

Decolonial Schools as Critical Spaces for Healing: An Invitation to Occupational Therapists and Occupational Scientists

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Dates:

Received: 05/06/2026

Accepted: 17/07/2026

Article citation:

Motimele M. (2026).
Decolonial Schools as Critical Spaces for Healing: An Invitation to Occupational Therapists and Occupational Scientists. *The Human Occupation & Wellbeing Journal*, 2(2).
<https://doi.org/10.18552/hogw.841b794>

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.



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Grounding, Breathwork and Release

Deep breath in—hold—and release.

As I sit down to write this piece, I notice that my chest has become a little tighter, and my breathing a little more constricted. As I sit in this discomfort, I realize that my anxiety lies in the fear of being misunderstood. Will I be able to find the language to accurately describe my experiences, thoughts, hopes and observations? What of my disillusionment, disease and disappointment? How could I communicate these, not as criticisms, but as unspoken truths that hold the promise of true liberation and healing? As I feel my anxiety grow, I choose to return to the breath. Through the breath, we return to our most basic expression, the rhythm that connects us to ourselves and to all others.

So,
As I steady my breath,
As I ground myself in both the
simplicity and complexity of this life,
I invite you to do the same.

With one hand on your heart and the
other on your lower belly,
Take a deep breath in,
And picture yourself in nature.

As you breathe, picture yourself
entering into a covered space with two seating areas—
One for you, and the other for me.

Let us set the intention to have a
conversation with each other,
One in which we invite deep listening and critical reflection.

Lastly, note any tightness in your
body.

As you inhale, picture a steady
flame, heating up the area of tension,
And as you exhale,

Slowly,
Intentionally,
Dissolve and release the tension
through the breath.

Deep breath in – hold- and release.
Ashe.

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Locating (my)self within coloniality

I have had an interesting relationship with the academy over the past 14 years. First as an occupational therapy student, then as a clinical educator and lecturer, and now as a postdoctoral research fellow. I mention these positions or occupational roles, not only because they describe my position in and contribution to the academy, but also because they give you a sense of the various power-differentials I have had to, and continue to, encounter and negotiate. As a black womxn, mother, therapist, educator and spiritual counsellor, located in the Global South, this power-differential manifests itself through various encounters with the violence of coloniality, with consequences for my experiences of health/ill-health and wellbeing/ill-being. During my PhD journey that investigated the manifestations and contestations of violence within the Rhodes Must Fall movement at the University of Cape Town (UCT) from 2015 to 2016 (Motimele, 2024), I became keenly aware of the various (legitimate, normalized, and widely accepted) ways universities actively reproduce and sustain colonial power structures, despite claiming the contrary. I highly recommend reading student-activists' powerful narratives of being denied being at UCT, as a microcosm of the broader South African society. As you read these, you will find that their experiences resonate globally, as contrary to popular belief, coloniality is a global culture and structure (Grosfougel, 2006). We therefore have to think about how coloniality manifests within our respective geopolitical locations and locate ourselves within it, to begin to understand the various ways we participate in our own oppression. Only then can we grapple with decoloniality as imperative and begin the work of de-linking (Mignolo, 2017), disrupting, and dismantling coloniality.

From my work with students, academics, health professionals, and social development organizations, I have come to realize that coloniality has been a (mostly) silent, obscure, yet enduring force, deciding whose knowledge is recognized and valued, whose notions of wellbeing are prioritized, and whose voices are amplified within health and educational systems. As occupational therapists and occupational scientists, have we spent enough time reflecting on our complicity in the endurance of coloniality? If this is not required of you within your institution, therein lies coloniality's most potent weapon, denial and silence. How do we unpack and eventually heal something that we cannot recognize or name? How do we offer decolonial perspectives of occupation, propose decolonial approaches to research and practice if we have not yet done the inner work of locating ourselves within coloniality? How and with who do we begin to unpack, unravel, unlearn and relearn? Where are the (institutional) spaces that offer opportunity to reimagine decolonized systems, structures and relationships?

The scarcity of (decolonial) spaces.

During my time as a lecturer at UCT, I became a member of the Black Academic Caucus (BAC). I drew great comfort and strength in gathering with black academics and allies, brought together by our mutual concern regarding enduring institutional violence at the university. This collective created a space to share experiences, thoughts and concerns, and offered opportunity to collectively problem-solve, strategize and mobilize in response to continued coloniality within the University. Outside of this core mandate, the BAC offered a space to show up authentically, be seen, and to be in community with those similarly Othered. Although an empowering and necessary initiative, this space was

not without its tensions, conflicts and triggers. Rather than viewing these as merely personal, I understood them as reflections of the enduring colonial-apartheid logics that continue to shape social relations, institutional cultures, and possibilities for dialogue and collective healing. I eventually left BAC, and eventually the university.

Later, working in the education technology space, as Head of People, I saw how coloniality endured within workplace culture, despite working with a fairly young leadership team. Black account managers were sent to serve underprivileged schools in the townships and informal settlements, while white employees, employed in the same role, were sent to 'previously white' schools located in the suburbs. This was explained as encouraging 'cultural connection'. During performance reviews, black account managers would have less success in onboarding and supporting their assigned schools due to a number of contextual issues beyond their control, and would therefore be scored lower in performance reviews, and not qualify for performance bonuses. Understandably, this resulted in a high turnover rate of predominantly black staff. When confronting this issue with the all-white senior leadership team, my concerns were met with denial and silence. Further to this, staff were paid at below market-rate, without access to any benefits. However, high unemployment rates kept South Africa's colonial links to racial capitalism alive and kicking, allowing this company to benefit from "cheap labour," while positioning itself as a solution to the country's inequality as this pertains to access to education. Here, there were no spaces to name and confront coloniality, and eventually I resigned after the 10th employee had left within the 10 months I had been there. All

cited experiences of institutional violence within their exit interviews.

Most recently as a postdoctoral research fellow at Stellenbosch University, I was confronted with the endurance of coloniality through observing student segregation in public spaces, and the continued issue of predominantly Black student exclusions due to fees. In my host department, there was not a single Black South African academic or professional administrative, support and service (PASS) staff member when I joined the team. Indicating sustained issues of Black student and staff access, representation and agency within universities, despite increasing numbers. Further to this, I attended several research, staff development initiatives, and conference spaces that were concerned with transformation and seemed to be invested in changing the status quo. However, these were more often than not informal conversations about transformation, and rarely decoloniality. When decolonization was discussed, it was always directed at individual action rather than the hegemonic and hierarchical structures and relationships within the academy. Decolonization therefore became something one mentioned, and at times argued for and researched, but it did not find expression in the institution's systems, structures, or culture.

The above experiences reaffirmed my understanding of the 'shapeshifting' nature of coloniality, that endures and masks itself not only as the ordinary, but also as the foundational. Which begs the question, *How do you confront and eradicate that which is at the root?* Coloniality endures because it positions itself as the authority, determining everyday human relationships and interactions within its own notion(s) of society. It is at the root of why security guards at the entrances of university buildings, or those who clean the

venues are hardly acknowledged or greeted by University staff and students, who readily greet their peers and academic staff. It is at the root of why an educator would feel emboldened to mock and disrespect a Muslim student who flagged the need to break her fast during a time scheduled for an exam ("UCT Prof Apologises," 2018). Coloniality is at the root of why decolonial praxis remains optional, and why decolonial schools and initiatives within the university remain underfunded and poorly supported.

As occupational therapists and scientists, we often find ourselves within health, education, and/or social development spaces that are "blind" to and/or resistant to the coloniality of human occupation and the enduring impact this has on dehumanized populations experiences of health and wellbeing. Outside of the very real consequences for individual and collective health and wellbeing, namely "death-debility-disability" (Mohamed, 2023), what does this mean for our role and scope as occupational therapists and for our scholarship within the discipline of occupational science? With the above in mind, decolonial scholarship becomes an imperative for our personal and professional growth, and for the health and wellbeing of our service-users. If, however, we do not yet have space(s) to critically engage, unlearn, reframe, heal, and reimagine ways of knowing, being and relating, then our 'doing' remains bound within applications of coloniality.

Decolonial Schools: Spaces to unlearn, relearn, ignite possibility and reclaim being

I have attended various decolonial schools as part of my PhD and personal growth journey. This first was at the University of South Africa (UNISA) (2018), the second in Barcelona (2019) and the last two at UCT, (2021 and 2026). Although markedly different and

diverse spaces, I recall incidents of both disruption and affirmation that unmasked coloniality and invited collective reflection on how this 'thing', this all-consuming application of violence, could be confronted without losing one's livelihood, living or life. This is a question I continue to grapple with, but there was something offered in the space that I did not have before- a community. A community of scholars who, for different reasons, circumstances and experiences, found it necessary to gather with others and think through the web of coloniality with others. In these spaces we were greeted with critical, radical and courageous scholars who had done, and continued to do the work of decoloniality both within and beyond the university. We engaged in ways that traditional teaching and classrooms did not allow - we shared, we unpacked, we questioned, we grappled, we cried, we raged, and most importantly we sat (collectively) with the growing realization of how everyday doing continued to uphold oppressive structures (Ramugondo, 2015).

At UNISA's decolonial school, Prof. Siphamandla Zondi opened his lecture with a triggering question, '*How does it feel to exist as a problem?*'. This question has stuck with me and plays over and over again in my head when I see, witness or experience the violence of coloniality as a denial of dignity. It plays in my head when I see a child, barely able to walk, playing in a rubbish dump, near a freeway, alone. It plays in my head when we fail a student who struggles to communicate in English as a second or third language. It plays in my head when white Afrikaner 'refugees' are flown via private jet to the USA, while a plane full of Palestinians 'mysteriously' finds itself landing in South Africa under 'unknown' circumstances (Imray et al., 2025). It plays in my head when a child witnessing a drumming circle at Green Point

Park, curiously looks on and asks his mother “Mom, what are they doing?” and she angrily responds, “making noise”, and pulling the child to continue walking. It plays in my head when a white, male vice-chancellor is appointed to the most senior leadership position at UCT without a PhD, yet a black, female, vice-chancellor’s qualifications are immediately questioned and cast into doubt (Zondi, 2017). It plays in my head when black students protest institutional racism and are openly called “barbarians”, “hooligans”, and “cunts” by academic staff and the public, despite the critical scholarship they produce(d) (Motimele, 2024).

‘How does it feel to exist as a problem?’ As health and rehabilitation professionals, educators and researchers, I think it is a question we have to start to become comfortable with. What I mean is, if we hope to disrupt the coloniality inherent within human occupation, then we need to become comfortable with ‘existing as problems’. The question then becomes, how do we position ourselves, reinforce ourselves, support and protect ourselves? How can we form and offer each other a sense of community? How are these communities sustained and how do they reflect a commitment to decoloniality? Personally, the decolonial schools attended became spaces where community was forged, and connections made. I sat with new friends, colleagues, my partner and others, and through participation in the decolonial schools, had the privilege of reconstituting self and others through a new humanizing lens. A lens that did not crack under the weight of dehumanization, or get out of focus when faced with contradiction, illusion and propaganda. A lens that revealed restoring dignity as the root of decoloniality, and that affirmed all life as sacred. Not only did this perspective restore a sense of hope, but also

ignited a spark of possibility – what if? What if things could be different? What if I could be different? What if I could be myself? What would need to change? How could I approach things differently? How could I position myself as a disruption to coloniality, while still protecting my health and wellbeing?

An invitation to grapple together

I know that it may seem that I have raised a lot more questions than answers, but decoloniality has taught me that there is value in asking questions that challenge dominant assumptions, create space for reflection, and open possibilities for more just and humanizing ways of being, knowing, and healing. Arriving at the answer is less important than the path of enquiry it unfolds. As occupational therapists we profess to use occupation therapeutically to promote health and wellbeing. I query, how so and to what extent if we have not understood how human occupation manifests as a “mode, means and relationality of coloniality with potential towards decoloniality”? (Motimele, 2024, p.224).

The UCT Decolonial Summer School (DSS) is co-convened by Prof. Elelwani Ramugondo, DVC People, culture and belonging, and a fellow occupational therapist who continuously grapples with what it means, takes and demands to do this “healing work” (Ramugondo, 2018). Seeing one of our own doing and creating spaces for decoloniality is both inspiring and affirming and confirms that yes, occupational therapists and occupational scientists have a critical role to play towards disrupting and dismantling coloniality, especially because it masks itself within everyday doing through valued occupational roles within our families, communities, workplaces and institutions. Further to this, the organizing team has intentionally decentered the classroom (as far as possible) through

curating a transdisciplinary and multi-generational space, that encourages learning through participation. Personally, engaging with documentaries, filmmakers, artists, scholars, youth and elders from various locations offered a rich experience, that reminded and reinforced the notion that healing, or the restoration of dignity, is a collective experience. Plainly put, we need one another. Our connection to self and all other is at the root of our healing and conversely at the core of our experiences of coloniality. Decoloniality requires collective work; collective grappling, repositioning, rebuilding, restoration, and recentering. Spaces like the DSS at UCT, and other decolonial schools offer a safe space to sit with the discomfort of naming and unpacking various manifestations and dimensions of coloniality.

Breathing out of the space

I invite you to return to the breath.

Hand on your heart,
The other on the belly.
As you breathe, scan your body:
Is the tightness still there?
Has it shifted?
What are you holding that begs for release?

Deep breath in — hold —
And as you breathe out,
make any sound that offers relief.
Ashe.

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