Rehearsing Power
Movement Practices
to Change the Future

Workshop Guide by
Eric John Olson and
Tamin Totzke
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Paul Goodman famously wrote, “Suppose you had the revolution you are talking and dreaming about. Suppose your side had won, and you had the kind of society that you wanted. How would you live, you personally, in that society? Start living that way now!” It’s an argument for tiny and temporary victories, and for the possibility of partial victories in the absence or even the impossibility of total victories. Total victory has always been a elusive goal and partial victories are about building a place where all the old past hierarchies and levels of deference have been dismantled. This was how the civil rights movement imagined that victory would take its shape in Americanrace relations, which is practically the same as in the history of society. It is impossible and will never come. It is something that has arrived incrementally, and often incrementally, but
Introduction

*Eric John Olson*

It can be hard to envision a hopeful future in politically dark times. People are overworked and stressed from a constant attack on civil liberties, rising income inequality, and impending climate disaster. Writers and researchers have responded to this hopelessness with frameworks that leverage today’s uncertainties to imagine tomorrow’s possibilities. Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown describe “visionary fiction” in their book *Octavia’s Brood* as the work that organizers and activists do when they struggle tirelessly to create and envision another world (brown & Imarisha, 2015). Max Haiven researches the “radical imagination,” writing that it’s a collective political imagination that brings dreams back from the future to inspire action today (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014). Yet, based on personal experiences, pointing to utopia without addressing sources of hopelessness can lead to a replication of systems of power, burnout, and despair.

This work grew out of a series of visioning workshops imagining a future where artists could be a force of anti-displacement instead of agents of gentrification. Working on these issues, while Seattle topped the lists of the fastest growing cities in the United States, led to feelings of hopelessness and eventual burnout. Recently, I have come to see this as indicative of “cruel optimism,” what Lauren Berlant analogizes as believing you are swimming towards a beautiful horizon, when in actuality you are “dog paddling around a space whose contours remain obscure” (Berlant, 2011). Hope on the horizon is not enough; we must also examine the systems of power that foreclose the future’s possibilities. “Rehearsing Power” sprang from the realization that in order to make headway and adjust the course toward an achievable future, we need to address the systems of oppression that created
experiences of shame held in the body and subconscious.

This workshop is an ongoing, participatory research project that examines how movement practices can shift one’s relationship with the future, and it identifies experience as source material to leverage for imagining and embodying tomorrow’s possibilities. It combines visioning tools, design thinking, anti-oppression, plus performance workshop techniques to provide a framework to explore how we can use our bodies to shift our relationship with hope.

This publication serves as a starting point that shares methods, movement scores, and resources to aid people interested in facilitating similar work with their own communities. Each iteration of the workshop is adapted in response to collaborators, participants, and institutional partners, creating a constantly evolving and shape-shifting process.

As we learn our way through this work we continually ask:

*How can past moments of hopelessness be leveraged to imagine new possibilities?*

*How can movement practices be used to change one’s relationship to the future?*

By formalizing our process and conversations in this publication, our hope is that this work can be used, adapted, and discussed by groups of friends, colleagues, artists, dancers, cooperatives, activists, unions, or any group that is working toward alternative visions of tomorrow.

Recently, I’ve been dreaming about what would change if people incorporated similar work into their daily routines. How could a daily exercise routine or moving meditation help someone process their past experiences of hopelessness or
disappointment? How would these practices shift a person’s capacity for risk or disappointment? If people continually took the time to identify points of power contributing to their feelings of hopelessness, how would their tactics to change the future adapt? Would individuals and collectives have more emotional capacity to take the necessary risks to create and live the revolution they have been talking about and dreaming of?


Movement and Facilitation

Movement practices are essential to this work. Our body has a natural way of processing difficult moments in our lives, but many times our inability to physically act or respond causes experiences to be lodged in the body. By engaging our nervous systems and examining past moments of hopelessness alongside longings for the future, our body can create new pathways for information to be processed. Through the continued, collective practice of vulnerability and activating our social engagement nervous systems, we can contribute to our resilience while making space for future hope and disappointment.

*In order to change, people need to become aware of their sensations and the way that their bodies interact with the world around them. Physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past.* —Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*

Generative Somatics describes: “The word somatics comes from the Greek root soma, which means ‘the living organism in its wholeness.’ It is the best word we have in English to understand human beings as an integrated mind/body/spirit, and as social, relational beings.” This workshop relies heavily on tools and techniques developed by somatic practitioners, more information can be found in the “Resources” section at the end of the publication.

As a facilitator, it is important to be aware of your role as a space-maker and holder. Exploring sources of hopelessness can bring up past trauma. This workshop relies on shared vulnerability between facilitators and participants to examine systems of oppression and sources of uncertainty. We have found it helpful to remind participants that they should try to honor their boundaries and question what feels appropriate to unpack, given the
constraints of a given workshop. Participants should be informed that they get to choose what they want to share and what they don’t, and that it is ok to enter or leave the conversation or space at any time.
Workshop

SUMMARY

OVERVIEW

Duration
2.5-3 hours

Space and Materials

In-Person Workshops

- Movable chairs
- Space to move around freely
- Writing implements
- Paper
- Timing device
- Optional Voting supplies (sticky notes and dots)
- Snacks are also encouraged

Online Workshops

- Computer with a webcam
- Zoom meeting software
- Space to move around
- Writing implements
- Paper

Timeline

20 minutes: Introduction
5-30 minutes: Uncertain Future
20 minutes: Grounding Movement
50 minutes: Visionary Futures
30 minutes: Rehearsal Movement
20 minutes: Documentation & Reflection

Introduction

Introduce the workshop to the group. Define community agreements for the duration of the workshop and take a moment to get to know one another.
Select or define which uncertain future the group will collectively explore in the workshop.

Guided movement practice that familiarizes the participants with their environments and works to settle the nervous system while acknowledging one another.

Each participant identifies past experiences that influenced their feelings about the future being workshopped. Collectively the group maps the forces of power that contributed to past feelings and roleplays ways power can be shifted to create the future they want to see. Individually, participants reflect on roleplayed scenarios and create instructions to enact the imagined future.

Guided movement practice is when participants find repeatable gestures to embody and enact their instructions for the future. Gestures are witnessed, shared, and rehearsed both individually and collectively.

The workshop ends with time for reflection, sharing movements, instructions, and time to imagine new possibilities that the future can hold.
At the start of a workshop or public event, we open with an acknowledgment of the Native land we are occupying. To read more about honoring Native land, please see the “Resources” section of this publication. Tamin and Eric are residing on the unceded territory of the Duwamish and Coast Salish peoples, and before starting each workshop we like to encourage people to look into how they can support Native communities still thriving on their traditional lands. Locally, we invite people to look into supporting the Duwamish Tribe by paying rent for the stolen land Seattle is built upon, people can find out more about this work at https://www.realrentduwamish.org.

The workshop begins with sharing the context and an overview of what will be covered, materials needed, participation expectations, and the time expectations to complete the workshop. The following is a past example:
Example Workshop Introduction

“It can be hard to envision a hopeful future in politically and culturally dark times. This workshop acknowledges that hopelessness in the future is rooted in past experiences that have foreclosed on what feels possible. This practice stems from the work and research of artists, choreographers, trauma therapists, writers, and organizers who speak to the power of body awareness and the radical imagination. In this workshop, we will leverage today’s uncertainties to imagine tomorrow’s possibilities.

Together we are going to create rehearsal instructions for the future. We start by mapping the past sources of hopeless feelings and then move to using our body’s innate ability to process stress and anxiety to ground ourselves while creating space for the imagination. Using tools from “Theater of the Oppressed,” we model sources of oppression and workshop how to shift power. Finally, we return to our bodies to find the movements we can do to rehearse these envisioned futures.”
GROUP AGREEMENTS

- Be Present Fully
- Assume Good Intent
- Watch
Another tool we use in our workshops is a list of group agreements that participants work to uphold during the time spent together. This gives people time to check in with their needs and expectations, while also giving space to listen to others. We find it helpful to offer suggestions or past examples to start the process while inviting participants to add their own. We also find that making time to do this is helpful both in-person and online.

Artist and social activist Maria del Carmen Montoya shares the following community agreements in classes she teaches:

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**Example Group Agreements from artist Maria Del Carmen Montoya**

1. Be fully present.
2. Assume good intent.
3. Watch your AIR TIME. Let 2 others speak before you speak again.
4. Experience discomfort.
5. Confidentiality of our stories.
6. Be aware of your power.
Depending on the number of participants present in the workshop, we break up the group into small groups due to time limitations. When hosting the workshop online, we use the Zoom meeting “Breakout Rooms” feature. These same groups will be returned to later in different parts of the workshop.

Each participant, including facilitators, are asked to share their name, pronouns (they/them, he/him, she/hers, etc.), and if their accessibility needs are met or not. Participants are also invited to answer an ice-breaker question.

**Example Ice Breaker**

*What is one thing that feels hopeful and one thing you wish you had more hope for?*

**More Information**

If you would like more information about stating pronouns or accessibility needs, please see the “Resources” section of this publication.

**STEP 2**

**UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

**Duration**

5-20 minutes

**Overview**

Each workshop attempts to address hopelessness or uncertainty in a particular collective future. Depending on the time limitations of the workshop and the group, we either select a future to workshop before the session, or we invite
participants to vote on a future. Voting is optional, and – either way – we work to create space to hold all the uncertainty people are feeling regarding the future.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OPTION A</th>
<th>VOTING ON A FUTURE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Materials</strong></td>
<td>5 sticky notes and 3 dot stickers for each participant.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overview</strong></td>
<td>One of the goals of this workshop is to get people to collectively dream of a possible future and how to enact it. Sources of hopelessness vary between individuals and stem from a multiplicity of lived experiences. In the past, we have found it helpful to vote on a single uncertain or hopeless feeling future to workshop together.</td>
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| **Past Examples** |  Gentrification and Displacement  
| |  COVID-19 Mutual Aid  
| |  Climate Change Crisis  
| |  Dismantling White Supremacy |

In an attempt to avoid groupthink that commonly occurs with brainstorming and group negotiation, we adapted a popular design-thinking methodology called “note and vote.”

| How it works | 1. Note: Each participant is handed a stack of sticky notes and takes 5 minutes to write down the top five |
uncertain or hopeless feeling futures they are interested in workshopping.

2. **Share:** Each person puts up their sticky notes on a wall, the facilitators work to help participants group notes around common themes. Facilitators, or one of the participants, announces the different possibilities to be voted on.

3. **Vote:** Each person gets 3 colored dot stickers to use as votes and can either place all votes on one option or spread them out across options however they see fit.

4. **Announce:** The facilitator tallies up the votes and announces which future will be workshopped.
After selecting a common uncertain future, we like to invite participants to shift the topic and make it more open if necessary. If anyone feels it doesn’t resonate with them, we ask: How can you change it to make it more yours?

**OPTION B**

**PREDETERMINED FUTURE**

**Duration** 5 minutes

**Overview** If you decide to workshop a predetermined future, the group should take a moment to talk about what they are collectively examining. In past workshops, people shared selected readings, presented organizing goals, or took a moment to discuss visions.

Uncertainty and hopelessness in a collective future can stem from a multiplicity of lived experiences. Before starting the movement work we try to create space for participants to share all the different sources of hopelessness they are holding and we take a moment to reflect on what was shared.

**STEP 3**

**GROUNDING MOVEMENT**

**Duration** 20 minutes

**Overview** The different movement scores in this workshop are similar to guided movement explorations found in
somatic, improvisation, and composition movement-based classes.

- Awareness to the internal body experience
- Bring attention to the environment
- Connect with eachother in the room
- Create a container of comfort and support

Goals

- Body Scan
- Authentic Movement
- Image-based movement explorations
- Engaging the Interoception and Proprioception Senses
- Contact Improvisation Scores (i.e. Steve Paxton’s Small Dance Score)

Techniques and Scores
Example of Grounding Movement Instructions

Lie on the floor and bring your attention to a place in your body that feels relaxed and able to rest down into the floor. This place might be your heel, elbow, or back of your head.

When you find this place in your body, notice your whole body’s experience of that relaxation. Find another place in the body that also feels relaxed. Notice how these two, relaxed places are supported by the floor. What sensations do you notice in your body?

Then find a place in the body that is holding tension or a contraction. When you arrive there, observe this place with curiosity. Notice the tension. Does it increase, decrease, or stay the same?

Keep your attention here. Be curious about what this area of the body needs. Does it need movement? Does it need breath?

Begin to follow any impulse for movement. Is this movement a rocking, a stretch or lengthening, or a rolling of the head on the floor from side to side? What’s the body’s experience of following this impulse? Is there another layer of settling in the body or relaxing, or breath?
Continue following your movement impulses as they arise. This could be reaching up towards the ceiling or pressing into the floor with your feet. What is your body’s experience of this movement?

We’ll begin to move towards a standing position, but first stay in the middle range, moving through table position (on hands and knees) into a sitting, squat, or crouched position. Crawling, rocking, reaching, as we move to standing. Find actions that feel really good in your body. It could be a stretch or a shake or a rock. Follow that goodness. How is your body communicating to you that this is good, that this needs to happen? Checking into the place in the body that held tension, what is that like now?

Eventually, arrive standing, taking as much time as necessary to get there. Continue to move following movement impulses that lead us into actions and gestures. There’s no wrong way to do this. Can you turn off the critical voice that might be getting in the way of your experience and trust that your body knows how to move?

Once standing let your eyes be drawn to seeing around the room. Your eyes can lead your head. What do you notice about your environment? Continue to move through the room, continue to see your space (i.e.
textures, architecture, light, a corner). How does your body respond to noticing the room?

How can you now move in relationship to the room, the architecture, the light, the texture, etc.? What is it like to reach, wall to wall? What is it like to trace your environment with your body, such as using your eyes, your limbs, your toes, your rib cage? Can you travel to a wall and press into this architecture? What is this experience in your body? In your bones? Explore this evolution of the evolving dance, by continuing to move, following impulse and trusting the body.

Start to slow your dance down and eventually arrive standing in stillness with your eyes closed. Feel the subtle sensations of rocking side to side. Notice what this is like in your body. The body never is completely still, there is always some form of micro movements. What is it like to notice this subtle motion? With this you can open up your eyes and come back to the group. Take this whole experience with you. Stand to look at each other for a few moments.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STEP 4</th>
<th>VISIONARY FUTURES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PART I</strong></td>
<td>PAST SOURCES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
<td>10 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>The first part of building visionary futures is to map past sources of hopelessness. Before prompting participants to map their past sources of hopelessness, we invite them to check in with their boundaries and to try to select an experience they don’t mind sharing and collectively workshop with people they might not know well.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Writing Prompt</strong></td>
<td>Free write a personal narrative based on a past moment that reinforced feelings of hopelessness in the voted-upon future.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>PART II</strong></td>
<td>REIMAGINING POSSIBILITY</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Duration</strong></td>
<td>30 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Description</strong></td>
<td>Inspired by a popular Theater of the Oppressed exercise titled “Image Theater” (Resources &gt; Theater of the Oppressed for more info), the small groups will workshop each others’ past experiences and work to reimagine them as visions of a possible future that would have reinforced hope.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Facilitator Note</strong></td>
<td>Given the time it takes to collectively freeze-frame participants’ experiences, it is best to break larger groups into...</td>
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Levana Saxon describes the inspiration for this step in *Beautiful Trouble* as:

“Image theater, a social change tool developed by Augusto Boal, is one of the more widely used forms of Theater of the Oppressed, in which activists, students or any group are invited to form statues that represent a moment in time of an oppressive situation. The image can then serve as a springboard for critical group reflection in order to both understand the situation better and to try out possible solutions.”

smaller groups of around 5 people for this part of the workshop. We try to use the same group we used in the introduction so that people can build on previous relationships.

**Procedure**

Each participant shares their personal narrative while others in their group work to model and visualize the story with their bodies – representing different actors and oppressive systems creating or contributing to the storyteller’s experience. The small groups can ask themselves: Who are the actors, both people and systems, in the story? How are they exerting their power over the narrator? Which actors in the image are in a position of power to shift the narrative?

Once the frozen image is created, the narrator can move actors around to best complete the image in their memory. Once complete, small group participants will work together to suggest possible shifts to the image that would have created a moment free of the different oppressive forces, or one that would have instilled hope in the future possibilities instead of hopelessness.

**PART III**

**FUTURE INSTRUCTIONS**

**Duration**

10 minutes

**Description**

After everyone has finished sharing and
reimagining the past, we find it helpful to give participants a couple minutes to lay back and dream about their new personal visionary fictions before moving into the writing prompt.

Remap your personal narrative into a personal visionary fiction where your past was free of the oppressive forces that caused the feelings of hopelessness. Write instructions on how someone can create that new moment for others in the future.
**STEP 5**

**REHEARSAL MOVEMENT**

**Duration**

30 minutes

**Overview**

In the rehearsal movement step, we invite participants to find repeatable gestures to practice the future. The score culminates in witnessing each other’s movements and then collectively performing them together. The goal is for participants to enact their visions of the future through movement, create a shared experience, see each other’s moments of hope, and connect one’s desires with the sensations in their body.

**Techniques and Scores**

- Choreographic Movement Tools (e.g. speed, weight, etc.)
- Create a Movement Phrase (a repeatable set of gestures)
- Ensemble Improvisation Scores
  - Lower Left’s Ensemble Thinking
  - AVID
  - Other resources found in the “Resources” section
- Contact Improvisation (More information at Contact Quarterly)
- Authentic Movement (More about authentic movement)
Example of Rehearsal Movement Instructions

Keep the instructions that we just documented close by, in case you need to refer back to them. Let’s come back into our bodies with some easy movement, such as walking through the room, looking around, stretching, rolling through your spine, etc. Notice what your body is needing. While you are moving, begin to remember your list of instructions that you created.

Choose one instruction from your list that you want to physicalize into action. Bring this movement into your body. For example, if my instruction was to offer a hand to someone, my action could be to extend an arm, reach it forward and take a few steps. Your actions and gestures can be literal or abstract. Notice if this instruction requires a push or pull. Does this action travel through the room? What does it look like from the outside? Be really curious about this set of actions. Now, get to know what they feel like on the inside. Do they feel powerful? Strong? Centered? Or...?

Without losing the first physicalized set of actions, find another instruction from your writing. Begin to develop actions for this instruction as you did for the first instruction.

Now you have two sets of gestures/actions
that we are going to link together. Maybe there is a movement between these actions, like a grasping, a hugging, a pull, or a jump. As you continue to explore, you will add one more set of actions from your list of instructions. There will be a total of 3 physicalized instructions that will be linked together to create a movement phrase (a repeatable set of movements.)

As you’re moving through this movement phrase, notice your body’s experience of this phrase. Let this phrase evolve, let it become abstract, letting your body begin to create meaning or story from this phrase. What happens if some parts are quicker or slower? Or for certain gestures to be repetitive?

Continue to move through your phrase while opening your awareness to the others on your screen and notice the group around you. You might notice that you share similar movements with others, or that your movements may be in contrast. Notice what it’s like to be moving and connecting with others. While we are moving, someone is going to initiate a pause where we all come to stillness. Then someone will begin to move, and the whole group will continue moving together again. We will cycle through moving and pausing a few times then finally ending in pause.
STEP 6  DOCUMENTATION & REFLECTION

Duration  20 minutes

Overview  We find it inspiring at the end of workshops to share instructions and movements created with the group. Past workshops have used lots of methods from generating protest signs to rehearsal instructions, to objectives and actions to take to practice and enact the future.
In all examples, we invite people to at least share:

1. A short summary of the past source of hopelessness
2. Instructions on how to enact the future visions
3. Movement gestures that correspond to their instructions for the future

How did the rehearsal feel in your body?

What did you see?

Did anything shift in your feelings towards the future?

To close the workshop we ask people to share their instructions to create the future. For the online workshop, we invite people to email the hosts and their instructions so that they can be disseminated to all participants.

Participants share any final words or thoughts and as facilitators we thank everyone for their vulnerability and participation.
Discussion

A dialogue with Eric John Olson and Tamin Totzke

ERIC: Let’s start talking about some of the workshop’s foundations and sources of inspiration. I’m interested in your experience as a somatic experiencing practitioner. When did you first learn about it and start practicing it?

TAMIN: I was in my MFA program for dance at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign when I really started to become interested in trauma. How the body holds trauma and how trauma drives behavior, action, and thought. I spent my whole graduate program researching trauma then weaving it into my writing and my choreographic practice. Initially, when I entered grad school I had planned to continue following a career in academia, but that vision took a sharp turn when I discovered the field of Somatic Psychology. After I graduated, I began researching somatic psychology modalities and found Somatic Experiencing. It felt like a homecoming. This path felt so completely right that I returned to graduate school to complete a MA in Counseling to, in a way, legitimize my Somatic Experiencing practice.

ERIC: Were you also exploring your own sources of trauma and how it manifests, or was it more of an exploration of the program’s culture? Can you give me an example?

TAMIN: It was sort of all of that. The culture of the MFA program was definitely disturbing, but I began to look more at my own history. My graduate thesis and choreographic work was centered around my own experiences of trauma, which in my case I focused on the chronic pain I’ve had in my legs my entire life. During my graduate program, I explored how the abnormality of my leg structure led me through my dance training in a really particular way, moving me away from traditional ballet training and towards
dance practices like improvisation, somatic release-techniques, and contact improvisation. These practices gave me the tactile experience to develop a technical understanding of my body. My legs needed the physical, immediate feedback of relating to tactile surfaces, such as in sharing weight in contact improvisation and negotiating momentum/falling in release techniques, to understand the necessary structural organization for a particular task.

Somatic practices gave me the skills to fine-tune my internal awareness, plus become curious about how my own body moved, how it could move, and what was possible. So yes, my own past trauma has hugely informed my path as a choreographer and somatic practitioner.

ERIC: This makes me think of a question that comes up often. Many people have inhibitions around their bodies, especially in regards to dance or somatic movement. Who is this kind of work for?

TAMIN: It’s for anybody and everybody. Anybody who has a body. So then that’s everybody, right? We all have some sort of experiences that are still held in our system and are still telling the story. Just the act of going internal and being curious allows the body to move, there’s so much intelligence in that for people to tap into. AND there no wrong or right way for this to happen. We each will have a unique experience of how our bodies want to move.

ERIC: Do you feel like people need a certain experience to do that type of work?

TAMIN: No. I don’t think so at all. I think there’s an assumption people have that they need a certain training to be able to move their bodies, or dance. I rarely use the word dance because it’s so weighted and people are automatically like, “I can’t dance,” or “I can’t move” or “I can’t do that.” Ah, but you can.

It reminds me of when I used to teach in academia. My
favorite classes to teach were non-major dance classes for this reason. It’s incredible to see people who held this notion of, “I’m not a mover, I’m not a dancer”, start to inhabit their bodies. It’s amazing to watch someone come alive in themselves and realize the capacity that they have to do that. It’s a really profound thing to witness.

ERIC: I’ve had the exact same experience in classes I’ve taken! Lately, I have been reflecting on this workshop and its early sources of inspiration. In the past, I found myself stuck in a cycle of dreaming for some radical change, trying to use art and activism to respond to it, and then running up against a wall of doubt, skepticism, or hopelessness, especially when doing work around gentrification and displacement.

At first, I thought it was a personal problem, the residuals of past childhood trauma from growing up in a working-poor family with lots of mental illness. But as I continued to do the work and interview others I found that it was more of a shared experience between people working for social change. It wasn’t that we just needed more optimism or magical thinking. At the same time, I was also working on more personal projects around reenactment and loss. You actually introduced me to the idea of somatics; later we worked together with Tia Kramer on a movement-based project at the Seattle Art Museum Sculpture Park, and after that, I started taking somatic movement workshops with both you and other practitioners.

All this work led to a light-bulb of curiosity going off in my head questioning: “If somatic practices can change one’s relationship with difficult or traumatic pasts, can it also change one’s relationship to hopeless feeling futures?”

What are your thoughts on that early question?

TAMIN: Yes, I do know that’s possible. And you just named it, too. Through somatic practice, we can renegotiate our experiences of the past. When we think about the nervous system, there’s no time stamp that says, “Hey, this happened four years ago. Let’s leave it behind, let’s move on.” The body doesn’t do that. Traumatic
experiences that have occurred in the past can continue to run their story. Renegotiating them can change your system’s response to your experience of yourself, your body and your environment. I do think we touch on that in the workshop.

We look at the past as a way to make a bridge to the future. It’s those working in tandem. We acknowledge the body and let it play out what it needs for a renegotiation of a new experience. We continue this work through shared experience, through dialogue, through moving together, and later into seeing one another and being witnessed. We share what we want the future to be. And then we begin to embody those future possibilities, which solidifies this whole arc.

ERIC: Exactly. And I think that is why I think the project has shifted from being just about the future into this idea of rehearsing a shift in power. Imagining how we can shift the power in past experiences to create the future we want to see. Trying to see how you can hold both the past feelings of hopelessness in your body, and also the shared visions for different futures. You once mentioned to me there is this idea of pendulation in somatic experiencing?

TAMIN: It’s almost like by changing the association to that thing, it changes the past, present, and future. Regarding your question about somatic experiencing, if we have this experience that we’re wanting to move with, whether it’s dismantling white supremacy or addressing anxiety around COVID, we set the tone where people first feel safe in their bodies. People can feel safe in the room. Granted, even the word “safe” has roots in white supremacy. Is there a more inclusive word?

We create community agreements for being in the room together, where hopefully there can exist a semblance of safety to look inside, to feel into the body and first notice the calming or settling of the nervous system. Then we ask questions about what feels challenging, what feels activating, and invite people to notice that activation. This is “pendulation” like a pendulum swinging back and forth, the nervous system moves from deactivation to
activation. Again, first notice the nervous system settling, then we acknowledge and notice there is also activation present on one side of the arc, and we give this space to once again find a calm or settling state to swing back the other way. This process can create more capacity for someone to be with an uncomfortable experience or challenge. So if we’re examining a challenging moment of the past, we’ve created a structure to be with that experience and not get stuck there. A person then can also have more capacity to be with any new visions of the future. So we build capacity on both ends. Is that making sense? Also to note, we aren’t asking people to focus on major life traumas, but instead envisioning futures that can hold a sense of hope.

ERIC: At the same time, I think we all have an innate capacity for resilience. But we don’t always get the chance to go back and reflect on when we were in an activated state of “fight or flight.” To go back and reflect, and then bring awareness to our bodies and our natural ability to be resilient.

After starting this work, there was a big shift in my thinking. At first, I was imagining the past and future as separate things to address. Then there was this realization that the reason we’re hopeless in the future is because moments in our past foreclosed on its possibilities, be it trauma, moments of crisis, or just deep feelings of disappointment.

In all those experiences, we build up walls and we aren’t allowed to move through or past them to where our bodies and imaginations want to go. It’s also interesting that when you continually run into walls, even if there is eventually an opening, you might not try it because it doesn’t seem worth it to be disappointed again.

TAMIN: Right, exactly. It’s not built into our society to say, “Hey, take some time for yourself, take time and get support or take some time to acknowledge that we actually have bodies that are incredibly intelligent.” Our society is saying, “Hey, get back on your feet. Keep going, keep going.”
ERIC: Those same systems of white supremacy that push us to keep on going, push us to not question power, and stay productive. They keep reinforcing the cultural myths of meritocracy and individualism. At the same time, I’m also interested in talking about the importance of a collective experience. It’s one thing to do this work by ourselves, or in one-on-one therapy. But I’m wondering if you could talk a little about the social engagement system and collective or shared experiences?

TAMIN: Well, if we think about trauma, trauma (specifically PTSD) most likely happens because there’s been some sort of relationship breach. If there’s a traumatic experience and somebody shows up to validate, listen, or hold space during that immediate experience, PTSD is less likely to happen. But if there’s an experience and nobody shows up for that person – or believes them when an incident is reported – then PTSD can be more likely to occur. So trauma happens in relationships. Therefore, the renegotiation of trauma also happens in a relationship, a stabilizing supportive relationship. These relationships can be drawn from shared or collective experiences.

The Social Engagement System (SES), is the part of the nervous system that is wired for social interaction. The SES anatomically consists of eyes, ears, larynx, cranial nerves, and the torso above the diaphragm. It’s both receptive and expressive, picking up cues from other people such as body language, tone of voice, and facial expression while also expressing our own disposition. When we are out in public the SES is constantly assessing for danger, but if the SES notices that people are smiling or relaxed, then our systems remain calm by recognizing there’s no danger present. This is all nonverbal communication. Again, however, this is a generalized statement, BIPOC can have a very different experience where their SES can feel constantly under threat due to the nature of systemic oppression.

With intentional, shared, or collective experiences, the SES allows us to tune into being in community with people and feel, “I can relax here. I can belong here,” then the nervous system moves
towards settling. Co-regulation can begin to happen as well, where all the individual systems in the room begin to ping off one another a sense of safety, letting the group nervous system begin to regulate. In a shared or collective experience there becomes a foundation for relating and creating common language that can feel powerful. Ugh, I love that experience! In other words, having a sense of camaraderie, that we’re all here in this together.

ERIC: I think that’s why I feel it’s important in the workshop to collectively examine just one difficult, uncertain, or hopeless future together. Even though we have all of our individual experiences where we felt a lack of agency, we can share disappointments and feelings of powerlessness together. We can try to explore it collectively because our individual experiences can be shared. And also our imagination for the future and how we can see each other rehearse it with bodies in nonverbal ways can be shared. I think witnessing each other just feels powerful in those moments.

TAMIN: Yeah, totally, we don’t have to hold those disappointments and feelings of powerlessness alone. Going back to the felt sense that we’re in this together, I think this feeling is really held in the room when we’re in the workshop. And yeah, wow, witnessing is powerful and it can be really vulnerable in those moments as well, for sure. Hopefully, that feeling of vulnerability is then met with camaraderie and support from the other participants. Then vulnerability can hopefully turn into empowerment in sensing that we do have agency to change our futures from hopelessness to hope. It’s pretty amazing to witness this transformation in the room (or Zoom) – to see someone experience this hope in their own body, then watch as it’s shared and held by the whole group, then feel how the collective energy of the group amplifies and solidifies this feeling of hope filled future.

ERIC: It’s funny because I always go into projects dreaming of fully collaborative and cooperative work, yet every time I initiate that kind of work, it becomes really, really difficult. I think that’s why intentionally crafted containers are helpful in approaching
collective work. On the other hand, I truly believe if you can do this work and suspend your disbelief for even a moment, it can really show you a glimpse of what’s possible. And I actually don’t know if it needs to be real all the time. Utopia is not really something we can exist in, it’s actually “no place” or some guiding force we are working towards on the horizon. I’m really interested in a way that we can create these temporary systems, these temporary networks of trust.

Maybe through continued practice, long and meaningful relationships can be created where people become friends, community, or even responsible for one another. Though most of the time it doesn’t. Yet, is there a way to practice that? I think that’s why this whole workshop is about rehearsal. It’s about practicing, and the value of imagining and embodying shifts in power. It might feel fruitless to say, “Oh, let’s rehearse some utopia or impossible future.” But I just keep looking at all the amazing and positive responses we get from it and people trying.

TAMIN: But we can imagine our own utopia and tune into the felt sense of that place and what that place would feel like in our bodies. Imagination is a powerful way to work with the nervous system, so being in the imagination channel or imaging utopia, would allow the body to experience the realness of that place. Imagining and embodying an idea or vision sets the possibility in motion to shift our internal and external experience. Rehearsing the future becomes like priming the person and their nervous system to hold the reality and feel a sense of possibility and hope that that the envisioned future can actually happen. And people aren’t holding this hope alone; again, they are holding it with a group of humans who are validating and encouraging one another’s visions. And yes, yes, yes, incredible relationships can be built from such a shared journey with other humans.
Documentation

The following narratives and images are meant to serve as examples of work done in past workshops.
Organizing for Independent Artist Relief and an Equitable Distribution of Resources in a Pandemic

The first examples are movement instructions created during a workshop with a horizontal coalition of artists and organizers that formed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their goal was to advance the self-determination of their communities through an equitable distribution of relief resources. In their mission statement they write:

“We recognize the immediate and devastating impact of COVID-19 on artists as indicative of historic, widespread systemic failure under capitalism to honor the role and intrinsic value of art in the lives of individuals and communities, and to equitably compensate for that labor.

We recognize the disparate experience of impact to artists and disparate access to information and relief resources in our communities as the result of longstanding inequities in broader systems of education, technology/creative industries, and philanthropy/non-profit industrial complex.

We are coming together as artists, cultural workers, and community organizers to fill gaps in service, access, and resources for the most vulnerable among us, and through these efforts seek to facilitate holistic analysis and systemic change in our city towards a more equitable and community-rooted creative ecosystem that provides for all.”

The following narratives and movements are paraphrased and meant to serve only as examples.
Past Narrative: Feeling inadequate to step up into organizing a leadership role. Pressure from people questioning position or worthiness. Being gaslit and dismissed by people in roles of power and representing oppressive institutions.

1. Relax, center myself, root into the earth.

2. Open up and expand my heart and mind to new possibilities. Take up space.

3. Shake off any haters, you got this.

4. Forgive myself for my mistakes. Forgive others and keep pushing forward.
Past Narrative: Being overwhelmed by the work of organizing against institutional power. Countless opportunities for systemic change, met with meeting after meeting, and a number of hollow promises. Exhausting pace due to the immediacy of need.

1. Search and find what actions I can emotionally handle each day.

2. Step up and pull myself into the opportunities.

3. Explore those actions fully, try to leverage the opportunities to the best of my abilities.
Past Narrative: Feeling new to organizing and uncertain about what my role is and how I can best use my time and skills to help work towards the coalition’s goals.

1. Reach out to artists, organizers, and institutions and invite them in to our work.

2. Bring people together and connect them with one another. Build relationships and trust.

3. Actively listen, put my whole body into it, to hear what people need and want to change.
Toxic Political Environment’s Impact on Hope in the Future

During an early iteration of the workshop, a group of artists and cultural workers with no somatic movement experience came together to workshop hopelessness in the future. Participants used the first part of the workshop to discuss their uncertainty in the future, and, ultimately voted to workshop their feelings and experiences surrounding toxic white supremacy and the political climate under Trump’s presidency.

The following posters were designed based on instructions created in the workshop and are paired with past experiences that contributed to the feelings of hopelessness.
“For four, recent years of my professional life, I and several of my dearest colleagues-now-friends had a Donald Trump-caliber figure as a boss and coworker at an arts nonprofit organization. He exuded a toxic masculinity more venomous than a cobra, bullying brutishness more embraced than a love language, and sexual predatory behaviors more traumatic than a concussion. My hopelessness about disrupting toxic masculinity stems from power-grabbing and power-stabbing opportunists like him who boastfully claim in open offices, “I will destroy anyone who gets in my way.” It also stems from the fact his career thrived in tandem with his scaffolded misogyny and sexual harassment while my female colleagues endured statements like, “I can only work with women who are ‘unfuckable’ or else I’ll be tempted to sleep with them.” The irony is that he was working on his debut memoir about his journey to help dismantle the culture of toxic masculinity. I think about how these toxic figures will be stopped, but with a president like #45, even liberal, mid-thirties-aged men – who somehow survived the #metoo movement – are still thriving off the exploitation of others.”
REMEMBER!

BRIAN CAN

BEAT US DOWN

BUT HE CAN'T BEAT US TOGETHER!
“Every winter my dad would get laid off from his job as a construction worker. My family would struggle to make ends meet while getting government assistance, food stamps, and charity from our church. Even though both of his parents were immigrants, he blamed his employment precarity on similarly precarious undocumented migrant workers.”
OLE!
BUILD
A BRIDGE TO
ORGANIZE
YOUR LABOR
“I grew up hearing my immigrant parents extol the virtue of hard work and discipline, instilling within me the value of meritocracy on a daily basis long before I ever heard the term. By the time I was in the eighth grade, this belief system was so deeply ingrained that when assigned an essay defending or arguing against affirmative action, I fervently argued against it, believing it wasn’t fair to those who worked hard (like my immigrant parents), and those who didn’t succeed just lacked discipline. It took me many years to question and critically examine this belief, and even longer to understand the nuance of privilege.”
DEAR MOM

IT IS NOT A

LEVEL

PLAYING FIELD
Resources

It is essential for us to acknowledge and recognize that all of these ideas, scores, and tools have been borrowed, inspired by, or deeply influenced by the sweat and labor of others. Below is a non-exhaustive collection of references, resources, and suggested readings of our influences. Links to the following resources can also be found at rehearsingpower.com.

Readings on art, activism, dance, performance, and somatics:

- Dance and the Lived Body: A Descriptive Aesthetics, Sondra Fraleigh, 1996.
- Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Paulo Freire, 2005.

Group work resources:

- Beautiful Trouble & Beautiful Rising
- Community Agreements
- Design Kit
- Game Storming
- Gender Pronouns
- Holding Space
- Honoring Native Land
- Native Land
- Study Center for Group Work
ERIC JOHN OLSON is an artist, technologist, and educator. His work explores systems of power and their relationship to lived experiences through interdisciplinary and socially engaged art practices. He collaborates with artists, performers, organizers, and community members to co-create projects and conduct participatory research. Recent work has examined hopelessness, movement, participation, displacement, and intergenerational exchange. Olson’s art has been supported by the Seattle Art Museum OSP Residency, MadArt Studios, Seattle Office of Arts & Culture, Eichholz Foundation, 4Culture, The Seattle Public Library Foundation, and other arts and civic organizations. His projects have been written about in The Seattle Times, Vice Magazine, The Stranger, and others.

TAMIN TOTZKE is a dance artist, educator, and Somatic Experiencing practitioner, whose work is rooted in her fascination with the body as an archival site of personal history. She is co-founder of the “Resiliency Project” with her collaborator, Amelia Reeber, which is a workshop blending movement, creative process, and performance practices that aims to enliven connection to ourselves within a shared experience with others. Tamin also performs and teaches with the Seattle-based dance company, AVID, who prioritize live-dance making through their refined improvisation practice. She holds an MFA from the University of Illinois and MA (LMFTA) from the Antioch University; her work has been funded by organizations such as 4Culture, Artists Trust, Duwamish Revealed and Knowles Fellowship.