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Embodying the erotic: cultivating sensory awareness through dance/movement therapy

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the intersection between the erotic, embodiment, and empowerment. It explores how the erotic and oppression live in the body by reviewing the literature and research from the fields of psychology, somatic psychology, as well as the theories of poets and activists. Sensory awareness of the erotic can transform oppression. A body-based lens for resisting, transforming, and developing resiliency in the face of oppression is critical for cultivating sensory awareness. Using Caldwell’s (1996) Moving Cycle, this paper explores ideation for how the erotic can be accessed, connected with, moved, and transformed using a somatic model for healing.

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Introduction
The erotic, an elusive and mysterious concept, both definable and indefinable; its nature is sensory and creativity is its expression. It stirs you up and leaves you aflutter. I was first introduced to the concept in 2013, when I enrolled in the course, ‘Erotic Intelligence’ taught by Carole Clements at Naropa University. I was surprised by how much the course engendered my academic routine with spaciousness and spontaneity. I recall feeling discomfort and excitement on the very first day when we gathered on the green to feed one another in silence. This tension grew my curiosity and began my erotic venture.

During my graduate education, I began a project titled, ‘Arousing Creativity,’ in which I engaged in art and other activities that I found arousing. I oriented to arousal as the activation of my nervous system (NS). After hand building vulvas, spinning lopsided bowls on the wheel, shimmying up a pole, and roaming around a red square I was able to recognize desire through sensory awareness, discover the role of the nervous system in experiencing emotion, and track how often and ordinarily I felt arousal. I suspended my need for control; to know – thereby increasing my capacity to tolerate uncertainty. I learned that although
they sometimes do the erotic and sexuality do not have to merge. This supported me in understanding that an experience can be erotic without being sexual and likewise sexual without being erotic.

This paper sets out to operationalize Audre Lorde’s (1984) conceptualization of the erotic – power that is inherent in each person and when resourced acknowledges and expresses deep feeling (Lorde, 1984). If embodied this power can be used to promote resilience and social change. In order to appreciate the erotic, we must also understand oppression.

‘Oppression refers to ...those attitudes, behaviors, and pervasive systemic social arrangements by which members of one group are exploited and subordinated while members of another group are granted privileges’ (Glasberg & Shannon, 2011, p.1). Historically, the erotic has been oppressed due to the threat posed by empowerment, generating an enmity between society and the erotic (Clements, 2016). ‘In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change’ (Lorde, 1984, p.53).

The somatic connections that I made between arousal and emotion led me to dance/movement therapy (DMT) – given its unique capacity to assist clients in becoming aware of sensation and regulate emotion using the body. After all it is the body itself that experiences the erotic and oppression and therefore a body-based lens is crucial to reconciling injustice. D/MT is positioned to effectively work with the erotic because it recognizes ‘...that who we are is reflected and manifested in our bodies’ (Levy, 2005, p.61). D/MT emphasizes the interdependent link between the phenomena of the mind and the body. The Moving Cycle (see Figure 1), as defined by Caldwell, is a model within D/MT that guides clients and clinicians in accessing the erotic somatically for the purpose of regulating emotion and transforming oppression, thereby encouraging healing as well as developing resilience.

![Figure 1. Christine Caldwell’s ‘The Moving Cycle’. (Caldwell, 1996)](image-url)
The erotic

According to Merriam-Webster, the erotic has been defined as ‘tending to arouse sexual love or desire’ (n.d., para. 1). It is important to distinguish between sexual and erotic; while they are obviously related and often conflated, a nonsexual experience can be imbued with eroticism whereas sexual behaviour can be nonerotic. Correspondingly, this paper asks the reader to reconsider what is sexual, arousal, love, or desire and to reflect on how they originally came to understand these concepts. This definition of the erotic is a spring board from which we can evolve our understanding through criticism thereby promoting new and complimentary thought. This paper encourages readers to both reorient themselves to the traditional definition as well as consider alternatives having explored etymology and the ideation of authors like Lorde and Clements.

‘The word erotic originates from the Greek word “Eros”, the personification of love in all its aspects – born of chaos, and personifying creative power and harmony’ (Lorde, 1984, p.55). Eros, in Greek mythology, the son of Aphrodite, presides as the God of love, shooting ‘darts of desire’ from his bow and arrows (Bulfinch, 2014, p.6).

Clements (2016, p.41), describes erotic intelligence.

This keen and nimble intelligence often forbidden for its risky, intuitive, circuitous, and queer nature stands apart from convention, and wallops us over the cliff to a new and ungraspable way of learning: Freefallin’. Fortunately, according to Trungpa, ‘The bad news is you’re falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is there’s no ground’ (cited in Oglesby, 2014, April 14). It is precisely its impossibility to prove and to pander that makes it such an intriguing and worthwhile investigation."

Lorde defines the erotic as a potential that exists in all of us, ‘deeply rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling’ (Lorde, 1984, p.53). The erotic references our capacity to know and the power that comes with knowledge. This knowing is inherent in each of us; it rests in our ability to tolerate sensation and to trust in our bodies. It is the wisdom of the body; this somatic sense or bottom up process that intuits feeling. ‘The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire’ (Lorde, 1984, p.54). Hence, in respect for the self, we agree to consciously feel emotion, regardless of discomfort. This requires a great deal of effort.

Alternatively, succumbing to ‘fear of feeling’ and burnout ‘...are a luxury only the unintentional can afford’ (Lorde, 1984, p.54). The unintentional refers to the idiom ‘ignorance is bliss,’ where one does not worry about something they do not know about. It is therefore critical to the understanding of the
erotic that we appreciate how privilege protects ignorance and fuels inequality. Privilege is complementary to the unintentional because it emphasizes ‘not knowing’ whereas, folks operating from a marginalized identity may have less agency in the face of oppression. On the other hand, metacognition, ‘thinking about thinking’, allows us to access the erotic with the caveat that entering awareness is agreeing to uncertainty and encountering fear (Metcalfe & Shimamura, 1994).

The erotic asks us to feel via embodiment; how do we do something rather than what we are doing (Lorde, 1984). By bringing the erotic into our everyday lives, as I did in my ‘Arousing Creativity’ project, the erotic is conventionalized. By adding the erotic to routine, daily tasks become infused with creativity and aliveness. It is important to acknowledge that the act of conventionalizing the erotic is steeped in privilege; whiteness historically controls and compartmentalizes concepts in order to maintain power.

We deny a potent aspect of our experience when we chose not to feel or engage in emotion (Lorde, 1984) especially when our understanding of the physiological experience increases our capacity for growth. Rather, if we embody the erotic by inviting it through the senses and actively feel physiological arousal in the body, we can utilize the power of the erotic to regulate emotion and build resilience which will inevitably have an impact on our relationships and community.

The moving cycle

The Moving Cycle (MC) is a process-oriented model developed by Dr. Christine Caldwell beginning in the 1970’s and evolving in 1990 when she founded and directed the Somatic Counseling Psychology program at Naropa University (Caldwell, 1997). It was developed out of years of witnessing the natural healing and transformation process. The MC wakes up the body’s ability to know what to do. It develops a way of working that is in alignment with how the body already operates. The MC recognizes that movement occurs from the micro to macro level, ‘...cellular to organismic to community levels, as well as, physiological to psychological to social levels’ (Caldwell, 2016, p. 249). It has four phases which include: awareness, owning, appreciation, and action (Caldwell, personal communication, 8 September 2014). The range of sequences within the MC, the oscillation between strength and symptom, and the process of embodying feeling through sensation make this model suited to normalizing the erotic in everyday life.

Awareness phase

The MC begins with the awareness phase which can be understood as waking up attention; the first movement towards healing (Caldwell, 1997, 2016). This
phase provokes inquisitiveness and mindfulness making it inherently creative. It is about becoming aware of the physical experience of the body by attuning to ‘sensory signals’ (Caldwell, 2016, p.250). These signals occur in our body but stem from our internal emotions, drives, and sensations or have ‘external inputs’ such as divorce or addiction (Caldwell, 2016, p.250). Embodying the erotic similarly requires tracking and identifying what is noticeable, perhaps something that had not previously received attention. It is a present moment awareness of arousal, followed by naming and acknowledging the erotic, and staying curious when desire is triggered. The awareness phase invites to follow desire and experience the erotic through the senses. By building sensory awareness we are turning toward the erotic and inviting it to deepen somatically. There is a moment-to-moment curiosity as well as courage involved in awakening to the erotic. Associations such as images, sounds, tastes, smells, memories, and emotions arise in relationship to the content of the awareness phase. This increases our metacognitive capacity while teaching us to suspend judgement and reveal our sensate experience as is done in Focusing (guided sensory tracking) and Shamatha meditation (mindfulness of breathing) (Caldwell, 2016; Gendlin, 1996; Trungpa, 2015).

**Owning phase**

The owning phase of the MC is characterized by seeing everything that is happening as your own. In this phase, people can evolve because they are ‘...able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing – of knowing that they know and knowing that they don’t know’ (Clements, 2016; Freire, 2004). Taking ownership of the erotic in the body is what Clements calls, ‘...the shimmy – a practice of arousal that grows familiar but remains vibratory and uncomfortable’ (Clements, 2016, p.38). This begins our pledge to ‘sensory tracking’ and correlating movement impulses, ranging from subtle to gross (Caldwell, 2016, p.250). This transformation of desire is the process of becoming responsible for our individual experience of the erotic. In the owning phase, we are embodying the erotic and agreeing to be accountable to ourselves by fully feeling the sensations and developing our response to emotion. It requires tremendous courage to acknowledge what is happening in the body and then ‘stay with’ the experience, rather than seeking to change it. Often, attempts to alter and avoid feeling the erotic are driven by anxiety. Anxiety may be present because there is newness, we are encountering the existential unknown and find ourselves faced with feeling fear and discomfort. It is critical that we trust the body’s experience, remaining open and curious when we take this leap. The destination being the site of perpetual reexamination echoing a commitment to ‘disruption and discomfort’ (Clements, 2016, p.38). We must learn how to stay still and allow desire to unfold without rushing toward some imagined goal. This kind of presence is not achieved effortlessly.
When aiding these movement impulses, we earn access to body states such as arousal and other affects (Caldwell, 2016). ‘Movement impulses develop into movement sequences which can be seen as complex body narratives – nonverbal accounts of who one is and what one feels…’ (Caldwell, 2016, p.250). By developing movement sequences, we are taking ownership of the erotic, of the sexual scripts and erotic themes we have internalized that shape our attitude and behaviour. We can further provoke original narratives that alternatively support us in engaging oppression (Caldwell, 2016). Caldwell (2016) emphasizes the influence of Gestalt therapy on the process of integrating parts of the self into the whole person. This experience of ownership facilitates our ability to process the associations that emerge in the awareness phase of the MC. The owning phase culminates in the reformation of our ‘internal locus of control’ – the quality of our responsiveness, through mindfulness and movement (Caldwell, 2016, p.251).

**Appreciation phase**

The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal, and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our oppression… (Lorde, 1984 p.58).

The arising of desire is an opportunity to question what teaching is being offered to us. Answering this question is the creative process of recovering personal power by abiding with our experience (Caldwell, 1997). The appreciation phase provides an opportunity for accomplishment and is characterized by the unconditional acceptance of yourself, including the erotic within you (Caldwell, personal communication, 8 September 2014). In the body, this involves breathing with whatever feelings and sensations emerge. It requires suspending judgment of the erotic and implementing practices of self-love and creativity. The erotic ceases to be compartmentalized in the appreciation phase. ‘This satisfaction, and other positive feelings associated with safety and connection, can threaten our reinforced internalized beliefs and physiological habits, and therefore special attention to the conscious movement sequencing of self-appreciation, compassion, and caring must be addressed’ (Caldwell, 2016, p.251; Weiss, Johanson, & Monda, 2015). ‘Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives’ (Lorde, 1984, p.57). The hallmarks of this phase are integration, stabilization, and fulfilment. In the appreciation phase, fresh perspectives of ubiquitous existential crises, connect us to our authenticity and develop the foundation of self-knowledge in order to become active.
**Action phase**

Healing is not sustainable without the final phase of the cycle, action. Action is the application of the erotic, which was uncovered in the first three phases through sensory tracking and the expression of movement. The action phase yields an existential component of the erotic free from attachment. Epstein advises us to see desire as divine: to recognize ‘how incredible it is to be capable of desiring, or being desired...Especially when stripped of all the addictive fixations’ (Epstein, 2005, p.187) The MC generates an environment that favours the release of creativity and where transformation of the erotic is possible. Change cannot be permanent unless it is acted and utilized in daily living. By practicing this embodiment of the erotic, we are able to sequence movement and regulate emotion and arousal states within relational and social frameworks (Caldwell, 2016). The action phase is an opportunity to courageously empower our subjective erotic. Action is a progression towards an ideal, it does not have to be grandiose but it should be embodied. ‘In this sense, conscious and precise action is seen as supporting sustainable and contributive activism, and social activism is seen as natural and necessary partner to individual creativity and healing’ (Caldwell, 2016, p. 251).

**The erotic as power**

It is impossible to talk about the erotic without discussing its counterpart, the intentional rejection of the erotic, given it epitomizes the repression of emotion. This rejection introduces sensation detached from true feeling (Lorde, 1984). It is important not to conflate the erotic with sensation void of feeling because we risk separating the spiritual from the political (Lorde, 1984). ‘The bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic – the sensual – those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passions of love, in its deepest meaning’ (Lorde, 1984, p.56).

Perel (2007) remarks on the repression of the erotic in interpersonal relationship:

> We see what we want to see, what we can tolerate seeing, and our partner does the same. Neutralizing each other’s complexity affords us a kind of manageable otherness. We narrow down our partner, ignoring or rejecting essential parts when they threaten the established order of our coupledom. We also reduce ourselves, jettisoning large chunks of our personalities in the name of love. (p.13)

It is difficult to separate love from desire. Historically a cisgender (a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth) woman’s desire has been validated only when it is identifiable (Perel, 2007; Safehouse Progressive Alliance for Nonviolence, personal communication, 2013). Women were forced to perform femininity which
was safely expressed through innocence, surrender, and delicacy rather than libido, desire, and vigor. Vitality was circumscribed to masculinity (Perel, 2007). ‘Women have continuously sought to disentangle themselves from the patriarchal split between virtue and lust, and are still fighting this injustice. When we privilege speech, and underplay the body, we collude in keeping women confined’ (Perel, 2007, p.46). Yet, the erotic is not a concept that solely belongs to women.

In bell hooks’ work ‘feminism is for everybody’ (2015), she states that as the feminist movement evolved, stakeholders realized that cisgender men were not the obstacle, rather that it is the patriarchal framework that reinforces sexism. Understanding this challenges marginalized groups to consider how they enact and uphold oppression as well. This shift in ideology reflects a deviation from allyship toward collective liberation. Collective liberation reflects a perspective that an individual’s freedom is bound by the collective experience (Tsunemi Rooney, Anti-Racism Intensive, Personal Communication, November 2016).

Oppression sustains itself by subverting the origins of power among marginalized groups because power is intrinsic to transformation (Lorde, 1984). Historically, the erotic has been oppressed, particularly the bodies of cisgender women, because of the threat posed by their empowerment. Likewise, people operating from a position of privilege are also limited by the binary isolation of the erotic. This results in the repression of the erotic; severing us from our innate wisdom and leaving us skeptical of our inherent power. The erotic asks us to turn towards one another, challenging us to open to intimacy and engage our vulnerability. Lorde (1984) invites us to negotiate the power derived from exchanging passionately any quest with another. Lorde (1984) insists that this exchange forms a bond that can reconcile the threat of difference.

Clinicians can further the integration of D/MT and social justice counseling by using a strength based, trauma informed, and client defined approach to therapy. Strength based clinical work reminds clients of their resiliency and the skills inherent in their survival strategies. A trauma-informed perspective understands that oppression is a chronic stressor in the client’s daily life which contributes to their ongoing experience of trauma (Tsunemi Rooney, personal communication, May 2016). In client defined therapy, the clinician orients to the client with the belief that the client is inherently whole and basically good (Tsunemi Rooney, personal communication, May 2016). The client carries intrinsic wisdom, the erotic, that guides the therapy and delivers healing.

D/MT is able to address oppression by encouraging clinicians to use their bodies inclusively within their professional role. There is an inherent relationship between social justice and D/MT because oppression is an embodied experience (Johnson, 2009). It is the body specifically that is often marginalized within oppressive frameworks.
“Homophobia is about defining queer bodies as wrong, perverse, immoral. Transphobia, about defining trans bodies as unnatural, monstrous, or the product of delusion. Ableism, about defining disabled bodies as broken and tragic. Class warfare, about defining bodies of workers as expendable. Racism, about defining bodies of people of color as primitive, exotic, and worthless. Sexism, about defining female bodies as pliable objects. These messages sink beneath our skin. There are so many ways oppression and social injustice can mark a body, steal a body, feed lies and poison to a body” (Clare, 2001, p.362).

Because oppression operates by separating individuals from their bodies, D/MT assists people in reconnecting with their embodied experience and increases their tolerance for sensation (Hooks, 2015). ‘This understanding of nonverbal communication and oppression postures D/MT to address the somatic impacts of oppression by assisting clients to become more aware of their bodies, increase tolerance for sensation, access greater movement repertoire, and reclaim some agency and control within their lived experience of oppression’ (Cantrick, Anderson, Bennett Leighton, & Warning, 2018, p.196; Caldwell & Bennett Leighton, 2018). Hence, D/MT reorients the role of clinicians to include activism as a critical component to healing.

Limitations

The erotic is not a new concept; non-western cultures have been exploring it for centuries. This is an exploration of how the erotic can be used to develop emotional intelligence and transform oppression through a body-based lens. It suggests the MC as a one possible process for assisting clients to connect to the erotic. Further research must be conducted to develop a model which could be applied in a therapeutic or educational setting to test this theory. Additionally, for clinicians to become multiculturally humble, in the somatic sense, more research and trainings about the variety of embodied experiences across cultures and how these differences impact the therapeutic relationship are necessary.

I am aware of the limitations and bias inherent in my professional history and sociocultural locations. While I cannot remove myself from this inherent bias, I acknowledge this limitation and my responsibility to critically assess this lens. Furthermore, this bias actively functions through the current movement observation and assessment frameworks and in the body itself, making it critical for clinicians to continually assess whether sensation and movement are tolerable interventions for their clients. The literature reviewed in this paper reflects current peer-review journals which are not necessarily representative of diverse authorship. This results in research that is indivisible from a privileged bias which recapitulates oppression.

Caldwell (2013) stresses the importance of how clinicians assess moving bodies ‘unconsciously enact bias by subtly pathologizing how different bodies move and act’ (p.183). ‘Caldwell and Chang, encourage dance/
movement therapists to contribute to socially just therapeutic practices by examining how our own biases impact the way we relate to bodies from different sociocultural backgrounds’ (Cantrick et al., 2018, p.197; Caldwell, 2013; Chang, 2006).

It is important to honour the erotic’s ephemeral nature and withhold from any attempt at fixing the concept. The contingent nature of creativity is such that the refining process may dilute any understanding of the erotic.

**Conclusion**

This paper suggests that D/MT, specifically MC, can be used as a tool to promote social change, challenging systems of oppression by cultivating erotic intelligence and embodiment in the therapeutic setting to establish an environment where alternatives can emerge. ‘Erotic intelligence exists beyond linearity, beyond a conceptual understanding of what is true, beyond the construction and constriction of time’ (Clements, 2016, p.41).

It is palpable. It is a point arising in infinity, a distinction that is critical. Form arising in emptiness favours magic more than manipulation, and rather than solitary adventure, it is a co-created dance: a fertile intersection that requires ‘transcendent fearlessness,’ which begins by loosening the grip and freeing oneself from fixation. It is the conjunctive AND rather than BUT as it includes rather than excludes. It is a liberated ‘social space filled with explosive, almost magical potential because no one knows beforehand what we can create together (Clements, 2016, p.41).

It concludes that working consciously through the body in the therapeutic setting, experiencing the erotic through its diverse aspects begins to mitigate symptoms of oppression and serves as an ingredient of resiliency for the future.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Notes on contributor**

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