

# Decolonization from Root to Bloom: A Somatic Movement Approach to Reconnect with the Essence of our Sentient Body\*

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## [ABSTRACT]

This article examines various definitions of colonization and decolonization with the attempt to view current issues that may be defined as new problematic ways of embodying coloniality. The field of somatic movement studies serves as a framework for viewing the roots of the argument and for offering a practical experience that may elicit ease and peace around what the truth is, when it comes to somatically identifying that our nature is to live freely in a decolonial soma. Activists, scholars, artists, and pioneers in fields such as somatic movement, somatic psychology, critical race, indigenous studies, and subaltern theory offer insight into the complexity of understanding the processes of decolonization that are necessary today and that can be experienced by utilizing specific tools from somatics, such as the embodiment of space and the return to notions from pre-colonial languages that expand our reality and have the potential to heal the wounds of our colonial self.

**Keywords:** Decolonization, Coloniality, Somatics, Somatic movement, Global events, Embodiment.

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## Descolonización de la raíz a la flor: Una aproximación desde el movimiento somático para reconectar con la esencia de nuestro cuerpo sintiente

## Descolonização da raiz ao florescer: uma abordagem de movimento somático para reconectar com a essência do nosso corpo senciente

[RESUMEN]

En este artículo se exploran las diversas definiciones de colonización y descolonización con el objetivo de analizar aspectos contemporáneos que puedan identificarse como nuevas formas problemáticas de encarnar la colonialidad. El campo de los estudios del movimiento somático constituye el marco para explorar el argumento subyacente y ofrecer una experiencia práctica que promueva una sensación de facilidad y tranquilidad en la comprensión de la verdad sobre nuestra naturaleza somática, que consiste en vivir libremente en un soma decolonial. Activistas, académicos, artistas y pioneros en campos como el movimiento somático, la psicología somática, la teoría crítica de la raza, los estudios indígenas y la teoría subalterna arrojan luz sobre el complejo proceso de descolonización que resulta esencial en la actualidad y que puede experimentarse mediante el uso de herramientas somáticas específicas, como la encarnación del espacio y el retorno a conceptos de lenguas precoloniales, que amplían nuestra percepción de la realidad y tienen el potencial de curar las heridas infligidas a nuestro yo colonial.

**Palabras clave:** descolonización, colonialidad, somática, movimiento somático, eventos globales, encarnación.

[RESUMO]

Este artigo explora várias definições de colonização e descolonização objetivando examinar usos contemporâneos que podem se identificar como novas formas problemáticas de representar a colonialidade. O campo dos estudos de movimento somático serve como quadro para a exploração do argumento subyacente e oferecer uma experiência prática que promove uma sensação de facilidade e tranquilidade na compreensão da verdade sobre nossa natureza somática, que é viver livremente em um soma decolonial. Ativistas, acadêmicos, artistas e pioneiros em áreas como o movimento somático, psicologia somática, raça crítica, estudos indígenas e teoria subalterna contribuem com insights sobre o complexo processo de descolonização que são essenciais nos dias atuais e que podem ser experimentados através do uso de ferramentas somáticas específicas, como a incorporação do espaço e o retorno a noções de linguagens pré-coloniais, que expandem a nossa percepção da realidade e têm o potencial de curar as feridas infligidas ao nosso eu colonial.

**Palavras-chave:** Descolonização, Colonialidade, Somatismo, Movimento somático, eventos globais, corporização.

> What does decolonization mean in today's world? Considering the impacts of global events over the past three years and potential directions for our future, how can movement artists and somatic practitioners highlight vital avenues in terms of decolonization? What actions do we grow from our histories and what actions can we adopt to truly attune with a decolonial body? What stories must we discard in order to repattern, to tap into our own consciousness, and attain the freedom of a new life paradigm? What new stories will help build and shape the new decolonial self?

This article examines definitions of colonization and decolonization from various perspectives. The field of somatic movement studies serve as the framework for viewing critical issues and for offering a practical experience that may elicit ease and peace around what the truth is when it comes to somatically identifying that our nature is, has always been, and will always be to live freely in a decolonial *soma* (the living body in all its dimensions). Somatic movement artists and practitioners have the unique treasure of understanding the oneness of feeling, thinking, willing, sensing, and moving, based upon the aliveness of the *soma*, which does not separate the essential elements and actions that constitute its life. Somatics and dance scholar, Sondra Fraleigh, explains that the roots of the word *soma* are Greek. She emphasizes the important fact that Greeks never use the word *soma* alone. *Soma* is always used together with *psyche*, which represents "the triplicate unity that Plato posits as soul-spirit-mind, not separate from body, and Aristotle explains as vital life principle. For him soul (as *psyche*) is not a precious spiritual entity; it is part of aliveness in everything" (2015, xx). Furthermore, Fraleigh refers to connections that come from neurobiology for defining *soma* as "the elusive body of the precognitive self" (2015, xxi). She offers insight regarding how to understand the various layers behind the definition of the term *soma* so we can grasp the non-duality aspect and oneness intrinsic characteristic that are fundamental to the practice of somatics.

Scholar and activist, Amber McZeal, integrates somatic practice with social justice and spirituality. On her website "Decolonizing the Psyche," she refers to coloniality as "the long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism... It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self..." (2021). McZeal's viewpoint is a call to action in the realm of deep decoloniality, with the purpose to end oppression and construct more humane social relationships. Furthermore, McZeal emphasizes that "at the root, it is about how we form values, and what we devalue... how it crystallizes in the psyche and how it constellates in the soma." (2021). This crystallization and constellation is where McZeal's research intersects with Fraleigh's; both experts deem reconstruction vital.

We could safely assume that coloniality refers to the apparently never ending patterns of relating to self and others—such patterns are rooted in our deep, perhaps invisible, *wounds* of our colonized body. Seeing coloniality in parallel with the complex hierarchical systems that have shaped and continue to shape our civilization is a mandatory step in order to find what the truth actually is behind what we have interpreted and embodied as coloniality. Our own actions and ways of being in the world are products of colonization and are perpetuated as enculturated phenomena, having been passed down to us across countless generations. Without awareness, we run the risk of continuing to pass down such detrimental behaviors, if we do not attend to them. Recognizing, accepting, and forgiving (with actual love and compassion) our own patterns of coloniality are important steps toward reclaiming our natural decolonial state of being.

From the perspective of somatic movement practice, we can seek methods for attending to our *wounds*, for allowing our innate ability to live in an *innocent body*, for creating our embodied availability to welcome self-liberation, and for examining our constant efforts (individual and collective) to end the perpetuation of colonization. How, as we return to an *innocent body*, are we able to invite our precognitive self to guide us so we access the *soma+psyche* that is free from any of the processes that we may associate with colonization? How do we repattern to a different somatic tone to reset to something that supports processes of transformation that are necessary today, based on how our world currently functions?

We, humans, are preoccupied with matter. What we consider the physical reality shaping our body has taken us away from understanding the beyond-the-matter-essence. There are means to awakening the precognitive self and inviting the *innocent body* to reveal the ease of how our *soma+psyche* moves, flows, and acts upon life. For example, Body-Mind Centering® (BMC®) focuses on addressing “the embodiment of space,” an approach that guides us to embody space as the preliminary step to embodying structure. The notion promoted by the founder of BMC®, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, relates to the early and even prior stages of the embryo in which we see a process of life guided by the embodiment of space happening prior to the embodiment of structure. “The place I want to share with you is an empty space. The first embodiment, before we embody structure, is that we embody empty space. Throughout our embryological history, we are in a sequence of spaces. But we don’t just inhabit space; we create space.” (2012, 163).

We embody space when we attune to our own embryological development (the first eight weeks of our life) and allow our body to remember the actual processes that took place at the cellular level in order for the structures that formed the body to emerge. We can *feel* the space of those living actions that happened prior to and during the embryological period, which are no longer alive as they once were because they became something else in the process of creating the actual structure of the body. For example, we can tune in to the space of the yolk sac or the amniotic cavity, or the place of the notochord. When we open our somatic attention to our spinal column (structure) and then move on to a more profound level to *feel* the spinal cord and then allow our body to recall what was there prior to creating our central nervous system, then our body can remember the notochord from when we were an embryo. In Bainbridge Cohen’s words “when I embody the notochord, I come into space. I’m not as structured in the same way because it is a past process, not a current structure...If I go through the notochord, which isn’t actually there anymore but the process is there, I’m in space” (2012, 166).

Through tools from somatic practice such as visualization and embodiment, Bainbridge Cohen guides us to explore beyond the physical structure to remember what we once were and access the roots of our pre-birth consciousness. Furthermore, she explains that we are in the “place of space” when we “connect to that primitive sense of space” (2012, 167). When we immerse ourselves in this practice of embodying space, we are at the most natural state of our *soma+psyche*. At this precognitive level, we are freed from the limitations of our material

body and thus ready to reclaim our beyond-the-matter-essence. From there, we may re-open the door to our original place of a decolonized body. We can return to who we were before we were forced to change through the historical and present-day impacts of colonization.

Perhaps the practice of “embodying space” (returning to the essence, to the original patterns that created life and the roots of our being) is the road we should take to attain an understanding of the body that precedes imposition of any kind, including the colonial imposition. Reclaiming our essence can take us to the truth of what it is to be free beings. The etymological root of “essence”, after all, refers to “the being”; “to be”; “I am; I exist”. Dance scholar, Karen Bond, explains the etymology of essence with the words “I am both *being* and to *be*” (2018, 218). Essence is what sustains us, it is the actual *light* that supports our being. An embryo is “free” from expectation yet completely dependent on the mother. So perhaps the freeness of being, pre-colonially, would be the freedom to rely on external nature and one’s intrinsic nature. Our constant struggle to be free of oppression throughout history relates to the profound feeling of having had our freedom of essence stolen/suppressed/repressed by colonization. Our somatic being can remind us that our essence is fundamentally free.

Let us return to the definition of colonization. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, a Bolivian sociologist, historian, activist, and a follower of Quechua and Aymara cosmologies, provides a simple answer, declaring that colonization is: “...an invasion, a violent imposition, an unequal exchange” (ALICE CES 2014). When we hear the word, we might also think of exploitation of resources, control, domination, imposing one’s view as the only one or as a better one, full erasure of agency, indoctrination, stripping individuals of their autonomy to then achieve subjugation and—even more than that—acquiescence.

If we look beyond colonization as an event that happened in a particular time in history, and take the time to reflect on the actual meaning of the word, we can see that our own coloniality as described above is alive in different ways; it is both constant and sporadic, it operates at both the micro and macro levels, and is at once conscious and unconscious. We could claim that methods of colonization may be seen in multiple ways and therefore some of what we can consider as ways of colonizing population have evolved over time.

A question that arises is what from today’s perspective can be examined as new forms of colonization, the phenomenon that may come to mind is the increasingly isolated virtual world, the digital infrastructure, and the *transhumanism* movement (which could be described as the social movement that involves the development of human-enhancement technologies, including technologies that are physically embedded in the human body). *Transhumanism* is not new, but boosted by the capacities of the internet, *transhumanism* has advanced. Today we see the emergence of the *transhumanist Metaverse*, which is described by its founder Mark Zuckerberg as an “embodied Internet” that gives one a “feeling of presence”. Is this virtual “existence” today’s new form of colonizer, coercing us into experiencing virtual reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), Extended Reality (XR), and the new Brain-Computer Interfaces (BCI), which will replace screens and physical hardware entirely?

The fusion of the technological and the biological is also not entirely new, but *Metaverse* is breaking grounds and changing our world. Is our new colonized body basically us allowing the biological to become subordinate to the technological? Can we see that the new form of control and domination is coming with the way that VR is evolving and will continue to evolve? With these incredibly rapid changes that have no precedence in history, we will need to create new definitions for what have been core concepts in the practice of somatic movement: embodiment; presence; and the relational self. The new *Metaverse* absorbs our human consciousness into cyberspace; it takes us completely away from our sensitive human body; it shifts our innate sensual perception so we are solely engaged with a virtual reality.

Some phenomena offered in the *Metaverse* will include “eco-goodies” that will be advertised on the platform. Somehow we will be able to experience events that only occur in nature such as “entering” a honeycomb. All the information about what we like to eat, to buy, and to do, will be stored so that what and how we consume can be further manipulated and controlled. One of the most shocking facts is that at some point in the next few decades, anyone can have a virtual baby. Digital avatars, virtual pets, and virtual children will be programmed. In the case of virtual babies, they can be made to look like us; we will be able to cuddle them, play with them, and even wear special gloves with which to “feel exactly” as if we are touching a real human baby. These new technologies bring up controversy. They are advertised as the progress and enhancement of humanity. *Metaverse* even incorporates the term “well-being” in its promotional advertisements. However, somatic movement practitioners can and should loudly claim that well-being is impossible—in separation, in isolation, in a state of control—because we are in essence relational, and more importantly, free beings. The motives behind the new world of *Metaverse* are incredibly complex, but if we scratch the surface, we will find the clear goal of colonizers striving to keep the population in control. The world has been preparing our perception and how we act in life during the last three years. Now with VR advancements, we take so much without question. At this rate, our behavior will soon be marked by obedience to the degree of full compliance and acquiescence. Viewing colonization through a broad lens, we can determine that what today’s world is imposing upon us is in fact a new form of colonization.

The examination of new technologies as new forms of colonization requires an in-depth analysis and the purpose of these pages is to find a practical way to embody a decolonial body using somatics. Flipping the initial question of what colonization is, we can alight on the definition of decolonization. There are many approaches and views on decolonization, especially with fresh scholarly research from the last couple of years. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui offers inspiration to look at processes of decolonization for all, and in particular, for those in South America who identify as *Mestizo/a/x* (the word is derived from Latin, meaning mixed or juxtaposed. The term in Spanish describes people who have a mix of white European and indigenous heritage).

Rivera Cusicanqui says that “There can be no discourse of decolonization, no theory of decolonization, without a decolonizing practice” (2021, 56). Furthermore, scholars Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang in their article “Decolonization is not a metaphor” explain the problems with how the word “decolonization” can be superficially adopted by particular sectors such as education, academia, politics, social justice, and applied vaguely as an action without really considering it as work that must be done individually at the same time as a collective endeavor (2012, 1-40). Rivera Cusicanqui emphasizes this last aspect, regarding the need of doing the work with one another. She honors the fact that the practice of decolonizing oneself is a process that takes time, perhaps even an entire lifetime. Anti-racist activist and author, Ibram X. Kendi, reminds us in his book “How to be an antiracist”; that claiming to be a non-racist is not the work that will propel us toward being a free-of-racial-injustice society. One can claim to be a non-racist, but going beyond that claim is needed because it is in the doing, in taking action, in the everyday effort that we will make a difference. And this work requires “a radical reorientation of our consciousness” (2019, 23). We must start with the willingness to be disoriented and face our intrinsic vulnerability so we can constantly be in the process of becoming an antiracist.

The same goes for decolonization. Decolonization is not a metaphor for an action that can take place now or in the future. Authors Tuck and Yang state, “When we write about decolonization, we are not offering it as a metaphor; it is not an approximation of other experiences of oppression. Decolonization is not a swappable term for other things we want to do to improve our societies and schools. Decolonization doesn’t have a synonym... And Decolonization is not a metonym for social justice” (2012, 3). Decolonization is a process. Rivera Cusicanqui constantly reminds us of the idea that we have all been colonized. Colonialism is an active presence that is embedded in our subjectivity whereas Coloniality is a state of being (our patterns coming into action), and we live in this permanent state of being. Looking internally to recognize this

state of being in this *patterned, enculturated*, or in Rivera Cusicanqui's words, *stained body*, is fundamental in order to open our most vulnerable self to awaken toward the work of decolonization as a life process.

Regardless of our efforts and the various cycles where the work of decolonization has taken place in history, an internal colonialism remains, according to Rivera Cusicanqui. During an interview last decade, she asserted, "In spite of the efforts to create forms that are inclusive, they actually exclude because they justify the inequality at the same time as they proclaim inclusivity" (ALICE CES 2014). Our profound prehispanic past is at all times in our present moment. There is a constant internal struggle between our prehispanic past and our posthispanic past. As already mentioned, Rivera Cusicanqui's interest is in the Andean reality in South America, particularly in relation to the *Mestizo/a/x*. With all the complex layers that being "mixed" represents, it is in the recognition of our mixed qualities that we can embrace our diversity and accept that it is in what Rivera Cusicanqui refers to as the "stain" where we embrace that we are *this* and *that*, and *that*, and also *that*—without opposites or tension. We can embrace the notion that when one reality meets another, we multiply our possibilities of being.

Rivera Cusicanqui considers the importance of returning to indigenous languages, such as the language of the Aymara indigenous peoples of Bolivia, as part of the practice of decolonization. She is interested in looking at all precolonial languages and seeing how in them there is no dualism. For example, *collo* in Aymara language, means poison and cure at the same time. This is different from our common Western view, which is characterized by the fact that there is only one kind of ultimate substance or principle, or that there is only one possibility, only one truth, which is what the monistic approach promotes and what came to us with the European colonizers. This approach also roots from Ancient Greek thought, particularly in Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction, where we see that A is only A and is not B; B is only B and cannot be A. This is something that in indigenous languages such as the Aymara language, does not happen. For the Aymaras, A can be B and B can be A. And this reality forms a third possibility. So it is in this way that, according to Rivera Cusicanqui, language can teach us that we are not only one reality or one truth, but that we can be more than one, and when we accept that, then a new third reality emerges. Rivera Cusicanqui further explains by comparing this viewpoint to the yin and yang symbol; the two opposites in the moment of contact unfold into a third space where the two co-exist.

Rivera Cusicanqui claims that "...the possibility of a profound cultural reform in our society depends on the decolonization of our gestures and acts, and the language with which we name the world" (ALICE CES 2014). She uses the Aymara word and concept *Ch'ixi*, which reflects the Aymara idea of something that is and is not at the same time. This is the logic of the included third. She writes, "A *Ch'ixi* color gray is white but is not white at the same time; it is both white and its opposite, black... *Ch'ixi* has the force of undifferentiation, and '[t]he potential of the undifferentiated is that it joins the opposites'" (2021, xxi). Neither white nor black but both at once. Entities that are *Ch'ixi* exist, according to Rivera Cusicanqui. In interview quoted by Paulo Ilich Bacca in an online publication by the Centre for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, Rivera Cusicanqui notes

*Ch'ixi* as a concept-metaphor embodies the quintessence of an Aymara *double bind*, namely, an Andean gesture to work with the contradiction as a way of moving between opposite worlds. Thus, for instance, the snake is not only *ch'ixi* for being spotted but also for being an Aymara mythical animal who is undetermined in cosmological terms: it belongs to both the world above and the world below, it is both masculine and feminine, it is both rain and a vein of metal, it is symbolized both as lightning striking from a great height and as a subterranean force. (Bacca 2018)



When Rivera Cusicanqui is asked if she is indigenous and non-indigenous at the same time, her response is “of course, being indigenous is a becoming. It is not an identity, it is a search” (Bacca 2018). She further explains “We are all Indians as colonized peoples. Decolonizing one’s self is to stop being Indian and to become people” (Bacca 2018). It is in the contradiction where we find potential for all possibilities. Rivera Cusicanqui elaborates, “It is necessary to coexist with the contradiction, and the contradiction must be converted into a purposeful referent rather than an obstacle to the subject’s integrity” (Bacca 2018). By embodying the “stain” (that we are all the components that make up the “stain”; that we are *that* and also *that*), and that we don’t need to deny one aspect of our embodied being in order to accept another, we embrace all aspects of our being without any judgment, simply acknowledging their existence. When we land in that place at the somatic level, we multiply our possibilities and open the door to embody the space where there are no obstacles, no need to identify with what we have inherited and also cultivated in this lifetime as our colonial self.

Rivera Cusicanqui questions how the process of decolonization asks that we reawaken the body’s gaze (a somatic gaze). To “decolonize Cartesian oculoctrim and reintegrate the body’s gaze to the flow of inhabiting space-time, in what others call history” (2021, xix) is a powerful idea that Rivera Cusicanqui acknowledges. She further explains that “...looking with the whole body as another way of mistrusting Western oculoctrim brings other organs into play, to the point of fine-tuning the gaze and lateralizing it toward that which stays hidden: It is about knowing with the *chuyma*, which includes your lungs, heart, and liver. Knowing is breathing and beating. It involves a metabolism and a rhythm with the cosmos” (2021, xxviii). The rhythm of the heart and lungs; the orchestration of the lungs, the heart, and the liver; all that comes from the awakening through visualization, somatization, and embodiment of these three organs may open the door to realities that are beyond what our vision within the five sense limitation can grasp.

In the experience of *Ch’ixi* and *chuyma*, where we can embrace the multiple realities that create us and that are fundamentally not separate, we are able to also recognize the part of our colonization that has taken us away from our innate non-separation from nature. And *Ch’ixi* reminds us that humans and nature are one reality; there is no one and the other, but both as one. Arguments about anthropocentrism being at the root of what has caused our separation from nature are worth looking into. Edgardo Lander, a Venezuelan sociologist, left-wing intellectual, and professor emeritus of the Central University of Venezuela, gave a speech at the Latin American Council of Social Sciences 2018 Conference, entitled *Decolonizing the World*. There he said

When I speak of the issue of decolonization, I approach it from the point of view of coloniality, which has to do with the fact that there is a colonial order that has built a colonial modernity on the planet, which is characterized by a set of dimensions that have to do with patriarchy, racism, the construction of Eurocentric power patterns; it has to do with a monoculture that imposes itself on the entire planet; and it has to do with an issue that is absolutely the core of the problem, which is the issue of anthropocentrism (the notion regarding human beings owning the planet, with the right to use it, exploit it, and subjugate it). It is indeed this issue that presents the most immediate and severe threat to life on the planet. (CLASCO TV 2018)

We may forget our innate oneness with all that constitutes our *soma+psyche* and our innate oneness with nature. Everything in these qualities of oneness coexist due to their complementary and contradictory characteristics. There is no hierarchical organization when we refer to oneness. There is no need to superimpose something so you can find something else that is inferior and that must be subjugated, controlled, and dominated. There is no need for the human species to think that they are superior and can conquer nature at will. When we are



able to understand the true oneness that is at the root of the term (and the practice of) “somatics”; we can see that it is precisely what Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui reminds us; that by returning to indigenous languages, such as, in her experience, the Aymara language, we are able to remember the oneness that characterizes all that constitutes life.

Many questions and concerns have been considered throughout this article. Some are left open without resolution or definitive answers. What is certain is that further reflection must take place at a personal level as well as a collective level, in order for us to embark on true processes toward embodying the essence of our decolonial self. However, for now we may conclude that it is in the act of remembering our *soma+psyche* and our human+nature oneness—which is what *Ch'ixi* invites us to experience—where we can find a path toward our decolonization awakening. Rivera Cusicanqui encourages us to “know” with the *chuyma* (the body when we allow our vision to shut down so we can open the perception of our inner body and particularly of our heart, lungs and liver). By embodying *Ch'ixi* and allowing *chuyma* experiences, we can continue to live in our wholeness in spite of what the new virtual world is inevitably bringing to us. A new paradigm of life requires that we remain in our sentient body and in our relational essence.

By true engagement with our *soma+psyche*, our fundamental connection with others, our oneness with nature, and with specific somatic movement tools such as the practice of the embodiment of space, and the awareness of and actual somatic work with organs such as the heart, the lungs, and the liver, we will find connections to our fundamental nature of oneness and we may therefore find the other side of the dark tunnel that colonization has dragged us into. Together we will reach the light of our essential decolonial self.

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