

Welcome

I am happy you are here and excited that we get to be in this work together. Though I don't know you, I'm imagining a few things about who you are. I'm imagining that like me, you spend some time feeling the fullness of the world. For as much beauty as you see, there is also so much pain. It's hard to find time to simply be. Do you dream of putting it all down? Do you, like me, try to imagine what liberation would feel like? Would it feel like being part of a humming community, intimately connected yet supported with ample space, time, and ease? Would it feel like tucking your body into something soft, a quiet night, and a good book? Maybe it would feel like riding a bike, hands-free under an audacious sunset sky or contentedly attending to your world alongside busy bumblebees, satisfied in your individual dances and yet fundamentally interwoven.

I'm imagining you spend some time wondering how you can bring more rest, more connection, more love, and more authenticity into your life. Maybe you, like me, bounce between feelings of joyous possibility and waves of grief. Though I don't know you, I feel like I can be honest with you. As though we share the same desire to be who we truly are in our relationships. No masks. No shapeshifting. No pretending.

In this moment, if you were to ask, "How are you?" I would reply that "I am anxious." It's nothing to be alarmed about. My anxiety sits on my chest and radiates up toward my throat. I'm very familiar with these sensations. They've been with me my whole life. There was a time when I tried to push them away, believing they indicated something broken within myself. I've found though that distracting myself or trying to will away what my body is feeling only makes it louder. I've learned to live with my anxiety. Like rain, it moves in and out on its own pattern. Sometimes I can pinpoint a specific reason for the storm. Usually, I cannot. My body is like an antenna that picks up many frequencies. Often what's coming through

is a staticky mix of information. There is the steady clarity and insistence of my ancestors, layered with loss, grief, and so much resilience, and there is the fear and righteous rage of our present-day social context. I'm anxious because anxiety is an honest response to tuning in.

Right now, I hope you feel my invitation to show up exactly as you are, and to welcome in all your complexity.

This book is about your radio dial. It is about coming to trust the honesty of your embodied experience. It is also about belonging and community and getting close to the parts of ourselves that have been banished so that we may fully welcome them home. In decolonizing the body, we make a commitment to no longer being afraid of who we are. We know that when we reclaim our bodies, we also support collective transformation.

Please know, the intention of this book is not that you finish these pages and feel complete. Quite the opposite. This is a beginning with no discernible end. Until the systems of oppression that structure our societies are dismantled, we will not be decolonized. Rather, we place ourselves in the stream of the many who have come before and the many who will come after us working toward liberation.

The road ahead is arduous. It is a sticky, muddy path. It is days of toiling forward only to feel (at times) like you're back where you began. You will be frustrated. So why do it? The circuitousness of this route affirms its authenticity. There is no arriving because we've stepped out of linearity—beyond goals, finish lines, and checkboxes—and into the ever-emergent present. In our travels, we're healing the past and seeding the future. There will be moments of satisfaction. The sun will peek out, the rattling of your nervous system will settle, and you'll feel yourself deeply held in the tapestry of creation. Your capacity for attuning to the whispers of the ancestors and guidance from the great beyond will deepen. You will feel in service to life itself. The balm of these moments, the relief of knowing you're right where you're meant to be, anchors you for the unknown ahead. The complexity of this journey brings you to the truth of your being—your decolonized self.

What Is a Colonized Body?

We live under systems of oppression established during colonization. For most bodies of color, if we were to trace our lineage, we would see that at some point, our ancestors were colonized. The reality of what this means is deeply embodied. Colonization is the ripping of children from mothers; the breaking and whipping of backs; the enslavement of bodies; the raping and murdering of women; the annihilation of entire villages; the decimation of culture, language, and foodways. It is bloodied hands and bruised knees for a religion that espouses intolerance. Species are lost, lands destroyed, and entire civilizations erased by the greed and hunger for power that fuel colonization.

Colonization and its sister, imperialism, are the “first poisons” from which other ways of dehumanizing and hierarchically valuing bodies find fertile ground. From this view, it is not just bodies who were violently removed from their land who suffered the impacts of colonization, but also bodies who were stolen, enslaved, and subjugated under colonial value systems. We know we are a colonized people when we do not speak the native tongue of our lineage; when we do not know our lineage; when we do not know our foods, spiritual practices, rituals, and ceremonies; when the social politics that historically governed our people has been erased or consumed by white-value systems. A colonized people are required to adopt the values and traditions of their colonizers to survive. A colonized people do not know where they are from and question their belonging.

As the brutality of colonization spread across the Americas at the beginning in the fifteenth century, how colonizers related to the land is also how they related to the native bodies who inhabited that land. Black and brown bodies were to be controlled and wielded for a specific use. If they did not comply, they were disposed of. While many of our ancestors fought, survival meant contorting to fit the societal role demanded by the dominating power. Writes Frantz Fanon (1952), “Every colonized people—in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of its local cultural originality—finds itself

face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards." To do this, our people learned to hold their rage quietly, to not draw attention to themselves, to comply, to attend to the needs of the oppressor, to "keep their heads down." Internally, we learned to push our anger far down, to disconnect from feeling and sensation "to get through," to feel shame for ourselves and our bodies.

These ways of being were taught to us and passed down in our DNA. Today, we feel how this conditioning plays out. A colonized body does not know how to rest; has difficulty saying "no"; may feel guilty for taking up space; may feel more comfortable putting others first and itself last; suspects that it can't rely on anyone; finds it difficult to ask for and receive support; believes it is meant to always be of service, useful, and working; and prioritizes getting ahead over self-connection. The more marginalized social identities one inhabits, for example, being both Black and female-identified, the more likely one is to feel these impacts. We'll explore this in greater depth in chapter 4.

Where Does Decolonizing the Body Come From?

This book is born from my coaching work with women and nonbinary folks of color. These are the themes and practices we've come back to over and over. In weaving the insights from our sessions together, I hope to support the many others holding similar experiences and questions. This book is a reminder that, though your present reality may feel isolating, you are not alone. Unbound by time and space, we stand and breathe alongside you.

I recognize that in my own learning, though many of the practices and approaches I use originate from indigenous communities, several of my teachers and mentors are white bodied. Many times I have asked, How can I decolonize if the lens from which I connect to these teachings is filtered by whiteness? That this is the case is not a surprise given the racial

hierarchy we live under in the United States. These are the beings who've been given the social credibility, resources, and visibility to share these tools. Still, I have wanted a purer stream. I've wanted to learn about decolonial somatic practices from the indigenous teachers of my own lineage. I've traced my ancestry hoping that one of my DNA threads would lead me to a wellspring of rituals and practices I could authentically embody. But deepening in the ways of some of my people meant leaving other parts behind.

A true product of the American experiment, my ancestors were both stolen and came of their own volition. DNA testing shows that I am 34.2 percent West African, 10.8 percent Congolese, and 54.3 percent Northwestern European. I also have a trace of Southeast Asian blood. In my studying, the underlying question has always been, Where can 100 percent of me belong? This longing brought me to the dream realm, to my connection to the earth, and to my ancestors. In my fog-soaked sojourns, what always came back was, there is no looking outside for yourself. Your wholeness resides internally. My ancestry is complex, but my completeness is not. I feel gratitude for the many teachers in human, spirit, animal, and plant form who have continually held space and invited trust in the wisdom my body already holds. My call now is to translate these explorations through this politicized Black body, if, for no other reason, than to offer another lens.

Who I Am

I'm a cis, biracial, queer, Black woman. My pronouns are she/her and they/them, and I live on the land of the Ohlone people, now called San Francisco, with my partner and our dog, a rescue pittie-blue heeler, that reminds me constantly of how trauma manifests in the body. I am a partner, daughter, auntie, friend, and bestie. In my professional work, I am a writer and cultural somatics practitioner, mindfulness guide, astrology nerd, and numerologist working alongside powerful, insightful, inspiring, creative, strategic,

and thoughtful women of color. I am a lifelong dancer, burgeoning Hoodoo practitioner, Buddhist, bomb-ass chef, and a joiner; I'll say more about that last one shortly. My work is politicized, and I prefer to be in relationships with bodies for whom the words "patriarchy," "colonization," and "racialized capitalism" are not feather-ruffling.

I did not grow up in a politicized household. The words "diversity" and "equity" did not roll off my tongue. My family did not discuss race. My formative years were spent surrounded by whiteness in a small suburb outside of Salt Lake City. My father is Black, my mother is white, and to my peers, I was "weird." My family also isn't Mormon, a faith that centers family gatherings and community activity far beyond the Sunday service. As a teen, I subconsciously tried to minimize my Blackness, shellacking my hair into a tight ponytail and listening to alternative music. I believed that if I wore the right clothes, liked the right things, and spoke the right way, I would fit in. I internalized my inability to belong as something faulty within myself. I learned how to perform what I was "supposed to be": cheerful, friendly, smart, athletic.

I identify as a joiner, someone who loves to be part of a group. I was a Girl Scout. I was in the school choir, a cheerleader, a drama nerd, on the youth city council. I joined the Earth Club yelling alongside others, "Who's your mother!" to baffled neighbors in our small town's homecoming parade. I didn't realize that in all my moving around and jumping in and out of organizations, I was searching for something. My learned skill of becoming who others wanted me to be served me well for being invited in. It did not offer so much in knowing who I was.

I still remember the words of my first meditation instructor: "This practice has made me more who I am than anything else." I didn't know how much I longed for that until I heard it. This was my introduction to Shamatha meditation at the Boulder Shambhala Center, a Buddhist lineage established by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. In that first five-minute session, and many sessions after, I was flooded with anxiety. I couldn't place why or from what, and I was curious. I started to see how my

anxiety had been with me for a long time and, like a canary in a coal mine, it told me something honest about my history and my present. I started listening to my body.

This pivotal experience led me to the study of somatics, learning more about the wisdom of my body through the practice of InterPlay and training at the Strozzi Institute. The more I dropped below my head and followed my body, the more myself I felt. I gradually began to make bolder decisions in my work and life. I left Boulder after honestly reflecting on the question, “What does my body want?” The answer was clear: ocean. I moved to the Bay Area and felt for the first time that I could fully be a part of the kind of community I longed for. With willing and dedicated volunteers, I founded a meditation community in Oakland, co-launched a class teaching somatics to artists and activists, published a viral article on the need for BIPOC-only spaces, began teaching somatics in corporate and nonprofit spaces to Black and brown folks, and started coaching women of color to connect to their body’s own liberatory wisdom. This work culminated in the online course “Decolonizing the Body,” which brings together somatics and spiritual and creative practices for personal and collective liberation.

I tell you all this to help your body discern whether I’m a trustworthy guide. As I mentioned, this journey is about your radio dial. It’s about learning to trust what your body is pointing you toward—even when it’s uncomfortable. It’s about being in the practice of liberation by revealing and reclaiming more of your full self. Take a moment, take a breath, and if you’re ready, let’s cross this threshold together. I’m happy to have you by my side. I hope you feel me at yours.