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On African Ascendance, Body Acceptance, and Somatic Experience

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This article provides a brief background on a contemplative practice, a poetic narrative around the practice, followed by directions for the practice itself. The practice explored in this article centers the lived experiences and wisdoms of African ascendants (Dillard, 2012, p. ix). African ascendants refer to anyone who identifies or experiences the world as Black, African American, Afro Latino/a/x, Afro Caribbean or belonging to the African diaspora. Our bodies carry norms, cultural traditions, spiritual practices, and ways of being that have been demonized, othered, policed, politicized, and oppressed in a variety of ways. This practice is an attempt to marry ourselves back to our embodied experiences in a way that is gentle and communal. It brings together somatic movement practices (brown, 2019, p. 275) with narrative and storytelling.

The practice explored in this article centers the lived experiences and wisdoms of African ascendants (Dillard, 2012, p. ix). African ascendants refer to anyone who identifies or experiences the world as Black, African American, Afro Latino/a/x, Afro Caribbean or belonging to the African diaspora. Our bodies carry norms, cultural traditions, spiritual practices, and ways of being that have been demonized, othered, policed, politicized, and oppressed in a variety of ways. But the complete tapestry of our individual and collective stories is held in our bodies. We live in an oddly disembodied culture in the U.S. that uses physical form as a way to mark all sorts of unhealthy oppressive systems for living, but also does not fully acknowledge the body. It privileges the mind, but discounts it from the rest of the body. Mental health is somehow seen as separate from physical health. As if our consciousness is not connected to our physical brains that control the movement of our bodies.

This practice is an attempt to marry ourselves back to our embodied experiences in a way that is gentle and communal. It brings together somatic movement practices (brown, 2019, p. 275) with narrative and storytelling.

Briefly, somatics is a school of thought that connects the internal felt body to the external perceived body (Hannah, 2004). Our brains are connected neurologically to help us function and that can at times be threatening. Our bodies react to perceived threats physically and at times sub-consciously (van der Kolk, 2015). We now understand that this extends beyond our own personal traumatic experiences, but that we carry forward intergenerational traumas from our elders and ancestors (Menakem, 2017). This work functionally brings forward much needed and deserved space for centering Black wellbeing.

The lineages that are brought forth into this practice stem from a womanist spirituality that relies heavily on the work of Alice Walker and Dr. Cynthia Dillard, as well as coming out of the teachings of community organizations such as Generative Somatics, Trauma Response Crisis Care (TRACC) 4 Movements, and the Mystic Soul Project. Generative Somatics provides the general framework for how I conceptualize and enter into somatic practice.

Generative Somatics feels into how, in a collective or group, patterns of pain can indicate the mass, or inter-generational, trauma people are surviving. And how each of us has the power to help each [other] feel more, heal more, and move toward our longings for liberation and justice together. (brown, 2019, p. 275)

These practices are meant to make the subconscious conscious. We are only dipping our toe into somatic work and bringing together intentional conscious awakening to embodied experiences.

Socio-cultural context is helpful to unpack body shame broadly, ableism, and fat phobia related to body size. This contextualization is in response to the following questions: Who does shame serve and where does it come from? What practices help disrupt internalized oppression surrounding body shame? Embodied somatic practices can help dis-

rupt negative thought patterns stemming from internalized oppression. However, it isn't enough to simply release your own body shame, because it persists in the larger cultural ethos. We have to co-create new collective counter-narratives for dominant socio-cultural ideals to be dismantled. This is the desired aim of this paper and connected practice.

Eurocentric beauty and health standards persist in the U.S. and globally, serving ideals rooted in whiteness. Skin color is a racialized visible part of a person's appearance therefore race is always present to conversations about beauty and the body. Body size also plays an important role in perceptions of wellbeing. This rings true in dominant portrayals of who participates in and holds expertise around contemplative practice. As Harrell reminds us:

Marketing materials portraying images of young, thin, healthy, seemingly middle/upper-class, "blissed-out" white people can convey very individualistic and de-contextualized messages appealing primarily to values of personal advancement, success, and happiness... These images bear little resemblance to the daily lived experience of many [people of color] and can be perceived as irrelevant and unconcerned with their circumstances. While larger-bodied [people of color] seem to be appearing more frequently in the mindfulness media, these can be tokenized and objectified within broader cultural messaging that remains largely unchanged. (Harrell, 2018, p. 29)

Recent texts such as *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* by Sabrina Strings (2019) are beginning to fully articulate the complex histories and experiences of fat Black women like myself. It thoughtfully contextualizes how over the course of colonial history body shape and size became a part of Black women's racialization. Black women's bodies dehumanized by white supremacist conceptualizations of them as overly sexually expressive, deviant, and lacking self-control made evident in perceptions of that body.

As well as other points of embodied oppression such as ability status, linguistic hegemony, and so forth. In Sonya Renee Taylor's powerful text, *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (2018) highlights the origins of body shame. For many, body shame emerges in childhood and stems from awareness of external cultural beauty ideals and understanding our positionality within those ideals as being less valuable. Internalized negative messaging around body size is reinforced by the media, social circles, family, educators, medical professionals, etc. (B. Brown, 2006; D. Brown, 2018; Taylor, 2018).

However, these legacies of shame and internalized oppression are not our birthright. Taylor tells us that "living a radical self-love life is a process of de-indoctrination" (2018). Our bodies are literally wired for joy and pleasure (brown, 2019). Centuries of African ascendant peoples have created and re-created themselves through visual art, music, performance, movement, and storytelling (Dillard, 2012). We have the agency to tap into that internal wiring on purpose with intention. There is so much beauty created by, for, and with Black African ascendant women throughout the diaspora in every single corner of the world. Oppression seeks to deny that beauty and strip out all creativity within us. But by naming and claiming it in articulated counternarratives, a kind of freedom is found that cannot be suppressed. Expressions of African ascendant peoples' full humanity counteract the falsehoods presented.

Perceptions of specific physical attributes generate the socio-cultural, political, economic, and structural outcomes that play into people's very real lived experiences of their bodies. As a contemplative womanist scholar and practitioner, my work is to disrupt the narrative that dehumanizes in order to call forth a higher understanding of the whole human being. These external bodies do not define us, but they are our homes. They hold our intellect, wisdom, and spirit. The embodied vessel that holds us should not be shamed and degraded but nurtured and uplifted.

All of US: A Poetic Landscape of the Body

More spacious being, it is time to take up more space in the world. As a woman in a voluminous (aka fat) body I have been taught to be small; wearing my coffee colored skin I have been taught to be small. Not to speak my feelings out loud because of how it might be perceived by the outside. By someone else who has been taught to take up every corner in every room; yet still has no joy. Telling me to move out of the rooms that don't belong to me. But my ancestors built these rooms. Their ghosts still inhabit them. My mother gave birth to these rooms, her blood still stains the walls though unseen. The grandmothers' ancient wisdom whispers in my ear, "Take up space, it is yours to fill." Jars of yearning to pour out onto a thirsty world. Quenched of love and belonging. Your bosom is ample, your belly is soft, full of the beauty I gave to you from my grandmother and her grandmother and hers before her. They were black, brown, white, red, mulatto. Animists, spiritual gurus, sha(wo)men, teachers, healers, lovers. We actually haven't left, they only think because our bodies are buried beneath the ground and our ashes scattered, that we are no longer here. But now we are part of the earth. The space, these rooms exist on, are ours to inhabit indefinitely. Not to haunt, but to remind you, we are them, and they are US. It is only a horror if you let it be. Running away from possibility of the wisdom we offer. We, them, US, you, it is an illusion as it always has been. Our bodies bear the scars of that illusion, but the sight of the scars reminds you, them, they, US, we, are not the only victims of brutality and hatred. We, they, US, you, them hurt. The pain is inescapable if they, we, you, them, US do not learn love beyond what is seen, to beauty unseen.

Somatic Practice Directions

Opening: Light a tea candle (incense or another small incendiary). Honor a supportive African ascendant ancestor by lifting their name up into room (can be a relative, cultural, and/or movement figure). Invite participants to do the same.

Whole Body Noticing Activity: Invite participants to check in with all senses accessible to them (Sight; Smell; Hearing; Taste; Touch/Feeling). Next, invite participants to explore somatic body tapping. If accessible, simply use the tips of the fingers (one or all five) and gently tap different parts of the body. Start with the crown of the head, down the face, paying special attention to eyebrows, cheek, and jawbone. Then down the front of the body, paying special attention to the collar bone, then down the whole body to the feet. Repeat up the back of the body using an open palm.

Closing: Invite participants to place their hands somewhere on their body (heart, gut, or somewhere significant) and send it some compassion. Take a moment to honor how good your body has been to get you to this moment. Take a deep breath in and out. Then come back to the room. Blow out the tea candle.

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