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## Embodied Social Action: How Dance Movement Therapy Can Support Resistance Against Systems of Oppression

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Embodied Social Action: How Dance/Movement Therapy Can Support Resistance Against

Systems of Oppression

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

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Dance/Movement Therapy

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Abstract:

This thesis explores the ways in which the field of dance/movement therapy has been impacted by colonialism through examination of power dynamics within the therapeutic movement relationship and use of body/movement observation and analysis. This literature review examines the historical context of the field of dance/movement therapy while outlining ways that dance/movement therapy practices and approaches can target trauma due to experiences of oppression which can be a contributing factor toward creating social change. Themes of power, privilege, oppression, and cultural identity are explored in a variety of populations and settings to highlight the indiscriminate ways colonialism impacts all people based on identity, marginalization, and hierarchy. With consideration of social change, themes and significant findings within the literature are highlighted and connected to orient toward a direction of future research and growth in the field of dance/movement therapy.

*Keywords:* colonialism, power, oppression, trauma, decolonization, social change

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Systems of Oppression

**Introduction**

Throughout human history, dance and movement have been central aspects of culture, tradition, and healing across various parts of the world. Across space and time, and in many places in the world today, indigeneity, connection to land and spirit, and holism as healing concepts have been accepted as central to life (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016). In the book *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, Harari (2015) explored how in the earliest human civilizations, people lived in tribes and migrated across continents, sharing resources and protecting one another from external threats (i.e. elements of nature, wild animals, and other tribes). By nature of this lifestyle, “foragers discounted the future because they lived from hand to mouth” (Harari, 2015, p. 100). This communal lifestyle, coupled with a collective focus on the present moment or very imminent future, offered humans time to work, rest, hunt, forage, eat, reproduce, play, and enjoy leisure activities (Harari, 2015). Due to the agricultural revolution and invention of farming, tribalism dissipated, social hierarchies began to form and civilization was changed forever (Harari, 2015). For the first time ever, individual humans became tied to specific pieces of land to own and operate farms where they would cultivate a single type of resource, a “monoculture” (Merriam-Webster, 2024). The farming of monocultures created a surplus of resources which led to inequities where “rulers and elites sprang up, living off the peasants’ surplus food and leaving them with only a bare subsistence” (Harari, 2015, p. 101). Certain groups of people gained resources, power, and prestige, and consequently others were killed off,

subjugated, and/or forced to bend to the will of those who held power<sup>1</sup>. This capital gain, combined with social power and brute force, led to the concept of colonialism.

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy defines colonialism as “a practice of domination, which involves the subjugation of one people to another” (2023). This has resulted through violence which has led to war, genocide, land theft, and a culture of domination structured around capitalism and supremacy <sup>2</sup>(Marya, 2018). In her book *Decolonizing Therapy*, Mullan (2023) described the ways in which “colonization is a psychological and spiritual trauma” and defines colonialism as “the systematic and methodical removal of land, culture, trust (in self and others), family history, freedom, and Spirit” (p.42). Colonization often leads to oppression which can be described as “the exercise of authority in a cruel or unjust manner” (Hilton, 2011, p. 45). The evolution of colonialism has shaped the trajectory of history by creating hierarchical systems and structures that led to inequities and oppression within mental health systems (Mullan, 2023). Cantrick et al. (2018) drew connections between oppression, social justice, and dance/movement therapy by demonstrating how “the body is the crux of marginalization” because “social oppression is experienced in and through the body” (p. 2). This is significant for the purpose of this paper because dance/movement therapists cannot “understand people’s knowledge from a different worldview without an understanding of the actual etiology of colonization and oppression and subsequent conditions” (Rivera, 2015, p.

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<sup>1</sup> Fiske, S. T., & Berdahl, J. (2007). Social power. *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles*, 2, 678-692. This text explores power as influence, potential influence, and the ability to control the outcome of a situation. Power has been studied in many disciplines of research and for the intention of this paper will be discussed as a sociological and psychological phenomenon. Power is relevant not only within the confines of therapy, but in all social relationships.

<sup>2</sup> Colonialism Diagram By Rupa Marya (2018) presented during her talk, “Health and Justice: The Path of Liberation through Medicine” at the National Bioneers Conference. This diagram demonstrates the pathways colonialism creates for social systems to form based on capitalism and supremacy.

122). By examining the systems of power and oppression that perpetuate colonial violence, dance/movement therapists have the opportunity to address those systems directly through the body which may help to improve the efficacy of dance/movement therapy with various populations. The scope of this paper cannot justly describe the deep and pervasive impacts of colonialism<sup>3</sup>, nor does it claim to suggest that therapy alone can remedy the oppressive systems that exist today as the legacy of colonialism. This thesis will examine the ways dance/movement therapy can use body-based practices to explore how oppression lives in the body, how that oppression creates and perpetuates trauma-states, and how the therapeutic container may act as a corrective experience for individuals experiencing oppression. The intended goal of this paper is to provide insights into how the field of dance/movement therapy has been impacted by colonialism and how it can be an impactful agent of resistance against colonialism.

The field of dance/movement therapy is uniquely situated to deal directly with systems of power, oppression, and colonial violence because it focuses on, processes, and materializes emotional experiences through the body. It is also important to note the centrality of the body in trauma-focused therapy with the consideration that “oppression is trauma” (Caldwell & Leighton, 2018). Dance/movement therapy can provide opportunities to explore, process, and truly feel one’s own body—something that often becomes scary, threatening, or even re-traumatizing for individuals who have experienced trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014). The Journal of Trauma and Rehabilitation cites scientific research demonstrating that:

“persons who have experienced some type of trauma are more prone to addiction, behavioural disorders (abuse or dependence), psychoemotional disorders (depression,

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<sup>3</sup> Rivera, E. T., & Fernandez, I. T. (2015). Tools of oppression and control in counseling: Making the invisible, visible. *Revista Griot*, 8(1), 119-127. <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/descarga/articulo/7048273.pdf>. This article provides insight into tools of oppression used in counseling within patriarchal and colonial societies.

anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder), impairment in relational/social and other major life areas, physical disorders and conditions (sleep disorders, eating disorders) or different kind of psychosomatic disorders” (Martinec, 2018, p. 1).

These co-occurrences impact traumatized individuals’ ability to process, release, and heal from trauma due to the fact that “the body is the mediator through which the traumatic content is experienced” (Martinec, 2018, p. 2). When discussing how trauma impacts people, Menakem (2017) explains that “trauma always happens in the body. It is a spontaneous protective mechanism used by the body to stop or thwart further (or future) potential damage” (p. 8).

Trauma impacts the deepest parts of the brain, the limbic system or “lizard brain”, which is connected to our vagus nerve or “soul-nerve” and activates the body’s autonomic fight, flight, freeze response (Menakem, 2017, p. 6). The function of the limbic system leads the brain and body to be impacted by past experiences of trauma and develop defense mechanisms to protect against future threats of harm throughout a person’s life (Menakem, 2017). This consideration invites dance/movement therapists to be curious about the ways in which the brain and body store and pass down wisdom and innate knowledge of protective mechanisms through biology.

Trauma can be passed through genetic material, suggesting that symptoms of trauma caused by experiencing oppression, can be physically transmitted through generations of people “through changed DNA” (Mullan, 2023, p. 195). This paper will focus on generational trauma that has resulted from the creation of “white body supremacy” which contributes to the ongoing experience of oppression, and continues to impact people of various race, gender, ethnicity, and backgrounds (Menakem, 2017, p. xix). A core facet of generational trauma caused by settler-colonialism is the violent, forcible removal from land (Mullan, 2023). As stated by the Wompanoag people “to lose land is to have no ground beneath you; to fall down; to lose your

connection to the Earth” (Makepeace, 2010). Land displacement and sovereignty is an important topic touching many disciplines beyond the scope of this paper. However, the role of settler-colonialism in North America, specifically in the United States, is relevant to the ethos of this inquiry, the landscape upon which dance/movement therapy was built, and the many studies that provide evidence to support the claim that colonialism is impactful and important to address within therapy. Connection to land, specifically a person’s land of origin and the land one traverses and inhabits throughout life is relevant to the embodied experiences one accumulates throughout life and is an area of study that needs more research in the field of dance/movement therapy.

Additional research into disparities in mental health outcomes due to generational trauma caused by settler-colonialism could have implications for dance/movement therapists who aim to explore decolonized ways of approaching oppression as trauma. Mancenido et al. (2020) provided evidence to demonstrate how intersections of identity in relation to immigrant generational status impacts psychological distress. Through the use of self-reporting on the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (Kessler et al. 2002), across intersections of race, poverty, and gender, this study found that psychological distress was less prevalent in white first-generation immigrants than non-white second generation immigrants. Additionally, it was suggested that due to “increased exposure to racial discrimination and fewer protective cultural ties, second-generation and non-white non-immigrants may have greater prevalence of poor mental health outcomes” (Mancenido et al., 2020, p. 1273). The differences in mental health outcomes across identity demographics continues to be an important topic impacted by colonial norms within mental health fields. Mullan (2023) described how “mental and behavioral health has overlooked and chosen to ignore the soul wounding of historical, ancestral, and



intergenerational trauma—all emotional aspects of colonization” (p. 321). This “soul-wounding” is the legacy of past and continued colonial-oppression, meaning that the trauma created by oppression from past and present is reinforced and upheld by social norms and standards of a dominant culture which leads to ongoing oppression and subsequent unresolved trauma. This has led to inequities in mental health outcomes, the pillaging of the Earth’s resources, and continuous murder of Black, Brown, and Indigenous people (Mullan, 2023). Although attention must be paid to the inequities caused by colonialism, it is worth noting that even those who hold privilege and power within colonial systems are negatively impacted through those colonial systems due to participation in them leading to disconnection from one’s own humanity (Harro, 2018). In order to address this “soul-wound” within a colonial system, dance/movement therapists must engage in the decolonization of their own practices and interrogation of ways they embody and uphold inequity which leads to oppression. Indigenous psychology invites people to view themselves, others, and the Earth as “co-equal partners of an interdependent holistic system” which may lead to more questions and calls to action for change and transformation within the field of dance/movement therapy (Blume, 2022).

Put forth by the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA), dance/movement therapy is “the psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive, and physical integration of an individual” (ADTA, 2014). With that objective in mind, dance/movement therapists must consider how an individual can integrate into an inherently traumatizing society that was founded upon and continues to perpetuate inequity, oppression, and violence. Is the function of therapy to make people feel better about participating in an oppressive society—to increase people’s ability to “function” within constant states of stress and dysregulation? Or might there be space within the therapeutic container, where a new world can be imagined,

explored, and created? It is possible that dance/movement therapy can offer opportunities to embody equity, anti-oppression, and true liberation in practice. This thesis will examine the ways dance/movement therapy can facilitate an exploration of how oppression lives and functions in the body. With that in mind, it is important to identify the ways in which the field of dance/movement therapy has been impacted by colonial systems of power and oppression before exploring how it might be an agent of resistance against those same systems.

## Literature Review

### History of DMT & Colonization

Despite the long history of dance, movement, and ritual as indigenous healing practices<sup>4</sup>, dance/movement therapy as a field of Western psychology is a fairly new concept. The field of dance movement therapy (DMT) originated in the early twentieth century in North America. Many of the first practitioners of this field were able-bodied, white, cisgender women who had previously been accomplished modern dancers and whose personal experience of teaching and performing dance led to exploration of the potential benefits of using dance and movement as a form of psychotherapy (Levy, 2005). These women observed their patients' movement patterns and responded through their own body posture, gesture, and movement qualities—creating a dialogue with patients through movement. There are many aspects of movement interaction and dialogue that can be understood as taken and appropriated from other cultures which impact how the therapeutic movement relationship is formed between dance/movement therapist and client. Concepts such as mirroring, kinesthetic empathy, rhythm, movement and weight effort, specific

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<sup>4</sup> Morejón, J. L. (2018b). From the areíto to the cordon: Indigenous healing dances. *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Da Presença*, 8(3), 563–591. <https://doi.org/10.1590/2237-266069826>. This article depicts a variety of indigenous healing dances from Caribbean and Central American cultures and explores the spiritual and culturally significant healing power these indigenous dances hold.

movement aesthetics, and healing through arts as community, are central in many cultures yet are seen as unique constructs within the field of dance/movement therapy (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016). When a dominant group takes an aspect of culture from a smaller, marginalized group and co-opts it to benefit that larger group and oftentimes make a profit, that is cultural appropriation (Cooper, 2017). The appropriative factors of dance/movement therapy not only take these concepts out of their cultural context, but also inherently change the meaning of them within the context of the dance/movement therapy space. The ways dance/movement therapists acknowledge and explore the impacts of appropriation within their therapeutic interactions may hold significant transformational power within the confines of the therapeutic relationship between dance/movement therapist and participant.

Interactions between dance/movement therapist and participant are often interpreted through the lens of the dance/movement therapist as psychotherapeutic information for the therapist and client to expand upon and explore in a variety of ways (Levy, 2005). This interpretation was and continues to be impacted by the power, privilege, and subjective experience of the dance/movement therapist. Additionally, the therapeutic relationships formed through movement dialogues between dance/movement therapist and client are imbued with power dynamics and complexities due to the different identities and roles in society held by practitioner and participant which may contribute to the perpetuation of oppression (Cantrick et al., 2018). This is the foundation on which the current frameworks of DMT are built, which can be seen in the therapeutic movement relationship and movement observation & analysis.

Since its inception in the early twentieth century, dance/movement therapy has expanded and evolved, but in many ways it still relies upon a colonized model of therapy. The hierarchical power dynamics of therapist as “expert” and patient as “pathologized” impacts the therapeutic

movement relationship in dance/movement therapy, particularly due to conscious and unconscious bias toward white, eurocentric, colonized ideals about mental and physical wellness (Rivera & Fernandez, 2015). By positioning the practitioners and participants of dance/movement therapy in this way, both parties may miss out on embodied knowledge of the party who has “lesser” power due to the assumption that the dance movement therapist holds expert-based truth (Rivera & Fernandez, 2015). This power imbalance is a form of institutional inequity which is systemically reproduced through oppression (Young, 2004). In the documentary *Still/Here*, B.T. Jones posed the following: “what do you know that I don’t know?...let’s make it movement”, which is a way of approaching dance and movement therapy that demonstrates a view of movement and embodiment as collective knowledge building. This may take shape in many forms, and is undoubtedly shaped by the identities and experiences held by the people participating in the dance/movement therapy interactions. Openness to conversations with clients about power imbalances is the first step of many that dance/movement therapists can take to engage with their clients in culturally affirming ways which helps to build safety and trust within the therapeutic relationship. As stated by Chaiklin & Wengrower (2016), “by acknowledging differences, exchange becomes possible” (p. 47).

Embodying the tenants of decolonization in therapy is a life-long practice that has a role in shaping the forward movement and future trajectory of dance/movement therapy (Hook et al., 2016). Understanding the physicality of power imbalances can enrich the impact of dance/movement therapy by providing opportunities to explore harm caused by existing paradigms and imagine or create something new. As dance/movement therapy is taught to students and new clinicians entering the field, it is important to note how and why harmful paradigms and power dynamics are being recapitulated within the comprehension and practice of

dance/movement therapy so that changes may be made to prevent harm. As the field of dance/movement therapy grows and evolves, the changing needs of the practitioners and participants of this work may be unmet by the existing paradigms. The evolution of these needs require the field of DMT to not only continue to change in meaningful and impactful ways, but also to reconcile with past and current harm it has caused due to its roots in systems of oppression.

### **Therapeutic Movement Relationship**

The premise underlying dance/movement therapy is that by increasing the capacity to feel and sense the body through physical embodiment and movement effort, one is better able to explore shifts, adjustments and changes to one's attitude, thought patterns, and mental habits. This happens through continued exploration of relational dynamics and exploration of one's own body experience with facilitation from a dance/movement therapist. The relational experience between client and therapist of moving and dancing together creates rich interactions that often reflect inner feelings and experiences through "both emotional content and a movement aesthetic" (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2015, p. 6). The relationship between dance/movement therapist and client(s) has long been considered central to the learning, teaching, research, and practice of dance/movement therapy and is built through embodied interactions of movement.

Young (2017) conducted a phenomenological study exploring the concept of the therapeutic movement relationship (TMR) and its role in the process of dance/movement therapy. The therapeutic movement relationship refers to a "shared presence of body, mind, and spirit between the dance/movement therapist and client where healing occurs within the safe containment of a creative collaboration, and results in a resonance" (Young, 2017, p. 104). The therapeutic movement relationship often becomes a central focus in dance/movement therapy

due to the relational and embodied nature of dance/movement therapy practices and interventions. This study examined the experiences of eight co-researchers who are board certified dance/movement therapists and who completed semi-structured interviews which were then analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method. This data analysis resulted in several themes that describe how the therapeutic movement relationship shows up in dance/movement therapy sessions. These themes include: (a) fundamental, foundational, and integral, (b) powerful, dimensional, and full, (c) shared presence and connection through movement, (d) creative collaboration, and (e) evidence of the therapeutic movement relationship. Additionally, structural themes of presence, space and time, and creativity described how the therapeutic movement relationship is experienced in a dance/movement therapy session. All of the themes that emerged inform the definition of the therapeutic movement relationship by demonstrating how dance/movement therapists and participants use their intersubjective experiences to build trust, express inner feelings, and create change in the context of a therapeutic relationship. This impacts the teaching, learning, practice, supervision, and research of dance/movement therapy by locating and exploring relational aspects of change-making. This study acknowledged factors of intersubjectivity and aimed to describe the meaning or essence of the therapeutic movement relationship and implications for dance/movement therapists, rather than just the experience of the therapeutic movement relationship.

The idea that resonance and shared presence can only occur or be healing within the confines of a therapeutic relationship, requires consideration of how Western culture has severed mind, body, spirit, land, and community as a function of colonialism. The ways that client and therapist feel towards one another, also known as somatic transference and countertransference,

impacts the ways they make sense of their own intersubjective experience and relate to one another within the dance/movement therapy context (Dosamantes-Beaudry, 2007). Through investigation and deconstruction of traditional power dynamics, dance/movement therapists have a unique opportunity to explore how oppression becomes embodied in the therapeutic movement relationship. With that in mind, the therapeutic movement relationship holds potential to form connections, build resilience, and develop skills of attunement which can be applied in the process of facilitating change. Investigating the complexities of identity, power, and oppression within the therapeutic movement relationship and its role in creating change could offer opportunities for expansion in the field of dance/movement therapy.

### **Body/Movement Observation & Analysis**

In order to develop a therapeutic movement relationship between dance/movement therapist and client, dance/movement therapists rely on the use of movement observation and analysis in conjunction with tools of clinical reasoning, intersubjectivity, and embodiment to guide the direction of therapy. Gallagher and Payne (2015) draw connections between embodiment and intersubjectivity within clinical reasoning by suggesting that clinical reasoning is an “ongoing embodied, embedded and intersubjective process” experienced between therapist and client. In traditional Western thought, “the body is understood purely as a physical mechanism, a biomechanical system, in contrast to the mind or consciousness, which is treated as a subjective epiphenomenal product of brain states” (Gallagher & Payne, 2015, p. 69). Dance/movement therapy offers space for psychological material to be expressed through the body, creating connections between the neurological process and a person’s felt sense of their body. These connections help people develop an awareness of their own kinesthetic experience which “is intrinsically connected to emotional experience” (Barrero González, 2019).

Despite colonized efforts to separate body from mind, research has long demonstrated that “the body and mind are inextricably intertwined” suggesting that the mind-body connection is innate, universal, and as unique as each individual human being (*NewsRx Health*, 2023). The mind-body connection is in constant interplay due to the fact that thoughts and emotions impact one another, and “how movement itself affects change within each of them and is affected in return” (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016, p. 5). Dance/movement therapy uses enactive approaches as an effective way to develop and strengthen the connection between body and mind which exemplifies that “the mind is not located in the head, but is embodied in the whole organism” (Fischman, 2016, p. 35). By creating opportunities for clients to experience connection between psychological processes and physical sensation, dance/movement therapists engage in “a movement dialogue” with their clients where a therapist “may use her body-felt sense to engage with, and respond to, the patient’s emotional/feeling content as manifested in their movement” (Gallagher & Payne, 2015, p. 72). Dance/movement therapists are tasked with observing the material that the client brings into therapy, whether that be related to movement dynamics, emotional expression, or a myriad of other aspects of self-expression, and using that material to guide therapy with clinical intention. These body-based processes are directly impacted by systems of power, privilege, and oppression and may reflect and re-enact power imbalances through movement and embodied expression (Chang, 2016). The ways dance/movement therapists work with their clients to explore how systems of oppression and cultural bias impact the therapeutic movement relationship, may lead to changes in clients’ sense of self-awareness and ability to express inner needs and desires in relationships with others. When discussing cultural consciousness in dance and movement therapy, Chang (2009) claimed that “through identifying and bringing racial, ethnic, and cultural issues into conscious awareness and seeking



the personal and social roots of contested issues, mutual solutions can be discovered and danced” (p. 300). By exploring and deconstructing the ways power imbalances impact communication within the therapeutic container, clients may gain greater insight into the ways power dynamics impact their ability to maintain autonomy, connection, and community outside of therapy.

Dance/movement therapy relies heavily upon movement observation and analysis to guide the progression of therapy, which is also impacted and informed by power, privilege, and oppression based on identity and cultural bias. Caldwell (2013) explored the importance of diversity issues in the scope of dance/movement therapy practice by examining how movement observation and analysis is impacted by unconscious biases embedded in the intersections of identity held by both clients and practitioners. Personal identities, as well as the training dance/movement therapists receive, hold conscious and unconscious bias which impacts the comprehension and practice of dance/movement therapy. These biases are inherently political because they either perpetuate oppression or invite dance/movement therapists and participants to embody resistance against those dominant systems of oppression. The concept of movement observation and analysis using Western movement frameworks such as Laban/Bartiniéff Movement Analysis (LBMA)<sup>5</sup> or the Kestenberg Movement Profile<sup>6</sup> is inherently colonized and biased because of the power dynamic between the mover and observer and cultural bias embedded in the movement frameworks. These frameworks were created by individuals from a

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<sup>5</sup> *Rudolf Laban*. LABAN / BARTENIEFF Institute of Movement Studies. (2024). <https://labaninstitute.org/about/rudolf-laban/> Rudolph Laban was a white, German man who had ties to the Nazi political party. Despite questionable personal and political beliefs, he contributed to the world of dance and choreography by developing a framework to observe and classify movement qualities that has become accepted in mainstream communities of movement.

<sup>6</sup> Lowman, S. & Merman, H. (1996). The KMP: A tool for Dance/Movement Therapy. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 18:1, 29-52. This document describes the rhythms found in the Kestenberg Movement Profile and how they impact developmental movement.

colonized, western culture and have been taught and upheld as standards for dance/movement therapy education, pedagogy, and practice in many spaces to this present day (American Dance Therapy Association, 2021). The notion of a dance/movement therapist having more body knowledge than the participant and utilizing knowledge originated in these colonized movement frameworks may impact participants' sense of freedom and autonomy over their own body and movement experience. Dance/movement therapists must be conscious of the ways they use movement observation and analysis frameworks so that they do not project cultural or diagnostic assumptions onto their clients and so that they may practice dance/movement therapy in a culturally-affirming and non-judgemental way. As stated by Caldwell (2013), "if diagnosticians think and observe only through the lens of personality and pathology, they may fail to consider the variables of power, privilege, and difference" (p. 184) which influence participants' movement, affect, and ability to engage in therapy. The variables of power, privilege, and difference have the potential to impact and effect the therapeutic movement relationship and effectiveness of therapy because of the relational impact of these concepts within the context of therapy. Issues of somatic transference and somatic countertransference may also deal directly with conscious and unconscious bias, microaggressions, and discrimination within the therapeutic relationship. Hook et al. (2016) explores how counselors' lack of cultural humility and the presence of racial microaggressions in therapy may negatively contribute to mental health outcomes in minority populations. Some ways dance/movement therapists are addressing these topics include using alternative movement observation and analysis frameworks<sup>7</sup>, using

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<sup>7</sup> Dixon Gottschild, B. (2017) NYU Tisch School of the Arts Talks with Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iHVeMSV2dMU>. In this talk, Brenda Dixon Gottschild explores Africanist movement aesthetics and other concepts in her book "The Black Dancing Body".

whole-person centered approaches<sup>8</sup>, and engaging in culturally affirming practices<sup>9</sup>. By implementing alternative approaches to movement observation and analysis and acknowledging bias embedded in movement observation and analysis frameworks, dance movement therapists can approach dance/movement therapy using radical imagination to collaborate with their clients and co-create new ways of being in relationships and approaching problems.

Considering the ways in which movement observation and analysis is central to the development of a therapeutic movement relationship, topics including identity, intersectionality, power, privilege, oppression are important factors to explore in relation to body/movement observation and analysis which impacts dance/movement therapy research, teaching, comprehension and practice. By positioning these topics as central to the therapeutic relationship, dance/movement therapists have a unique opportunity to unpack and dismantle systemic oppression within interpersonal interactions which can impact the efficacy of therapy and uncover new discoveries found within the context of therapy. By using anti-oppressive, trauma-informed approaches, dance/movement therapists and their clients can co-create movement dialogues and experiences that target the nuanced complexities of identity, power, and oppression within a colonial society. This is important for the practitioners and participants of dance/movement therapy because it enriches awareness of one's own lived experience which

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<sup>8</sup> Serlin IA. Dance/Movement Therapy: A Whole Person Approach to Working with Trauma and Building Resilience. *Am J Dance Ther.* 2020;42(2):176-193. doi: 10.1007/s10465-020-09335-6. Epub 2020 Nov 20. PMID: 33250545; PMCID: PMC7678605.

<sup>9</sup> American Dance Therapy Association. (2018, April 6). *Afro-Caribbean Dance Healing System: Connection. meaning. power.* YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M8UdejfyfFE>. In this video, Maria Rivera explores Afro-Caribbean dance as a cultural healing system for individuals who are suffering from trauma due to oppression. While the focus on her work is primarily within communities of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), the implications of her research are impactful to all practitioners of dance/movement therapy dedicated to anti-oppression and liberatory practices.

impacts feelings of self-worth as well as the ways in which people are able to be in relationship with others. Koch (2017) explores how making art facilitates humans' quest for making meaning. This is important in dance/movement therapy because the living body is the medium through which art is created and furthermore, meaning is made. Making meaning out of movement and body expression enables participants and practitioners of dance/movement therapy to connect with their inner experience and share that with others in authentic ways which is part of relational building and can contribute to creating change.

By connecting with the humanity of oneself and others, the therapeutic container may become a space where individuals who have experienced trauma have the chance to experience safety in their own body and in relationship to others. Through these embodied, relational interactions, practitioners and participants of dance/movement therapy can engage in an intersubjective process of creating meaning beyond the scope of the dominant culture that reinforces norms of supremacy, hierarchy, and binary thinking. Within the past decade, these topics have begun to take root in discussions about movement observation within the ADTA and other governing bodies who are responsible for advocating for best practices. Dance/movement therapists have also been advocating for more research and consideration of colonized practices and the harm they cause, due to the growing collective consciousness of cultural humility and competency within the field of dance/movement therapy. The avoidance of such topics reflects an intention of maintaining the status quo, which is born from a culture of colonialism and holds the potential to cause harm by reinforcing norms of supremacy, hierarchy, and domination.

### **Application of Trauma-Informed, Anti-Oppressive Practices**

Over the past two decades, as the use and application of dance/movement therapy has grown worldwide, dance/movement therapists have incorporated knowledge from adjacent fields

to enrich their understanding and application of dance/movement therapeutic practices (Chaiklin & Wengrower, 2016). Alternative frameworks<sup>10</sup> and approaches<sup>11</sup> to dance/movement therapy are being developed and explored, often centering concepts of identity, empowerment, and resistance against oppression. These alternative approaches originated from indigenous wisdoms and afrofuturism<sup>12</sup> concepts which are culturally-responsive and trauma-informed to support goals of resistance and empowerment, particularly within populations of people who have experienced trauma due to oppression.

Gray (2017) discusses her contributions to “the co-development and co-creation of polyvagal-informed DMT, in collaboration with Dr. Porges,” as a method for working with survivors of trauma. By examining the ways science, culture, and trauma impact the body, Gray explores how polyvagal DMT “supports the human right to embody” by citing how “emotional and psychological state shifts are not possible nor are they likely to have longevity without physiological state shifts” (Gray, 2017, p. 5). This means that working directly with the body can create opportunities for psychological and emotional content to be processed in safe and empowering ways for trauma survivors. By creating immediate shifts in physiological states, the

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<sup>10</sup> Beardall, N., Blanc, V., Nichols, E., Cofield, Y., Quentel, F. G., Lee, S., Newroz, M., Pierre-Antoine, S., & Sinclair, S. (2024). Creating spaces for discoveries in movement observation and beyond. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10465-023-09395-4>. This paper provides commentary on the current issues, experiences, and debates about movement observation frameworks and their cultural limitations.

<sup>11</sup> Barkai, Y. (2016). Hair as a resource for women’s empowerment in Dance/Movement therapy. *American Journal of Dance Therapy*, 38(1), 81–97. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10465-016-9215-3>. This study examined the ways that women’s hair holds social and political power and ways it can be included in movement observation as a tool of self-expression and empowerment.

<sup>12</sup> Tanisha G. Hill-Jarrett. (2023). The Black radical imagination: a space of hope and possible futures. *Frontiers in Neurology*, 14. <https://doi-org.ezproxyles.flo.org/10.3389/fneur.2023.1241922> This article discusses the centering of Black identity as a core to the process and presence of afrofuturism.

body can learn to connect these physical shifts with experiences of emotional and mental shifts that promote wellness, healing, and empowerment. The experience of creating physiological change in the body via movement can help a person's nervous system move between mobilized, immobilized, and resting states. Building the capacity to tolerate and notice these shifts can be helpful for individuals who have experienced trauma. Dance/movement therapists must center trust and safety within the therapeutic relationship in order for individuals to experience physical and emotional shift states.

When considering how body-based oppression contributes to trauma, it is important to note that safety and trust are paramount to the therapeutic relationship so that therapy does not become a place for retraumatization. Gray (2017) notes that "feeling alone may be the most definitive hallmark of being traumatized," making it difficult to build safety and trust in relationships. By exploring the physical experience of shifting between physical states with the guidance and support of a therapist who considers and addresses how oppression impacts the body, trauma survivors may begin to find ways to establish safety, trust, and vulnerability within the therapeutic container. This can act as a surrogate stage for life beyond the therapy session which can help people living with trauma navigate safety, trust, and vulnerability in relationships beyond the therapy session(s). Safety and trust also provide a foundation from which one can begin to use play and imagination in therapy, particularly incorporating movement, breath, rhythm, song, and story-telling into the therapeutic process (Gray, 2017). By using one's own imagination and creative process within an embodied therapeutic space, themes and metaphors can be crystallized and called upon to be explored through movement. Thematic and aesthetic choices in movement also often reflect cultural and familial movement and gesture which can

bring about a sense of connection to communities and culture, creating an intersubjective experience beyond the sum of the individual's subjective experience.

Themes of empowerment, community, and change can be explored in a variety of settings with different demographic groups through different dance/movement therapy practices. Levy et al. (2020) conducted a study examining the impact of hip hop dance as an expressive tool that is supportive of intersectional identities and decolonized approaches to counseling for urban youth. The purpose of this study was to highlight and uplift the perceptions and experiences of youth who participated in a hip hop dance program through a community center. Participants of the study were interviewed and selected from a local chapter of the Girls & Boys club and provided written parental consent and verbal assent to participate in the program. The study consisted of eight participants who participated in a ten-week hip hop dance program followed by an interview with the participants about their experiences. Hip hop music and hip hop dance has roots in Black, urban, youth culture, which addresses participants of this study in a way that is congruent to the intersectional identities of the participants (Levy et al., 2020). The results of this study support the idea that participating in a hip hop dance program can facilitate increases in self confidence, stepping out of one's comfort zone, and experiencing positive feelings associated with processing difficult topics with peers. These results indicate the importance of integrating youth and cultural practices into therapeutic interventions and suggest that empowering youth through culturally affirming, arts-based methods may lead to change.

The role of art as an agent of resistance is demonstrated by the arts-based research conducted by Karcher & Caldwell (2014). This research investigates the somatic effects of oppression on people living in marginalized social categories. This began when professor, researcher, and Board Certified Dance Movement Therapist (BC-DMT), Christine Caldwell and

colleague Rae Johnson conducted a qualitative research study in 2009 to examine this topic. During the initial research, semi-structured interviews were conducted with thirty participating co-researchers who identify as disabled, LGBTQ+, a person of color, or occupying other oppressed identities. In these interviews, co-researchers shared lived experiences of oppression in a somatic context. One of the co-researchers named Owen Karcher was an art therapy student at Naropa University, transitioning from female to male and using art to explore his identity and somatic experience. Over the course of eight months, Caldwell and Karcher engaged in three in-depth interviews exploring Karcher's experience of oppression as a transgender person, in addition to feelings and attitudes about his body and transition. The data from these interviews were then used as inspiration for choreography for Naropa University's 2012 Somatic Arts Concert, which was performed for six hundred people. Throughout the study, Karcher also explored visual arts and created a multi-modal final performance of the data from this study at the 2013 American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) annual conference.

Throughout the process of research, several themes emerged which inform how this research was received and integrated into the existing literature. Karcher and Caldwell (2014) depict these themes as relevant tools for engaging in a process of creating social change. The first theme was the importance of embodied social action which emerged in response to research examining injustice and marginalization. Another theme was the sense of agency and healing that is associated with participants' ability to learn data and express their perspective through their own language, movements, and images. The final theme was that the results of these inquiries were most impactful when performed and/or presented in a way where the society observing may participate directly. The results of this research indicate that future inquiries into the experiences of trans people may have transformational impacts when exhibited through art



and narrative-based data. Understanding how the impacts of marginalization shape the experiences of transgender people may provide insight into ways that cisgender people can embody social action to affirm and protect people with transgender/non-binary identities from harm. These issues demonstrate the potential of dance-movement therapy as a supportive tool for social change and encapsulate how arts-based processing can impact those creating it as well as the society who consumes it.

In another study, researchers utilized feminist and arts-based methods, including dance workshops, to explore how movement and expression can facilitate opportunities to experience agentic freedom through dance in carceral systems (Winsor & Sheppard, 2023). The findings from this study suggest arts-based approaches within prison environments may create opportunities for women to express their identity and sexuality through movement, in ways otherwise not permitted in prison. The implications of this on future research are significant, especially regarding health outcomes for people of color, who are disproportionately impacted by the carceral system, due to its roots in chattel slavery<sup>13</sup>. Dance/movement therapy provides the opportunity for individuals to make choices, explore metaphors, and embody emotions in creative and liberatory ways. In the context of carceral systems, as stated by Winsor & Sheppard (2023), “a prisoner’s ability to make choices and move with little to no restrictions might be conflated as a form of freedom” or in other words, “to dance while in prison is to be momentarily free” (p. 223). For individuals in this study, a sense of freedom may be associated with an improved ability to focus and take care of themselves while confined.

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<sup>13</sup> Section I of the Thirteenth Amendment reads: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” Essentially, this amendment created a loophole to the abolition of slavery through creation of the carceral-justice system.

Across various populations, dance/movement therapy can be implemented as a tool to create and experience personal transformation which is an important tenet of collective action towards creating social change. By implementing various arts practices in client-centered ways, dance movement therapists can take an active role in facilitating that change process with participants. Gerber et al. (2018) conducted arts-based research that explores the role and function of intersubjective phenomena in creative arts therapies processes as they relate to transformation in perception, behavior, relationships, and well-being. This study was conducted at a university in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania where a group of doctoral students and faculty studied these phenomena using a method called Intrinsic Arts-Based Research. Intrinsic Arts-Based Research is a “systematic study of psychological, emotional, relational, and arts-based phenomena, parallel to those emergent in the creative arts therapies, using individual and collective intrinsic immersive and reflective experience in combination with qualitative and arts-based research methods” (Gerber et al., 2018, p. 1). The goal of this study was to create opportunities to experience the creative arts therapies with the intention of identifying, documenting, and describing the complex transformative phenomena that occur at the intersection of arts-based expression, reflection, and relationships in arts therapies. Using a deductive thematic analysis of written accounts of creative arts therapies experiences, three broad themes emerged. These themes include (1.) ruptures, resolutions, and transformation; (2) relationship and intersubjectivity; and (3) arts-based expressive processes. These broad themes were supported with more specific constructs including dialectical rupture and resolution, relational attunements and ruptures, imaginational flow, sensory/kinesthetic/embodied ways of knowing, and intersubjective transcendence. The results from this study propose that change in the creative arts therapies is driven by a dynamic system of interactive phenomena which create

conditions for relational attunement, imagination, dialectical tensions and creative resolutions, and creative transformation. The conditions created by these interactive phenomena can support resistance against systems of oppression within the field of dance/movement therapy by empowering practitioners and participants to actively engage in change processes. What this suggests is that the complex process of change, which is impacted by many interactive phenomena, has the potential to create lasting impacts on individuals ability to experience relationships with others, identify and solve problems, and engage in positive personal transformation. Connecting personal change with the change of social systems, political systems, and ecosystems, is a unique part of locating oneself within the web of life. In her book, *Parable of the Sower* (2023), Science-fiction writer Octavia Butler wrote “all that you touch you change. All that you change, changes you. The only lasting truth is change” (p. 4). Personal change is impacted by internalized systems of oppression so it is worth considering the ways creative arts and embodied approaches to change can invite people to dismatle internalized colonialism and move towards social action for collective liberation from colonial systems of oppression. Colonial systems of oppression can be deconstructed and reimaged through trauma-informed, client centered, and culturally affirming dance/movement therapy interventions and explorations.

All of these research studies embark to uncover ways in which arts-based data can have an impact on participants and consumers of the data which can contribute to transformational change. This information depicts how the arts-based processing of complex issues helps to clarify and identify components of conflict as well as potential solutions or pathways forward. Working in collaboration with participants as co-researchers also functions as a tool of empowerment by creating opportunities for people to have agency over their comprehension and dissemination of data. These studies support the idea that dance-movement therapy and other

arts-based practices can facilitate the exploration of somatic impacts of marginalization on the body which can thus contribute to the process of embodying social action, generating ideas and solutions to current social issues, and overall engaging in the process of creating social change. The sum of these studies suggest that by utilizing person-centered and culturally appropriate dance/movement therapy and creative arts interventions, people who live in marginalized identities and therefore experience oppression, may find the experience of participating in dance and movement a powerful act of resistance against those systems of oppression. This is significant and warrants more research to highlight and uncover specific ways in which dance/movement therapy can provide opportunities to embody anti-oppressive, liberatory practices.

### **Discussion**

The history of colonialism and its impacts on dance/movement therapy research, teaching, comprehension, and practice, invites dance/movement therapists and future researchers to consider the direction that the field dance/movement therapy is moving in and become active participants in that evolution. By considering historical impacts and future implications of colonialism and subsequent systems of oppression, dance/movement therapists and researchers have an opening to collaborate and embody an evolving, liberatory, trauma-informed practice of movement, embodiment, and connection. This thesis is a call to action for further investigation of how dance/movement therapy can be implemented in creating social change. The hope of this thesis is that dance/movement therapy can be more than a means to an end; that it may offer space to invite shared presence where people may truly explore the “felt-sense” of the complexities that accompany experiencing oneself and others in body, mind, spirit. This research endeavor has aimed to provide inquiries and examples about how the deeply personal, social,

cultural and political concepts that are available through embodied approaches, may provide material that can be personally transformative which may contribute to collective action for social change. No matter what social location and subsequent oppressive experiences people may have lived through, the connection between embodiment, identity, power, and oppression can be uniquely felt and danced within the confines of dance/movement therapy.

Clinical research has been important in supporting the claim of this thesis by demonstrating evidence of the impacts of colonialism within dance/movement therapy and providing pathways forward that address these issues in clear and evidence-based ways. Although traditional research methods often operate using colonial tools of observation, labeling, and much more beyond the scope of this paper, more research is needed to continue to uncover and shed light upon how dance/movement therapy can be an effective tool of resistance against systems of oppression. Alternative approaches to research using Indigenous psychology, community-based experientials, and arts-based methods can continue to push the needle forward toward decolonized teaching, comprehension, practice, and research of dance/movement therapy. Due to the embodied nature of dance/movement therapy, it is worth questioning how the felt experience can serve as important and sufficient evidence for the presence of transformation.

Through the sum of the studies in this paper, it is evident that the field of dance/movement therapy has been impacted by colonialism through hierarchical dynamics embedded in the therapeutic movement relationship and dominant body/movement observation and analysis frameworks, among various other areas beyond the scope of this paper. By examining tools of clinical research and decolonized practices within dance/movement therapy, changes to traditions in the field and innovative approaches to dance/movement therapy can be created, embodied, and expressed. This thesis has also prompted further questioning around the

goals, purpose, and implementation of effective dance/movement therapy practices and approaches. Through continued research and investigation of alternative movement frameworks, decolonized practices, cultural dance, and performance art, it is evident that dance/movement therapy can be implemented across populations as a useful tool for building self-awareness, forming connections, and engaging in change-making processes which can lead to personal and collective transformation and liberation.

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the experience of researching, writing, moving, and processing the contents of this paper, I have felt as though I am standing on the precipice of an important moment in history. Over the course of the past seven months, while I have been pondering these issues and writing this paper, over 30,000 Palestinian men, women, and children have been murdered at the hands of the Israeli war machine that is funded and openly supported by the United States government (Batrawy, 2024). As explored in this thesis, colonialism has caused violence that continues to exist and impact the world presently; but the ways dance/movement therapists are particularly suited to address body-based violence and somatic oppression leads me to believe there are pathways forward in comprehension, research, and practice of dance/movement therapy to contribute to a collective building of liberation. Although humans may never live in tribes, foraging and cohabitating as they did prior to the agricultural revolution, a future that holds mutuality, justice, and interdependence at its center is not just born, it must be built. Through investigation of oppressive systems, decolonization of therapy spaces, and the uplifting of indigenous wisdom and voices, dance/movement therapy can be a landscape for collective social action towards transformational change. As an emerging voice in the field of dance/movement therapy, I hope to continue to question, criticize, and explore existing paradigms of

dance/movement therapy as well as build and learn about alternative approaches to and applications of dance as a healing practice and tool of resistance against systems of oppression. I will continue to seek out supervision and wisdom from mentors and dance/movement therapists who have committed themselves to this work and paved the way for this thesis to exist. I hope to call in my peers and colleagues in this movement towards collective liberation from oppressive systems and engage in discussions directed towards collective knowledge-building. I aim to utilize culturally affirming body-based practices, art, and community engagement as a way to take action steps towards decolonizing my own practice of dance/movement therapy. Overall, the process of writing this thesis has shaped my perspective as an emerging dance/movement therapist and will continue to inform the ways dance/movement therapy can be a supportive tool of resistance against systems of oppression.

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***THESIS APPROVAL FORM***

**Lesley University**

**Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences**

**Expressive Therapies Division**

**Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Dance Movement Therapy, MA**

**Student's Name:** Lauren Pope

**Type of Project:** Thesis

**Title:** Embodied Social Action: How Dance/Movement Therapy Can Support Resistance against Systems of Oppression

**Date of Graduation:** 5.18.2024

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

**Thesis Advisor:** Dr. E Kellogg