

**Reclaiming Wellness:
The Land, Neurodecolonization,
and Indigenous Resilience**

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Introduction

Indigenous knowledge systems provide a comprehensive, interconnected framework for understanding health, wellness, and resilience, particularly through the relationship with land. Colonization severed many of these relationships, leading to cultural, psychological, and physical trauma among Indigenous peoples. The process of neurodecolonization offers a way to heal these historical and ongoing traumas by re-integrating traditional practices – grounded in the land – with modern therapeutic techniques such as mindfulness, somatic experiencing, and intentional land-based healing.

Neurodecolonization is not inherently aligned with somatic experiencing, which is a separate therapeutic modality focused on healing trauma through the body. However, this article introduces somatic experiencing into the neuro-decolonization process as a complementary tool for restoring wellness. By integrating somatic experiencing – where individuals reconnect with their bodies to release trauma stored in the nervous system – Indigenous peoples can further amplify the healing potential of neurodecolonization. This combination enhances the ability to address the physiological impacts of colonization on Indigenous bodies, enabling them to return to a state of emotional and physical balance.

Incorporating somatic practices into neurodecolonization is part of a broader cultural resurgence. Leanne Simpson (2011) argues in *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* that resurgence is an act of resistance against colonial systems that sought to suppress Indigenous identities and knowledge systems. By reclaiming traditional practices and integrating modern therapeutic methods like somatic experiencing, individuals are healing personal trauma while simultaneously asserting their sovereignty. This approach not only addresses the emotional scars of colonization but also counters the systemic forces that continue to marginalize Indigenous communities.

In this context, neurodecolonization, enhanced with somatic experiencing, serves as both a personal healing practice, Indigenous knowledge reclamation, and a political act of sovereignty. The following sections will explore the role of land in well-being, the impact of somatic practices, and how reclaiming Indigenous beliefs about joy and spirit contributes to holistic wellness.

Land as the Ultimate Facilitator of Well-Being

The relationship between Indigenous peoples and the land is fundamental to their understanding of health and well-being. Far from being merely a resource, the land is a living relative that provides guidance, healing, and spiritual sustenance. This worldview was violently disrupted by colonization, which sought to sever the physical, emotional, and spiritual ties that Indigenous peoples held with their land. Hugh Brody's *Maps and Dreams* (1981) describes how the Beaver Nation in British Columbia relied on the land for sustenance, spiritual guidance, and emotional balance. For Indigenous peoples, the land is a source of wisdom, a space that offers clarity and resilience.

Cree teachings hold that the land and personal well-being are deeply intertwined. The land is not separate from the individual; it is an extension of the self, influencing emotional states and offering clarity in times of difficulty. This aligns with modern therapeutic practices such as somatic experiencing, where the body is seen as capable of self-regulation and healing if given the right environment. Peter Levine (1997), in *Waking the Tiger*, explains how trauma is stored in the body but

can be released through intentional physical practices that help the body return to a state of balance. Indigenous practices, such as walking, smudging, and engaging with and recognizing the essence and spirit of the land, provide these conditions for healing by creating a living relationship with the land.

The concept of "forest bathing" (called *Shinrin-yoku*) from Japan reinforces the healing power of nature. Li (2018) demonstrates that time spent in natural environments can reduce cortisol levels, lower blood pressure, and improve overall mental health. For Indigenous peoples, these scientific findings affirm what has been known for generations – that the land holds the key to emotional and physical well-being. Contemporary research, such as that by Ober, Sinatra, and Zucker (2014), further shows that engaging with the earth can reduce inflammation, a leading cause of many chronic diseases. This underscores the importance of reconnecting with the land to address not only mental but also physical health concerns.

Reducing inflammation is particularly crucial for Indigenous communities, where health disparities—exacerbated by colonial trauma—are common. Nakazawa (2015) highlights that inflammation contributes to over 90% of chronic diseases. Practices that reduce inflammation, such as grounding (direct physical contact with the earth) can lower stress levels and improve immune function. Grounding practices, such as walking barefoot on the earth, have been shown to reduce inflammation and improve overall health (Ober, Sinatra, and Zucker, 2014). For Indigenous peoples, the healing that comes from engaging with the land is not just physical but emotional and spiritual, offering a holistic approach to wellness.

In my own journey, daily walks along the North Saskatchewan River allowed me to reconnect with the land and regulate my emotions. This practice reflects Cree teachings that emphasize the reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment. The land sustains us, and we, in turn, care for the land. This mutual care is key to cultivating resilience in the face of trauma and disruption. Additionally, I have noticed two integral outcomes of creating a relationship with the land. The practice of visiting the land has resulted in a relationship

where this land recognizes me. What happens when the land recognizes you? In my experience, it creates a felt sense of belonging, of feeling of welcome, and a feeling known and cared for. It feels good. This is significant in a land where for the past 150 years (in the prairie provinces), we as Indigenous peoples haven't been welcomed and cared for by colonizers and their institutions.

Furthermore, part of the decolonial process requires a shift from the societal belief, and colonial tool, that feelings don't matter. Feelings and emotions are critical aspects in addressing well-being, and hold imperative information. This feeling of belonging and welcoming that is exhibited from the land, has helped me to maintain my walking practice. Thus, the land's role in supporting well-being is evident in such practices like smudging, grounding, and being with the land, which help individuals regulate their nervous systems and maintain emotional balance.

Somatic Experiencing and Healing

Somatic experiencing (SE) offers a pathway for releasing trauma that is stored in the body. Developed by Peter Levine, SE focuses on the physiological aspects of trauma, which can become trapped in the body when it is not properly processed. Levine (1997) explains how unresolved trauma can lead to dysregulation of the nervous system, causing chronic emotional, psychological, and physical health issues. For Indigenous peoples, colonization has inflicted both individual and collective trauma, leaving deep wounds that are stored not only in memory but in the body itself.

Indigenous communities have endured centuries of trauma, including forced relocation, residential schools, and systemic marginalization (Alfred 2005; Anderson 2000; Chomsky 1993; Daschuk 2013; Donald 2004; Milloy 1999). Nakazawa (2015) in *Childhood Disrupted* discusses how early trauma disrupts the body's ability to regulate stress, often leading to chronic health conditions such as cardiovascular disease, autoimmune disorders, and mental health challenges. The trauma experienced by Indigenous peoples is often passed down through generations, compounding the physical and emotional effects of

colonization (Methot 2019, 2023). This makes the role of healing practices, like somatic experiencing, particularly crucial.

Incorporating somatic experiencing into the neurodecolonization process allows Indigenous peoples to address the physical dimension of trauma. Although neurodecolonization traditionally focuses on reclaiming mental and emotional sovereignty, I introduce SE as a complementary approach that helps release trauma at the bodily level. Levine (2010), in *In an Unspoken Voice*, describes how trauma becomes lodged in the nervous system, leaving individuals in a constant state of hypervigilance. SE guides individuals through reconnecting with their physical sensations, helping the body to restore balance.

Given the high rates of inflammatory diseases within Indigenous populations—linked to systemic oppression and stress—incorporating grounding into somatic experiencing offers a powerful tool for healing (Mcbride, 2021). By combining SE with Indigenous practices such as walking and being with the land and smudging, I have been able to release trauma stored in my body and shift from a state of chronic stress to one of peace and emotional clarity.

Reclaiming Joy and Spirit: Cree Foundational Beliefs

This section reflects key findings emerging from my doctoral study, which explored how reclaiming Cree foundational beliefs around joy and spirit can serve as a path to emotional and spiritual wellness. Central to Cree teachings is the idea that we are spirit— *niya ahcak*—which guides our relationship with ourselves, the land, and others. Cree Elder John Crier teaches that knowing ourselves as spirit allows us to access deeper truths about our existence, aligning with the natural world and the Creator. This belief is not abstract or theoretical but is expressed in everyday life. Cardinal and Hildebrandt (2000) in, *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan*, emphasize that Indigenous spirituality is inseparable from daily actions and relationships, reflecting a holistic view of well-being.

Colonization disrupted this intrinsic knowledge system by imposing Western systems that fragmented mind, body, and spirit, creating a sense of disconnection among Indigenous peoples (LittleBear, 2000).

McBride (2021), in *The Disembodied Mind*, notes that Western philosophical frameworks have long privileged intellectual knowledge over embodied or spiritual wisdom, leading to an alienation from one's own spirit. Reclaiming the understanding that we are spirit is essential for healing from the disruptions caused by colonization. It calls for more than just the re-adoption of spiritual practices; it demands a deep, embodied awareness that we are part of a living universe, interconnected with all forms of life.

A major insight from my doctoral research is that joy is a natural emotional baseline for Indigenous peoples. Elder John Crier reminds us that joy is our birthright; it is an emotion that flows naturally from living in alignment with spirit and the land. However, colonial trauma has altered this baseline, replacing joy with fear, guilt, and shame. This emotional disruption is not only psychological but physiological. Nakazawa (2015) discusses how trauma rewires the brain and nervous system, making it harder for individuals to access positive emotions like joy. As Indigenous peoples work to reclaim joy, they also restore their body's ability to regulate emotions and reduce the long-term impacts of stress and trauma, which are often expressed in the body as chronic inflammation.

Joy, then, is not simply a fleeting or surface emotion; it is the core of our emotional and spiritual well-being. For Indigenous peoples, reclaiming joy involves a conscious, deliberate process of decolonizing emotions. It requires unlearning the patterns of emotional dysregulation that were instilled through colonization. As Elder John Crier teaches, joy is more than a feeling—it is a state of being. It is the baseline from which Indigenous peoples have historically operated, but this baseline was forcibly shifted by colonial trauma, which sought to instill fear, disempowerment, and subjugation.

The process of reclaiming joy also aligns with the Cree concept of *Wiyotamon*, the belief that we are creators of our own lives. This teaching asserts that through our thoughts, emotions, and actions, we have the power to shape our reality. This concept resonates with modern understandings of neuroplasticity—the brain's ability to rewire itself based on repeated emotional and cognitive patterns. Siegel (2020) in *The*

Developing Mind explains that the thoughts and emotions we engage with most frequently create lasting neural pathways that shape how we perceive and interact with the world. By intentionally shifting toward joy, Indigenous peoples are reclaiming not only emotional well-being but also agency over their lives. They are dismantling the harmful colonial narratives that have sought to limit their power and self-determination.

Moreover, reclaiming joy can act as a form of resistance. By centering joy, Indigenous peoples defy the colonial legacy of grief and trauma, reclaiming a birthright that was nearly erased by systemic oppression. In this way, joy becomes both a personal and political act—an assertion of Indigenous resilience and the continued survival of Indigenous knowledge systems.

Defining Decolonization and Neurodecolonization: A Key Distinction

Decolonization and neurodecolonization are terms often used interchangeably, but they refer to distinct processes. Decolonization broadly refers to the dismantling of colonial systems, structures, and ideologies that have oppressed Indigenous peoples and other marginalized groups. This includes reclaiming land, languages, governance systems, and cultural practices that were disrupted or destroyed by colonization. In essence, decolonization is the broader socio-political process of removing colonial rule and its lingering effects from Indigenous peoples' lives.

As Tuck and Yang (2012) argue in *Decolonization is Not a Metaphor*, decolonization cannot be reduced to abstract concepts. It is a material process that involves the return of Indigenous land and sovereignty. It is about Indigenous peoples reclaiming their right to self-determination, land, and culture. Decolonization addresses the external systems of power that continue to marginalize Indigenous communities, emphasizing structural change and the reassertion of Indigenous sovereignty.

Neurodecolonization, on the other hand, is a more specific and internal process. Coined by Michael Yellowbird, neurodecolonization focuses on how colonization has affected the mind and body at a neurological level.

This concept explores how colonial trauma, racism, and systemic oppression have created harmful thought patterns, stress responses, and emotional dysregulation in Indigenous peoples (Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird, 2012; Yellowbird n.d.). Neurodecolonization involves undoing these harmful patterns by reconnecting with Indigenous knowledge systems, contemplative practices, and mindfulness techniques. It is about healing the neurological and emotional impacts of colonization.

Yellowbird (2012; n.d.) emphasizes that neurodecolonization integrates Indigenous contemplative practices—such as meditation, deep breathing, and connection with nature—to promote healing. These practices have been scientifically shown to reduce stress, improve brain function, and promote emotional regulation. While decolonization focuses on external systems of power, neurodecolonization focuses on the internal processes of healing and reclaiming emotional and mental wellness.

Importantly, neurodecolonization does not inherently include somatic experiencing. Somatic experiencing, a trauma-healing method developed by Peter Levine, focuses on the physiological release of trauma stored in the body. While neurodecolonization traditionally focuses on reclaiming mental and emotional well-being, incorporating somatic practices allows for a fuller healing of trauma that has been stored in the body for generations. This integrative approach enables Indigenous individuals to reconnect with their bodies, release trauma, and reclaim their emotional baseline of joy. By combining these two approaches, Indigenous peoples can engage in a more holistic healing process—one that addresses not only the mind but also the body.

Policy Implications for Education and Lifelong Learning

The insights from neurodecolonization and somatic experiencing can have significant implications for educational policy, especially in how Indigenous learners are supported. Historically, educational systems in colonized countries have been tools of assimilation, where Indigenous knowledge, languages, and cultural practices were suppressed in favor of Western norms. The legacies of residential schools, where Indigenous

children were forcibly removed from their families, have left lasting scars, both personally and collectively. Reimagining educational systems through the lens of decolonization and neurodecolonization provides an opportunity to foster environments that nurture holistic well-being for both children and adults.

One key policy implication is the integration of land-based learning and mindfulness practices into the educational curriculum and pedagogy. By centering education around Indigenous ways of knowing—such as learning through connection with the land and fostering a relationship with nature—schools and other learning spaces can create healing spaces for Indigenous learners. Yellowbird’s (n.d.) research on mindfulness practices, combined with traditional Indigenous contemplative methods, shows that these approaches can promote emotional regulation, reduce stress, and improve cognitive function. Such practices can be introduced in classrooms to help Indigenous learners manage the effects of historical and ongoing trauma.

Additionally, educational policies should support the inclusion of somatic practices within schools and other educational spaces, particularly for Indigenous learners who experience the effects of trauma. Grounding techniques, breathing exercises, and movement-based healing practices could be incorporated into the school day or adult learning environment, helping students to release stress and reconnect with their bodies. Given the high levels of chronic disease and inflammation within Indigenous populations, which are linked to systemic oppression and stress, these practices offer an opportunity to improve both mental and physical health outcomes (Ober, Sinatra, and Zucker, 2014).

Another policy shift would involve redefining educational success in a way that values emotional, spiritual, and cultural growth alongside academic achievement. Schools and other spaces of lifelong learning need to move away from Eurocentric standards of success, which prioritize intellectual achievement over well-being. Policies that incorporate Indigenous perspectives on wellness—such as raising the value of joy, cultural identity, and community connection—can create learning environments where Indigenous learners feel valued and

supported. This would represent a true decolonization of education, where Indigenous knowledge systems are placed at the center of the learning experience.

Indigenous knowledge is also supported and facilitated by the land. Western educational systems are beginning to recognize that land-based learning holds many benefits. “It helps students learn about the history, infrastructure, and natural environment of their place of living and makes the entire learning process more enjoyable and more meaningful” (Domokos 2021, 17). However, it is imperative to note that there is a distinct difference between Indigenous land-based learning and western land-based learning. Indigenous land-based learning is centred on the relationship between the learner and the land. The land is alive and a relative. This understanding shifts perception significantly and is integral in creating a felt sense of belonging. Therefore, this recognition of the land as relative and land as spirit is another important policy shift for educators and educational institutions.

Finally, educational institutions should prioritize the hiring and development of Indigenous educators, who bring a deep understanding of both Indigenous knowledge systems and the impacts of colonization. These educators can lead the integration of neurodecolonization and somatic experiencing into the curriculum, providing learners with role models who embody Indigenous values of wellness, balance, and resilience.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Joy, Spirit, and Self

The process of neurodecolonization, enhanced by somatic experiencing, offers a profound pathway for Indigenous peoples to reclaim wellness in all its forms – mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual. Reconnecting with the land, releasing trauma stored in the body, and reclaiming joy as a natural emotional baseline are central to our healing journeys. By integrating these practices into educational systems, we can create spaces where Indigenous learners are empowered to heal, grow, and thrive.

Reclaiming joy is not just a personal act; it is a political one, challenging the narratives of trauma and subjugation that colonialism sought to impose. Through neurodecolonization and somatic experiencing, Indigenous peoples can restore balance, reclaim their identity, and both inspire and activate resilience for future generations.

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Reclaiming Wellness: The Land, Neurodecolonization, and Indigenous Resilience

Rochelle Starr

Abstract This paper explores the intersection of neurodecolonization, somatic experiencing, and the land as pathways for Indigenous healing and resilience. Colonization disrupted Indigenous knowledge systems and attempted to sever the recognition of relationship to the land, resulting in cultural, psychological, and physical trauma. Neurodecolonization is a process that reconnects individuals with Indigenous knowledge and contemplative practices as presented by Michael Yellowbird. This approach is discussed alongside somatic experiencing which is a trauma-healing method developed by Peter Levine, to offer a holistic approach to wellness. Drawing on Cree teachings and personal reflections, this paper highlights how the land serves as a living relative and ultimate facilitator of well-being, supporting emotional regulation, reducing inflammation, and creating a sense of belonging. The integration of somatic practices enhances the physiological and emotional aspects of neurodecolonization, creating a powerful synergy for addressing intergenerational trauma. Furthermore, reclaiming joy and spirit, foundational elements in Cree teachings, emerges as a critical component of Indigenous resurgence and sovereignty. The paper concludes with policy implications for education, emphasizing land-based learning, mindfulness practices, and the inclusion of healing spaces for Indigenous learners. Through this work, neurodecolonization and somatic experiencing are reframed not only as personal healing practices but as political acts of resistance and empowerment.

Keywords neuro-decolonization, decolonization, somatic experiencing, Indigenous resilience, Indigenous knowledge systems, , Cree knowledge system, Indigenous healing, Indigenous lifelong learning, land-based learning, mindfulness practices, intergenerational trauma

Récupérer le bien-être: La terre, la neurodécolonisation et la résilience autochtone

Rochelle Starr

Résumé Cet article explore l'intersection entre la neurodécolonisation, l'expérience somatique et la terre comme voies de guérison et de résilience autochtone. La colonisation a perturbé les systèmes de connaissances autochtones et tenté de rompre la relation avec la terre, engendrant des traumatismes culturels, psychologiques et physiques. La neurodécolonisation reconnecte les individus aux savoirs autochtones et aux pratiques contemplatives, telles que présentées par Michael Yellowbird. Cette démarche est examinée conjointement avec l'expérience somatique, une méthode de guérison des traumatismes développée par Peter Levine, pour proposer une approche holistique du bien-être. En s'appuyant sur les enseignements cris et des réflexions personnelles, cet article met en lumière le rôle de la terre comme parent vivant et facilitateur fondamental du bien-être, en favorisant la régulation émotionnelle, en réduisant l'inflammation et en créant un sentiment d'appartenance. L'intégration des pratiques somatiques enrichit les dimensions physiologiques et émotionnelles de la neurodécolonisation, générant une synergie puissante pour aborder les traumatismes intergénérationnels. De plus, la réappropriation de la joie et de l'esprit, éléments centraux des enseignements cris, se révèle être un pilier essentiel de la résurgence et de la souveraineté autochtones. L'article conclut avec des implications politiques pour l'éducation, soulignant l'importance de l'apprentissage en lien avec la terre, des pratiques de pleine conscience et de l'intégration d'espaces de guérison pour les apprenants autochtones. Ce travail recadre la neurodécolonisation et l'expérience somatique non seulement comme des pratiques de guérison personnelle, mais aussi comme des actes politiques de ré.

Mots clés neurodécolonisation, décolonisation, expérience somatique, résilience autochtone, systèmes de connaissances autochtones, savoirs cris, guérison autochtone, apprentissage tout au long de la vie, apprentissage en lien avec la terre, pratiques de pleine conscience, traumatisme intergénérationnel.

Reclamando el bienestar: La tierra, la neurodecolonización y la resiliencia indígena

Rochelle Starr

Resumen Este artículo explora la intersección entre la neurodecolonización, la experiencia somática y la relación con la tierra como vías para la sanación y la resiliencia indígenas. La colonización perturbó los sistemas de conocimiento indígena e intentó romper la conexión con la tierra, generando traumas culturales, psicológicos y físicos. La neurodecolonización es un proceso que reconecta a las personas con los conocimientos indígenas y las prácticas contemplativas, como las presentadas por Michael Yellowbird. Este enfoque se analiza en conjunto con la experiencia somática, un método de sanación del trauma desarrollado por Peter Levine, para ofrecer una perspectiva holística del bienestar. Basándose en las enseñanzas cree y en reflexiones personales, este artículo destaca cómo la tierra actúa como un pariente viviente y facilitador esencial del bienestar, al promover la regulación emocional, reducir la inflamación y fomentar un sentido de pertenencia. La integración de prácticas somáticas enriquece las dimensiones fisiológicas y emocionales de la neurodecolonización, creando una sinergia poderosa para abordar los traumas intergeneracionales. Además, la recuperación de la alegría y el espíritu, elementos fundamentales de las enseñanzas cree, emerge como un componente clave del resurgimiento y la soberanía indígena. El artículo concluye con implicaciones políticas para la educación, subrayando la relevancia del aprendizaje basado en la tierra, las prácticas de atención plena y la creación de espacios de sanación para los estudiantes indígenas. Este trabajo replantea la neurodecolonización y la experiencia somática no solo como prácticas de sanación personal, sino también como actos políticos de resistencia y empoderamiento.

Palabras clave neurodecolonización, descolonización, experiencia somática, resiliencia indígena, sistemas de conocimiento indígena, saberes cree, sanación indígena, aprendizaje a lo largo de la vida, aprendizaje basado en la tierra, prácticas de atención plena, trauma intergeneracional.