



## Accessing the Untapped Resource of Humankind through Critical Cultural Action & Embodied Arts Praxis

**Julene Siddique**

Socio-Systemic Impact Specialist, Laszlo Institute;  
Composer & CEO, Nada Brahma Ltd; Associate Fellow, WAAS

**Rae Johnson**

Social worker, Somatic Movement Therapist and Scholar

### Abstract

*To powerfully access humankind around the world to act systemically, we must engage an authentic critical praxis, reflecting on direct experience in connection with strategic action. Only by understanding power can we transform it. Through the development of critical cultural action, everyday people learn to understand power; how its structures are embedded in society; and, then, have the knowledge to take effective local action. Creative, somatic and sensory information are crucial and powerful aspects which have been left out of most efforts for social change and which hold much potential for healing, social transformation, social justice and systemic action in the everyday. An emphasis on embodied praxis makes the entirety of the human being relevant and meaningful and enables a humanising global agenda that incentivizes us to explore all dimensions of our humanity. A global grassroots curriculum with a profound humanising incentive coupled with somatic competencies, enables us to cradle the traumatic wounds of our global crisis that keep populations divided, and can set a solid foundation for transformative global healing and social change. The acknowledgement and embrace of our suffering in a meaningful and intentional way can go hand in hand with the transformation of it. Cultures imbued with a critical, embodied artistic praxis can cultivate deeper understandings of what it means to be human, of possibilities for human development, and new possibilities of ways to relate to ourselves as well as to each other and hence open important pathways towards a new social architecture.*

*The smallest incidents of our social life contain all the moral and political values of society, all its structures of domination and power, all its mechanisms of oppression.*

– **Augusto Boal**

### 1. Accessing the Untapped Resource of the Humankind

Activism and efforts for sustainable development are currently focused on third sector NGOs and organisations working on world poverty and environment etc. However, in order for activism to be sustainable in the long term we will need small-scale, micro-activism to redistribute the work of social justice into many hands rather than a designated few. Furthermore, social sciences have clearly revealed that there is no isolation of social phenomena. Specialised fields such as the Anthropology of Development have highlighted

that the structures and behaviours which sustain poverty, the environmental crisis and world issues are embedded into everyday lives. And hence, everyone has the possibility to take action for the profound level of social change required to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The question is how? This paper brings forward key methods to access the untapped resource of humankind for global social change. We put forward forms of critical cultural action and embodied arts praxis. These frameworks can be multiplied, scaled out and utilised in diverse contexts, to engage and accelerate global social change and systemic action on world issues.

---

*“Praxis is an experiential form of learning by which one understands and generates knowledge through direct experience. By giving everyday people tools, resources and facilitators to develop a critical praxis we can unlock everyday experiences to generate social leadership and the broad-based social transformation required for achieving the SDGs.”*

---

## **2. Introduction: Levels of Systemic Action**

Social systems can be understood as functioning simultaneously on three interrelated levels: the macro level of government and international social institutions, the meso level of organizations and communities, and the micro level of individuals and small groups. Activism tends to focus on the macro and meso levels, leaving out the incredible untapped resource of humankind.

### ***2.1. The Importance of Working at the Micro-Sociological Level.***

Working at the micro level with everyday people closes the gap between theory and practice through being informed and connected to everyday realities. Furthermore, it works to support change in the relational fabric of our lives so that structural shifts carved for a new social architecture can correspond with authentic transformations in attitude and behaviour. As Adrienne Maree Brown points out: “What we practice on the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system.”

Social norms are articulated and maintained through various forms of social control—from laws (macro level social control), to company policy (meso level), to peer pressure (micro level). All of the injustices and global issues we face also play out in the lives of everyday people. By focusing on the intimate injustices playing out in the context of the present moment between people who are directly, mutually, and concretely affected by them, we activate agency and engagement. We ‘bring home’ the rhetoric of global issues by making them personal and meaningful through direct everyday experience. By being meaningful, personal and engaging in context, we can access the untapped resource of the humankind.

We not only need to just access the untapped resource of humankind, but we need to do so in a way that engages them to act powerfully and systemically on our global issues.

Somatic and sensory information and embodied praxis hold that tremendous potential for unlocking major levels of transformational social change. Somatic theory (Gendlin, 1978; Hanna, 1970; Johnson, 1983; Yuasa, 1987) suggests that cultivating embodied consciousness produces/elicits an altered state of consciousness, and Hanna (1970) suggests that this shift in consciousness can serve as a locus for resistance against oppression. More specifically, many somatic practitioners (Johnson, 2003) argue that being comfortably anchored in a solid, felt experience of the body in relation to other bodies is so phenomenologically different from the experience of “othering” or being “othered” that it provides a compelling counterpoint to hierarchical models of social power—a place from which to experience the world differently even when the social structures through which that experience is shaped have not yet changed. Somatic theory (Greene, 1997), as well as social theory (Foucault, 1990; Johnson, 2001), would understand this process as having profound implications for social structures, based on the premise that social structures are created and reproduced through a web of interpersonal relations. When those relationships change—body by body—so, eventually, do the structures.

Embodied arts praxis and sensory information are crucial and powerful aspects which have been left out of most efforts for social change and which hold much potential for healing, social transformation, social justice and systemic action everyday. These provide a key bio-social axis\* through which we can access humankind in a meaningful, powerful, and transformational way for systemic action on world issues.

### 3. Critical Cultural Action: How to Activate Systemic Action in the Everyday

The unity of theory and practice begins in everyday experiences.<sup>1</sup> Praxis is an experiential form of learning by which one understands and generates knowledge through direct experience. By giving everyday people tools, resources and facilitators to develop a critical praxis we can unlock everyday experiences to generate social leadership and the broad-based social transformation required for achieving the SDGs.

#### 3.1. What is Critical Praxis and Critical Cultural Action?

A critical praxis has a transformative agenda. The transformative agenda is not on the surface. It goes under the surface to the roots and causes that are embedded in society. According to Ledwith, “empowerment needs an analysis of power to be transformative, otherwise, it remains a personal, individual act of self-belief rather than political, liberating movement for change.”<sup>2</sup> A critical praxis involves critical reflection on direct experience in connection with strategic action.

Critical praxis enables us to question taken for granted aspects of everyday experiences in order to extraordinarily re-experience our life and embody movements of change. It enables people to see power in action, and therein act strategically on it as well as co-create new knowledge and new stories about our world. A critical praxis highlights assumptions hidden in the contradictions of everyday life. It engages A) the questioning of everyday experience

\* Axis points act as key leverage points for systemic change. See: Julene Siddique and Peter Joseph, *The Social Architect: A New Framework for Effective Activism and Leadership* (To be Published in Cadmus Journal May 2021)

and B) making critical connections to the structures of society that discriminate so that each person can C) have an understanding of how to act systemically to change things for the better. A critical praxis practiced collectively becomes critical cultural action.

---

*“Critical cultural action means the mutual development of individual autonomy alongside collective agency.”*

---

### **3.2. Without Critical Cultural Action there is No Authentic Social Transformation.**

Stewart Hall warns: “Action will not result in change unless the analysis on which the action is based is critical.”<sup>3</sup> Efforts for social change must be critical in order to be effective. We are currently lacking both a critical focus and the ability to engage diverse populations outside the development sector. Critical cultural action is also crucial for development sector professionals. Shaw explains: “If you are uncritical you end up delivering top-down practices that end up increasing injustice.”<sup>4</sup> He argues that without critical praxis and cultural action we end up with “actionless thought and thoughtless action.” Critical cultural action is built on lived experience. Ideas are not capable of transformation without critical action.

An authentic critical praxis exposes the relations of domination and subordination. Gramsci writes on these forces of oppression and highlights coercion—through law, police, arms; and in parallel to this, ideological persuasion in order to gain the consent of the public. Gramsci argued that a transformative praxis needs to address both. He warns about negating it in attempts for social change saying that: 1. we have more of the same; 2. we have a transformed version of the same; 3. we achieve relations radically transformed based on social justice. Therefore, in order to achieve authentic social transformation a critical cultural praxis is essential.

We learn which human characteristics are valued and which are not—and we learn how to navigate our relationships with others informed by the power and privilege that are attached to those characteristics. Scholars of implicit bias<sup>5</sup> have shown that we may remain largely unconscious of our prejudice against those we are taught to consider ‘inferior’ or ‘other,’ even when our conscious beliefs affirm the equality of all human beings. This is where critical praxis comes in, as it allows us to become aware of our everyday assumptions. It changes how we understand things ourselves as well as how we relate to and engage with others. An individual critical praxis which is then expressed collectively as critical cultural action, enables a collective shift in consciousness in relation to power and control in society. It exposes the contradictions leading to privilege on one hand and inequalities and injustices on the other, and enables systemic action.

Critical cultural action means the mutual development of individual autonomy alongside collective agency. It develops a culture of questioning and learning and an empowering process which enables more people to believe in the possibility of genuine societal transformation. By developing critical praxis and critical cultural action, we activate the lifeblood of humankind, that is their everyday lived experience, their bodies, their feelings, their lives, and utilise it for the development of sustainability practiced as an art of systems change.

#### **4. Critical Community Development: Systemic Action on the ‘Axis of Culture’<sup>6</sup>**

Freire offers a complete process that starts with critical consciousness in local communities following through to transformative collective action for change on a global level. The process starts with the profound belief that everyone has the human right to dignity and respect, that there exists a pedagogy of love to counter the pedagogy of hatred and that all people are capable of the thought and action needed to change our world for the better.

A critical praxis is only transformative if situated in its social, political and economic context and utilises a collective approach. Therefore, on the axis of culture, through an approach which engages everyday experience, we can begin the process of transformation through humanising that which is dehumanising. Processes of dehumanisation can include:

- **Cultures of Silence** – oppression creates passive acceptance of unjust conditions because people blame themselves for the suffering. Critical community development enables a critical dialogue of thought—action—praxis which enables people to understand that their circumstances are not due to their own inadequacies but are a result of societal structures.
- **Structural Discrimination** – becoming aware of everyday lives as systemically structured societal relations of domination and subordination. A critical praxis cannot be passive in this process; through its critical dialogues and praxis it should expose contradictions, myths, pathologies and root causes of social injustice.
- **Dehumanising Stories** – stories which dehumanize marginal groups in the name of power, invading minds for consent to oppressive forces. These stories can filter into public consciousness as an unquestionable truth that becomes embedded into the structure of society. It is therefore crucial to create spaces for critical dialogue through which dehumanising stories can be questioned. In the process of questioning<sup>7</sup> the dehumanising story should engage the mapping of intersectionality, i.e. the process of mapping critical connections for how this dehumanising narrative connects to societal structures and institutions. The critical discussion and mapping of dehumanising narratives play a key role in the development of systemic action.

Critical Community Development is a form of critical cultural action based on Freire and Gramsci. It requires few resources other than a ‘Critical Educator’. The process proceeds as follows:<sup>8</sup>

- 1. Create a Context** or a space for people to question their everyday experiences.
- 2. The Critical Educator** listens from the heart, with empathy, mutual respect and believes in the people’s ability to engage critical change.
- 3. Generative Themes are Identified.** These are themes that generate passion because they are relevant to people’s lives and that release apathy of hopelessness and powerlessness of circumstance. Many local activists and community workers will be aware of the local generative themes. The critical educator may work with these people in advance to become aware of these themes. Ledwith explains: “People will act on issues which they have strong feelings about. There is a link between emotion and the motivation to act.”<sup>9</sup>

4. **Using a Problematising Method.** The generative themes are then decontextualised from their everyday ‘taken for grantedness’ and questioned in order to see the unacceptable contradictions and power relationships. People then map and make critical connections where they link cultural, political, social and economic issues with their everyday life experience.
5. **The Concerns of the People are Captured in Artistic Codifications.** These can be stories, photos, cartoons, drawings, poetry, music, drama etc. It should be simple and capture the familiar scene from everyday life that relates to the generative theme.
6. **These Artistic Codifications are then Decoded in a Mutual Horizontal Dialogue.** Simple questions like ‘what’s going on?’, ‘who is affected?’ start the process of engaging critical thinking for the mapping of critical connections in their society. By, firstly, engaging content which is meaningful to their lives; then, secondly, questioning ‘it’s taken for granted’ assumptions; and then, thirdly, mapping its intersectionality, i.e. how it relates to the structures in society, the participants gain the capacity for systemic action. It is important to note that this process that Freire calls ‘conscientization’ must be rooted in reciprocal relations—where the educator is the teacher/learner and the student is the learner/teacher. **Always questioning and not telling people how to think** creates the context for the development of individual autonomy and collective agency.

In these critical cultural spaces counter-narratives are created and new understandings are born which are powered by everyday life experience and hence have the ability to breed critical cultural action. **Only by understanding power can we transform it.** Through the development of critical cultural spaces, everyday people learn to understand power; how its structures are embedded in society; and, then, have the knowledge to take effective local action. Critical consciousness is exercised through practical projects. Working towards a world built on a value for the wellbeing of the human being and the planet. We build the capacity for the development of a politics of love to counter the politics of hatred, grounded in the lived experience of everyday people.

## 5. Engaging Embodied Praxis: The Body as a Key Axis for Systemic Action<sup>10</sup>

Critical cultural action can take on a higher level of transformative potential through engaging somatic arts for both healing and social justice. An embodied (somatic) praxis enables us to feel deeply into the effects of social issues and provides a sensory and means to transform our individual experience and navigate strategic pathways for powerful action in everyday scenarios. There is an increasing consensus from the scientific community<sup>11</sup> that the lived experience of the body, that is our bodily sensations, perceptions and behaviours, play an important role in how we experience the social world and, in particular, how we enact asymmetric power relations. Not only are our bodies a primary site for the reproduction of unjust social systems, our bodies also bear the impact of discrimination and oppression. Traumatologists are increasingly coming to understand the degree to which trauma (including the complex trauma of oppression) is experienced and held in the body<sup>12</sup>—particularly in the nervous system—and expressed in our relationships and interactions with others.



Although our bodies can be co-opted, hijacked, and colonized by the forces of domination and control, they are also crucial, and often untapped, sources of knowledge, creativity, and connection.<sup>13</sup> Activist and scholar Emma Goldman (1869-1940) famously stated: “If I can’t dance, I don’t want to be part of your revolution.” She points to the central feature of an everyday, embodied activism—the emphasis and insistence on pleasure<sup>14</sup> and healing. If we are to access humankind and meet the challenges of a sustainable grassroots paradigm shift, it must be with what Rob Brezny calls a “**fierce, primal YES**”. Our creative and generative impulses must be enlisted and supported, not just our critical and destructive ones.

The benefit of engaging embodied praxis is it enables us to enter all levels of society in a meaningful and powerful way with greater potential for social transformation. Building social spaces of trust, we can enter any level of society and supply people with skills, literacies and capacities that enable them to take powerful systemic actions in their everyday lives. **Furthermore, to incentivise embodied praxis is to create an incentive for global participation in an agenda that demands all of us to explore all dimensions of our humanity. An emphasis on embodied praxis makes the entirety of the human being relevant and meaningful and enables a humanising global agenda.**

**Embodied Praxis.** Embodied Praxis is built on the notion that harnessing the lived experience of our bodies is a necessary component in creating sustainable and equitable social change. This framework introduces a form of embodied, everyday activism that proposes that 1) it is possible to identify and transform the harmful effects of oppression; and that 2) each of us are agents for positive social change in the context of our own lives. The method endorses the development of a somatic literacy that addresses both the personal and the political dimensions of bodily experience.

Embodied praxis brings us into a key area of systemic action—bio-social axis points.<sup>15</sup> Furthering the transformative potentials of culture, by incorporating the body and an embodied praxis we engage a bio-social interface of factors. Through bio-social axis points, we can engage and act on multiple aspects of a system, and, hence, locate key leverage points for changing that system. In this case we refer to bio-social leverage points to leverage change in ourselves, our culture, our social system and societal institutions. Three key bio-social axis points will be outlined below along with practices for taking effective action in the micro level, i.e. unlocking humankind for systemic action and global social change.

## **6. Bio-Social Axis 1: 7 Steps to Begin an Embodied Praxis**

Embodied praxis enables us to engage with new processes of social learning<sup>16</sup> which can enable and empower ordinary citizens to create meaningful social change in their own lives and affirms their capacity for leadership and activism. It enables them to become more aware of power dynamics and processes of exclusion in order to activate their capacities as everyday change agents. Everyday embodied praxis constitutes a form of micro-activism. It includes strategies and practices for enlisting our bodies toward enhanced moral courage and effective conflict resolution and the undoing, disarming, preventing, and resisting the harmful effects of microaggressions.<sup>17</sup>

We need to understand that systems of oppression are interlocking and mutually reinforcing, and to recognize that although systems of oppression are never about individuals

per se, individual effort can and does make a difference. While one may not have created the conditions of oppression that currently exist, one must accept the fact that failure to resist these systems of oppression effectively maintains the status quo. All the oppressive system needs to thrive is a person's willingness (conscious or not) to go along with it. Although not all oppression is enacted through the direct subjugation of the body, our bodies are always on the line. An embodied praxis is about incorporating this knowledge in everyday life. We outline 7 key strategies here to begin an embodied praxis:

- 1. Reflect.** Doing the difficult work of examining how oppressive social systems have affected you on a personal level is one of the foundations of effective embodied praxis. When you do not know how you have been wounded by patriarchy, racism, capitalism, heteronormativity, ableism, or other forms of discrimination, it is easy to be triggered and reactive when these issues surface in your interactions with others (even allies and fellow activists). On a somatic level, through an embodied praxis, this self-examination can be especially transformative.
- 2. Identify and Uncouple Trauma Patterns.** Oppression is a form of trauma, evidenced now by a considerable body of research. Discover how your body has responded to this ongoing traumatic event, and learn about some common somatic effects, including hypervigilance and chronic hyperarousal of the autonomic nervous system, somatic dissociation, and intrusive body memories. Work to uncouple environmental cues from unconscious reactive patterns so that you are better able to witness your body in the moment and support your ability to be resourced in difficult situations.
- 3. Reclaim your Body Image.** One of the most insidious ways that oppressive social systems maintain their power is by convincing the oppressed that there is something fundamentally wrong with our bodies. We are too fat, too flat-chested, too tall or too short; our skin is too dark and our hair is too curly; we use a wheelchair or a cane; our eyes are the wrong shape or colour. The list is endless, and the work of managing, correcting, and hiding what is "wrong" with us is exhausting and demoralizing. If we channelled all the time, energy, and resources devoted to making our bodies socially "acceptable" (to the degree that is even possible) and redirected it instead toward cultivating and celebrating the uniqueness of our body selves, the social world would be such a rich and vibrant place. We are not suggesting that we always find ourselves in a body that fits who we are, or that we should not make changes to our bodily appearance; what we are suggesting is that body shame is a tool of oppression, and finding ways to radicalize and reclaim our body image serves us all.
- 4. Cultivate your Senses.** Another key strategy of oppressive social systems is a tendency to promote a dissociative or disconnected relationship with the felt sense of the body. While we are encouraged to identify with the outside appearance of our body, we are discouraged from feeling ourselves from the inside. Sensuality is often misappropriated as sexuality, and the palpable enjoyment of our own bodily capacities and appetites may be judged as unseemly. The process of socialization in many cultures involves the cultivation of a master/servant attitude toward the body that renders our senses as little more than tools in the project of self-mastery, rather than as gifts to be celebrated and enjoyed in their own right.



- 5. Examine your Non-Verbal Communication.** Research into the interpersonal dynamics of body language suggests that oppressive social systems are reproduced and reinforced by the everyday nonverbal interactions with others whose social standing differs from ours. These asymmetrical interactions occur when a person with higher social rank is permitted to use movement, behaviours that are forbidden to the person with lower social rank—for example, the right to take up more space, to use forceful, direct movements, and to initiate touch. Learning how nonverbal communication informs your interactions with others can help you shift the patterns that reinforce harmful power dynamics.

---

*“Engaging a process of healing themselves, deepening self-knowledge whilst acting critically in the everyday to carve new relationships for the new social architecture required to effectively achieve the SDGs.”*

---

- 6. Liberate your Movement.** Once you have explored how body movement can be co-opted by oppressive social systems to reinforce inequitable power dynamics, continue the process of self-liberation by experimenting with movement expressions that are unique to your own body. Allow yourself to stretch into new shapes, rhythms, and movement qualities that express who you are and how you feel on the inside. Explore relational space in new ways. Claim the pleasure and authority of your own movement preferences.
- 7. Learn about your own body privilege and how it manifests.** In the same way that our bodies are shaped by experiences of oppression, so too are they shaped by experiences of privilege. The unearned benefits of having a body that meets the criteria for membership in a socially dominant group are considerable. Even if we do not choose or do not want these privileges, they attach to us and afford us access and ease in countless ways—being able to walk down a city street without being afraid of harassment or attack, being able to gain access to public buildings using the main entrance, using the restroom that fits your gender, not being seen as exotic, or dangerous, or feeble-minded just because of the way your body looks or moves.

Each of us holds a unique combination of body privilege along with bodily oppression, so unpacking the privilege your body affords you is as important a part of embodied activism as exploring the somatic implications of being oppressed. In particular, be attentive to social situations in which your body feels particularly comfortable or unremarkable—the luxury of inattentiveness is a hallmark of privilege. Notice also when your body reacts with vague apprehension or distaste to the bodies of others, and ask yourself if you hold more body privilege than they do.

**Embodied Praxis enables everyday people** to become engaged with their bodies and their humanity. It gives them the skills to read, understand and act systemically, altering the social fabric through their everyday interactions. Engaging a process of healing themselves,

deepening self-knowledge whilst acting critically in the everyday to carve new relationships for the new social architecture required to effectively achieve the SDGs. The importance of engaging embodied praxis in the everyday cannot be understated. We have so far only engaged the macro and meso levels of activism, this underutilised micro level underscores the majority of the population and, hence, gives us the ability for transformational embodied global social engagement.

---

*“A global grassroots curriculum, implementable at all levels of society whose intention is to incentivise us all to better understand and develop our humanity is critical for genuine social transformation.”*

---

**Training Up the Know How.** These critical skills, literacies and capacities outlined above as well as curriculum already evaluated and produced on the ‘embodied everyday activism’,\* can activate humankind for profound social transformation can be taught or trained online or offline in a range of formats. Outreach programs can also be created and modified to suit the needs of the participants and the skills of the particular instructor. This content can also be expanded to strengthen a global grassroots movement which can act in integral collaboration with Social Architects<sup>18</sup> for systems change.

**Scaling out Embodied Praxis.** Delivered within an educational context as a larger program, the curriculum could include

1. the cultivation of conscious embodiment as an essential element in the development of critical consciousness;
2. the development of somatic literacy (in addition to the other forms of literacy designed to help students become more aware of social conditions);
3. an emphasis on the engaged quality of the teacher-student relationship;
4. the use of narrative as approach to accessing the felt experience of the body;
5. the expansion of recognized sources of institutionalized oppression to include those whose impact on the body is particularly strategic (e.g., medicine); and
6. the cultivation of the teacher’s own embodied critical consciousness as a first step in teaching students how to unlearn oppression.

**A global grassroots curriculum,** implementable at all levels of society whose intention is to incentivise us all to better understand and develop our humanity is, in fact, critical for genuine social transformation. To heal social injustice, we have to know how to trace it, understand it, and remove it from our bodies. A focus on the social microcosm as the locus

---

\* For the past 20 years Rae Johnson and her colleagues have been researching the embodied experience of oppression and have been developing a teaching curriculum predicated on the notion that harnessing the lived experience of our bodies is a key component of equitable sustainable social change. The modules have already been individually evaluated and could be combined into a larger curriculum.

of intervention stems precisely from the visceral immediacy of face-to-face interactions as the site of contested power and social change. Although frequently overlooked as a source of knowledge and understanding, our embodied selves are critically important in the navigation of social power relations and the creation of new possibilities for being with one another.

A global grassroots curriculum with a profound humanising incentive coupled with somatic competencies which enable us to cradle the traumatic wounds of our global crisis that keep populations divided, can set a solid foundation for transformative global healing and social change. It holds the key potential for transforming our current state of bio-social crisis into a platform for collective transformation and bio-social evolution. This change in awareness and consciousness which arises from incorporating embodied perspectives and critical engagement with everyday life experiences can become the lifeblood of meaningful, powerful engagement with all of humankind, and untapping global social leadership in everyday people.

## **7. Bio-Social Axis 2: Trauma Healing and Social Justice**

The next important bio-social axis for systemic action is trauma. Trauma models are increasingly focused on healing the embodied impact of oppression.<sup>19</sup> Trauma serves as a critical bio-social axis for engaging both healing and social justice and also holds great potential for exploring capacities for dynamic collective re-invention. Much evidence shows that human and social service providers, activists, community leaders as well as victims of trauma all deeply need training, support and resources in transforming the traumatic imprint of oppression.<sup>20</sup>

Some of the traumatic effects of oppression include:

- Hypervigilance and reactivity
- Dissociation
- Intrusive memories
- Movement constriction
- Body shame

Skills, capacities and literacies for engaging this important bio-social axis in the everyday for these multiple roles and sectors can include;

- Identifying and untangling trauma responses
- Examining nonverbal communication for unconscious patterns of dominance and submission
- Discovering the body's authentic knowledge
- Reclaiming body image and liberating movement constrictions.

As somatic literacy encompasses both personal and political dimensions of bodily experience, skills for systemic action on this bio-social axis could be developed, which could work integrally with key leadership models such as Social Architect leadership.<sup>21</sup>

Critical to a transformative agenda is the ability to engage with 'dark intelligence'. The acknowledgement and embrace of our suffering in a safe, meaningful and intentional way can

go hand in hand with the transformation of it. We have encouraging evidence from studies in post-traumatic growth,<sup>22</sup> which suggests that the transforming of trauma can go hand in hand with the development of more extraordinary human capacities. We have the possibility not only to engage ‘a fierce primal yes’ from global civil society but also a dynamically engaged, meaningful systemic global participation that enables us to explore human potential. Thus, we turn the ordinary into the extraordinary through our re-invention of it.

## 8. Bio-Social Axis 3: Community-Based Embodied Arts Praxis

Trauma-informed art therapy (<https://www.trauma-informedpractice.com/>), studies on music and the brain (<https://advancedbrain.com/>), use of rhythm for engaging the sensory-motor system<sup>23</sup> to repair degenerative disorders such as Parkinson’s<sup>24</sup> as well as the ethnographic evidence of healing/therapeutic arts-based practices around the world,<sup>25</sup> demonstrate much potential to be unlocked for the expression of embodied praxis through artistic modalities. Creative arts therapy approaches<sup>26</sup> are, in fact, already being developed that harness the healing power of the arts to address issues of power and social identity.

An embodied arts praxis in everyday life could also act in both a healing capacity as well as in a critical and political capacity. Here is the testimony of the intimate process of Johnson coming into her own embodied activism:

“Through these experiences of collective resistance through art, I have strengthened my understanding of my body as artful in itself [...] that is, I became more adept at accessing the felt experience of my body through art, better able to communicate that experience through language. [...] I learned that I was an agent of personal and social change, and that my body was the locus of those transformations. [...] Through my body, I generated new understandings and knowledge, and if I was willing to risk being fully present in my own body, the art I produced could serve as a catalyst for further transformation. [...] My capacity to be artful through my body both affirmed my status as ‘outsider’ (Wilson, 1956) and allowed me a way to ‘come inside at last’ (Johnson, 1997) – not to any kind of socially affirming status quo, but to a quality of engagement, aliveness, and presence in the body that was both radical and collectively relevant. In short, I understand being fully and artfully embodied as a form of political activism.”<sup>27</sup>

Exploring expressions of an embodied arts praxis, this bio-social axis of critical cultural action holds a key space for cultivating new social relationships which express, embody and breed the creation of transformative cultures. Many forms of embodied arts praxis already exist, but only recently have frameworks been created which enable us to correlate and scale them out.<sup>28</sup>

New performance modalities can be further developed through the creation of new social and/or artistic spaces. For example, creative director, Dorota Stanczyk (<https://www.dorotastanczyk.com/>) seeks to re-invent traditional performance spaces such as art exhibitions and concert halls to include music therapy, art therapy, and meditative practices into artistic

performances. Theatre director, Katerina Melenova, involves art therapy and aromatherapy ([www.archavuni.cz](http://www.archavuni.cz)) in her theatre productions. By changing our current social/artistic spaces and by creating new modalities of performance based on embodied arts praxis we can breed transformative cultures and dynamically accelerate critical cultural action.

An embodied arts praxis can engage creativity and performance in ways which shape new, more alive, more aware cultures working towards systems change. Art possesses an inherent capacity to create and transform culture—indeed, to see this as one of its primary functions. By linking the idea of art as an important tool in the creation of countercultures with the notion of art as an embodied experience, it is possible to examine a further set of linkages that understand the experience of ‘being in your body’ as inherently transgressive. The development of new modalities of art and embodied experience support the development of new cultures. Cultures imbued with a critical, embodied artistic praxis cultivate a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, of possibilities for human development, and new possibilities of ways to relate to ourselves as well as to each other—micro level sociological reinventions which act on systemic axis points and open important pathways for a new social architecture.<sup>29</sup>

## **9. Identifying and Correlating New Skills, Capacities, Literacies and Action Frameworks**

In essence, a critical praxis is about learning and reflecting on and through direct experience. Experience enables us the capacity to engage with multiple dimensions of ourselves and of our world. A critical praxis engaged collectively becomes critical cultural action. We propose that for a more powerful transformation, which acknowledges our shared, worldwide trauma and mental health issues, we also incorporate the body for an embodied praxis of everyday activism. Furthermore, as there already exists a body of theory, research, practice and movements for arts in health and social change, we suggest the further cultivation and development of embodied arts praxis to create transformative social arenas and the cultivation of new cultures.

Critical Community Development provides a method for the mobilising of local communities for systemic action. Moving from the axis of culture to an important bio-social axis of embodied praxis, we can locate a skill set to develop capacities in people around the world for healing as well as effective systemic action in their everyday lives. A global grassroots curriculum, acting at the micro sociological level, can carve the needed changes in relational fabric, which can work hand in hand with the structural and systemic changes needed to achieve the SDGs.

The second bio-social axis which enables us to act on system leverage points is trauma. We suggest that the skills and capacities in this paper be developed and scaled out not only to trauma victims but also to human and social service providers, activists and community leaders who also deeply need it. This final bio-social axis of Embodied Arts Praxis incorporates culture, the body and the arts. By acting on 3 system leverage points this becomes a powerful intersection for social transformation.

To access humankind for systemic impact we need to bring forward these new skills, capacities and literacies and act on the key system leverage points of culture, embodiment,

trauma and embodied arts praxis. By engaging, developing and cultivating practices on these key system axes, micro level activism can take on a powerful systemic agency, which, even until today remains to be an untapped potential.

---

*“With an embodied arts praxis, we can access the untapped resource of humankind for authentic and powerful social transformation, and unveil the possibilities of our human potential.”*

---

## 10. Prospects for Multiplying and Scaling out Efforts from Local to Global

Critical Cultural Action and Embodied Arts Praxis could move outwards from their localities with other communities, networks and alliances for a global movement for change through the 7-point Agenda<sup>30</sup> for critical cultural action and embodied arts praxis outlined here.

- 1. Voicing Values** – Values are central to the process of change. As Monbiot states, “they are the bedrock of effective politics.”<sup>31</sup> The goal of optimising human development and environmental flourishing needs to be made explicit so we can really start to address the key things that are becoming detrimental to that. By engaging in embodied arts praxis, we can become more aware of ourselves and cultivate these new values through a critical embodied awareness.
- 2. Making Critical Connections** – Presenting a provocation that points out societal contradictions to a group of people to whom they are relevant stirs dialogue and debate. Critical connections that the group makes in such a dialogue can, then, be mapped to power structures. Wilkinson and Pickett show how inequality increases anxiety levels, affecting the way we think and feel and relate to each other, causing ill health and social problems—inequality makes us sick. Through embodied arts praxis, we can become aware of the detrimental social forces affecting our bodies. By reclaiming our bodies engaging in critical cultural action, we not only make these critical connections theoretically but we also locate them in everyday situations and can act powerfully through an embodied deeply felt sense. Embodied arts praxis could also express itself through creative means, making the invisible visible and cultivating a collective awareness around critical systemic issues.
- 3. Critiquing and Dissenting** – Critique is at the heart of deepening democracy. Creating contexts for critical questioning is vital to the practice of critical community development. All forms of critical cultural action engage this crucial practice of creating spaces for the development of critical dialogues. Through embodied arts praxis, we learn to critique the forces that disconnect us from ourselves and from our bodies. Through the process of decolonising our bodies, we gain critical awareness. Critical praxis develops the ability for critical reflection. Embodied arts praxis, if practiced through a community performance, has the potential to scale out the capacity for critique.



4. **Imagining Alternatives** – We need to excite people’s imaginations to see that an alternative world is possible. We have to nurture thoughts, imaginings, visions and projects of an alternative world and creating alternative systems. Embodied arts praxis activates us to utilise our creative, healing and regenerative impulses. We can capture our personal transformations through art. As we break through barriers in ourselves and in our society, we can creatively imagine and even perform alternatives, embodying a vision of a different world.
5. **Creating Counternarratives** – Till now, we have failed to create a compelling counternarrative. Ledwith maintains: The counternarrative needs to engage with intersectionality, identifying interconnected, overlapping oppressions.<sup>32</sup> The counternarrative also needs to have new stories about new possibilities. Embodied arts praxis is profoundly creative; it can incorporate a creative experience of the body itself as well as directing of creative impulses to reinvent ourselves. Through this process of embodied reinvention combined with societal critique, we can create everyday practices to change narratives in our local contexts as well as a more humanising global narrative about the rediscovering of our humanity.
6. **Connecting and Acting** – When we change the way we see the world, we change how we act in the world. Moving out of symptomology, critical cultural action alters traditional forms of activism and charity to understand how to act more systematically on local and global issues. Embodied arts praxis is situated at the critical bio-social axes. Each bio-social axis can identify its system leverage points and act strategically.<sup>33</sup>
7. **Cooperating for a Common Good** – Ledwith astutely points out: “An interconnected, rather than disconnected praxis addresses the interlinked crisis of climate change, violent conflict, forced migration, widening inequalities, rising xenophobia, and endemic financial instability.”<sup>34</sup> This deeper interconnected understanding sets the grounds for more meaningful collaborations between diverse initiatives and should incentivise integral systemic action across sectors. The beauty of embodied arts praxis is that it creates an incentive for the exploration of our humanity and the importance of healthy human development and planetary wellbeing. With these values understood and, then, practiced everyday through an embodied arts praxis, we can activate global social leadership, taking action from local to global through clear systemic steps indicated in the bio-social axes points.<sup>35</sup>

Out of the rhetoric of world issues and into the embodied ‘primal YES’. Out of the gap between theory and action into an embodied arts praxis which can unlock global participation in a powerful and systemic way—from our destruction into our dynamic reinvention. We challenge the dehumanising with the profoundly humanising. The sensorial intelligence, creative fire, the social inter-relational, nonverbal embodied brilliance of a whole system reinvention of ourselves and our society. Healing the scars of societal violence and re-creating our worlds personally, emotionally, biologically and socially so they are deeply felt, deeply known and profoundly lived. With an embodied arts praxis, we can access the untapped resource of humankind for authentic and powerful social transformation, and unveil the possibilities of our human potential.

## Authors contact information

**Julene Siddique** – Email: [Julene.Siddique@protonmail.com](mailto:Julene.Siddique@protonmail.com)

**Rae Johnson** – Email: [info@raejohnsonsonomatic.com](mailto:info@raejohnsonsonomatic.com)

## Notes

1. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York and London: Continuum Books, 2000)
2. Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development, A Critical and Radical Approach* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2020)
3. Stuart Hall, *The Meaning of New Times*, in D. Morley and K. H. Chen (eds) *Stuart Hall: Critical dialogues in cultural studies* (London: Routledge, 1996)
4. Mae Shaw, *Community work: Policy, Politics and Practice* (Hull and Edinburgh: Universities of Hull and Edinburgh, 2004)
5. “Project Implicit”, Harvard University, accessed September 27, 2020, [www.implicit.harvard.edu](http://www.implicit.harvard.edu).
6. ‘Axis points’ are system leverage points and key areas of systemic action which when utilised can fundamentally alter systems. See: Julene Siddique and Peter Joseph, *The Social Architect: A New Framework for Effective Activism and Leadership* (To be Published in *Cadmus Journal* May 2021)
7. The processes of questioning (problematizing approach), is what Freire calls conscientization. See: Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York and London: Continuum Books, 2000)
8. Paraphrased from Margaret Ledwith’s presentation at GL21 e-conference June 2020, accessed July 27, 2020, <http://worldacademy.org/projects/global-leadership-in-21st-century-project>
9. Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development, A Critical and Radical Approach* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2020)
10. In Socio-Systemic science ‘Axis’ are key systemic points to take action on which leverage the behaviour of the whole system. See: Julene Siddique and Peter Joseph, *The Social Architect: A New Framework for Effective Activism and Leadership* (To be Published in *Cadmus Journal* May 2021)
11. Antonio Damasio, *The Feeling of What Happens* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999)
12. Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (New York: Penguin Books, 2015)
13. Rae Johnson, *Embodied Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2018)
14. Adrienne Maree Brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (London: AK Press, 2019)
15. In Socio-Systemic science ‘Axis’ are key systemic points to take action on which affect the behaviour of the whole system. In particular bio-social axis points hold a matrix of factors which enable a higher transformative potential. See: Julene Siddique and Peter Joseph, *The Social Architect: A New Framework for Effective Activism and Leadership* (To be Published in *Cadmus Journal* May 2021)
16. “Transformative Ecosystem” in M. Popovich and J. Siddique, *Systemic Engagement of the Arts and Culture: A New Framework for Integral Transformative Strategies* (*Cadmus Journal*, Vol.4, Issue 3, November 2020), 90-91
17. Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life* (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2020)
18. Julene Siddique and Peter Joseph, *The Social Architect: A New Framework for Effective Activism and Leadership* (To be Published in *Cadmus Journal* May 2021)
19. Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother’s Hands* (Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2017)
20. Rae Johnson, *Grasping and Transforming the Embodied Experience of Oppression* in *International Body Psychotherapy Journal, The Art and Science of Somatic Practice* (California: Pacific Graduate Institute, 2014)
21. Julene Siddique and Peter Joseph, *The Social Architect: A New Framework for Effective Activism and Leadership* (To be Published in *Cadmus Journal* May 2021)
22. L. Calhoun, C. Park, and R. Tedeschi, (eds) *Post-Traumatic Growth: Positive Changes in the Aftermath of Crisis* (London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 1998)
23. Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute, accessed September 27, 2020, <https://sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org/>
24. Dance therapy is a large and growing area. Specialised forms of dance therapy are now widely available and accredited. Dance therapy for Parkinson’s is one form of specialised dance therapy. “Dance for Parkinson’s”, Dance for PD, accessed October 7, 2020 <https://danceforparkinsons.org/>
25. Peregrine Horden, *Music as Medicine: The History of Music Therapy since Antiquity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000). Also see Penelope Gouk, *Musical Healing in Cultural Contexts* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000)
26. Own Paul Karcher, *Sociopolitical Oppression, Trauma, and Healing: Moving Toward a Social Justice Art Therapy Framework* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2017)
27. Rae Johnson, *The Artful Body: A Narrative of an Embodied Relationship with the Arts*. in *The Quest for Meaning: Narratives of Teaching, Learning and the Arts* (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2009)

28. Mila Popovich and Julene Siddique, *Systemic Engagement of the Arts and Culture: A New Framework for Integral Transformative Strategies* (*Cadmus Journal*, Vol.4, Issue 3, November 2020)
29. Rae Johnson, *The Artful Body: A Narrative of an Embodied Relationship with the Arts. in The Quest for Meaning: Narratives of Teaching, Learning and the Arts* (Boston: Sense Publishers, 2009)
30. "Reclaiming the Radical Agenda: 7 Steps to a Radical Agenda" in Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development, A Critical and Radical Approach* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2020), 243-260
31. George Monbiot, *Out of the Wreckage: A New Politics for an Age of Crisis* (London: Verso, 2017)
32. Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development, A Critical and Radical Approach* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2020), 243-260
33. Julene Siddique and Peter Joseph, *The Social Architect: A New Framework for Effective Activism and Leadership* (To be published in *Cadmus Journal* May 2021)
34. Margaret Ledwith, *Community Development, A Critical and Radical Approach* (Bristol: Polity Press, 2020)
35. Socio-systemic science explains how to act on bio-social system leverage points in combination with Social Architects. See Julene Siddique and Peter Joseph, *The Social Architect: A New Framework for Effective Activism and Leadership* (To be published in *Cadmus journal* May 2021)