Personal Narrative

Re-membering through Ubuntu consciousness: A decolonial approach to researching, understanding and healing trauma

🆔 Maria Takaendisa[1] Bsc, Msc

Affiliation:

[1]Systemic/Family Psychotherapist Maria Takaendisa Consultancy Ltd London, United Kingdom

Corresponding Author:
Maria Takaendisa
maria@mariatakaendisa.com
https://mariatakaendisa.com

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INTRODUCTION

This article is grounded in Ubuntu consciousness, offering a decolonial lens through which I explore my personal experience of trauma and healing within Western academic institutions. The choice to use a decolonial lens was born out of a need to consciously move away from and decentre Eurocentric ways of knowing and demonstrate epistemic pluralism.   This shift aligns with decolonial scholarship denouncing the coloniality of knowledge and the enduring power structures that normalise Western ways of knowing as universal truths.

I centre my indigenous ways of knowing that pay attention to and respect cultural roots, language and ways of being. I use the concept of 're-membering' as part of my healing journey as I reassemble fragmented aspects of myself. Re-membering arises as both a methodological and existential counter-position to the 'dis-membering' effects of colonial epistemologies deeply embedded within Western academic traditions. In my context, dismembering is a state where parts of who I am have been erased and fragmented, thus leaving me feeling disconnected from parts of my identity and questioning my sense of self. This process of dismembering happened on my academic and professional journey. It is through storytelling and the use of proverbs that I am learning to locate, reassemble and re-member the missing parts of my identity. I reconnect and re-member (Dillard, 2012) my culture through my use of my native language, Shona, thus authentically placing myself in the work. My journey towards re-membering aligns with Richardson et al. (2021), who highlight how one's culture significantly influences definitions of unwellness, wellness, healing, and recovery when dealing with the aftermath of colonial violence.

In talking about trauma, I adopt a first-person narrative voice and draw on Ubuntu as both an ontological foundation and epistemological guide, rather than employing conventional Western trauma research approaches, which often use biomedical paradigms that emphasise individual pathology, overlooking broader socio-cultural and historical contexts (Solomon & Heide, 2005; McLaren, 2009; Leroux et al, 2023). I engage with culturally resonant practices, namely the use of proverbs as inquiry tools to establish ethical, relational connections.   I use proverbs and idiomatic expressions to either introduce a new theme or to punctuate discussion points. This method reflects a deliberate shift away from extractive research norms toward an indigenous approach rooted in communal respect, self-reflection, cultural humility and spiritual integrity (Matshabane et al, 2022; Wiredu, 1998).

Positionality

Before I was Black, I was a woman. I am now a woman racialised as Black. I am a first-generation migrant. In my Shona culture, proverbs are used to pass down wisdom. Folk tales, natively known as "ngano" are used to pass down values. Wisdom is passed down through rhythmic storytelling. This is indigenous knowledge. I am not based in my country of birth, Zimbabwe, but I carry my indigenous ways of being in my Being.

I am a qualified psychotherapist, trained within Western theoretical frameworks. Upon completing my training, I carried the silent but profound responsibility of creating therapeutic and healing spaces for marginalised, non-Western communities. With silence comes the projected burden of not being good enough because I am not white, and of letting one's own down because of cultural paranoia. With silence, the load feels like it is yours alone to carry. Through supervision from a non-Western supervisor, I realised that I had a wound. I engaged with the pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire, 1970). Who was I? What did my race and culture have to do with how I turned up professionally and what clients and trainees expected of me? I danced with the liberation praxis, a praxis that Freire (1970) describes as not only examining social structures that perpetuate oppression but also actively dismantling these structures. I became the subject and not the object of study (Fanon, 2008). The voiced and unvoiced weight of racial expectations and racial paranoia clubbed together and propelled me on a journey towards re-membering, healing and wholeness.

Through Ubuntu-informed storytelling and reflection, I reclaimed silenced narratives and reconnected with parts of myself that colonial academic structures had maligned, marginalised, disenfranchised and alienated. The process of re-membering enabled me to reinterpret trauma not as an isolated psychological event, but as a communal and historical wound (Burstow, 2005). The process of writing this article has implicitly contributed towards my healing by affording me the space to reclaim my identity, dignity, and purpose within cultural, professional and scholarly spaces. It has helped me to address my own "schizophrenia", as Fanon (2008) would say in his writings. My writing is nonlinear. This means that I tell the story of the past and the present in parallel. I externalise my internal sense-making dialogue to give context to the narrative.

Conceptualising trauma

"A bee sting can only be cured by uprooting the sting"- Proverb from folk tradition

Medical frameworks often conceptualise trauma through a lens of linear causality, suggesting that exposure to potentially traumatising event(s) directly results in psychological disorders (Linklater, 2014; Sodhi, 2024). This perspective conceptualises trauma as an individual pathology, implying that individuals are responsible for their responses and effectively pathologising their suffering (Maté & Maté, 2022; Deacon, 2013). This reductionist framing overlooks broader systemic, relational, and contextual factors that shape trauma experiences (Maté & Maté, 2022).

An Indigenous framing of trauma challenges dominant Western medical paradigms, which often pathologise behaviours and position the clinician as the ultimate authority. Instead, it repositions trauma within a framework that views responses as

behavioural and protective mechanisms arising from injury. Such a perspective recognises trauma responses as adaptive strategies developed within contexts of harm and the need for self-protection (Menakem, 2017; Linklater, 2014).

A decolonial lens further deepens this understanding by acknowledging the cumulative and polycrisis nature of trauma, particularly as it affects Indigenous and colonised populations (Hübl, 2023; Linklater, 2024). From this standpoint, the concept of Ubuntu is integral, as it situates suffering within broader communal, historical, and systemic contexts. Ubuntu emphasises relational identity and collective healing rather than individual pathology (Chigangaidze, 2020).

Recognising trauma through this lens entails acknowledging its embeddedness in the land through colonisation and its reproduction within institutional and structural systems (Linklater, 2014). Trauma is not merely historical but is sustained and perpetuated within contemporary pedagogical structures. As Peck (2017) asserts, "history is the present," while Jones and Adams (2000) remind us that "the personal is political."

Healing through language and narrative does not follow a linear trajectory. Instead, it unfolds cyclically, grounded in story and tradition. While language can serve as a bridge, it can also obscure or erase Indigenous and non-linear modes of communication (waThiong'o, 1986). As Menakem (2023) explains, "we are bodies of culture," referring to all bodies not identified as white. This framing emphasises that we are embodied beings whose histories, traumas, and healing processes are deeply rooted in cultural and contextual experiences.

Chinokanganwa idemo asi muti haukanganwe (Shona proverb)

"Chinokanganwa idemo asi muti haukanganwe" is a Shona proverb which directly translates to "It is the axe that forgets, but the tree that was harmed will always remember".

This proverb illustrates a painful dynamic whereby the perpetrators of violence quickly move on, forgetting or dismissing the harms caused to the victim. In contrast, the victim carries the weight of that wound, the trauma, indefinitely. Like the axe, exclusionary academic spaces dismembered me and then forgot the harm inflicted. My established ways of knowing and making sense of the world were systematically invalidated. Nevertheless, like the tree, I remember and carry the wound.

In a decolonial context, trauma is witnessed from a multi-traumatic context, meaning that one acknowledges that marginalised people constantly live in and with trauma (Linklater, 2014). Traumatisation implies that there is an after-effect. This perspective underscores the severity of the trauma I have experienced in academic spaces. Trauma shaped and dominated by whiteness as a structural ideology. In this context, I define whiteness as an ideological system, a constellation of beliefs, norms, and institutional practices that sustain white privilege and authority while marginalising and devaluing non-white cultures (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019). Within such environments, trauma emerges not merely from interpersonal bias but from the structural and epistemic violence enacted through academic norms that elevate whiteness as the default and render other knowledges invisible (Melaku & Beeman, 2022).

My trauma in academia began during my undergraduate studies at a university in the United Kingdom. As a Black woman, I was over policed by a lecturer. I had to explain and justify every sick day that I had. My lecturer's sense of duty stretched to the point where I was observed on placement during a night shift. I only realised that this was only done to me when I spoke about her visit with my fellow trainees who were not racialised as Black. All this scrutiny was done under the policy of student assessment and support. This made it legit, but the impact of such scrutiny left me unconsciously paranoid. It left me with a wound.

My postgraduate experience involved the forceful erasure of my inherent ways of knowing. I was instructed to exclude knowledge drawn from my cultural upbringing and to remove African phrases that anchored my learning. There was no academic curiosity about how my ways of knowing enhanced my learning. In compliance, I conformed, but this left a psychological wound I did not know I had. The challenges continued, privately, and dressed up in shame. In another incident, I got caught up in the visible-invisible bind that most people from minoritised communities tend to find themselves in (Iheduru-Anderson, 2025). This bind means that my presence is hyper-visible but ignored, and my identity is demanded but denied. I was encouraged to talk, but when I did, I was quickly labelled a troublemaker. A lecturer who looked like me pulled me aside and said, "Keep quiet, get your certificate, then speak after you graduate." I had to conform in silence to pass my postgraduate degree. The cost was huge, I battled self-doubt, experienced heart palpitations, ruminated over assignments, and ultimately, I lost my voice, burying both my cherished culture and my core identity.

These experiences made me lose confidence. I internalised racism. I created a template, a geographical positioning system (GPS), a navigation guide for how I entered or did not enter academic institutions. To my understanding as a practising psychotherapist, these experiences do not meet the criteria for a trauma diagnosis using the medical, Eurocentric frameworks for diagnosis. What these experiences do not explicitly say is the role that my race and coloniality of knowledge and power played in how I was treated. These experiences reflect how some institutions reproduce colonial hierarchies by demanding assimilation whilst in the same breath punishing difference and suppressing epistemic pluralism.

My experiences represent a wound I carry through academic life, rooted in living and working within trauma triggered by my racial identity. These experiences are a wound that I carry in academia. This trauma is not merely personal or incidental, but it is embedded within educational systems shaped by white supremacist culture and actively maintained through the everyday scholarly practices of implicit silencing, denial of participation, and restricted access to vital information (Joseph-Salisbury, 2019).

Healing, wellness and wholeness

'Where two rivers meet, there can never be calm'- African proverb

One cannot talk about trauma without talking about the healing journey and restoration of wellbeing. Hübl (2023) describes trauma as a suppressed story that is constantly fighting to come out, be witnessed and heard. He elaborates and states that the process of

externalising the story is the starting point of healing. My journey toward healing and identity restoration begins with naming, talking, and writing about my experiences. I invite my audience to witness my process of understanding the academic wounds I carry, consciously applying a decolonial lens to prevent pathologising my adaptive responses and behaviours. In my myriad of roles, I have observed how sharing my epistemic disobedience resonates deeply with audiences, bringing genuine grounding, reconnection, and holistic wellbeing.

A decolonial and indigenous frame towards healing foregrounds the importance of relationships and the collective in the healing process. Healing honours one's ecosystem; the pain I endured was not mine alone, but it is shared by all who are connected to me. In moments of deepest despair, I experienced the nourishing power of collective solidarity. On my own, I would not have made it this far. As we say in Shona, *"Chara chimwe hachitswanyi inda"* which directly translates to "One finger cannot crush a louse." This proverb succinctly illustrates that overcoming a notorious problem requires collective effort. I deliberately chose this proverb because its words are so fitting: *inda* (louse) powerfully evokes the "blood-sucking" or "life-sucking" nature of the trauma I experienced, while *tswanya* (crush) precisely describes the nature of action needed to overcome it.

Healing from trauma is therefore not about individual pathology but about wellness and restoring balance within oneself through the relationships one has with others and the environment (Stewart, 2007). This includes spirituality. Healing is about restoring one to fullness of wellbeing. It is about restoration. Restoration acknowledges one's multifaceted relationships with the cosmos and the whole of creation.

For years, I silently carried the shame that had been injected into my body. I used the silence that I had been prescribed by my lecturer to powerfully inform my way of being in the world of academia. It was now a protection and not a behaviour that had resulted due to psychopathology. This is the impact of a decolonial lens towards trauma. Behaviour is not psychopathology; it is a response to a wound.

"Those who live in peace work for it" - Anonymous

In my work as a psychotherapist, there is a deep appreciation for the interconnectedness of art and healing. Art holds the power to tell stories that move people emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually. This is because meaning is delicate and deeply personal. Art narrates impact and consequence, offering not just expression but also the quiet presence of hope for healing. Healing begins with the recognition of imbalance, whether physical, spiritual, or academic. True healing addresses root causes rather than merely treating symptoms. Healing may come through language in the form of proverbs and folktales, resulting in a more holistic restoration of oneself.

I came to recognise that my body carried trauma triggered by academic imbalance. Even though I knew I had valuable insights to share, the opportunities to present them felt systematically closed to me. Scholars from marginalised backgrounds often encounter exclusion from authorship, publishing pipelines, or relevant mentorship. This is rooted in implicit hierarchies and structural inequities within academic institutions. This imbalance manifests in authorship; Who gets to write? How does one write? Who gets published? These

questions expose systemic inequities and academic imperialism (Chilisa, 2020). Healing through using language is not linear but cyclical.

This non-linear approach to my article is an intentional grounding in our collective love for narratives and storytelling, a practice that itself is healing. Our wellbeing extends beyond intellectual frameworks. It is rooted in culture. As Menakem (2017) reminds us, our culture lives in our bones, in our bodies. Colonisation and slavery attempted to erase this culture, reducing it through language and silencing embodied knowledge. For me, the process of re-membering, reconnecting with my cultural identity, with my ways of knowing and self-expression, is central to my healing.

What next? Decolonising my research

"A changed place cannot transform a person, but a transformed person can change a place"- Anonymous

Busia (1989) describes re-membering as the process of being "able to see again the fragments that make up the whole" (p. 197). Dillard (2012) expands on this stating that *re-membering* is an act of piece-gathering, of collecting and assembling fragments and innovating identity for marginalised people. I take re-membering to be an act of decolonisation in itself. It is not only reassembling something, like putting a body or broken object back together. Rather, it involves actively constructing that which was broken in a way to bring wholeness, leading to new understanding, meaning and wellbeing. It is a research process in itself. It is about making conscious choices to lean into cultural wisdom and strategically choosing ways of understanding that have been marginalised in formal education (Dillard, 2012).

Indigenous methodologies emphasise the researcher's self-location within the research (Wilson, 2003). Linklater (2014) states that as researchers, we write our own stories and share our position in the world before we write about the world. Absolon and Willett (2005) states that we can only speak with deepest authority when we speak about our own experiences. As an emerging researcher, it has meant coming to terms with and healing from my trauma experiences in academia, first as a migrant initially oblivious of the colonial mind and secondly as a migrant now conscious of the pedagogy of the oppressed. These perspectives inform and shape my doctorate journey, where I am intentionally and consciously using decolonial methodology to inform my ontological and epistemological being. I am intentionally embodying the invitation to be disobedient in my epistemic ways (Mignolo, 2009).

My conceptualisation of "Indigenous" intentionally challenges the Western subject–object binary and the epistemic power hierarchies it sustains. In this context, "Indigenous" refers to foundational assumptions about knowledge, reality, and selfhood that are grounded in non-Euro-Western epistemological frameworks (Dei, 2000). This approach is explicitly post-colonial; it rejects the privileging of Western rationalist frameworks and instead centres knowledge traditions that are relational, contextual, and community grounded. In so doing, it avoids the hierarchy that elevates certain knowledge systems as universal or objective, affirming instead epistemologies rooted in lived, situated, non-Western realities. It is knowledge that arises from people who have a lived colonial history and have learnt to value justice through collective fighting for liberation

(Chilisa, 2020). This deliberate position that I take in my research journey calls to consciousness what Foucault (1977a) termed as the power struggle between the researchers and the researched. Foucault stated that what we know and how we know it is grounded in shifting, diverse historical human practices, politics, and power. Indigenous episteme does not hold knowledge in object-subject binary positions. It views knowledge as non-fragmentary, interdependent and holistic (Atleo, 2004). Indigenous methodology invites me to engage with Foucault`s (1977b) ideas on authorship, knowledge and power through hierarchies that control access to discourses. As Achebe (1958) wrote, *"Until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter"*. This, for me, is an invitation to prioritise and honour indigenous ways of knowing.

Epistemology and ontology are essential concepts in research. They have an intrinsic, interconnected relationship that influences how the researcher approaches the phenomenon being studied (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Ontology questions and brings forth the researcher's relationship with the reality of their study. It invites the researcher to define what they believe about the nature of their reality, while epistemology guides the researcher on how they gather and understand knowledge so that they can show how they know what they know.

Kovach (2021), in her work on situating Indigenous and Western methodology within qualitative research, states that a lot of indigenous researchers resonate with Heidegger`s constructivist phenomenology because of the "self-in-relationship" approach. This approach acknowledges that our authentic understanding of the world and ourselves is not pre-given but emerges through our engagements with others and our environment. My ontological and epistemological position is informed by relational paradigms. Relational ontology places an emphasis on "I-We" as opposed to "I-You". Reality implies a set of relationships. Wilson (2008) describes relationships in this paradigm as not merely shaping reality; they are reality. Chilisa (2020) describes a relational ontology as a social reality that is investigated and understood in relation to the connections that human beings have with both the living and the non-living.

My ontological and epistemological position is rooted in Ubuntu wisdom (Oviawe, 2016; Seehwar, 2018). Ubuntu is an indigenous way of being that privileges wisdom derived from interactions, relationships, dreams, and spirituality. Ubuntu is relational. (Ovaview 2016; Seehwar, 2018). I use Ubuntu storytelling and proverbs as my approaches for researching and understanding self. Stories offer a gateway into greater insight and deeper understanding of a phenomenon (Lewis & Hilderbrandt, 2019). Malunga (2014) states that African proverbs can communicate modern issues more eloquently than conventional methods. Dzobo (1992) describes them as highly effective for facilitating conversation because they give insight into human being-ness or personhood. They reflect values that promote health and wellbeing. They serve as a behavioural guide and a mechanism for survival (Etta & Mogu,2012).

Proverbs can elicit the unconscious logic that is motivated by emotional motivations rather than rational intentions. This way of structuring stories can, for example, allow the storyteller to talk about anxiety in a way that makes sense in their life without structuring it in a pathological sense (Nare et al, 2018).

Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu

"Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu"- A person is a person because of others.

Mkabela (2015) describes Ubuntu philosophy as a social ethic. Social ethics require one to foreground moral reasoning, human dignity and social responsibility. These three aspects are vividly reflected in my native greeting, *Tiripo kana makadiniwo?,* which is offered in response to a greeting and loosely translates as "We are well if you are well." However, the English translation fails to fully capture the cultural richness of the original phrase. The pronoun "you" is plural, referring not only to the individual but also to their extended social network, reflecting a communal orientation. Moreover, the term "well" signifies a holistic sense of wellbeing that extends beyond physical health to encompass emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Replying in vernacular, one does not just talk about themselves; one also brings their family, their livestock, their whole ecosystem into their wellness. This salutary exchange enacts Ubuntu as a philosophy of interdependence. As scholars such as Charura and Bushell (2023) affirm, Ubuntu extends the axiom 'I am because we are' into broader relational forms like 'I am because we are being' and 'I am because we belong'. It is a reminder to me that personhood is enacted relationally through belonging, shared existence, and reciprocal care within human and non-human communities.

Giving back

"Tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today"- African proverb

In this article, I have placed my voice back in academia through the art of words. I have used proverbs to re-member aspects of myself that have been denied, silenced and effectively erased from my meaning-making because they were deemed not to be "academic". This is my story of resistance. This is my activism. My activism is my healing journey because I am using wisdom from a wound to influence epistemic disobedience (Mingolo, 2009) and encourage epistemic witnessing (Pillow, 2019).

Through words, I have shared my story. The story of the pain caused by colonial extractivism. I am healing the pain by re-membering and embracing that which was denied and reduced through language. In this, I have become the subject of my study and not the object of it, a key concept explored by Fanon (2008) that challenges the extractive nature of colonisation itself.

By writing about my work, I externalised the psychological homelessness wound that my body has been carrying. I demonstrated how I utilised my cultural ways of knowing, specifically proverbs, my Shona language and Ubuntu storytelling, to understand myself and take steps towards my healing. This article narrates a chapter in my journey towards healing. Healing is about understanding who one is so that one can reclaim their power. I am sharing my story with my audience with the hope that it will gift you what it has gifted me.

CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates the potential of Ubuntu consciousness to serve as a decolonial framework for researching trauma. It challenges dominant Western paradigms and affirms the value of indigenous knowledge systems in fostering healing and authentic self-discovery. I offer this work as an invitation to fellow scholars to

embrace their cultural epistemologies as valid, transformative contributions to academic, professional life and wellbeing. I offer this work as an invitation to fellow practitioners and academics as a quest for epistemic disobedience (Mingolo, 2009) and epistemic witnessing (Pillow, 2019). Our ways of knowing are valid. Our ways of knowing are relevant. I also offer this as an invitation to spend time with oneself to identify the source of one's wound and what healing one will need. The greatest conversation one can engage in is the internal conversation with oneself.

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