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## **Bodily Listening in Somatic Education**

Hiie Saumaa

*Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action*

By Martha Eddy. 369 pp. Illustrated.

Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2016. \$57.00

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Martha Eddy's *Mindful Movement: The Evolution of the Somatic Arts and Conscious Action* offers a rich account of the history, evolution, current concerns, and possible future trajectories of the field of somatic education. The somatic arts are grounded in our ability to perceive our physical selves, feel our bodies in motion, listen to bodily messages, and imagine our bodies from within—in other words, to live inside the human body with awareness. Eddy's book reveals how somatic ideas inform arts, performance, dance, education, and activism. Eddy comes to this project as a long-time academic contributor to the field of somatic studies and a somatic practitioner, educator, and innovator herself. A Registered Somatic Movement Therapist, teacher of Body-Mind Centering, and Certified Movement Analyst, Eddy is the founder of Dynamic

Embodiment, a somatic movement therapy training, and the nonprofit Moving for Life organization.

The book is divided into three main sections.: Part 1 addresses the influences on and development of somatic education; Part 2, the emergence of somatic movement education and therapy; and Part 3, the current trends in somatic thinking and being. Part 1 discusses the word “somatic,” examines what somatic education is, and tells the stories of the pioneers who developed somatic systems that are still in use today, such as the Alexander Technique, Bartenieff Fundamentals, the Feldenkrais Method, and Ideokinesis, among others. Asian and Caribbean movement forms that have influenced somatics are discussed here, as well as early forms of physical culture in Europe. Part 2 extends the discussion into the work of third-generation somatic practitioners and forms that combine influences and methodologies from various somatic practices. This section accounts for somatics in academia and pre-K-12 education as well as in therapy and fitness settings. Part 3 explores links between somatics and neuroscience, “social somatics” and conscious action, and advocacy and activism, and also investigates spirituality, ecstasy, and genetics.

Aside from her own writing and research, which make up the majority of this impressive book, Eddy has invited guest authors to contribute chapters on their expertise. Kelly Jean Mullan sheds light on European antecedents to somatic movement, Sangeet Duchane examines Asian and African influences, Sara Reed and Sarah Whatley write about the growth of somatic dance education in Britain, Rebecca Nettle-Fiol explores a case study at the University of Illinois-Urbana, and Kate Tarlow Morgan, et al. illuminate somatic movement and dance in pre-K-12 education. At the ends of several chapters are

shorter pieces, by Eddy and others: excerpts from interviews, books and book reviews; in-depth descriptions of particular educators' work; and personal musings and reflections, such as Eddy's memorable piece, "I Can't Get the Movie *Selma* Out of Me," in which she vividly recounts how the movie impelled her to write the story of a trauma of her own that she "wasn't even aware [she] was living with" (p. 228). The book concludes with appendices on the somatic educators Elaine Summers, Emilie Conrad, and Ruth Doing. Throughout, readers find helpful visuals, such as a map of "Founders of Somatic Movement Trainings and Their Influences" (p. 2) and a "Lineage of Somatic Movement Leaders" (p. 102).

Numerous aspects of this work make it highly valuable. One is Eddy's attempt to bring clarity to the very question of what the word "somatic" means and what makes a practice "somatic." These are important questions in a field as rich and diverse as somatics, a field abounding in forms, philosophies, and approaches to movement, the body, and the self. While somatic practices emphasize similar guiding principles—such as sensing, feeling the movement rather than focusing on its outward "look," cultivating relaxation and ease in movement and alignment, and taking time to "tune in" to the body, to name a few—their methods, approaches, or particular foci can differ remarkably. What do these practices share and how do they differ? Are Pilates, Tai Chi, and yoga somatic practices? What is "somatic fitness"? What is the role of the teacher's background and education? Since many somatic movement educators are influenced by or trained in various somatic forms, should they let their students know, during class, where particular ideas or convictions about movement are actually coming from? Why does one constantly need to explain what "somatics" is, in the first place? Why is this term still not

widely known inside and outside the realms of movement, dance, health, and education? With insight, clarity, and firmness of voice, Eddy illuminates these and many other questions, with the intent of systematizing and clarifying this rich but potentially confusing terrain.

Another important aspect of Eddy's book is its scope. While scholarship on somatics is on the rise, with the path-breaking and insightful work of authors such as Sylvia Fortin, Sondra Freleigh, Jill Green, Don Hanlon Johnson, Kimerer LaMothe, Andrea Olsen, Amanda Williamson, and Eddy herself, to name only a few, it is difficult to find a work that touches upon such a range of trajectories.<sup>1</sup> *Mindful Movement* aims to give an overview of several generations of luminaries in the field whose work has been groundbreaking, covering the beginning of the twentieth century to the present day. Numerous lengthy quotations from Eddy's interviews with somatic innovators, a key aspect of her methodology, bring their voices, ideas, and language vividly alive on the page. Establishing historical trajectories is only one goal, however; the book focuses substantially on the present and future of somatics, showing how educational and artistic environments, science fields, consciousness studies, medical systems, and social activism can benefit from a deeper engagement with somatic thought and practices. Subjects such as somatics' role in conflict resolution, advocacy, and community activism, as well as the impact of martial arts and Eastern and African movement forms, have not been widely discussed in somatic studies. Also valuable is the introduction to a range of lesser-known contemporary somatic practices, such as BrainDance, SomaSoul, and eco-somatics, among others.

This work is relevant for dance scholars, students, and aspiring choreographers in several ways. Indeed, many past and present somatic innovators were or are dancers. Even though somatic practices are relatively widespread in academic dance departments, it might come as a surprise to many that there is a growing field within somatics called “dance somatics,” where dance movement is central to the practice (p. 9). Exploring historical dynamics between somatics and dance, Eddy discusses the impact of François Delsarte, Genevieve Stebbins, Rudolf Laban, and Mary Wigman on somatic methods. She also looks into the work of second-generation somatic explorers such as Anna Halprin, Elaine Summers, Joan Skinner, Sondra Fraleigh, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Emile Conrad, and Nancy Topf to demonstrate how they used modes of inquiry from dance “to heal, express and teach somatically” (p. 9). Briefly mentioned are forms of movement that are rooted in somatic experiences, such as contact improvisation and Gaga, and the role of somatics in contemporary dance and choreography.

Eddy’s work does not merely applaud somatic education and approach it uncritically. With admirable frankness, she discusses whether somatic techniques are a form of “navel-gazing,” and she also points to the hurdles that somatic methods face on their path toward greater recognition and practice. She notes that, instead of seeing the acts of tracking physical sensations and connecting inward as valuable daily occurrences, many people become interested in somatic work only after experiencing injuries or physical discomfort. She also draws attention to the significant cost of somatic education for teachers and students and limited access to somatic classes. Eddy and Eve Selver-Kassell highlight the difficulties of convincing administrators in K-12 education of the benefits of somatic education: “the positive results of including somatic movement into

[sic] the daily lives of children are often best expressed through anecdotes that, though moving, are not substantial enough to sway the school board” (p. 197). The fact that little literature and writing on this topic is accessible to those outside the somatics field is another challenge noted in this book. Doing scientific research on somatics can be problematic: in Eddy’s words, the “holistic paradigm” of the body, movement, affect, and cognition is “hard to research, as most quantitative research requires that small discrete parts be isolated for study.” Somatics is also difficult to research “because the neural structures that govern these areas are deeply embedded in the brain, making it hard to take measurements of its activity” (p. 214).

Although somatic practices do not use many props or ask for very particular conditions other than a clean, comfortable, and quiet space, somatic work is, in general, not an easy form of bodily engagement for a practitioner, instructor, and researcher. To be able to notice details in bodily sensation and bodily messages, practitioners need to attend to detail, commit to practice, and, importantly, have time and patience. Instructors need skills in guiding practitioners into sensation and exploration without sounding dogmatic or prescriptive. As Eddy notes, the nonverbal, sensory nature of somatic work and its body-based and inward focus make somatics difficult to grasp, and, for many, even to see as having any value. Eddy observes that, even though the awareness of somatic practices is spreading in the West, largely due to the popularity of yoga and mindfulness practices, which encourage participants to turn inward and cultivate sensitivity toward their physical selves, “the idea of being aware of one’s movement is novel and the health impact of the mindfulness in somatic movement is not fully known or valued as of yet” (p. 221).

*Mindful Movement* seems to assume its readers will have some physical knowledge of somatic movement. While explanations of somatic concerns and values are carefully and thoroughly explained throughout the work, a novice to somatics could perhaps have benefitted from an experiential exercise or a more detailed, embodied description of what a somatic experience could feel like on a deep sensory level. The genealogies of somatic educators, particularly the many current practitioners who have developed their own methodologies, and their teachers, as well as examples of institutions invested in somatic work can feel overwhelming in the course of the book. However, they open up vistas for future accounts that might unpack these connections at greater length.

*Mindful Movement*, the first comprehensive and large-scale study of somatic education, will surely become a foundational account in the field. It clearly and convincingly demonstrates the importance, breadth, and wide-ranging implications of somatic work. This book, doubtlessly a work of years of meticulous research and personal engagement with somatic practices, abounds in inspiring pathways for future scholars, educators, and students of somatics. Eddy's text helps to further establish, validate, solidify, and clarify this exciting field.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Sylvie Fortin, "Living in Movement: Development of Somatic Practices in Different Cultures," *Journal of Dance Education*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2002): 128–36; Sondra Fraleigh, *Moving Consciously: Somatic Transformations through Dance, Yoga, and Touch* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Don Hanlon Johnson,

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*Bone, Breath, and Gesture: Practices of Embodiment* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1995); Kimerer Lamothe's *Why We Dance: A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015); and Amanda Williamson, et al., *Dance, Somatics, and Spiritualities: Contemporary Sacred Narratives* (Bristol: Intellect, 2014).

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