

Structure, Function, Integration.

Journal of the
Dr. Ida Rolf Institute®

August 2021

Trauma, Self-Regulation, and Embodiment

The process of Rolfing® Structural Integration (SI) becoming trauma-informed work began in the late 1970s influenced by the work of Dr. Peter Levine and Dr. Anngwyn St. Just, and later Dr. Stephen Porges. The conversation is ongoing as we explore the connection between disorganized bodies and traumatic experience, and the way to trauma resolution as part of the holistic process of integration. We share a wide array of articles, including interviews with Porges and St. Just.

Also in this issue

Joining the Dialogue about Diversity and Inclusion

We share the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute® diversity and inclusion statement as well as articles from SI practitioner group 'liberation somatics' including explorations of Whiteness and White privilege in a somatic context and a consideration of equitable economics in Rolfing SI.

It's a Family Affair

Thoughts from Rolfers® married to other Rolfers. Marrying into Ida Rolf's family. Osteopath Frances Demmerle reflects on her grandmother Ida Rolf.

Introducing Liberation Somatics

SI Practitioners Organizing to Examine Racial Biases

By Organizers of Liberation Somatics

In the wake of the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, as well as the subsequent amplification of the Black Lives Matter movement, our colleague Ryan Hofer put out a call to structural integration (SI) practitioners interested in examining racial biases and overtones within ourselves, our practices, our communities, and institutions. This blossomed into Liberation Somatics, a collectively-organized group of SI and somatics practitioners engaging our community around issues of racial, social, and economic justice. Liberation Somatics supports a generous questioning of internalized and institutionalized biases and beliefs, we encourage our community to participate in exploring the previously unquestioned relationship of Rolfing® SI and anti-oppression. The following three articles, written by members of Liberation Somatics, are examples of such inquiries. Head to our website, where you can find resource lists and information on joining us for meetings and supporting our upcoming projects.

www.liberationsomatics.org

A Phenomenology of Whiteness in Rolwing® SI

By Tristan Koepke, Certified Rolfer®



Tristan Koepke

ABSTRACT *This paper discusses aesthetic and phenomenological philosophies as a lens to understand and discuss Rolwing Structural Integration (SI) and its relationship to orientation, neutrality, and Whiteness. Three primary understandings of orientation are discussed to investigate the aesthetic standards SI upholds, and the racialized implications of such standards. The first orientation relates directly to the work of Dr. Ida Rolf and Kevin Frank. The second, integral to this work, relates to scholar Sara Ahmed's explication of phenomenological orientation. Finally, the work of aesthetic philosopher Robin James explores how these models of orientation illuminate the ways SI may uphold Eurocentric hegemony. This paper outlines these orientations as an invitation to practitioners of SI, as well as all somatic educators and explorers to challenge their own understandings and assumptions of what a well-structured human should be. Questions are offered that may help somatic educators and scholars to question the ways in which they may, unknowingly, uphold Eurocentric hegemony in their philosophy and praxis. The author discusses his experience training as a Rolfer, and as a professional dancer and dance scholar, putting into conversation SI theories that are academic, somatic, and personal.*

Aesthetic taste, directed by implicit social cognition, dictates a standardization of what a structurally integrated body should look like.

The Horizon

In this paper I discuss aesthetic and phenomenological philosophies as a lens to understand and discuss Rolwing Structural Integration (SI) and its relationship to orientation, neutrality, and Whiteness¹. I investigate the aesthetic standards SI upholds, and the racialized implications of such standards. I offer three primary understandings of orientation in order to complicate and expand upon its predominant usage by Rolfers. The first, in relation to the work of Dr. Ida Rolf and Kevin Frank. The second, integral to this work, relates to scholar Sara Ahmed's explication of phenomenological orientation. Finally, I employ the work of aesthetic philosopher Robin James, and explore how these models of orientation illuminate the ways SI may uphold Eurocentric hegemony. This is not a *calling out* so much as a *calling in*; I invite practitioners of SI, as well as all somatic educators and explorers, to challenge their own understandings and assumptions of what a well-structured human should be. I offer questions that may help somatic educators and scholars to question the ways in which they may, unknowingly, uphold Eurocentric hegemony in their philosophy and praxis. As I weave my argument, I discuss my experience training as a Rolfer, and as a professional dancer and dance scholar. At present, SI as a field encompasses many different approaches and methodologies that share a common lineage. SI practitioners currently cross-pollinate their practices with additional somatic practices, such as The Feldenkrais Method[®], yoga, Pilates, and Somatic Experiencing[®]. In this tradition, this paper is also a cross-pollination, putting into conversation SI theories that are academic, somatic, and personal.

Orientation

In 2015, I paused my career in contemporary dance performance and began my formal training to study SI at what is now called the Dr. Ida Rolf Institute[®] (DIRI, having been renamed from the

Rolf Institute[®] of Structural Integration in 2018). SI is a collection of manual therapy, myofascial manipulation, and movement practices developed and taught by Rolf throughout the 1940s-1970s². Rolwing SI aims to “enhance function by changing structure,” and as such, supports the human body's ongoing and lifelong process of coordination, balance, and ease (Feitis, in the introduction to Rolf 1978, 5). SI is, essentially, a continuous questioning of two hypotheses (Koepeke 2020): In what ways can the structure of a human change and evolve into a more graceful and coordinated relationship with gravity? Do coordinated structural relationships within the soma create a more positive experience of living for a human?

As noted, SI today is a diverse field of practices, which all share roots in these initial teachings of Rolf³. Rolf passed away in 1979, yet her presence is still felt in the DIRI classroom as the oral tradition of her work continues (Dr. Ida Rolf Institute 2020, International Association of Structural Integrators 2020). Many anecdotes about her teachings are shared, some of them inspiring and intriguing, many of them strange. At one point in my training, during a lesson on psoas function and the human body's tendency to prefer either groundedness or lift, I heard for the first time that Rolf was an enormous fan of Fred Astaire's dancing, saying at least once that he was the only human she knew of that didn't need SI⁴. Although I can't find a direct quote in any text, it is widely accepted as truth that she upheld him as a sort of physical and energetic ideal (Corwin 2012).

Rolf's aesthetic taste and preferences are still found in the teachings. Contemporary research definitively demonstrates how bias, both implicit and explicit, is present in all education (Payne and Gawronski 2010). Explicit bias refers to conscious beliefs, usually expressed directly about a person or group of people, while implicit bias operates on an unconscious level. Both affect taste and preference. I bring up the example of Rolf and Astaire not to discount the importance and efficacy of SI or Rolf's teaching, but instead to

interrogate the ways in which this aesthetic taste, directed by implicit social cognition, dictates a standardization of what a structurally integrated body should look like. This interrogation is, at its heart, built out of love for the work, its progressive nature, and its bountiful future.

Gravity

Rolf stated that “the wonders of Rolwing [SI] occur because of gravity. Gravity is the therapist” (Dr. Ida Rolf Institute 2020). Gravity, the force of attraction between any two masses, is a constant in physical reality. Common understanding of gravity, the downward pull experienced by humans, is the primary organizing principle in SI. As humans learn to understand and create their world through movement and action, they experience context and space first through a phenomenological observation of gravity. Rolfer and Rolf Movement[®] Instructor Kevin Frank states, “Gravity is at the heart of how we build the world” (Frank 2007, 28). All sensation and perception of the human body in movement begins with the understanding that gravity is present. Gravity is sensed, felt, given in to, and pushed against. Gravity is a given, a phenomenological assumption, an *orientation*. Frank defines orientation as a “dynamic background event,” and as such, the perception of gravity guides and directs the experience of a body, proprioceptively, exteroceptively, and interoceptively (Frank 2007, 27). Orientation is the pre-movement that guides action and posture, described by Hubert Godard as the “crystallization of attitude” (Frank 2007, 27). An orientation towards gravity as a means to ‘uprightedness’ is the backdrop of all SI. This model of perception as driving posture and experience leads to an understanding of context, the world-inhabited, affecting the shape and movement of a body.

Let's return to Rolf's affinity for Fred Astaire. Throughout his illustrious career as an acclaimed tap dancer on the stage and Hollywood film sets, Astaire appears light and springy. His elegance is based upon his ability to skim across the earth, and into the air, seemingly unaffected by the downward drag of gravity. As he moves throughout his various works, he maintains a long vertical axis, what I will refer to as upright posture, or uprightedness (MsMojo 2018). Rolfers call this ‘the Line’ (Maupin 2014). Dancer and scholar Onye Ozuzu, in her illuminating TedTalk “Technologies of the Body,” describes such upright posture

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as a Europeanist condition based upon utility, necessity, and demonstrations of power and righteousness (Ozuzu 2012). Uprightness is of course not limited to Europeanist cultures or concerns, however the distinct pursuit and assertion of uprightedness as righteous and harmonious is, in this case, racialized as White. I employ Sara Ahmed's notion of a phenomenology of Whiteness as a framework for understanding the goal of uprightedness as a specific racialized orientation within SI. Ahmed describes this phenomenology as an orientation towards White experience and standards.

White phenomenology builds the backdrop of pre-movement that focuses and directs a human body towards culturally inherited habits, traits, and technologies, or *ways of moving* that are based upon colonial assertion and assimilation. The sensorium of a White phenomenological body is fixed on White standards and affectations, and calls a body towards action. From here on in, I will refer to Europeanist uprightedness as White colonial uprighting. Rolf, in her assertion that Astaire stands alone in not needing the work of SI to correct or coordinate his body along the Line with minimal effort, generated a vision for a platonically ideal body in Astaire's image. Of note, tap dance developed from a lineage of Irish jigging, English clogging, and most notably, Juba dance, an African American vernacular form (Siebert 2015, 88). Juba provided a primary foundation for the rhythmic sophistication and stylization of early tappers, and most famous and influential twentieth-century tap dancers, such as Bubbles and Buck, Jeni Le Gon, Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson,

the Nicholas Brothers, were all Black. Astaire is White. Rolf, focusing on Astaire's performances while ignoring the lineage and influence of many of his contemporaries, offers a clear example of White colonial idealism.

Don Hanlon Johnson warns of upholding any sort of somatic idealism (Johnson 1980). The critique of idealism within SI is not new, however, seems to disappear from mainstream perception. Johnson wrote that this idealism "provides a constant backdrop for invalidation for human life," and that "narrowing perception" to only the structural field within this lens denies the lived experience of people as social, political bodies (Johnson 1980, 5).

Whiteness

Orientations are described by Godard and Frank as pre-movement, and Ahmed explicates this further: the body senses the world, and is oriented towards certain perceptions. Orientation, in the phenomenological sense, is better understood here as a verb. The senses orientate the body. The body is directed by its senses to create meaning about what it senses. In turn, these meanings and concepts further direct the body. For Ahmed, senses and concepts not only orientate a body's movements, but also, more fully, its attention, attitudes, assumptions, beliefs, and actions. These orientations, while unique to each individual, are inevitably tuned to culture and context, which include perceptions of race: a racialized phenomenology.

Rebecca Chaleff writes, "Whiteness is not strictly ontological, but phenomenological:

shaped by embedded histories of Euro-American colonialism" (Chaleff 2018, 72). Whiteness, rather than a fixed status, is an active process and processing of bodies in spaces. Agreeing, Ahmed writes that Whiteness "orientates bodies in specific directions, affecting how they 'take up' space" (Ahmed 2007, 150). Ahmed argues that spaces, not just bodies, are orientated in certain racialized directions. "Spaces acquire the 'skin' of the bodies that inhabit them . . . [They] take shape by being orientated around some bodies, more than others" (Ahmed 2007, 157). I explore her notion of a phenomenology of Whiteness as a framework for understanding a specific racialized orientation within SI. SI has been developed primarily by White practitioners, responding to the needs, concerns, and orientations of primarily White clients. The field of SI is, at large, a White space.

Ahmed states that Whiteness is "an ongoing and unfinished history" (Ahmed 2007, 150). The global history of Europeanist colonization and assimilation begins with bodies and extends into space. Being white-skinned is of course not the issue. While there is always a diversity of phenomenological experience within each identity group, White bodies are nonetheless generally orientated towards certain attitudes, assumptions, and affectations. Whiteness as an assimilated colonizing identity has been weaponized in the cultural fabric of a globalized world, doing real, corporeal, damage. My project of naming the phenomenology of Whiteness within SI explores how the body that experiences of Rolfing SI has, regardless of intent, become part and parcel of the idealist goals that adhere to White colonial uprighting.

Many Rolfers have argued in favor of the existence and pursuit of a neutral body. Rolf and actor Heather Corwin defines this neutral body as "a body in ideal alignment that functions absent of affect" (Corwin 2012, 38). The notion of neutral must be investigated. Although I'm not assigning this motive to Corwin, neutral is often code for White, and Whiteness is often disguised as neutral, while remaining complicit with racist and racialized factors (DiAngelo 2011)⁵. A neutral body is a body that adheres to the standard of White colonial uprighting along a vertical axis, the Line. In some texts, this, a body in neutral alignment, is referred to as a normal body (Rolf 1977). Within the context of the neutral and the normal,

White phenomenological orientations slip into the background, creating a landscape upon which the other, the non-White body, becomes the *disoriented*. As noted, orientations affect bodies and spaces. In this instance, White space is also a White field: the discipline of SI. In such a White space, racialized and non-White bodies are *full* of affect, expressions, and patterns that adhere to cultural lineage. In order to adhere to a 'neutral' standard of health within SI, in accordance with White colonial uprightness, non-White bodies are asked to sacrifice and ignore cultural expressions and patterns that are non-Europeanist. For example, scholar Brenda Dixon Gottschild elucidates the various Africanist aesthetics and attitudes that take shape in movement patterns. Gottschild writes, "the Africanist aesthetic embraces difference and dissonance, rather than erasing or resolving it," seemingly directly opposed to the basis of SI, which prioritizes Europeanist values such as "centeredness, control, linearity, [and] directness" as a means to resolve dissonant physical factors and sensations (Gotschild 1996, 93-96).

Bodies and spaces are orientated towards race; however, healthy biomechanics in SI paradigms are often bolstered by principles of physics and architecture that are seen as universal. The body may be looked at as an architectural structure, as evidenced by Dr. Stephen Levin's popular notion of biotensegrity (Levin 2005). Some argue that the Line is a universal organizing architectural truth that, as a concept, has no color or race. However, like bodies and spaces, concepts are in fact orientated towards race. In many spheres of knowledge, however, Whiteness is made invisible. That extends to physics and architecture. The incredible work of American Architect Lance Hosey, in his critique of the foundational *Architectural Graphic Standards*, explicated how and why

common models of architecture and design have been orientated towards and served White phenomenological experience. These design standards have served to support the pursuit of human structural perfection, upholding white male bodies as the primary orientation (Hosey 2001). He also writes that architecture standards based upon the neutral as code of White and male offers groundwork to generate a world of structures "for themselves in their own image" (Hosey 2001, 101). Hosey writes about buildings. SI practitioners find utility in extending architectural principles to the human body, and as such, the pursuit of structures that serve White hegemony reproduces White colonial uprightness.

In SI, phenomenology and the aesthetic are inextricably linked. The foundational understanding of a client's health begins with an understanding of the aesthetic through a practice often referred to as 'body reading'. SI practitioners are taught to discern healthy structure, posture, and movement through *sight* as well as touch, and most SI sessions begin and end with that process. Robin James writes, "though aesthetic concepts may *seem* to be neutral with respect to race, gender, and sexuality, and have nothing to do with politics or inequality at all, they only appear neutral because they conform to hegemonic norms" (James 2013, 111). Bodies, spaces, and concepts, which are orientated, can all appear 'neutral'. That which appears neutral, in White spaces and White fields, assumes an unquestioning standard of White hegemony. James continues, "aesthetics' apparent neutrality is actually evidence of its centering of Whiteness and heteromascularity" (James 2013, 111).

White colonial bodies notice the world as a means to take up space, to extend themselves into the space, and to assert their values. A phenomenology of Whiteness does not only affect people

with white skin, but extends into the contexts and spaces that reify them. The bodies that 'take up' space are White and non-White, although orientated towards the standards of White bodies. The bodies within SI practice (the practitioners, clients, and students) are not exclusively White. White and BIPOC[®] in SI alike, however, maintain an orientation towards White colonial uprightness, manifested as the Line.

The Line, Revisited

Many in the SI field discuss horizontal planes as a necessary foundation from which the Line, the vertical organizing principle, arises. I am interested in the horizon, as a concept, and its ability to be orientated and re-orientated. The horizon is wide and broad, open and possible. The horizon is far away, and also within focus. Horizons may also be bodily, describing that surface from which identity, sensation, and feelings arise. Bodily horizons are both the distant background of experience, and also the nearby fabric of skin. Robin James discusses bodily horizons as orientations that are bodily and corporeal. James, discussing the foundational work of Sara Alcott on interpretive horizons, states that these horizons "are not, however, biologically determined: they are learned, habitual compartments, the 'background, framing assumptions' that we acquire by living in specific sociohistorical relationships" (James 2013, 107). In SI, as in much of the world, gravity is an assumption. It is also assumed that gravity works the same on all bodies. While it may be true to some extent, gravity is but one factor impressed upon a body. Gravity works in tandem with lived and generational experience to shape the whole person (Koepke 2020). And so, I ask, can there be a more expansive definition of SI? Can SI broaden its orientation toward multiple directions?

Somatic historian and movement therapist Martha Eddy defines SI as an approach to "releasing the body's structure from lifelong patterns of tension," and I consciously and purposefully expand her definition to include the intergenerational and racialized traumas that are inherited and endured (Eddy 2017, 30). SI practitioners look to childhood traumatic events, such as chronically falling while learning to walk, an early ankle sprain, or getting the wind knocked out after a fall from a tree branch, as affecting factors of adult structures and movement patterns. It is the logical next

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step to consider racialized trauma – a diverse and complex set of experiences inherently linked to systemic racism that accumulate over time – is woven into the corporeal phenomenology, structure, and movement of a person.

James suggests that horizons and orientations “offer alternative epistemologies that emphasize *affect* over the visual. They focus not so much on how bodies look, but how a body kinesthetically senses itself” (James 2013, 107). The aesthetic adherence to the Line, implicated as a factor of White colonialist uprighting, cannot be the primary focus of a progressive approach to SI. SI has the ability to be a tool for somatic liberation, but only if, in the pursuit of grace, coordination, and health, multiple orientations may hold equal importance to gravity. I suggest turning *toward* culture, inheritance, community, and political fabric, without turning *away* completely from gravity. In the words of Rolfer Paul Wirth, “If a Line arises, let it come from context rather than assertion” (personal conversation 2020).

Yielding

I reiterate: It is out of deep love for SI and its capacity to invoke change and transformation that I call for this work. This is personal to me, as a Rolfer, and as someone whose life changed for the better through experience of receiving Rolfiging SI. My life has also been radically altered by my own opening to understanding my Whiteness and how it affects my understanding of the world. Both paths have taught me that change happens through listening to, interpreting, and assimilating stimulus and information. When Whiteness is seen and named, a common understanding of the lived racialized reality of the current world emerges. Race, racialization, and racial phenomenologies affect all people, not only People of Color. Practitioners of SI can continue to develop a high quality of somatic inquiry that holds true to its tradition, while expanding the understanding of orientation to include Ahmed’s, by actively including racial and cultural phenomenology into the bodily horizon.

As suggested, I encourage a turning towards culture, inheritance, community, and political fabric while continuing to listen to gravity as a source for physical clarity. This broadening of our phenomenological orientation is a conscious turn away from asserting or directing a body towards a

perceived somatic ideal, and an active yielding into the lived reality of the world around us. Yielding is a key concept for many Rolfers. The hands yield to the client upon contact, listening for qualities of movement, mobility, and motility. The hands yield to encourage the body to move towards its own sense of support. The hands yield, wait, and then follow the movement towards new possibilities.

Yielding is an important first step for practitioners of SI to work against White colonial uprighting as a platonic ideal for their clients and students. Instead of asserting what tissue needs release or tone, which hip should or shouldn’t be higher than it is, practitioners of SI should utilize a yield at its most basic definition: a slowing down as a means to come into relationship. SI is, after all, an inquiry into coordinated relationships within the soma. A true acknowledgement of these relationships is an understanding that there is no objective source of information, no objective assertion of the right way to stand or move. When an SI practitioner honestly yields, the horizon broadens to include physical functioning and its inherent ties to gravity and culture as equally important forces.

The journey towards health and more positive bodily experience for all humans begins and ends with questions. In my experience, somatic education begins with deliberate inquiry into felt sense and movement, and the inquiry leads to a multitude of both quantitative and qualitative manifestations for different people, depending on context. Sometimes, SI leads to a height or weight change. Sometimes, SI leads to a reorganization of the body around the Line. But sometimes it may be a softening of muscle tone, or a deepening or exaggeration of a physical sense or feeling. Whatever the manifestation, yielding into inquiry invites the most powerful transformation.

I offer these key questions to somatic practitioners to reflect and engage with my research. I hope that they open the doors for your own reflection, negotiation, and change.

1. In what ways does SI, or your somatic practice(s), assume and uphold White aesthetic standards of health and beauty?
2. How can your understanding of postural and structural health be broadened to include non-White standards and possibilities?

3. How does this re-orientation change the ways in which you work with your clients?

4. How does your own posturing and body action inscribe your own cultural positioning, and in what ways can you understand your positioning in relation to your clients?

5. In what ways do you assert your beliefs through your work, and when is there opportunity to instead yield and listen?

Endnotes

1. A note on capitalization: it is now common practice to capitalize racial identities, such as Black, Brown, and Person of Color (POC) to differentiate the racial construct from the color. There is currently an ongoing debate on whether or not to capitalize White when referring to a racial identity. Some argue for de-capitalizing White (white) as a political act of de-centering an identity marker that is historically privileged with so much visibility and power. Additionally, the capitalization of White has been argued to legitimize racist beliefs upheld by systems and organizations. For example, self-proclaimed White supremacist organizations uphold the capitalization as an effort to legitimize their hate speech. However, for the sake of clarity within this paper, I stick with the capital “W.” For more information on this, I suggest reading David Saunders reporting for the Associated Press, and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s writing in *The Atlantic*.

2. Rolf referred to her work as Structural Integration, but her students affectionately referred to the practice as Rolfiging. She soon adopted the terminology. Rolfiging is a trademark held by DIRI. I use the terms Rolfiging and Rolfer to refer to SI practitioners who have trained at and remained in good standing with DIRI.

3. My use of the word diverse here suggests the diversity of approaches, techniques, and methodologies. It does not suggest a diverse racial makeup of the field at large.

4. Much of Rolfiging SI is an oral transmission, with the inevitable variances of understanding that result. Since writing this, I’ve heard from a DIRI senior faculty member that Rolf’s comments on Astaire were more specific to him having knees that worked really well while dancing. That may well be the case – and it still raises an important point: a particularity about Astaire’s knees somehow moved through

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the oral tradition to a generalized mythology about him having the perfect structure. This hyperbolic (mis)interpretation speaks to the unconscious working of bias and White phenomenology in SI. Thus, regardless of what Rolf actually said, there is adequate support for my thesis.

5. I am not arguing that Corwin, who has contributed greatly to the Rolfing field through her practice and writings, her article, or the work of any specific Rolfer, is purposefully coding neutral as White. I am theorizing, however, that, the use of the word neutral has underlying assumptions that are complicit with racist logics, and perhaps Rolfers can think imaginatively about possible alternatives.

6. BIPOC refers to Black, Indigenous, and People of Color. It is a useful term that creates solidarity between non-White communities, although some critique its usage for collapsing the diverse experiences that various non-White communities face into one monolithic grouping.

Tristan Koepke is a dancer, educator, and Rolfer based in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He has been a Rolfer since 2016, and now serves as Chair of DIRI's Committee for Diversity and Anti-Racism. He is currently the Associate Director of the Young Dancers Workshop at the Bates Dance Festival, is pursuing an MFA in Dance at the University of Maryland, College Park, and is a co-instigator of Liberation Somatics. Tristan is also the Diversity and Inclusion Editor of this journal.

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