

THE POLITICS OF TRAUMA

Somatics, Healing,
and Social Justice

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North Atlantic Books
Berkeley, California

In this book are the theory and process of somatic transformation and healing, after the impacts of trauma and oppression. Here you will learn about how essential the soma is to transforming trauma, cultivating resilience, and embodying new practices, actions, and ways of being. Embodied healing means we can make choices based on what we care about, rather than react from survival strategies, even under the pressures of living, loving, and social justice work. Somatics allows us to heal, find wholeness, and be on a purposeful path of transformation. It does much more than help us understand what happened to us and why we are as we are. It lets us live, choose, be, and act differently. It lets us get better at loving and being loved, at generating safety, and at taking bold purposeful action. It pragmatically and authentically helps us know how to build more trust together, and work with conflict in a way that's generative. It helps us to heal shame and internalized oppression.

This book also asks the question of what causes trauma. What experiences, family and community dynamics, and social and economic conditions cause most traumas? It looks to social justice as the *primary prevention* of trauma, while also acknowledging how essential healing from trauma and oppression is to that goal, to decreasing suffering and to increasing safety, belonging, and dignity. If we do not understand and integrate the shaping power of institutions, social norms, economic systems, oppression, and privilege alongside the profound influences of family and community, we will not fully understand trauma or how to heal from it. We will not understand how to prevent it.

This book unpacks why healing, and a politicized, grounded methodology for healing and transformation, are a supportive part of creating social and environmental justice. Organizing to transform social and economic conditions and healing are very different processes, and take very different skills and strategies. Yet, they are related. While personal

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and systemic transformation require unique methods of change, they are deeply co-serving. I believe they need each other to be successful.

Oppressive social and economic conditions cause traumas that need healing. Social change requires masses of people building together toward collective safety, belonging, and dignity, and systems that support this. Healing can serve that goal. Systemic transformation can serve healing.

Social Context

Any transformation is happening within a social context or social conditions. We are shaped by and embody the social conditions in which we live. These conditions include the political, economic, and social systems as well as the cultural beliefs and practices we inherit, live, and function within daily. The institutions and social norms we are surrounded by are currently shaping and have historically shaped us. We embody these just as we are shaped by and embody our family practices and culture, those of our communities, and the land and environment. We are in both a current social and political moment, and strongly shaped by the flow of history before us.

When we are looking at transformation, social context is one of the most influential shaping forces, whether we are focused on personal, community, or systemic change. The impact of the shaping from these broader forces is often what we are looking to heal from and transform, individually and collectively.

Power-Over: Systems That Harm

As we see, we are shaped by power-over conditions and we come to embody them, both unconsciously (mostly) and consciously (some). Power-over economic, political, and social systems concentrate safety, belonging, dignity, decision making, and resources within a few elite, and particular nation-states. This is done by taking from and exploiting others and the natural world. Those who are harmed and made poor are blamed in broader social narratives. We can see how power-over systems do harm and cause trauma.

Power-over systems dictate that some peoples, nations, ethnicities, genders, and lives are more worthy of safety, belonging, dignity, and resources than others. Power-over declares that it is okay to leave many in poverty, hurt and exploited, while we concentrate money, energy, power, and decision making over others and the commons to a very few. The social and economic distribution of dignity, safety, and belonging is how we construct who is seen as worthy of existing and who is considered expendable.

Power-over depends upon violence, threats of violence, coercion, and a steady stream of misinformation to work. People(s) don't inherently want to give up their dignity, self-determination, or safety, or to be without resources. This must be taken through many forms of denigration and violence. Power-over is supported by vast cultural narratives, including media, religious beliefs, and government propaganda

(e.g., the Patriot Act) that validates and uplifts inequity, war, nationalism, patriotism, and the worthiness of these few, while suppressing and minimizing information that shows us otherwise.

Power-over also encompasses a worldview about the earth, our planet, and its billions of life forms. It creates a worldview in which the plants, animals, water, air, seeds, microbes, etc. that are here are primarily for the use of humans. It suggests that humans are inherently more worthy than all other life. It is assumed that natural ecosystems can be manipulated, devastated, or recreated to serve the ever-expanding human population. Aspects of the earth's ecosystem are "owned" and profited from, while the remaining devastation is most often left to the earth alone to recover from, for poor communities and countries to face and contend with the wreckage upon their lives, and for wealthy individuals and families to benefit from the resources.

This is the situation we have arrived in and it is ours to contend with. To live skillfully, to heal, to act in accordance with our values, we have to be awake to our conditions. To decrease suffering and prevent trauma, we need to organize or join organizing efforts that are working to transform social and economic systems.

While all human societies have social norms and systems, not all societies have been based on power-over structures. There are many examples, in the history and the geological record, of societies constructed on power-with dynamics. These social structures have small wealth gaps, gender equality and role flexibility, few war-related weapons, relatedness to nature as if humans are an interdependent part.

Power-Over and Trauma Healing

For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

(AUDRE LORDE, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House")

What we tend to think of as individual traumas, such as intimate partner violence, child abuse, harmful drug and alcohol use, and more, are not so individual when we look at the numbers and the social conditions in which they are happening. Intergenerational traumas can be best understood within this broader view as well.

Let me pose these questions:

- How can a woman heal from child sexual abuse without addressing sexism and gendered targeting, sexualization, and violence toward girls, women, and transgender people?
- How can a young Black man organize for social justice for his peoples without also addressing the intergenerational trauma of US slavery and racism? Where is his space to heal?
- How can people engage in spiritual awakening practices, yoga, mindfulness, or meditation practices and not become agents for social justice, actively organizing for the dignity and well-being of all life? How is it that the cultural appropriation, white supremacy, and classism in many of these practices is mostly left unaddressed?
- How can an immigrant domestic worker organize for equal pay without having an accessible and relevant place to heal from the pain of leaving her family in order to provide for them?

When we look at healing something as intimate as family violence or child sexual abuse, very quickly we find ourselves in the midst of social conditions and norms. Here are some things to consider:

What creates offenders, or people who sexually abuse children? Yes, we can give them a diagnosis, find them deplorable, or react through vigilantism or denial. If people are not born sexual abusers, what makes them that? Why are 96% of them men? This requires a complex answer. The statistics will tell us that a majority of people who sexually abuse children were neglected or physically abused as children. Those in treatment consistently report having felt helpless as adults, yet able to easily assert control over children. Typically, it

takes a year of treatment for people who have sexually abused children to begin to thaw out enough to empathize with those they hurt. If we look to male gender socialization, we find lots of training in power-over beliefs and behaviors with little permission to feel afraid or vulnerable, to not know, to not be in control, to have needs for connection. There is encouragement to control, win, fight, and know more, to earn one's worth and identity. Even the benevolent patriarch forms of these messages are power-over: protect, save, know, assure. There is deep social training in sex as power, sex as violence, and very little training in the social conditions of sexual empathy and mutual consent.

Why do so many people surrounding child sexual abuse not notice, deny it, or do nothing? Again, a complex answer. We have automatic survival responses to horrors and trauma. Denial and numbing are some of these. Running and hiding are others. The vast majority of child sexual abuse happens to children by their families and other people they know. There is a strong social stigma against intervening in the family. We are not supposed to comment on others' child-rearing. We have all kinds of shared social denial—they (children) don't remember anyway, kids are resilient, I would have known if it was happening, or I know him (offender) and he could have never done that, and more.

The social consequences are very high for discussing with a family or community member your concern about child sexual abuse in their family. Most of us can't even imagine the conversation. The social and criminal consequences are high for outing child sexual abuse, especially if you are poor or working class, from a community of color, or are undocumented. The more class status you have, the easier it is to buy your way out of child protective services by promising to do private therapy. Most people do not want to engage the criminal legal system in their families. The criminal legal processes are not designed for healing, accountability, and mending relationships. The

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evidentiary laws (proof) of the criminal legal system have very little to do with the facts and dynamics of child sexual abuse (i.e., physical evidence, a witness, child development, social denial, traumatic amnesia). And there are almost no treatment services within the US prison system for sexual offenders. Whew.

By looking at this situation holistically, we can see why child sexual abuse continues. How do we then heal this violation and the ensuing trauma? How do we prevent it from happening again? We can see that personal, family, and community healing are needed in consort with broader organizing efforts for social and environmental justice. In the case of child sexual abuse, organizing for transformative justice responses is central.

Because most of the root causes of trauma stem from power-over social conditions, we need to both heal and organize for social justice. We need to mend from deep hurts and violations *and* we need to change social and economic conditions that are causing the next generations of trauma.

After twenty-five years in both social justice and somatic work, I believe that we cannot heal, or help others heal deeply, unless we integrate into this work an analysis of social conditions and how they are shaping us. Theories and practices of trauma healing cannot end at the impacts of family or community, or integrate only war or natural disasters. Healers and therapists need a strong social and economic analysis to understand and successfully address healing, and help to prevent further trauma.

I also believe that our work to create widespread social and economic change can be served by addressing trauma and healing. Those we are organizing with, as well as ourselves, have been shaped and often traumatized by social conditions that require healing and transformation. What we believe and how we relate to each other can be at odds—and we need to continue to close the gap. An understanding of the impacts of trauma from both intimate experiences and social

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conditions, and the processes of healing and building resilience, have a place in our social change strategies and tactics.

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Individual and Systemic Trauma: A Somatic Understanding

*History, despite its wrenching pain, cannot be
unlived, but if faced with courage, need not be
lived again.*

—MAYA ANGELOU, “On the Pulse of Morning”

Let's delve into understanding just what individual and systemic trauma are.

There are many experiences that can cause traumatic impact in people. Since trauma has become a widely used word, I want to dig in and make some distinctions.

In daily speech, I often hear people say things like, “I was traumatized by that,” or “That’s traumatizing,” often meaning that it was an unexpected or intense experience. Or that they feel uncomfortable and are unsure how to process feelings of sadness, fear, anger, or even uncertainty. Having feelings (emotions and sensations) in life and about our world is normal. Developing our ability to be emotionally present and skillful is also a good thing.

Feeling, in and of itself, is not "traumatizing"—even when those emotions or sensations are intense. Often, intense emotions and sensations are actually part of healing, and a realistic, humane response to our world. In the big picture, I think becoming more and more skillful, able to feel and make choices that take care of ourselves and others with the aliveness of sensation and emotion, is both part of healing and part of being responsible people and leaders.

So what is trauma, what are traumatic experiences? Why are they so impactful? I want to invite you to look at trauma from a holistic perspective with an understanding that our emotions, thinking, physiology, actions, and relations are integral or inseparable. Thus, when the soma is impacted, all aspects of the self and relationship are impacted.

Here is a somatic definition of *trauma*:

Trauma is an experience, series of experiences, and/or impacts from social conditions, that break or betray our inherent need for safety, belonging, and dignity. They are experiences that result in us having to vie between these inherent needs, often setting one against the other. For example, it might leave us with the impact of "I can be safe but not connected (isolated)," or "I have to give up my dignity to be safe or connected." This is untenable, because all of these needs are constitutive or inherent in us.

We have built-in psychobiological (mind/body/evolutionary) ways to protect ourselves when our safety, belonging, and/or dignity are threatened. These are mobilized automatically; we don't have to think about it. You have likely heard about the instinctive responses of fight, flight, freeze, appease, and dissociate. We'll dig into these deeply in the next chapter.

At a profound level, two things are happening with trauma. First: We have an inherent instinct to mobilize to protect ourselves and often others. This is holistic and somatic; it engages all of us. We are either only partly successful at the protection/escape, or not successful. This mobilization and the harm of the violation are then left incomplete

in our somas. They don't go away, though—they are stored there and shape our experience, interpreting the world for us.

The second is this: Once threatening and harmful experiences have happened, we have mobilized to protect and this is left incomplete—the sensations of the trauma and mobilization can be overwhelming, and we shut them down. What the soma needs is to complete the excitation, and process and mend the break and betrayal. What we do instead is over-contain it, or move away from the pain and fear. In some very foundational way, we cannot tolerate the sensations and emotions that are evoked and shut them down instead. This becomes further shaping, contraction, and numbing on top of the wound and survival reactions.

One aspect of healing is widening the range of sensations and emotions we can feel, be present with, and allow to move in us. Primarily our reactions are to help us not feel the things we cannot tolerate. We'll explore this more in the following chapters.

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975. I remember the precise moment, crouching behind a crumbling mud wall, peeking into the alley near the frozen creek. That was a long time ago, but it's wrong what they say about the past, I've learned, about how you can bury it. Because the past claws its way out. Looking back now, I realize I have been peeking into that deserted alley for the last twenty-six years.

(KHALED HOSSEINI, *The Kite Runner*)

Thus, traumatic experiences cause a somatic contraction and "shaping" that becomes unresponsive to current time experience. This means that when our natural survival reactions cannot be processed through to their completion at the time of the event(s), these reactions, and resulting shaping of the self, become generalized. The soma organizes itself around the experiences and the caught survival reactions—"If it happened once, it can happen again!" The intention is self-protection

or prevention of further harm. Yet, the result is the overgeneralization of survival strategies.

Most importantly, this survival shaping does not take in new or current time information. Rather, the psychology, physiology, and relationality all remain organized around protecting from the same or a similar harm, without taking in new information. We become organized for danger, abandonment, and humiliation—without a way to regain safety, belonging, and dignity holistically.

This “survival shaping” impacts identity, interaction, relationship, physiology, emotions, behavior, and thinking or interpretation. The shaping remains, even when it is no longer useful or relevant to the current context. It is preparation for the worst, rather than being able to assess for danger, safety, connection, and dignity; and the nuances of each.

What are some examples?

- A successful Black woman in the United States who is a leader, published author, and looked up to as a mentor by others. She has been dealing with the impact and misrepresentations of racism and sexism for her entire life. She has a deep sense that she is not worthy, or must prove herself. A sense of never fully belonging, that something is wrong with her—that she has to “earn” her place.
- A male survivor of child sexual abuse, now an adult, in a vibrant, choiceful, and communicative partnership, has a deep sense of readying himself for betrayal and abandonment.
- A gender-queer person, who is also a survivor of rape, is left with a deep sense of shame. A sense that something is wrong with them. The shame of rape, and the shame of authentically expressing their gender in a world that doesn’t dignify them, are interwoven. Something as harmful and degrading as sexual assault is intertwined with something as life-affirming and full of agency as self-discovery and -definition.

Survival shaping can become so familiar that we can think it is "just the way we are." We end up acting and reacting from our survival shaping, even when it does not take care of what matters to us. These survival strategies live deep in our nervous systems and psychologies. We embody them. By embodying them I mean that they have become habits, not only in our neuronal pathways, but also in our muscles and tissues. We can't *not* be them (until we heal and transform them).

Some ways that survival shaping may look in the physiology are:

- Someone who consistently hangs their head or casts their eyes down, not taking up space. It may seem that they apologize with their bodies. This can be a survival shaping of appeasing, or one shaped by a deep sense of shame.
- Someone whose eyes are more fixed or held wide, like they are shocked or scared. Someone who knows where the exits are, and may be "on the move" a lot. This can be survival shaping of unprocessed shock, or one who is looking to escape, to run.
- Someone who gets angry, defensive, or controlling quickly. They may seem sharp or cold in their eyes, or jaws. The chest and jaw may protrude. This can be a survival shaping of "fight" or defense, when defense is not needed in the current situation.
- Someone who has a hard time staying "here" or present. It may seem like they are not paying attention, or that they don't care, or that they are "checked out" a lot. This can show up in the eyes, in not "hearing" or tracking what's going on. The person may somatically appear more airy or floating. This can be a survival shaping of dissociation, of staying away from feeling or experiencing life.

You may ask any of the above people about this shaping, and most would say they don't know what you are talking about. Once a survival strategy is embodied, it becomes less and less conscious to us, and more "just how things are." At this point, the soma has few other options than this shape.

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Evolutionarily, this all makes sense. Humans are very adaptive. Our somas (mind, brain, body, emotions, and the ways we relate) are organized through these devastating experiences. We are adapting to survive, to connect, to be dignified, and to matter, through traumatizing situations and/or conditions. Whichever survival strategies worked best in the traumatizing context, our soma will generalize and continue to use. This is naturally not a fully conscious process—we are mostly not choosing our survival strategies. Rather, the deeper and unconscious parts of the brain and nervous system, the muscular system, endocrine system, our being (sense of self, soul, and resilience), and the context we are in, all become a part of the “decision.” In fact, our conscious minds may get frustrated with the consequences of these survival reactions, and not be able to stop them.

Survival strategies are taking care of something very deep in us: our need for safety, for belonging, for dignity, and significance. These are vital. Often, these same survival strategies also cause struggles, breakdowns, and limitations in our lives.

Trauma can be caused by many experiences, including experiencing or witnessing violence.

- Examples of intimate violence include: child abuse (physical, sexual, emotional, and neglect), intimate partner violence, having a caregiver with severe mental health issues, sudden loss or abandonment, severe or ongoing harm from siblings or extended family, etc.
- Examples of community violence include: bullying, physical, sexual, or emotional violence, financial abuse, and many aspects of state or institutional violence that are enacted at the community level.
- Examples of state or institutional violence include: poverty, racism, sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, war, political torture, imprisonment, police violence, surveillance, unnecessary

medical procedures, forced migration (economic violence or political repression), xenophobia, etc.

- We can also be traumatized by accidents and natural disasters, and necessary medical procedures, among other experiences.

Most traumatic experiences are caused by humans and/or by human-designed cultural and institutional systems. Because we are social animals and need one another, this is even more deeply impactful.

Lastly, trauma is an individual and social experience. This is vital to the clear understanding of trauma, as well as how we heal and transform its effect. We'll explore more of this below.

I know this is a lot of bad news. Hang in there. We must know the problem well, in order to know the solutions well.

Systemic Trauma

Just as it is vital to get a holistic understanding of trauma, we also need to look at the larger context of systemic trauma. I am calling it *systemic* because many aspects of society interact to perpetuate this broader trauma. They include: our economic system, and the assumption that unending growth and concentration of wealth are its highest purpose; our institutions that focus the resources and decision-making power with the wealthy (corporations, owners of corporations, financial institutions, and politicians), and blame and institutionalize the poor; and social norms that teach us collectively that some human beings have more worth and dignity, are more deserving of safety, and have the inherent right to belong (e.g., men, whites, heterosexuals, the wealthy). The rest are left to prove their worth, their dignity, their belonging, and try to find safety amidst these inequitable social norms and conditions.

We delve into these power-over social and economic conditions more deeply in Critical Context at the end of the book

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What is systemic trauma?

Systemic trauma is the repeated, ongoing violation, exploitation, dismissal of, and/or deprivation of groups of people. State institutions, economic systems, and social norms that systematically deny people access to safety, mobility, resources, food, education, dignity, positive reflections of themselves, and belonging have a traumatic impact on individuals and groups.

The ongoing violence of colonization, slavery, imperialism, human trafficking, war, and genocide and the resulting dynamics of forced migration, criminalization, and displacement are all examples of systemic trauma. Other types of systemic trauma include the ongoing negative portrayal in the media of Blacks, Muslims, Arabs, LatinX, and indigenous peoples, of women, transgendered people, and poor white people that is backed by government and economic policies. For instance, women's airbrushed bodies are being used to sell us everything from shampoo to cars, from weapons to war, while women's actual bodies are scrutinized, criticized, legislated, and violated. Another example is the demonization of queer people by most major world religions. This lack of safety, belonging, and dignity traumatically impacts individuals and whole groups of people.

Climate change-induced disasters and environmental destruction are also a part of systemic trauma. Because of rising sea levels and the ensuing contamination of freshwater, many island communities may be forced to migrate by 2030. The Republic of Kiribati, Tuvalu, Tokelau, the Maldives, and the Marshall Islands are all at risk. *Anote's Ark*, an Official Selection at Sundance 2018, tells the story of the Republic of Kiribati. Land and place are central to the culture and identity of many of these communities. The collective impact of displacement is traumatizing.

Like individual trauma, systemic trauma overwhelms and breaks down safety, connection, and dignity in the minds, bodies, and spirits of individuals and communities. Collective survival strategies can "shape" whole communities across generations. Certain survival strategies can

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become embodied in cultural practices; some cultural practices may develop out of trauma rather than resilience.

When we live inside of economies and social norms based on a model of power-over (domination), rather than power-with (interdependence and cooperation), many peoples and communities are traumatically impacted.

Relevance for Social and Environmental Movements

Understanding this somatic definition of trauma, as well as how to generate healing, is vital to the success of social and environmental justice movements. As activists, organizers, and politicized healers, we are impacted by individual and systemic trauma and are often reacting out of our survival strategies. The same is true for the communities, members, and the organizations we work with.

These reactions shape the culture, strategies, and visions of our movements. Our experiences of trauma can be a source of compassion and wisdom, and also can have us bring increased suspicion, reactivity, and distrust to our work. Doing our own deep healing can dramatically strengthen our leadership and effectiveness. It can dramatically improve our relationships. It can help us align our actions

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and skills with our visions. Being able to integrate an understanding of trauma and a way of working with it into our movements can increase the well-being of our constituencies, our ability to effectively coordinate and connect with one another, and the relevance of our strategies for change.

As movements, we are committed to transforming oppressive conditions that damage our communities and planet, toward a more equitable, life-affirming future. Working with trauma somatically allows us to better understand *how* to generate change, *how* to build more agency and collective action, and *how* to sustain it over time. The somatic impact of trauma is predictable, as are the things that encourage transformation. We can incorporate these insights, principles, and practices into our work.

Healing Can Serve Social Change

As we see, social and economic change takes people, leaders, organizers, cultural workers, strategists, and ... more people. It takes people who are able to coordinate with each other, take courageous action together, and build toward an interdependent vision and purpose. It means we need to be able to invite and tolerate change based in liberatory and life-affirming values. Even when it gets hard. How do we be these people? How can healing serve all of this?

We are shaped by life, by our experiences, both positive and traumatic. Because of our safety strategies and power-over conditions most of us need to heal and transform to be able to live our values. We can heal and transform to be more whole, to hurt less and love more, to gain courage, and to have our values and actions become more and more aligned.

There are many, many things that trauma healing and embodied transformation can bring to our lives and communities, and to serve social and environmental justice.

- Embodied healing helps us become clearer in how we are seeing and assessing ourselves, others, and the situation at hand. It can also help us become clearer at assessing opportunities and challenges within social justice work.
- Healing widens our range of skills, from having clear yet dignifying boundaries, to being able to connect and hold our own and others' needs. These skills serve our relationships and build trust.
- Trauma healing allows us to develop presence, and the ability to be present with a wide range of people, emotions, and situations. We become less reactive, more responsive, and more connected

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to what we care about. Each of these capacities serves our lives, leadership, and our organizing for systemic change.

- Embodied practice helps us learn to hold and be creative with the inevitable contradictions we face. Contradictions are present in our social justice organizations, in healing and trauma work, within alternative models like transformative justice, and even within our experiments to combine healing and movement building. We need to be able to work with them well, and create possibilities rather than more breakdowns.
- Trauma healing and embodied practice let us engage in generative conflict. This can prevent splitting and group reactivity, and lead instead to more trust, holding more complexity, and leading more effectively together. Through healing we don't throw each other or others away so quickly. Instead, we learn to build each other up.
- Embodied healing can help us learn to be powerful and relevant allies. We can engage the deeper work of unpacking privilege and changing our reactions. We can also learn to "let in" allyship, extending trust instead of skepticism.
- Lastly, trauma healing supports us in being able to love and be loved better. We can mend and be happier, while we are navigating a complex world in which we choose to live and act from our values.

How We Change