experience as a priority.

The naming of the field tells the story of trying to find language to describe the work of independent practitioners who had “been exploring and teaching a view of the human body and its relation to physical, mental and spiritual health that differs radically from conventional notions” (Johnson, “The Way of the Flesh,” 26).

John Dewey, in a talk given to the New York Academy of Medicine in 1928, spoke to the need for a word to describe the body/mind in a unified way:

The very problem of mind and body suggests division; I do not know of anything so disastrously affected by the habit of division as this particular theme. In its discussion are reflected the splitting off from each other of religion, morals and science; the divorce of philosophy from science and of both from the arts of conduct. The evils which we suffer in education, in religion, in the materialism of business and the aloofness of "intellectuals" from life, in the whole separation of knowledge and practice--all testify to the necessity of seeing mind-body as an integral whole.

The division in question is so deep-seated that it has affected even our language. We have no word by which to name mind-body in a unified wholeness of operation. For if we said "human life" few would recognize that it is precisely the unity of mind and body in action to which we were referring. Consequently, when we endeavor to establish this unity in human conduct, we still speak of body *and* mind and thus unconsciously perpetuate the very division we are striving to deny. (Dewey et al, 1990)

Thomas Hanna, who coined the term "somatics," attempted to redress this lack in our language. In doing so, he drew from *soma*, "the Greek word which since the time of Hesiod has stood for *the living body* (July 3)." He described the field of study associated with it in the following way: "The field which studies the *soma*: namely the body as perceived from within by first person perception (Hanna 4)."

Don Hanlon Johnson, a former Jesuit priest and a leading force in theorizing the diverse practices associated with Somatics, speaks to the history of Hanna's word choice:

He was inspired in that definition by the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, who at the turn of the century set out an agenda for what he called a "somatology," a study of the relationships between knowledge derived from direct bodily experience and scientific studies of the body. These phrases originate in the classical Greek contrast between the dead body, *necros*, and the enspirited person, *soma*. That "somatology" would stand as a corrective to what might be called a "necrology," the body of medical science whose fundamental ideas about body parts and their structures have been derived from the dissection and analysis of corpse. (Johnson,

“Phenomenology and Somatics”)

In another paper, noting the effects that a subjective orientation can have on traditional views of health, Johnson defines the goals of Somatics as follows:

The pioneers of Somatics introduced to the West an alternative vision of health and the body, one that emphasized an intimate integrity of movement, anatomical structure, intelligence and spiritual consciousness. These teachers encouraged respect for lived *experience* and the wisdom that can be found through "attending to" rather than "conquering" or "controlling" life processes. (Johnson, “The Way of the Flesh,” 26)

Yvan Joly, a somatic movement educator and Feldenkrais® Trainer defines as follows:

This discipline is interested in the living body’s subjectively experienced capacity for self-education. The field it covers lies at the intersection of arts and sciences focusing on the living body, and is of relevance for many different spheres: health care (rehabilitation, psychology, physical activity), sports performance (training and competitive achievements), the creative arts (interpretation and creation), philosophy (embodiment of mind, “constructivism”), education and teaching in general (concrete physical and experiential foundations of learning); and also more specialized fields such as phenomenology, bio-mechanics, meditation, biology and “systemics”, cognitive sciences, and movement sciences. (Joly 3)

While Hanna conceived the field of Somatics as a philosophical frame, the

practical work that the name described was an extant and diverse collection of methods and practices. Martha Eddy, writing in 1992, named some of these practices that became known as somatic modalities:

Modalities involved in Somatics include the Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais' Awareness Through Movement, Rolfing, Selver's Sensory Awareness, Sweigard's Ideokinesis, Cohen's Body-Mind Centering, Bartenieff Fundamentals, Trager's Mentastics and Psychophysical Integration, and Hellerwork among others. (Eddy 22)⁴

Soma/Body

Much theoretical energy has been devoted to the study of the body/mind. The debate touches on almost all realms of intellectual practice: theology (Catholic doctrine, etc.), philosophy (Descartes, Merleau-Ponty, etc.), cultural studies (Foucault, etc.), feminism (Butler, etc.), cybernetics, and psychology just to name a few.

Disciplines emphasizing embodiment and embodied practice are, of course, easily integrated into the movement arts. Yet, the term "body" is not necessarily understood or used consistently among all parties. One might ask: "Is not the body simply a vehicle for the mind's expression?" Linda Holler speaks to the idea of body as object when she writes, "divorcing mind from body creates a dissociated ego that, by eliminating erotic life, destroys the connections necessary for practical and responsible agency" (Holler

⁴ Johnson, in his own definition of somatics, includes a list of major figures who have been at the forefront in developing the methods and practices: Elsa Gindler, Charlotte Selver, Carola Speads, Marion Rosen, Ilse Middendorf, F. Matthias Alexander, Moshe Feldenkrais, Ida Rolf, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Judith Aston, Irmgard Bartenieff, Mary Whitehouse, Gerda Alexander, Emilie Conrad Da'oud, Elizabeth A. Behnke, Thomas Hanna, and Deane Juhan (Johnson. "The Way of the Flesh" 26).

60). Somatics re-associates the mind and body into a construction sometimes called “being,” sometimes called “self,” sometimes called “body.” The body of Somatics “refers to all aspects of what it means to be human. The parts may sometimes be referred to individually as soma, soul, spirit, psyche, physical body, emotional body, intuitive body, energy body, thinking body, mental body, or collectively as self, ‘I’” (Olsen 3).

While the body is the prevailing entry point in the work of Somatics, the goal of the work is not simply to create more body and a reduced amount of mind. Somatics facilitates wholeness and integration, and provides tools to balance an individual’s personal tendencies. If someone is more intellectually oriented, Somatics can awaken him or her to their physicality. If someone is more experientially oriented, Somatics can broaden the intellect or the imagination. I will address this more specifically with regard to “the narrows” later.

While the topic of corporeal reality and its effect on human consciousness and expression is apparently endless—and one could spend an entire lifetime gaining expertise and contributing to the theoretical issues raised by embodiment—for the purposes of this review I would like to focus on the practical application of embodied learning. What actually happens in somatic practice?

What are the methods of Somatic Studies?

Within the embrace of a somatic practice, “sensitive touch and movement are used to gain awareness of a person’s total bodily experience, and in turn this physical reality relates to personality and lifestyle” (Eddy 22). Specific attention to the building of

knowledge through experience, not just information, is an essential aspect of a somatic approach. “According to Hanna, Somatics is the study of the soma, not as an objective ‘body’ but an embodied process of internal awareness and communication. Process is an inherent concept in this field. In this sense, Somatics focuses on an inner experiential body, not on a body as an objective entity or mechanical instrument” (Green 114).

Equally important to the “how” of Somatics is the impact that a constructivist approach has on its methodologies:

The fundamental assumption of constructivism is that the human experience of the world is a construction and that this experience can be changed. There is not an absolute reality out there. Our notions of truth are linked to the subjectivity of our experience. Constructivism values subjectivity since multiple meanings of the world are created rather than found. (Long 13)

Following the focus on constructivism, and of particular importance to the integration of Somatics and body-based creative process is the notion that *Socio-constructivist* models form the basis of Somatics’ effectiveness. “Socio-constructivism emphasizes the collective generation and transmission of meanings between people and their relationship with the world” (Long 14). This relational approach sets up particular criteria for the effective transmission of learning:

The socio-constructivist would argue that our learning is constructed out of our personal experiences, values and ways of being emerging from our social interactions in the world. Two shared commonalities between somatic education and a socio-constructivist approach are: (a) the notion

that people are intrinsically connected to their social environment and that behaviour emerges from interactions within that environment, and (b) the entry point for learning is personal construction of experience. The distinction with somatic education however, is that most somatic educators value movement as the primary representation of a person's way of being in the world, and therefore changes in behaviour are promoted through bringing a person's awareness to how they move in their world.

(Long 3-4)

Practices informed by somatic approaches apply dialogic methods in order to meet their goals. The work is viewed “as one of exchange and facilitation in which the student/client is asked to come forth with their own somatic wisdom. Ultimately it is their own expertise that is being drawn out, supported, and listened to” (Eddy123).

Somatic practices are concerned with embodied epistemology, relational process, corporal hermeneutics, and a respect for the subjective experience of being. How then does Somatics affect a pedagogical environment, particularly in relation to dance? What contributions and challenges arise when considering the nature of a somatically influenced model?

Somatics and Dance Education

Somatics, while in many ways consistent with values implicit in some dance, differs from a dance framework that is concerned with external modeling, quantitative analysis of body positioning, and objectification of the body for the purposes of creating a functioning instrument as opposed to an expressive person:

If you come through the professional world of dance, you will have various experiences with the choreographers who are producing *their* work, and they are often, but not always, more interested in the work they are producing, and the dancers are their tools-and are, unfortunately, treated that way. In more classical and dualistic definitions of dance they are material. The body is the instrument, and the medium is movement. This *instrumental* idea of the body, that you are just playing an instrument – that these are tools – kind of objectified the person. (Fraleigh)

Somatic practices can inform the relationship between self and self, self and other, and self and environment. With regard to learning, they can influence the relationship between students and their own bodies, between a teacher and a student, and between a student or teacher and the environment within which he/she does his/her work.

Somatic practices may also foster a sense of authority and agency in a person. Any good teaching can do this, but the somatic approach places the knowing of the student in an important place in the rubric of who is an expert and who holds power in a situation. Somatically influenced models are concerned with giving students a sense of their own capacity to learn and teach themselves. As Kent De Spain said in discussing a somatic approach:

When you become your own teacher, what are you in the process of doing? How can I help you get to the place where you are fully engaged in helping yourself? I don't want you to do what I tell you to do, but I want you get to the place where you tell your self what to do in the framework of collaboration and intelligent use. (DeSpain)

This is a curious paradox. While a successful somatic model may be a subtle version of the student still doing what the teacher tells the student to do, the values inherent within that model are interested in giving back personal authority to the student.

Somatics began outside of institutional structures. “In the 1980’s it was in the private sector that one found dance educators choosing to integrate their somatic training from the alternative health field into dance classes,” (Eddy 119-120) but as it has evolved and developed, it has gradually found more and more place within the training programs and approaches that are housed in college and university dance programs. Even so, while “one can gain a master’s degree in dance and learn a great deal about one or several somatic disciplines, in order to practice professionally in the field of somatic education and therapy one needs to matriculate in a non-degree professional program to obtain certification” (Eddy 121).

One notable exception to this trend is the pursuit of Laban Movement Studies. Several certification programs for this work are housed within academic institutions. Another step in addressing this issue is being taken by The University of Colorado at Boulder where graduate students in the Department of Dance may apply a portion of their credits towards a pre-certification program in the Alexander technique.

This acceptance into the curriculum was not always so liberal. In the early period of integration with dance, there were common misconceptions about the use of Somatics as a support for dance training. Perhaps this was, as Glenna Batson says, due to Somatics “being born out of psychological movements that were interested in pleasure” and dance’s “Spartan and punitive” identity in determining a conception of rigor (Batson). While it is arguable that every innovator of a somatic method would agree with this

notion of the origin of Somatics, we must also consider that pleasure and rigor live in conflict within certain dance traditions. This conflict has led some dance educators to regard somatic approaches with skepticism if not downright antagonism. Other reasons for this cool reception may be due to various concerns about the field:

- 1) A lack of a substantive body of research on somatic inquiry or application, and sometimes even the field's distance from the quantitative paradigm.
- 2) The evolution of the somatic professions from seemingly vocational programs, versus research and academic pursuits.
- 3) The perceptions that, due to their experiential approaches often derived from one person's somatic exploration, somatic methodologies are derived from 'gurus' and even estimated to be supportive of cult thinking.

(Eddy121-122)

Even with these concerns, there is, among current education theorists, a sense that Somatics, with its basic concept that “the habits of thinking and moving are inextricably related and influenced by the social circumstances in which we as individuals develop and mature,”(Bannon 18) might be useful in dance education. Perhaps this is a “result of a change of consciousness in attitude to persons, to moving, to performance, and to the creation of works” (Bannon 18). Or as Fraleigh suggests, “ To believe that the medium of dance is really the human being is a little bit different than viewing the body as an instrument” (Fraleigh).

Dancers as human beings are the kinds of collaborators I intend to work with. Strangely enough, though, dance as an art form has not always invited them into the

studio. While it is difficult to understand how an artistic practice can take on a de-humanizing tone, I must admit that my own early training seemed to have such an effect. Perhaps it was an attempt to re-pattern these early moments of my dance education that led me first to Somatics and then to a somatically-influenced model in my creative work. In the next section I explore just what that training entailed, in order to trace its effect and influence on my current strategies.

How a Person's History as a Student Informs His/Her Goals as a Teacher/Artist.

“The fundamental shift from alienation to authenticity is deceptively simple: It requires diverting our awareness from the opinions of those outside us towards our perceptions and feelings.”

(Johnson, *Body: Recovering Our Sensual Wisdom*, 154)

I began my serious dance training at a conservatory, the North Carolina School of the Arts. My initial training at NCSA focused on classical modern dance. Graham, Nikolais, and Horton techniques formed the foundation of my dance education. While the education I received was valuable, it came saddled with what some might call an *old school* approach. Jill Green describes this model of education in the dance studio as follows: “As the teacher presents specific movements that require rote learning, while students anticipate teacher praise and attention through correction and physical manipulation, the teacher is often viewed as an all knowing expert authority” (Green 81). This was true of my own experience. In this model it was the teacher's job to break you down and build you back up in the image considered most effective for success.

The methods used to achieve this took the form of verbal abuse, psychological manipulation, fear-based pedagogy, and an absolute demarcation between student submission and faculty authority. In that model, I was literally a “diamond in the rough”

(Schwartz) that needed to be polished. What the teachers saw in me was the raw material for their own imprimatur rather than a person with his/her own values who might be guided into conversation and development. In technique classes we were led to value the outside eye more than our own internal sensations; we were encouraged to work towards the teacher's approval at the expense of our own interests or desires, and we were often chided or berated as way of motivating us to work even harder.

In Composition and Choreography/Improvisation classes I was given assignments to be inventive and spontaneous but only within the frame of excellence that my teachers constructed. Novel thinking, experimentation outside of the narrow frame of acceptability set out by the teacher, was frowned upon. Students who bored the teacher with their efforts were called "*milquetoast*" (Markham), and creative work on assignments having to do with weight, time, space, and the like were considered "wrong" if they didn't conform to a particular stylistic sensibility.

As a young artist trying to navigate the terrain of a novel and alien form such as modern dance this proved very confusing. I was, on the one hand, being invited into a history of western theatrical dance that valued experimentation and personal expression, while at the same time being told that to stray outside the lines of external approval and design was unacceptable.

The conservatory kept its hand strong by employing a policy of invitation and dismissal to the program that kept students always worried that any wrong move would result in their disappearance from the school. While they had a strong track record of placing their graduates in companies, the actual number of graduates was quite

diminished compared to the entering enrollment. It was easy to keep statistics high, if a starting class of twenty only graduated four students in the end.

NCSA was definitely not a democratic institution or process. As a young man, without much knowledge of the world of dance, attending a school with a world-renowned reputation for “success,” I was terrified to speak my mind, as were so many others. To be dis-invited meant certain failure in our chosen profession.

Eating disorders, drug abuse, and other self-destructive behaviors were common within the gates of the school. I understand this better now, as I see that this kind of self-destruction was smiled upon. That was the point: break your “self” down and be re-made in the image of the school. This image would guarantee a student success in the professional dance world. While I am sure that there were good intentions behind all of these methods, it was hard to see them at the time. In retrospect, I also wonder whether the pedagogy employed was the most effective way to realize those intentions.

In contrast to my early training experiences, my college years offered a model upon which a democracy of learning could be built. Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University exposed me to a range of technical synthesis that helped me see ways for integrating my past into a dance practice that was more expressive of my self.

While there, I enjoyed an environment of profound support for the creative process and experimentation. At VCU, I had my first experiences with somatic movement education, being introduced to the work of Laban Movement Analysis, Body-Mind Centering® and the Feldenkrais Method®. I am now certified as a Practitioner of BMC and am two-thirds of the way through the same process for the Feldenkrais Method.

What differentiates my college experience from my conservatory history?

Foremost in my mind was the support and priority that the individual received in relation to his/her own engagement with learning. Rather than being made to feel guilty about doing things my own way, I was encouraged. The values of a self-disciplined and investigative personality were embraced. Class was an opportunity, not an obligation. Creative work was an investigation and a chance to learn, rather than a series of tasks to be completed for someone else's approval. Learning was a dialogue. Questions were encouraged. Different perspectives were met with appreciation and enthusiasm. As students, we were given the space and support to discover things for ourselves.

Certainly there were many moments when my teachers looked to me with a sad shake of the head or a nostalgic grin and remembered their own journey to a certain conclusion. I am sure there were many times when they wished they could have forced me to make different choices—but in the end they let me do what I was going to do anyway and trusted that my own life would teach me better than they could.

One way in which the differences in approach are clearly highlighted came in the form of faculty feedback sessions. In both institutions, students met with the faculty semi-regularly for feedback. At NCSA, these sessions were often held at night in the faculty lounge. Students would walk into a dark candlelit room, sit on a low couch, peer across a table strewn with empty wine bottles, and face a circle of faculty telling us what was good and bad about our performances and whether we could expect to stay on for another term. Some students would carry in tape recorders to their sessions because they had enough foresight to know that the whole experience would be so terrifying that they

wouldn't walk away with any constructive data unless they went back and listened later, away from the godlike gaze of their teachers.

By contrast, in college we would meet during the day in a well-lit, spacious room, and the teachers would often ask questions. There was dialogue, a sense of trying to understand what was going on with the student. There was a clear sense of when the student was both living up to his/her potential as the faculty saw it; and when that wasn't happening. Yet, rather than instilling fear, there was inquiry and a desire to understand and guide the student towards more effective choices.

More complex than demonizing NCSA and celebrating VCU, each of these experiences served a purpose. I gained an experiential appreciation for the history and legacy of modern dance from NCSA. Understanding who preceded me in this field, what they were responding to, and how they planted the seeds of this unique tradition has helped me to understand my own place within its lineage. The technical foundation I received from my training there still lives in my body today.

From VCU I learned to value the principles of creative research, intense questioning, rigorous discipline, personal freedom, and a dance that speaks of its time. Both of these gifts formed the bedrock of a philosophy that has carried me forward in my own life and art. Living as a student through both of these teaching models has given me a good vantage point from which to reflect on my own interests as a teacher and the pedagogical challenges posed when faced with training humans for a sometimes inhuman profession.

In my current work I am concerned with the construction of a learning environment that includes respect for each participant's contributions. In creating such

an environment I am cultivating an institution of learning and collaboration that has as its goal the construction of culture and art. As Kuhry says in his book on Authenticity:

As transmitters of culture, institutions are critical for the development of community. To be authentic, they must be organized to express the being of its members. Since the essence of the person is freedom, institutions must be participatory, or democratic in structure. The model for community is the relationship between equals, a relationship grounded in freedom. Though human beings differ in regard to their givens, freedom is the same in everyone. It is not how tall or short, how talented, intelligent, or clever, how strong, or how old one is that establishes a person's dignity and rights, but the fact that each of us is free. In its threefold manifestation as understanding, decision, and action, freedom draws things forth into their being. (Kuhry 60)

Looking back and reflecting on my history, I have come to realize that the shadow of my earlier training is still with me. In my work with “the narrows” and other creative projects, I sometimes struggle to find a balanced method of communicating with my collaborators. I seek ways to engage their wisdom while also meeting my own aesthetic desires. Within the creative process, this negotiation of my collaborators and myself has led me to examine not only embodiment practices, but also other forms of communication in the studio. From this examination, I have noted that the way a choreographer orients themselves to their collaborators in the studio has a great effect on the *somas* of the individuals with whom they are working. In the next section I speak to this research.

External Models, Somatically Influenced Models, and the Effect on Agency, Ownership,
and Collaboration in the Studio.

The commitment to a somatic approach informed the methods I used to create “the narrows.” While dance is a non-verbal, body-based practice, and one of the primary methods for communicating in this medium is through visual intelligence, it would be false to suggest that language and kinesthetic information played no role in the construction of the work. Supporting this was the notion that in using somatic practices, “verbal and tactile forms of communication are often favored over visual” (Fortin 12). That said, I would like to suggest that it is perhaps a language informed by kinesthetic experience that is most important to a somatic process, rather than language as disembodied theory that serves only to reify its own agenda.

It is a belief commonly held that movement is pre-verbal. As Sheets-Johnstone suggests, perhaps language is “post-kinetic.” Her book, *The Primacy of Movement*, goes into great detail articulating the research of philosophers, child psychologists, and developmental specialists who show that our cognitive lives are deeply informed by movement and the perception of movement.

Our fundamental bond with the world is clearly not a *je ne sais quoi* in need of radical reflection nor is it a non- or near inarticulate opacity impossible to elucidate. It is there before us in the phenomenon of infant life when we bracket our adultist perspective and humble ourselves to

acknowledge our true beginnings, which lie not by way of language, but by way of movement. (259-260).

I suggest that there is a continuum of non-verbal and verbal communication that can be reduced to three categories: *pre-verbal*, *post-kinetic*, and *post-verbal*. *Pre-verbal* experience is the phenomenological state of early being. The pre-verbal life sets the stage for language and is essential in language's development. The *post-kinetic* aspect of experience is the descriptive and recursive commentary on pre-verbal history. It allows us to frame feelings and ideas that arise from the phenomena of bodily life and to exchange them with others as a reflective exercise in communication and intellectual imagination. The *post-verbal* experience is what happens to embodied experience after it has digested language. Kinesthetics filter the intellect. A great deal of contemporary dance practice lives in the post-verbal state. It allows for a primacy of movement that informs "languaging," and this "languaging" in turn may inform the body in its non-verbal expression. One aspect of my research concerns the particular way in which the continuum of verbal and non-verbal processes can be used in the studio and the classroom.

I present here an articulation of two models. In doing so, I am referring to the models that grew out of the experiences I described in the previous section, as well as my observations from open-ended interviews that I conducted with members of Sheep Army—the Austin, Texas based dance group with whom I made "the narrows." In doing so I will build a case for how, in "the narrows," these practices supported an environment of collaboration, agency, and creative process. The two models of interaction and feedback are presented below:

1) Externally-Motivated Model

Choreographer



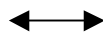
Dancer

In the externally motivated model, the choreographer is seen as an expert authority. His/her ideas and information are placed above the dancer and are rationed to the dancer. The flow of information from the choreographer to the dancer is mediated through affirming or negating language or behavior.

Whether the choreographer is motivating dancers by telling them they are not good enough, or by heaping effusive praise on them, the effect is relatively the same. Both the affirming and the negating model reinforce the authority of the choreographer and place dancers in the position of having to organize themselves towards external approval.

2) Somatically-Influenced Model

Choreographer



Dancer⁵

⁵ I have placed the arrow between the choreographer and the dancer deliberately in this parallel, but slightly uneven formation. The directional arrows indicate a dialogic relationship rather than one in which the choreographer is seen as a vertical authority. I do wish to acknowledge, though, that on certain occasions a choreographer comes to the situation with history or experience that places him/her in a context different than that of a purely egalitarian one. In the case of “the narrows” I had more experience and history making dances than the people I worked with. Nevertheless, the process we engaged in was one of conversation, collaboration, and mutual creation. In considering the visual map of this way of working it felt important to acknowledge the slight differences between us. Perhaps a more effective diagram would have an animated arrow that floats in the diagonal space between the choreographer and the dancer to

In a somatically influenced model, questions drive the process. Rather than encouraging dancers to work towards external approval, the choreographer serves as an educated guide, someone with experience who can facilitate dialogue towards a dancer's learning and performance objectives.

These models clearly reflect my earlier training history, but how do they show up in my current practice? As part of my research I conducted open-ended interviews with the cast of “the narrows.” I began each interview with the question, “How was the process of ‘the narrows’ like and/or unlike other dance processes in which you have been involved?”

While I never explicitly stated the above models to my colleagues—at least not until much later in my conversations with them – I did find that one of the distinguishing factors of “the narrows” was the use of a somatically influenced model rather than an externally motivated one. What follows are excerpts from some of those conversations⁶:

Ray:

How was this process like or unlike other dance processes you have been involved in?

Alison:

I think that there is something about the way that it was directed and framed that really allowed us to dig really deeply into something at the same time that we did *not* feel pressure *to* dig deeply into something,

indicate their different histories while still acknowledging the direction of interaction as mutually informative.

⁶ I conducted interviews with all five of my collaborators in “the narrows”: Alison Hart, Michel Scott, Lindsey Taylor, Nicole Whiteside, and Matthew Young. In this document I quote only Nicole, Alison, and

and I think sometimes, in a lot of other dance processes that I have been involved with, where the intent is to make a dance, I think that that pressure looms a little too large and figures in too strongly and it tends to push people in directions that are not necessarily helpful in creating work that addresses humanity.

That kind of process tends to address: “Well we have this stage, and we have four minutes of time, and we need to get dancer xyz across stage left, and we want the mood to be like this.” I think some of those external concerns didn’t figure into our process as much and instead we were able to focus our bodies and our dancing relationships to one another.

I think that most of us are used to these process that are more traditional, that sort of require this step one, step two, step three, make the dance, make some movement, make some movement, put it together, wrap it up, tie it up in a bow and put it onstage. I think there is a level of calm and honesty that you (Ray) are able to bring to the experience. For some reason your presence in the room can sort of drive away some of those rules, and free up a space to fail, to just play.

Ray:

One of the things that I tried to locate for myself is if there was something that I did—you mentioned listening and having conversations as one thing—that contributed to the sense of your voice or anyone else’s voice being invited into the process. Because I grew up as a dancer in an

Michel. This is not because Lindsey and Matt had less relevant things to say, but rather because there was

environment where my voice was important in a particular way; which was really as an instrument towards someone else's vision, and I wonder if that was the experience you had in this piece or if there was a way that this process had any resonance with ownership, a sense of agency, a sense of collaboration in the studio, with any of that?

Alison:

Totally. I think that we all absolutely felt a sense of ownership in the process, and if we hadn't...remember last year when we didn't get accepted into that festival and you presented to us that we didn't have a reason to come together and we didn't have any performance to work towards and so you are complete free agents, no strings attached. You are off the hook. What do you want to do? And every single person wrote in and said, "I love this process. I want to do it. I don't care about performances and I don't care about any of that stuff." We wouldn't do that if we felt like we weren't invested in it, but not just invested in it. We wouldn't do it if we didn't feel like the group was invested in us. I mean, to me, that was a remarkable demonstration of how each and every one of us feels incredibly, incredibly connected to the work.

Ray:

What was very interesting to me about all that was also that it wasn't, "Oh Ray, I want to do *your* work." It was very clearly written – I love the experience that happens when *this* group of people comes

together and that was what was so touching for me... that we were learning from each other. That was a huge thing for me. Not wanting to be the main thing, but wanting to work in an environment where people had something to give to each other beyond just getting. Because I remember Ellen stepping out of the process by saying, “Why would I want to work in that way because I want you to be a director. I would want to know what I am going to *get* from *you*.” Which is completely reasonable, but it was an interesting difference for me and it highlighted what I wasn’t interested in...someone who couldn’t look at a whole community of people and say, “Well I want to be in this because I am going to get something from everybody,” rather than I need something from one person.

Do you think given that kind of community perspective, there was a power construct in the studio? Was there a clear authority and was there a way in which that played out?

Alison:

I think that there were authority figures but I think that everybody valued each person’s place. So even though there might have been some authority I didn’t feel like there was a hierarchy.

Ray:

Even in relationship to me?

Alison:

Yeah, actually. I mean clearly I think that in the end that we would all defer to your judgment or direction but I don't think there was a sense of your being outside of our realm. And I think sometimes that is what hierarchy is about. I couldn't even consort with Admiral/Major/Captain because I am only Private/Private.

Ray:

Were there cues that kept me in your realm?

Alison:

The dinner parties⁷, and the fact that you asked us questions and you clearly valued the answers that we gave. It didn't ever feel like – when you said I am really curious to know what you guys want, where you want go next, and what you think would be appropriate – it was clear that wasn't like a lip service in any way and that you weren't saying that because you are some progressive dance director, but because that is honestly what you wanted and I think that when you include people in that way, then they respond to that in a pretty positive way.

Ray:

You don't think that some thought that I was abdicating my responsibility?

Alison:

⁷ At regular intervals the members of Sheep Army, along with various friends and associates would meet for potluck dinner parties. These gatherings served an important function in bringing us together for non-rehearsal based events. Through the use of shared culinary experiments and a consistent practice of playing party games such as “Charades” we built trust, camaraderie, and a sense that our experiences together need not remain constrained by the roles we adopted when working in the studio.

Never, never, not once. Sometimes I think we all saw you like, “I am so relieved that you don’t care about that,” because I have certainly worked with people who have absolutely freaked out when the choreographer wants to know where they think the next tendu should happen or whatever it is. They just can’t handle it. We experienced that a little bit with Lindsey in the beginning and then had that intervention and pulled her in. I am astounded at where she has come from that place, and how quickly she was able to make that jump. I mean she literally came to us and was like, “I hate being touched, I hate not being told what to do,” and it crops up every once in while and she definitely wants and craves more structure than many of the rest of us do, but at the same time she is able to roll with the punches in a way that I have seen other dancers just collapse under the idea that there might not be someone in charge.

Another conversation elicited a similar response by way of discussing the specific strategies that were used to create what the dancer called a “community of people creating art together”:

Ray:

Could you identify specific strategies that either you or other people engaged in that you think created the context for this kind of exploration, this environment for as you say...a community of people creating art together?

Michel:

It was great, specifically the way that you were in some ways the leader/choreographer, yet you would give us an assignment and then you would let it become what it was going to become. So within the group we had the ability to nurture our relationships together, as opposed to many dance environments where you are dancing, you are creating a relationship with the other person, but it is on the terms of the choreographer. It is very much...you have a specific amount of time to do what the choreographer says the best way you can do it; where what you had us do was much more general in that you would give us a task and say 'let it be whatever you want it to be and explore the relationship that you have with the other people within the context of that task' and that was pretty huge.

Also, the way that the piece was choreographed, as opposed to coming up with specific choreography before rehearsals I feel that because we created ninety percent of the choreography within the rehearsal, inspired in the moment by the improvisational stuff that we were doing, the piece being built that way made everything seem really honest.

While there was a sense of group cohesion and collaboration, it was not felt by everyone to be a completely equalized playing field:

Ray:

Let me frame a couple of things that I felt like I was consciously doing in the studio and ask your response to that. There were times when I feel like I was purposely ambiguous. When I would not answer a question without

asking a question in return or perhaps silence. How did that come across at times?

Michel:

Well for the most part it was nice; it was good to have that freedom. Sometimes it was frustrating, because as comfortable as we were – relative to how mostly people are in this type of situation – as much as you pushed us to just do whatever we wanted to do or felt right to do, it didn't always feel comfortable. I mean I would have not felt comfortable screaming and pulling my pants down and walking over to Alison and giving her a hug; that wouldn't have felt comfortable to me, even if I really I wanted to, I probably wouldn't have. So for me it was a little scary to have that ambiguity because on the one sense I wanted to be honest with myself to do whatever it was that felt honest in my personal interpretation of what you were giving us, on the other hand it was a little hard and sometimes frustrating that we weren't getting more direction, because I felt kind of trapped in that I couldn't do some...

Ray:

Was there some implicit desire that you heard in the silence?

Michel:

I can't think of a specific example, but I will say this, as comfortable as we were in the environment, I never really breached the divide where I felt like I could do anything and you wouldn't judge me, and that's pretty big but that is a huge barrier in our culture in general. I

have to admit – and I feel like probably most of us felt – even as comfortable as we were, there was still something that you were looking for and we were trying to interpret what you were looking for, and we were trying to give you that and so it wasn't completely honest to the individual at least for me, not all the time

Ray:

I think that is a really great point and it is essential to some of my questions. There is a sense for you that there was some attempt to redistribute authority in the room. At the same time it was never fully abdicated in a certain way by me.

What were the social cues that let you know that I was still the person that you were satisfying? And why would you agree? If part of your goal was to create this world where all are honest and doing what they feel in the moment, why would we all agree that there is still this kind of power division?

Michel:

Social cues. We wouldn't have been together if it wasn't for you; you weren't in the piece so you had an outsider's eyes. The fact that you were dictating from the outside kind of gave the sense that you were the person that held a little bit more power. The fact that in general you set the schedule when we would meet, what music we would generally listen to, when we warmed up when we stopped warming up, I think there was no real ever doubt about who was in control.

If we had come together and just were artists and were going to figure out our schedule together, I mean it probably wouldn't have felt so much like it did. We would have had so many different opinions at one time being thrown out into the space so that it probably wouldn't have been efficient.

In all honesty, it was essential that—not necessarily that we had the exact model that we worked on—but that we did have somebody who was sitting out to pick the particular things that worked, because it is a very fuzzy line between what feels good to you and how you are indulging yourself and how you are indulging the energy around you. So it was very important. I don't think that any of us were completely comfortable to work in a situation where we would have thrown our ideas out there and stood by our ideas while we were working with four or five other people who were also having their particular ideas. If we hadn't had that one person to stand by and pick certain things, I don't think any of us, at least not me, I don't think I would have been comfortable really throwing out what I really thought. And even if I had, and if we all had, perhaps we wouldn't have been able to get anywhere.

While there may have been a clear sense of roles, it was clear to another dancer that there was an obvious attempt to re-organize power dynamics in the studio. She had worked with me on several projects, and this was not new to only “the narrows”:

Ray:

Do you think that I was always in charge or do you think I was interested in sharing that responsibility?

Nicole:

I think ever since I have worked with you, you have always been interested in trying to break down the choreographer/dancer role. And I feel like in “The Book⁸,” it didn’t quite happen, and I feel like in “the narrows,” it did, and there was a big shift in the players between them.

Ray:

As someone who has been through that whole process and observed it as well, you stayed involved in the work. Do you think that was part of the interest for you? Was that attractive or disturbing?

Nicole:

What is both attractive and disturbing is your pursuit of individual voice. I have always felt like you have been trying to dig and scrape away at people’s skin to get down to the insides, and you do that by setting up exercises that require choice. A big landmark exercise for me was in “The Book” when we had to walk across the room and get born on one side and we are dead, or we age when we get to the other side. And that is so outlandish. I mean how do you even...?

Through the process of trying to fathom how the hell you would get born on one side and be ninety-eight years old on the other side, you

⁸ “The Book of Remembrance and Forgetting” (2004). This was the first work that Sheep Army created. It was a dance-theater work inspired by Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel Everything is Illuminated. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin. (2002)

really have to come up to that kind of journey. And there had been a lot of moments for me where I am like “How the hell am I supposed to do that, I don’t know what I am doing. I don’t know how to make any sense of this.” So that can be kind of disturbing, and painful and scary at times but then you find something that helps you make sense of it. Well, not even make sense of it. It’s more like feeling my way through it. And then, and most often it’s not just left at that. Usually after an exercise, you’ll come back at it with questions like “What is this? What were you doing? Can you articulate what that was?”

In reflecting back on these conversations, I feel that my own pedagogical goals, as stated on page 12, were met. While the participants had different perspectives on the specifics of the nature of authority in the studio, they all felt a sense of their own agency and ownership, and a willingness to support a collaborative process.

In my interview with Michel, we spoke at length about his sense of ownership in the process and how he came to understand his role within the group. I found it interesting that as the youngest member of the group he had the most clearly defined sense of authority. In continuing my discussion with him regarding his voice in the process, though, he noted how this perception was re-framed. It was through his responses that I found myself feeling secure that my methods and participation had been effective in terms of my goals:

Ray:

So do you think there was something about the role that I played that created a sort of lightning rod for people’s opinions and ideas like

there was some gravity or strange attractor for people to have their voice that there wouldn't otherwise have been if there wasn't a central figure.

Michel:

I think that your presence is what made us comfortable letting our expressions communicate with the other person's expressions. Because it allowed us to not become so defensive about our own personal desires. Ultimately, maybe this is not true but it feels like in any context with a group of people, especially more than two, that there is a leader that just emerges, that is just a characteristic of people. There is an inherent desire to let someone shape what is; I am not sure exactly why. So for us your being there was a way for us to say, ok well we aren't the ultimate creator so we can relax about that, and we don't have to try to be the person in charge and we don't have to be the person in the corner who is trying to flee from that power. We could just be artists who brought our opinions in when it felt necessary so we could relax, and not have to feel that pressure because there was somebody else who was shaping.

Ray:

What were some of the cues that allowed you to bring your voice into the room?

Michel:

Well it wasn't always like that, but it definitely hit a point. I think there was a point where I decided that I was going to just say what I wanted to say, where I felt like we were doing some things at some point that I really did not agree with and I felt like, "You know, I really do have something to say here." So I had to kind of get pushed to an edge. And that edge was in part me breaking down my idealistic view of your place in the dance. That Ray can do things and try things that aren't always what I perceive as the most effective. So in that way, I was kind of empowering myself to just be ok.

Ray:

Something about your own process re-framed your relationship to who I was...?

Michel:

Well I think we all kind of idealized you in a way, even if we were sometimes sassy to you. I felt like, because you ultimately had the vision that was bringing us together, you were putting the specifics on the table that allowed us to explore what we wanted to explore. So I felt like we kind of idealized your role. But we did—or at least I got to a point where I felt like I had enough stake in the process, that it was enough mine for me to have the responsibility and the desire to bring my honest opinions to the table.

The ramifications of Michel's statements have made me curious about the developmental aspects of a somatically-influenced model. When is it the right time to

bring people into a process like this? Do we need clear authority figures, which we idealize and then become disillusioned with, in order to stimulate a moment of self-empowerment? Is there a natural order to the process of claiming agency? Is everyone capable of being a collaborator? Does a process like this work for people who are predisposed to becoming collaborators, or can anyone, given enough time immersed in a somatically-influenced process, develop this sense of commitment to a creative project and a sense that it is theirs as much as anyone else's in the room?

Soma: Beyond the Body

Is a somatically-influenced model the most effective way to go about fostering collaborative relationships in the studio? In the process of conducting these interviews, my understanding of Somatics expanded from a purely body-based methodology to something more holistic. Future research will illuminate much more about Somatics and dance as they relate not only to motor learning and kinesiology – or what is commonly known as *dance science* – but also to philosophy, psychology, and aesthetics. My own contribution to this research will require immersing myself in new bodies of literature and experience while seeking connections to and applications of these broader perspectives.

How have I come to realize that there is much more research to do in the future? To answer that I must first explain how my initial assumptions about Somatics changed through the experience of creating and reflecting on “the narrows.” Entering into this process I felt that Somatics was always about “body,” and in trying to understand how models of authority and communication played out in the studio, I questioned whether or not I was in fact really addressing a somatic model. For one, language seemed to me a focus away from the body. Reading Sheets-Johnstone, and constructing my ideas about a non-verbal continuum helped me to re-connect words to movement and body, but I still

was curious whether my pre-existing understanding of Somatics really had anything to do with the work I was doing. Had I created a theoretical argument that placed Somatics at the center of my research, all the while misinterpreting the meaning of Somatics? Did I build an elegant castle on a sinkhole of theoretical balderdash?

When speaking with the dancers, I asked them if they felt the body was important in the process, beyond being simply a medium or tool. One dancer had this to say in response:

Ray:

How important do you think the ways that we chose to work with embodiment were to the art that we made? Were there things that we did that you felt were unique or specific to this process—that addressed embodiment in a different way than other experiences?

Michel:

For me, the importance of the way that we approached it was that we were very much relying on a form of communication that was non-verbal, and that's essentially what art is – unless you are reading poetry, and maybe even if you are reading poetry. To me it's not about the words, it's about the space in between the connection that you are having with the person, the energy flow, that something that we can't explain. That is how what you perform gets to the audience. It's not even about the movement. It's about the energy. And that is what contact improvisation is to me. It's about communicating with somebody on a profound level that has nothing to do with verbal communication. I feel that is how we became so trustful

of one another. We were experiencing something that's very easy to get excited about, that is kind of inherent in dance (but not always). At its best what dance can be is about that non-verbal communication.

You know, with our bodies – the way that we did, I think it just created an environment that none of us had really experienced with that many people at once. That's why we trusted each other because we were all excited about finding this communication.

Ray:

Was the body essential to it? Irrelevant of even that we were making a dance? Do you think the fact that we created that community, was it really essential that we were addressing ourselves on a physical level? Would it have been the same kind of work if we had been acting or just using text?

Michel:

I think not, maybe in a perfect world, possibly, where everyone was so in touch with their energy fields that they can actually realize that the words that they are speaking to somebody else are not really the communication that's happening. But I don't think that any of us were really on that level. So to use the body was essential because the body for us – as dancers – is something that we, even if we don't trust that we have this something that we can communicate, even if we think that it is all B.S. – that we can't truly believe that there is this energy flowing between us;

we wouldn't be dancers if we didn't somewhere – at least in our subconscious – feel that we were communicating through an energy that was passing between one person to another, because that is what makes dance feel good. So I think it was extremely essential and I would be very impressed if others were able to create what we were able to create without physical touch.

I found myself interested in this response but also hungry for something that was, perhaps, less ephemeral. I think I had wanted to hear how the dancers had found themselves embodied in new and exciting ways, ways that only somatic methodologies had given to them. More than anything, I had wanted for the dancers to reinforce what I later realized to be an outdated and perhaps limited view of Somatics in general. So I continued to mine this vein in subsequent conversations. What they said surprised me and I found myself opened up to a new understanding of somatic process and its ultimate goals. In one of my later interviews I discussed this question of somatic embodiment and came to a new realization through the conversation. I think it is worth quoting the whole exchange directly:

Ray:

I think there is something about the body itself that is essential to this idea that I just described – that because we have bodies and not just minds there is something as dancers that we learn to disenfranchise ourselves from. As much as we spend time learning with our bodies, we also learn how to give up control of them; and so when I say Somatics is this idea of trying to repair the mind/body split in the world...for Western

culture, that means much more emphasis on body because we tend to be much more emphasized on mind and intellect. Somatics developed in the west and although it adopted a lot of global influences, a lot of what people talk about when they talk about Somatics is body image or experience or sensation, or proprioception – all of them being body locations. I would argue that even at a more primary level it's just really about giving people back their bodies, and then how one applies those given bodies to the field of research or creative process. It is not what we are doing in the studio but it is influencing what we are doing in the studio, and I wouldn't be concerned with ownership and agency if I wasn't involved in a body-based process. Because we are dealing with our bodies, it is important that we feel ownership of our bodies and we use our bodies and we dialogue with our bodies and the conversation we are having is a physical, emotional, spiritual conversation – all integrated. In order to really generate that ownership and agency you can't just be just affecting the mind.

Nicole:

I feel like, though, that you have been giving me back my mind.

Ray:

Others have said that too. It is very frustrating to me because there is a huge gap between my impressions of what I thought I was doing. I have heard this two or three times, and I have asked people, “Do you think body was important in the process,” and people have said, “Well

actually it was my imagination, or my emotions,” and now you say mind. And, well, maybe that’s the thing – it’s about balance, maybe it is not all about body. Because we are dancers, we are already emphasized in the body so a somatic approach for dancers would actually give them back their minds.

I just got that. It is the missing piece I have been looking for. I have been struggling with this whole thing about body, body, body; because is so much about body, but it’s not just...especially for dancers. For a lawyer, maybe who needs to get down on the floor and roll around or for the architect...for people who spend their lives removing their minds from their bodies except as a vehicle for control, a somatic approach is going to, by nature, is going to be a balancing approach. The balance that is going to occur in the dancer’s studio is actually more intellectual and more mindful or emotional.

Perhaps Somatics is not really about the body. Perhaps it is really about balance and depending on the population you walk into, it is going to put back the thing that has basically been repressed.

This idea of Somatics as a path towards the whole person has appeared in the literature since writing about Somatics began. Yet, as a long time practitioner of both dance and somatic practices I find myself wondering about the nature of the field some twenty-five years after Martha Myers first introduced Somatics to mainstream dance consciousness through her articles in *Dance Magazine*. Since that time, in the field of dance, we have seen an explosion of visibility, a host of new practices and hybrid forms,

some scholarly research, and a general infiltration of somatic principles into technical training, etc. University job descriptions often list the ability to teach somatic methods as an important eligibility trait in their job searches, yet what does this term really mean to dancers? Discussions with many peers in the field suggest that while some people mean the type of work described by Johnson as, “basic methods for recovering from the existential sickness of dualism with all its implications,” (Johnson, “The Body in Human Inquiry”, 2004) what is often meant by Somatics is simply a code word for “conditioning” practices.

My own understanding of the work, after sixteen years of involvement with it, has come to mean a great deal more than conditioning and rehabilitation, but it wasn't until I undertook this project, reflected on my understanding of Somatics, and engaged in conversation with my colleagues that I realized how much more I needed to refine my relationship to the work. I must note, though, that should artists be less interested in a democratic context in the studio, my definition of somatic methods could be counter-productive to them. In that case I would argue that the term *dance science* is more applicable. *Dance science* approaches are more technically oriented, injury prevention focused, and kinesiology influenced. I think the differentiation of these terms is useful. Somatics seems to make as much room for philosophy and oneiric potential as it does for mechanical and technical principles.

In my future research I will continue to interrogate Somatics and its application to dance beyond the realm of technique and injury prevention. I wish to broaden its role as a balancing force, as a method of enacting phenomenological inquiry, and as a way of

bringing the whole person to the table as a soma. This conversation is, I feel, missing, even among the many ways that the field of dance has adopted Somatics.

In particular, the use of Somatics, for people who have been involved not only in the practice of the work but in its articulation in the field at large, is remarkably more complex than as a practice aligned solely to the body as instrument. I have heard it said that Somatics is a way to train for a democracy, that it is a primary tool for the development of choreographic process, that it is an inquiry into the creative self. Since the term appears more and more but with less and less clarity, the time seems ripe to examine the field and its application to dance, in particular through a lens of informed practice and historical distance.

In specific terms, one might ask, what are the qualities of a somatic approach? What are the values that a somatic approach embodies? The list below is one answer to this question.

Qualities of experience that characterize a somatic approach:

- a. Presence
- b. Connection
- c. Attending and attention
- d. Respect for and facilitation of internal authority and personal sovereignty
- e. Listening
- f. Conversation
- g. Trust manifested by the use of respectful touch (touch within a range of ease)
- h. Working “with” rather than “on”
- i. A balancing of rest and action
- j. Commitment to sensation
- k. Ease in breathing
- l. Cultivation of curiosity

m. Open awareness⁹

For the purposes of my thesis, I feel these values are concurrent with my own. More research, though, is necessary to identify how these qualities are shared by and differ among other somatic modalities.

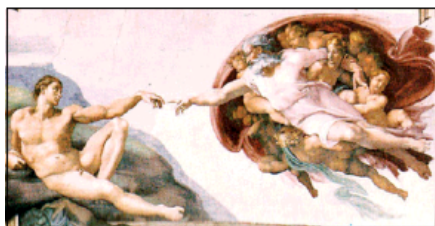


Figure 1: The Creation of Adam, Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo

Frank Meshberger¹⁰ provides an interesting departure point for considering the notion of Somatics as movement and process rather than object. If we look closely at the painting of God and Adam by Michelangelo from the Sistine Chapel, a metaphor appears.

Here is Adam – a naked, fleshy body resting quietly on a rock – and there above him is God flying inside a form that looks suspiciously like a brain in a sagittal dissection. Was Michelangelo suggesting that God is the brain and Adam the soulless body waiting for divine inspiration? What if we look closer between the hands of God and Man: is this a metaphor for the synaptic gap, the empty space of neural

⁹ The list is derived from a discussion among students, teachers, and practitioners during a program I participated in to become certified in the Feldenkrais® Method. The original question that started the discussion was: What would a person coming in off the street say about what they saw going on in a somatic process? How would they describe it from the outsider's point of view? I used the initial notes from that discussion to start the list and then refined it by editing and adding perspectives that I felt were more specific to the purposes of this thesis. Feldenkrais® Method training. Movement Educators. Class discussion. 27, May 2005.

¹⁰ Meshberger, Frank. "An interpretation of Michelangelo's 'Creation of Adam' Based on Neuroanatomy" *Journal of the American Medical Association* [JAMA] 1990, 264, pp. 1837-1841. *Association* [JAMA] 1990, 264, pp. 1837-1841.

communication? Is the gap the fissure between mind and body, intellect and action, thought and form?



Figure 2: The Creation of Adam, Sistine Chapel. Michelangelo (Detail)

I would suggest that the gap between these fingers is the site of Somatics, the dwelling ground of relationships, and the place of movement. This area is of non-material reality is, in fact, the locus of integration for body/mind/spirit. In the narrows of our body and mind, somatic practices dwell – not only on the objective body and mind, but also between them – where the differences and distinctions wrought by centuries of English language and Western dualism crumble into an inseparable process of being.

Conclusion

Choreographers create worlds. They do so by developing aesthetics based on whom they put on stage, how they work in the studio, the movement choices they use to frame their dances, and how they invite the audience into relationship with their dances. But these aren't only aesthetic choices. If you talk to any choreographer you will find a passionate belief in form or chaos, unison or individuality, music or silence, bound or free tone, line or curve. These choices reflect values that find their way into the design of a dance. As well, they make statements not only about the worlds they create but also about the world we share with each other.

Whether choreographers strive for a common language and a sense of uniformity in their dances or they tend towards a populist view which embraces the many variations and idiosyncrasies of the performers on stage, they are suggesting, by their choices, aspects of their belief systems and their values at that moment in their lives. Equally inherent in the work are the behind the scenes values – those of authority and leadership, effort, vision, collaboration, expectation, conversation, and respect. How a choreographer behaves in rehearsal affects not only the work that makes it to the performance arena but, more importantly, the lives of his collaborators.

Somatic movement education values dialogue, respect for individual histories, and a sense of balance between body, mind, and spirit. Somatic education considers experience essential to learning, and it holds the student/client and the teacher/practitioner accountable to one another when co-constructing a learning process.

When somatic education and dance-making intersect, opportunities arise for reflecting on how a value system based in collaboration, dialogue, and shared ownership affects creative practice. By adopting a somatically-influenced model in my dance-making I set the stage for exploring anarchic ideals within socio-constructivist art making practices. The research presented in this paper articulates that model and its effects on one project with one group of dancers. Further research is necessary to more deeply understand how this model affects the process with a different group of individuals and different dances.

How does a process that embraces the study of bodily life and invests that study with attention to poetic explorations of perception, action, sensation and the body-mind affect the making of a dance piece—especially when that work is no longer generated from the ground up by an original group of collaborators? I have begun the experiential aspect of that research by reworking and evolving “the narrows” with a group of undergraduate dance majors at UT-Austin. Over a period of nine months we have met twice weekly to build ensemble, develop improvisational skills, refine technical proficiencies in partnering and phrase work, and observe and deconstruct the choreographic design of Sheep Army’s version of the work. We also collaborated with a costume designer, make-up artist, composer, prop designer, and a lighting designer in order to explore what would happen to the piece when brought into conversation with other artists’ visions.

Throughout the process, with both the dancers and the other collaborating artists, I have consciously employed the values and practices described in this thesis. As the process is still ongoing I have made no conclusions about whether a somatically influenced model works for this group. I can say, though, that many similarities to the

Sheep Army experience have presented themselves. At least for this group of young dancers, it would be safe to say that they find themselves re-framing ideas about ownership and agency in the creative process. Comparing and contrasting their experiences in this type of working environment with their more traditional choreographic experiences – both in the classroom and in their non-academic lives – has proven a rich source of conversation, reflection, and re-evaluation of the possible ways to be an artist.

It would be a useful project to follow up with them in more formal interviews in order to help determine the challenges and benefits a somatically influenced model brings to this age group. While beyond the scope of this thesis, I do think the questions of who is a collaborator, when are they ready to be one, and whether or not the methodologies described in this thesis are specific to the individuals discussed within it or have a wider scope of effectiveness are useful questions for further research.

Drawing from this experience of re-working “the narrows,” other questions emerge. By restaging “the narrows” I found myself with a dance “script” of sorts. While many details changed in order to bring the new cast in to the process with a sense of ownership, the basic nature of the piece stayed the same. Yet, is it fair to still call it “the narrows?” How rigid are the boundaries of a work of art – especially a work of performance, which by its nature requires living individuals with uniquely embodied personal and cultural histories to enact it? What is consistent? What transforms? What elements are specific to the original cast and what elements are essential to the aesthetic goals of the work as a whole? Is it enough simply to reconstruct a series of steps within a particular time and space, or are there other elements that bring a work of dance to life?

Other avenues of inquiry present themselves. For instance, who speaks for the body? Who defines the work? While the major definitions of the field of Somatics come from men, the majority of practitioners of Somatics have been women. How does gender play a role in the professionalizing, assessing, and engaging with the field?

What happens to art when it is created through collaboration? Is there an aesthetic to collaboration? It was recently remarked to me upon seeing some of the group dances that I have made and also danced in, that it was hard to identify who the choreographer was in the work. Usually you can identify the choreographer who is performing in his/her own work. Is there something about a collaborative model that submerges individual nuance and movement style into a larger and more comprehensive vision? Is this always true, or is it specific to my working style? These questions deserve some attention. A detailed investigation of the concrete methods by which I, and others, go about creating a collaborative work is called for. What are the specific ways people are invited to contribute? How is movement generated and designed? Who makes what up? How is it put together?

Given that somatic methods applied to dancing have come to be understood primarily through the lens of physical adjuncts to technical training, I set out in my research for “the narrows” to examine how one might apply somatic practices and their attendant qualities to creative process as well as technical mastery. In what ways do the forms of attention, rest, self-generation, and facilitated embodied dialogue contribute to the generation of material wholly owned by the dancer? How does this ownership of material affect the choreographer’s practice in terms of making aesthetic choices? And finally, how do the use of somatic methodologies within the choreographic process re-

frame the process of learning technique? Are there technical benefits to approaching efficiency, coordination, movement science, and fundamentals of movement organization through a process that places the fulcrum of learning and discovery back in the hands of the dancer rather than in the authority of the teacher or choreographer?

The philosophical notion of Somatics as a relational event also merits deeper investigation. Finding the language to talk about the experience of both embodied movement and relational movement is one of the primary efforts of scholars like Don Hanlon Johnson, Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, and Elizabeth Behnke. Johnson speaks elegantly for the field of Somatics at large; Sheets-Johnstone has applied her research to the phenomenology of dance; and Behnke has articulated a phenomenology of somatic experience especially as it relates to victims of abuse and trauma. There is still much to be done, though, in cultivating a language specific to the integration dance and Somatics.

While plenty of somatic material trickles into the training of dance, whether or not people know the sources of their training is another matter. Many students in the U.S. are capable, to some extent, of internal knowing and possess a degree of comfort with anatomical imagery. Nonetheless, Somatics does merit definition as its own discipline so that we may better understand the disciplines with which it interacts. Conflating Somatics with dance or even a particular dance style confuses the issue and often leads to mistrust among practitioners.

A great body of literature and research can be revealed and articulated at the interface of Somatics and dance. Much literature around this subject, though, takes the form of a how-to manual. Perhaps this is an appropriate way of reaching a larger audience and keeping the frame of the work grounded in experiential practice.

Nonetheless, I think there is still good scholarly work to be done. Scholarship involves clear thinking, becoming conversant with the history of human intellect, and drawing bridges between theory and practice. It is my hope that through this thesis I have contributed to a liberating and clarifying dialogue. As I continue in my work as both an artist and a scholar, I wish to offer ways to re-frame body and mind, mend the rent of dualism, and bring substance to the interactions of artists, scientists, poets, healers, psychologists, activists, and philosophers as they interweave the tapestry that is somatic integration and creative practice.

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Appendix A

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Vita

Ray Eliot Schwartz is a movement artist and activist who spent the last 20 years committed to developing an experiential understanding of the body. As a co-founder of four contemporary dance projects in the southern United States: Sheep Army/Elsewhere Dance Theater, The Zen Monkey Project, THEM, and Steve's House Dance Collective, he has choreographed, performed, presented other artists, and developed educational curricula for diverse populations of students. In addition, he has taught at The Mimar Sinan Universitesi in Istanbul, Turkey, and colleges and universities throughout the U.S. Schwartz has served on the faculty of the American Dance Festival, the Bates Dance Festival, MELT, the Movement Research educational intensive located in NYC, and has taught, performed and conducted research extensively in the U.S, Europe and Asia.

His training includes high school at the North Carolina School of the Arts and a BFA in Dance from Virginia Commonwealth University. Additional study includes certification as Practitioner of Body-Mind Centering, trainings in Zero-Balancing, Cranio-Sacral Therapy, Traditional Thai Massage, and the Feldenkrais Method. He completed his M.F.A. at the University of Texas at Austin, where he balanced a rigorous schedule of academic research with a commitment to service and activism within the Austin, Texas arts scene. Towards that end, he directed Sheep Army/Elsewhere Dance Theater, taught classes in dance, movement, and body-work, researched the aesthetic and pedagogical implications evoked by the integration of somatic movement education and contemporary dance forms, presented papers at conferences, published articles, and learned, learned, learned.

Upon graduating, in addition to summer projects teaching at the Zen Monkey Project Summer Intensive Training (www.zenmonkeyproject.com), and teaching at the Seattle Festival of Alternative Dance and Improvisation, he took a one year position as Assistant Professor of Dance at the Universidad De Las Americas, in Puebla, Mexico.

Most permanent address: zenmp@hotmail.com

This thesis was typed by the author.

