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Andean Dance Cosmovision in the Classrooms: A Decoloniality Dance Approach toward Liberation for Elementary Students and Teachers

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Abstract

This reflexive ethnographic article offers an exploration of how the vibrancy of Andean dance cosmovision serves as a powerful decolonial process for both students and teachers in the classroom. It captures the essence of the Indigenous dance teachings of Don Juanito, an Indigenous dancer and elder from Cayambe, Ecuador, who passionately conveyed to his granddaughter the profound belief that all human beings are life dancers, interconnected in the rhythm of existence. The narrative delves into the transformative potential of dance as an alternative method of knowledge transmission, enriching the learning experience while simultaneously nurturing students' autonomy and creative expression. Through this lens, the article illuminates the significance of embracing Indigenous wisdom in educational settings, fostering a deeper appreciation for cultural heritage and the collective spirit of community.

Keywords: Andean Dance cosmovision, funds of knowledge, decoloniality, mind and body liberation

Introduction

Don Juanito used to say, "All humans are danzantes in the womb of Mother Nature." He was my grandfather, an Indigenous man who was my first dance teacher. He experienced the brutality of colonialism and racism in Ecuador, but he never stopped smiling at the world. His secret was his grounding in an Andean cosmovision expressed through dance. He learned this Andean knowledge from Michita, his mother. She used to communicate with Papa Viento (Father Wind), who guided my ancestors to dance. According to Don Juanito, "cada movimiento de la vida tiene un propósito y cada palabra hablada tiene que ser clara" (every movement in life has a purpose and every word must be spoken clearly).

His teachings on Andean dance and the cosmovision of which it was a part will always resonate with me in my ongoing journey of decoloniality. As a child, I did not realize it, but the dance teachings from my grandfather rooted me in an understanding of my Indigenous ancestors' origins. This understanding helped me cope with Ecuadorian patriarchal racism, legacies of colonialism-coloniality, racism from my mother's side of the family, and my feelings of abandonment by my father. With Don Juanito, I learned that I could create dance movements that connect with Pachamama (Mother Nature) and the universe. Every day, as human danzantes, we create our life's choreographies, he used to say. In the Andean dance cosmovision he shared with me, even the simple act of waking up becomes part of the human choreography. His teachings were rich with creative movement, allowing the body to express feelings through dance.

Don Juanito's teachings, though profound and insightful, could not shield me from the stark reality of societal expectations. Coloniality was also in dance. When my mother decided to enroll me in Western dance classes, I was taught that Don Juanito's Andean dance cosmovision did not fit in ballet. In the world of ballet, I was met with a torrent of contradictions: I was deemed too small, my body too square and curvy, my feet failed to point in the prescribed angles, and my turnout consistently fell short of the lofty standards. After each dance lesson, I returned home weighed down by an avalanche of insecurity about my body. A shadow swept over my spirit as I compared myself to the other dancers, who effortlessly embodied the ballet ideal. Yet, in those moments of doubt, Don Juanito would say, "Do not let anyone take away the rhythm of your heart and the colors of your dance."

Still, I allowed coloniality to strip away the rhythm of my heart and the colors of my dance. As a child, I was influenced by schools and their environments. At my school, I noticed that many teachers would often express their admiration for European culture, while at the same time, they seemed to overlook or even diminish the value of Indigenous culture. I found myself living in two worlds, just as Don Juanito did. In the Andean dance world, we had the ability to create art through movement. In the colonial world, we were bound by European ideals, which led us to question the validity of our own perceptions. He was also trying to navigate a society that minimized both his body and mind. To others, Don Juanito appeared to be an ordinary Indigenous man: short, with a sturdy build, dark skin, and features typical of Ruminaui or Atahualpa. In my child's eyes, he was the Aya Huma—an embodiment of guidance and a reminder of the unique beauty that my heritage and experiences infused into my dance.

The contradictions that shaped my understanding of decoloniality originate from my grandfather. He made a conscious effort to adapt to Ecuador's colonial culture while simultaneously wielding the Andean dance cosmovision as a powerful form of resistance against coloniality. Although Don Juanito was not familiar with the terms "coloniality" or "decoloniality," the Andean dance cosmovision unequivocally represented his decolonial praxis (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018), as it safeguarded his bodily and mental freedom. His influence is undeniable; I now assertively embrace the Andean dance cosmovision as my primary means of resisting colonialism and advancing my own decolonial journey.

In my decolonial journey, I have incorporated Don Juanito's Andean wisdom in my approach to teaching dance. This enables me to see how decolonial dance can empower students, foster their autonomy, and guide them towards mental clarity and physical freedom. This article is not merely a documentation of my reflexive ethnographic dance research, it also aims to highlight the

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profound impact that dance can have on students and teachers. My intent is not to promote dance solely as a means for those aspiring to become professional dancers. Instead, I aim to elevate the importance of this expressive art form within an academic realm that often prioritizes sedentary intellectual pursuits over physical activity.

As an Indigenous danzante, scholar, and researcher, I feel a deep responsibility to convey the unique advantages that dance can bring to the educational environment. Through movement, we can unlock our creativity, cultivate a heightened sense of bodily awareness, and root a stronger connection to our individual identities. Each step taken is more than a physical act; it is an expressive journey that promotes collaboration, enhances a mental and bodily decolonial process, and fosters a sense of community. By incorporating dance into the schools, we create not only an artful practice but also a vital component of holistic education that enriches the lives of all involved.

Andean Dance Cosmovision as a Source of Knowledge

Andean dance cosmovision has shaped my approach to teaching dance. This rich cultural framework, rooted in the interconnectedness of body, mind, and community, has influenced my instructional methods. To introduce dance as part of a decoloniality process in education. I needed to create a framework for Don Juanito's Andean dance cosmovision that shows how dance helps students' bodies and minds in the process of liberation, decoloniality, and autonomy.

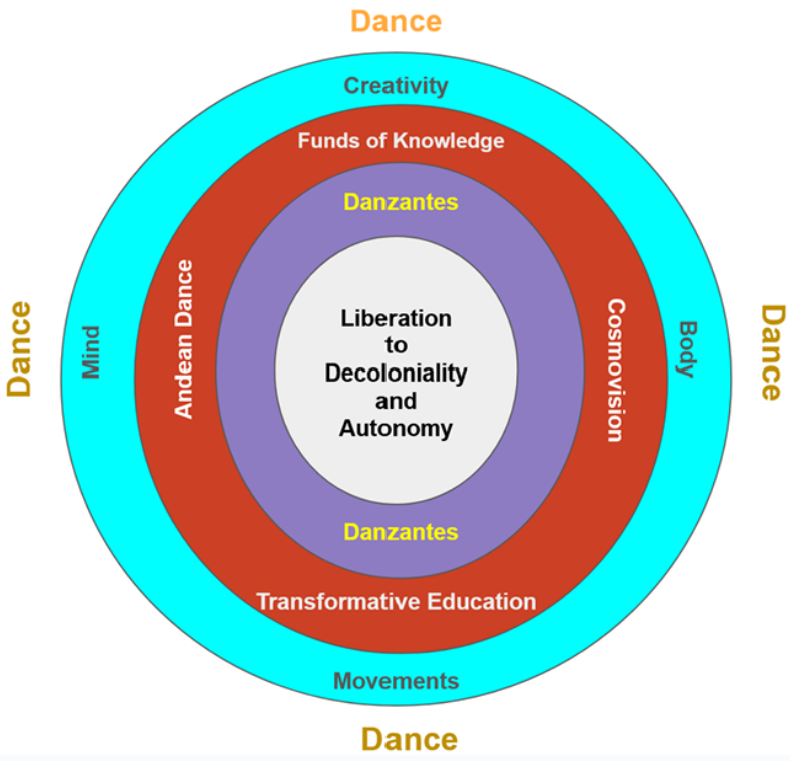

Figure 1. Integrating Dance and Andean Dance Cosmovision into Scholarly Concepts.

I developed Figure 1 in a circular form, inspired by Don Juanito's idea that all movements in life are interconnected. He often shared that his mother, Michita, used to say that when the wind moves the branches of trees, the leaves eventually fall to the ground. When these leaves touch the ground, they become fertilizer for the soil. Later, when the tree drops seeds onto this enriched soil, another tree begins its life, nourished by the rain and the sun. In a very simple way, Michita explained to Don Juanito the interconnectedness of life through this circular analogy.

Using her example of the tree, he would point out that the mind, body, and dance movements are all connected to shape our stories. In this metaphor, your body is the tree, your mind is the wind, the dance movements are the leaves falling to the ground, and the dance stories represent the seeds that intertwine with creativity, leading to new beginnings and starting a cycle of dance movements once again. With this concept of interconnection in a circular form, I created Figure 1 to link existing scholarly concepts to Andean dance cosmovision, forming a framework to validate Don Juanito's teachings in an educational context.

In Figure 1, dance exists outside the circle. It serves as a form of expression that connects with the movement and creativity of both the mind and body. This connection is intertwined with the funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 2009) of the students and my own background in Andean dance cosmovision. This blend enhances the practice of dancing, fostering a relationship between dance knowledge and transformative education. As students create their narratives through movement, they "develop creative and critical thinking skills to continuously question their own learning" (Orelus, 2013, p. 10). This process allows students to connect with their inner danzante.

Escobar (2016) suggests that by observing the various relationships among the components that shape an individual's world, we can see how their ancestral stories contribute to their identity. When students' creative uniqueness is discovered, their dance knowledge begins to surface, allowing them to link "knowledge to everyday life" (Rendon, 2014, p. 89). This situates students' knowledge within a dance framework that is "dynamic, relational, and constructed," enabling them to create dance stories as "a form of cultural-historical identity" (Raj & Ulanoff, 2022, p. 4).

This understanding brings us to the essence of the final circle in Figure 1, captured in the concepts of Liberation, Decoloniality, and Autonomy, which is crucial as it encourages self-expression and creativity (Daly, 2022). It underscores the critical importance of fostering autonomy—not only of the body but also of the mind—as a rooting step towards achieving genuine liberation and effective decoloniality. This perspective highlights that freedom can only be attained when individuals and communities exercise their own agency and control over their lives, free from oppressive structures and colonial legacies. Advocating for autonomy creates the necessary conditions for transformative change, allowing for a reclamation of identity and agency that is essential for collective empowerment and self-determination. This framework guided my reflexive ethnographic dance research, enabling me to document the complex relationships among dance, decoloniality, body-mind liberation, and autonomy in TK to eighth-grade students.

The Research, The First Lesson, and Andean Dance Cosmovision

In the 2022–2023 school year, I created an after-school dance program. I approached the school where my son attended, and having that connection, the principal allowed me to initiate a dance program at the school. I recruited twenty-eight dance students and divided them into two groups.

The first group was TK to second-grade students, with fifteen danzantes, and the second group of thirteen danzantes was third to eighth-graders (Moseley, 2024). The dance classes were held 3 to 4 days each week.

To prepare to teach using the Andean dance cosmovision approach, I recognized that the students needed to engage deeply with their creativity by learning to transform into danzantes—dynamic participants who not only absorb knowledge but also actively contribute to the creation of their movement. This method emphasizes the integration of bodily knowledge, allowing students to draw from their physical experiences and cultural heritage. In the context of Andean dance cosmovision, this means fostering an environment where students can explore their interpretations while connecting with the collective spirit of the dance. Through this process, they become not merely students but creators of their own expression, weaving together tradition and personal artistry in each movement they make. At the same time, students allow their bodies to explore movement that comes from their everyday experiences.

One of the activities I used to stimulate students to move was the action of waking up in the morning. For me, it is essential to incorporate this stimulus lesson when I begin teaching students who have not been exposed to the art of dance. From Don Juanito, I learned that the action of waking up leads to the choreography of one's day. In the Andean dance cosmovision, waking up sets your day for a new beginning. In my childhood, thinking about the action of waking up as a daily choreography assisted in awakening my creativity. It was a ritual in creating dance movement in my child's imagination. I have come to understand that the act of walking up sets the stage for students to begin constructing their movement.

I began by asking three questions to the TK to eighth-grade students to initiate the movement in this lesson: How do you wake up in the morning? What is the first movement that you do when you wake up? When you get out of bed, are you slow, fast, or jumpy? The tricky part of this dance stimulus lesson was that students must show with movement the action of waking up. After I explained that the entire body has its own vocabulary that does not require spoken words, students looked at me with surprise, as if I had shared something that was an impossible task.

If the students are shy, it is the instructor's responsibility to foster an inviting atmosphere where students feel at ease exploring and refining their movement. According to Paulo Freire, educational practice involves the teacher's interpretation of humanity and the world (Finders & Thornton, 2017). To ignite their creativity, with each question, I introduced a collection of whimsical dance phrases, starting with a detailed interpretation of my morning routine. I exaggerated my stretches, twirled playfully, and infused energy into each gesture, capturing the essence of waking up with enthusiasm. After I shared my joyful waking-up dance, the students' eyes sparkled with inspiration, and they eagerly embarked on creating their own movement expressions. Each student crafted phrases that resonated with their experiences and emotions. As they danced, these lively phrases evolved into a rich tapestry of choreography, allowing their stories to unfold and shine brightly on the dance floor, transforming an everyday action into a celebration of self-expression, autonomy, and creativity.

While doing this lesson, I had a 4-year-old student who laid down on the floor and decided to practice opening and closing his eyes. I asked him, “Do you move other parts of your body when you wake up?” He responded, “Yes, but I am practicing how to open my eyes, and I do not

remember which side to get up from bed." His response reminded me that my role was to motivate them to move, not to interfere with their decision-making. According to Don Juanito, we choose the steps that guide us on our daily dance path. The 4-year-old student was in his first dance class and needed time to recall his morning dance path. The next time we had class, he started to create movements that expressed not only his morning experience but also his family stories.

Building on Andean dance cosmovision as my foundation for teaching allowed me to be part of the students' creation process, and students embarked on a journey to bring their dance knowledge into a classroom environment that has often restricted them to being sedentary learners. In the coloniality setting, they are expected to adhere to the instructor's rules strictly. However, within the Andean dance cosmovision, students are encouraged to develop creative and critical thinking skills that empower them to cultivate problem-solving abilities (Orelus, 2013). Autonomy emerges as a means of reclaiming the liberation of both body and mind (Daly, 2022).

The Pathway of Dance Decoloniality to Decoloniality of Education

Using Andean dance cosmovision as my funds of knowledge not only allowed me to observe how the TK to eighth-grade students create their choreographies with their dance fund of knowledge to nourish their autonomy, liberation, and decoloniality, but it also enabled me to create an environment in which they used their math skills to memorize their dance steps. I was able to connect the different dance lessons to math reinforcement, in which TK to eighth-grade students needed to count their steps and multiply the steps by sections of four and three to determine how many repetitions of the dance phrases they had. The more dance steps they created, the more they had to use their math skills. The TK students used the numbers they knew, and they figured out how many dance repetitions they had with their fingers. The older students who had more knowledge of math used multiplication and division. The beauty of this experience is that they helped each other as a community. The older students helped the younger students count the steps and the repetitions. By creating and solving math problems in their choreographies, the students also decolonized the idea that math is only in math books, homework, or slides presented by the teachers.

By recognizing students' knowledge, we enable them to cultivate their autonomy through the liberation of their minds and bodies in the art of movement creation. This approach fosters an environment where students and instructors learn from one another. When I immigrated to the US and found a job as a dance instructor at a charter school, I observed that some students were struggling with vocabulary just as I was. To address this, I requested a list of vocabulary words from the English teacher. Together with the students, we created dance movements that represented the concepts behind each word.

Through this creative process, we expanded our English vocabulary through dance. It was a unique experience because we embodied words that were challenging to learn and pronounce. By developing movements that represented the meanings of these words, we memorized them more effectively. Each student interpreted the words through their distinct dance movements, which helped them understand the meanings. As An et al. (2019) states, "a proposed explanation for the relationship between physical movement and learning is that cell network binding processes within the students' brain can be accelerated through stimulation of body-based action" (p. 148). Don Juanito used to help me understand school material with the practice of movement. I do not think

he knew about the cell network, but he knew that it was easy for me to learn concepts while creating movement.

Once, I had to memorize a poem for school. I think it was in third grade. The poem was an homage to Quito, the capital of Ecuador. It was extremely long for my age, but Don Juanito, with the Andean dance cosmovision and respect for my learning process, helped me create dance movements for the poem. The movement was based on hand movements and some stomping. My body was not moving from my center. Everything was done in the same spot. I memorized the entire poem, I recited it in front of my class, and I was chosen to recite the poem in front of the school. However, in the process of practicing to perform the poem at school, the teacher who was in charge of the program minimized the way I was saying the poem. She wanted me to stay still, not to move my hands, not to stomp my feet. At the end, I got discouraged from reciting poems.

I call that experience a decolonial-colonial experience: my Indigenous grandfather's decolonial teachings assisted me in learning a poem that was difficult for me, but my school's colonial teachings discouraged me from wanting to say poems in front of people. Encouraging students to use dance as a form of self-discovery and incorporating it into educational subjects teaches both students and teachers that education extends beyond the traditional classroom (McCutchen, 2006). Learning beyond the desk as dance funds of knowledge is a form of decolonial practice to liberate the mind and body because it does not confine students to silence and passive listening. Instead, it encourages interaction, collaboration, and the creation of unique dance narratives that show the autonomy of the students.

From Chaos to Autonomy

It is essential for me that readers understand how much an act of repressing a child's voice can affect the child who one day will become an adult. Decoloniality is important in schools, and one way to initiate this decolonial process is by using dance. Decoloniality in dance can be expressed through individual embodiment, which actively "challenges and disrupts dominant societal structures" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, pp. 29–30). The TK to eighth-graders were not accustomed to having the liberty of creating, and sometimes the dance classes looked chaotic to some of the school staff. Nevertheless, the TK to eighth-grade students needed this creative chaos to achieve liberation of mind and body, decoloniality, and autonomy.

What may seem chaotic to adults is actually a valuable learning experience for students. Disrupting established structures is a decolonial process (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). It can prompt the body to initiate movement, resulting in a range of emotions such as joy, pain, or a sense of freedom that emerges directly from those movements. This process fosters a deep feeling of embodiment (Sagasi, 2020). During our creative sessions, the TK to eighth-grade students often laughed; at times, their movements were so swift that it looked as if they were running. Other moments saw us rolling on the floor, connecting with Pachamama with our entire bodies. We would jump, and some students would even do cartwheels. Those who could do cartwheels took the opportunity to teach their classmates. The noise generated during our dance movement experimentation reflected their personal life experiences; it was a form of liberation and a way for them to express their autonomy.

The dance narratives created by the students exceeded my expectations. While each story was unique, they were also interwoven with one another. Students supported each other when needed, learning to function both as individuals and as part of a community. The sense of community that they developed inspired me to create a school art festival called *Free To Be Me*! When I asked the dance student if they would like to perform, the TK to second-graders opted for two collective choreographies. In contrast, six students from the third to eighth grades expressed their desire to develop their own individual choreographies for the festival. The students who did not desire to be choreographers played the role of dancers, and others who did not want to dance took the role of stage managers.

Free To Be Me!

There were no funds to create the festival, but the wonderful aspect of creating "Free To Be Me!" was the involvement of parents and teachers in coordinating various logistical parts of the festival. Mothers and grandmothers organized fundraisers, selling treats like raspados, pizza, mango with chile, aguas frescas, and other delicious foods to raise money for materials to create the costumes. Two days before the festival, fathers helped clean and prepare the stage, ensuring it was safe for the students. Teachers played a crucial role by encouraging both parents and students to participate in the festival. Everyone had a role to play in this collaborative choreographic experience. Don Juanito would describe this spirit of connection and cooperation as a good "minga." In Cayambe, where he was from, mingas are common within the Indigenous community, where community members come together to help one another achieve common goals and foster a sense of identity. This embodies the spirit of solidarity and mutual aid.

The enthusiasm of the dance students while creating their choreographies was contagious to the entire school body. The development of the eight choreographies for the *Free To Be Me!* Festival was full of family stories from the students. Taylor (2003) suggests that performance is an expressive behavior that transmits cultural memory and identity. Using this theory of performance as a means of transmitting cultural memory, perhaps dance can also reveal the story of lost memories. Memories, in which dance as a cultural narrative, “creates a continuum of the past to the present to the future” (Raj & Ulanoff, 2022, p. 6).

At the *Free To Be Me!* Festival, the dance "Arcoiris (Rainbow)" featured third- to eighth-grade students. The performance began with a solo dancer expressing loneliness after losing her parents, while also showing gratitude towards her grandparents. Her movements, a mix of smooth and sharp, signaled the arrival of brightly costumed group dancers, creating a rainbow effect. The performance shifted when they froze in poses, returning to the soloist, whose sad movements conveyed deeper emotions. The powerful conclusion showed the soloist executing a movement that caused the group to fall, symbolizing her desire to let go of the past and embrace the future.

The day the dance student finished choreographing Arcoiris, she told me it felt as though a ton of weight had been lifted off her mind and body. When she performed Arcoiris for her family, her grandmother was in tears. After the festival, I asked her grandmother if she understood the choreography, which could have passed for an abstract dance piece. The grandmother replied that she could see her granddaughter finally expressing her pain about losing both parents. This choreography was not only about telling a painful story; it was also about the student’s liberation of mind and body, using movement as a form of expression. At the same time, it revealed a story

that had been repressed in her body. I viewed this as a decolonial process. Her autonomy was evident the moment she decided to create something that expressed a dance narrative that belonged to her.

While students were choreographing and dancing, I noticed that they grew in a way that their minds and bodies recognized a transformation. From not knowing how to tell a story with dance. The students found ways to express themselves creatively. And I found a way to give voice to Don Juanito Andean dance cosmovision while at the same time using his knowledge to open pathways for TK to eighth-grade students to find autonomy, begin a process of decoloniality, and liberation of mind and body. In addition, the TK to eighth-grade students in each dance class created a vibrant tapestry of dance movement that mirrors their unique life journeys. This was vital in observing how the children could use problem-solving and critical thinking. By using Andean cosmovision, the students and I were able to root our identities in this ongoing decolonial process.

Decoloniality, Dance, and Liberation

As McCarthy-Brown (2017) states, "Culturally [approach] teaching expands the possibilities for dance educators to reach all students and, in so doing, develop both the creativity and physical well-being of students" (p. 45). Throughout this journey, I was seeking the well-being of the students. I witnessed the transformative power of connecting students' identities to their everyday lives, using dance as a means for them to discover their true autonomy. The funds of knowledge that underpin dance practices are essential for understanding the complex contexts of individual experiences (Gonzalez et al., 2009, p. 5). In this exploration, I embraced the dual role of teacher and learner. I learned to approach artistic choreography with humility, moving beyond the role of Maestra who imposes her vision on the students. Instead, I became a seeker—an individual engaged in a dialogue with my ancestral Andean dance cosmovision, uncovering insights that transcended mere choreography and resonated with the essence of our collective heritage.

I cannot definitively determine whether decoloniality precedes liberation or if autonomy is a prerequisite for either. Alternatively, it is not clear if autonomy fuels decoloniality and liberation, or if liberation and decoloniality pave the way for autonomy. However, I am sure that engaging with Don Juanito's Andean dance cosmovision provides a profound way for students to connect with their identities. This cultural expression fosters a deep connection to their heritage and acts as a catalyst for initiating the journey toward decoloniality. By incorporating movement and rhythm, it encourages participants to experience liberation of both mind and body, ultimately guiding them toward a sense of personal and collective autonomy. This reciprocal relationship between dance and identity creates a powerful framework for understanding and challenging the legacies of colonialism while celebrating Indigenous wisdom and resilience.

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