

One's Freedom is Another's Cage: A Poetic Inquiry into the Colonization of Public Spaces

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Abstract

This work challenges the ways that people, predominantly white men, use their bodies and voices to centre themselves in public spaces and identifies the reactions of others to centre the men as well. By paying attention to my somatic knowledge and embodied experiences, I developed a more intricate understanding of the concept of “colonizing the space.” Through poetry, I share lived experiences of this phenomenon in an effort to draw attention to how we engage with each other in our communities and public spaces. As importantly, I imagine and celebrate responses that do not cage or marginalize our voices and bodies but “claim the sky” (Angelou, 1983, p. 19) and sing.

Keywords: Colonization, white privilege, somatic knowledge, poetic inquiry

“Ubuntu is an ethic of interdependence. It is an ethic that recognizes that everything I do has an effect on you and your well-being and everything you do has an effect on me and my well-being. Although we are different people we are essentially interconnected.”

~ Mpho Tutu van Furth¹ ~

Introduction

Ubuntu- I am because we all are. This South African worldview teaches us to see our existence as interconnected (Letseka, 2012; Metz & Gaie, 2010). In being responsible for ourselves, we are also responsible for each other. The way that we engage in our public spaces matters. The way we use our bodies and voices shapes these spaces and places, shapes us and in turn, we shape each other. When I originally read Maya Angelou’s (2015) poem Caged Bird, I saw the caged bird and the free bird as two separate birds, or at least two separate times in a bird’s life. Now, I see that they are connected because being caged and being free are interconnected.

Buddhist teachings call this “interbeing” (Hanh, 1998). Thich Nhat Hanh (1998) explained, “A cause must, at the same time, be an effect, and every effect must also be the cause of something else. Cause and effect inter-are” (p. 222). The caged and the free inter-are; their causes and their effects inter-are. The caged bird and free bird are interconnected within our spaces, our lives, and our society. Reflecting on my interactions with others in shared public spaces, I see this interconnection. One’s freedom shapes another’s cage. One’s speech shapes another’s silence. One’s movement shapes another’s stillness. Witnessing the free expression of white privilege and its impact on marginalizing others around them, I challenge this as an act of

¹ (Desmond Tutu Peace Foundation, 2015)

colonizing public spaces. By paying attention to movement and my somatic experiences in public spaces, I began to see the “colonizing of space.” I experienced how some white people expanded in public spaces by using exaggerated body movements and loud voices. I noticed myself shrinking into the margins of the rooms, silencing my Black voice, caging myself as a reaction to this white freedom. In response, I participated in an Authentic Movement group to explore how my own reactions might be different and more authentic. Through poetry and story, I grapple with the ways that white bodies and voices can freely expand in rooms and public spaces centring themselves by speaking louder and more often, using large hand and arm gestures, and drawing all focus to themselves. I point to my own experiences of how this action has pushed me to feel othered, to retreat, and to feel caged in the margins of our shared spaces. While I acknowledge that this white expansion may have the opposite effect on some Black people and people of colour, in sharing my stories with other women of colour, many have shared a common experience. They have also shared that they have begun to notice these experiences more now that we point to it and name it “colonizing the space.” By naming this experience, I helped myself to acknowledge it as an act of colonization rather than a fault of my own. I share my experiences of feeling caged by another’s freedom and experiment with resisting the man-made cage. By attending to my somatic experiences and pointing to them through poetry, I examine the phenomenon of “colonizing the space.” In this contribution, I share what I have learned from examining the interbeing of the caged and the free - within public spaces and within myself.

Somatic Knowing

We each use movement to navigate and understand the world in which we live. Colonizing the space is done with bodies and movement. It presents in the ways people move freely and widely in public spaces with an apparent disregard for the impact of their movement. We learn with our bodies, not only our minds. As a dancer, I am drawn to attend to my somatic knowledge, the knowledge that we hold in our bodies (Shapiro & Shapiro, 2002). Somatic knowledge, or our embodied knowledge, “may be seen as the ways we understand ourselves and our environments through the body; it is also the ways we make meaning of the world through our bodily experiences” (Green, 2002, p. 114). We can learn more about our understandings of ourselves and the world by listening to our somatic knowledge. Paying attention to movement honours the body as “not simply flesh and bones; instead, [as] a living enactment of culture and social beliefs” (Cancienne & Snowber, 2003 p. 244). As importantly, paying attention “[understands] the body as meaning, as opposed to a container in which we store or put meaning, [problematizing] the relations between inside and outside” (Springgay & Freedman, 2007, introduction, p. xx). The somatic lessons we carry dwell in the liminal space between the knowledge that openly presents itself and the knowledge that lingers within us.

Poetic Inquiry

In poetry, I share these moments and my understandings of this topic following in the leadership of many strong authors of colour who share their knowledge through stories and poetry (DePass, 2012). Maya Angelou explains poetry as a connection of the microcosm to the macrocosm (Scholastic, 2019), and I aim to engage in this connection in a form that disrupts the expected rhythms of academic articles. Civil rights activists around the world have utilized the non-violent protest methods of marches, sit-ins, and bus boycotts to disrupt and shatter

established societal rhythms, taboos, and laws, calling focus to the systemic and structural issues that white people were continually stepping over, ignoring, or refusing to see.

Poetry causes the reader to slow down, to pay attention to individual words and moments while making connections to the experiences we share. Audre Lorde (1984) explained:

poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. (p. 38)

Through poetry and story, I share the experiences that have disrupted my rhythms as I step outside of absentminded complacency, and “sing with a fearful trill of things unknown but longed for still” (Angelou, 2015, p. 208). I try to name these moments “carved from the rock experiences of [my] daily [life] and find tangible action” (Lorde, 1984, p. 38). This work highlights this element of colonization in the hope that others might see themselves and consider how things might be different, how we can interconnect differently. As Audre Lorde (1984) taught, “The Black mother within each of us — the poet — whispers in our dreams; I feel, therefore I can be free. Poetry coins the language to express and charter this revolutionary demand, the implementation of that freedom” (p. 39). I challenged myself to pay attention and draw attention to moments when the space felt colonized. In response, I experimented with how I might react differently, stand firm in my beauty, and reclaim my space.

Colonizing the Space

A few years ago, during an academic presentation, I first noticed a “colonizing of space” incident. A white man sitting in the audience used his body and his voice to demand and capture everyone’s attention by expressing loud exhales, making dramatic shifts in his seat, flailing his arms, and asking confrontational questions. As he assumed a stance of dominance, I noticed that the women in the room became smaller by stilling their bodies. They also became less vocal. All attention turned to this one man. His use of exaggerated body language and loud speech forced the rest of the audience to centre attention on him. When I shared my experiences with a few female academics of colour they responded by disclosing their own personal stories. We saw each other mirrored in our experiences. Maya Angelou taught that through poetry, a story we share can become a “...microcosm of the macrocosm. That is to say that it becomes a drop of water...in that drop of water is everything that’s in the sea” (Scholastic, 2019, 0:19). One story became a handful of stories. In this drop of water, I saw the world differently and began to pay attention. I became intrigued by the idea of *colonizing the space*. I noted the ways some people use their bodies and voices to centre themselves in public spaces and the reactions of others present, to intentionally or unintentionally, centre the modern colonizers as well. The following poem is shaped from the collection of stories shared with me and serves as a place marker of when I first noticed this behaviour.

Blow Your House Down

She stands
Frozen
By nerves, fear, pressure
Slowly defrosting
She settles into
Confidence
Sharing her story, her work, her love
She sits into herself
Building a house of her own
With her own tools.

He shifts in his seat,
With flailing arm and leg movements,
Huffing and puffing,
He exaggerates,
Drawing a huge X on his paper.
Huffing and puffing,
He circles her,
Attempting to unbalance her,
Pulling the attention to himself.

The other women grow smaller and more still,
Their bodies and voices shrinking,
As he becomes bigger and more dramatic,
He huffs and puffs,
Can your house withstand these blows?
She plants her feet,
Stands firm in the foundation of
White authors that he respects.

Finally,
With a wide toothy grin,
He says,
“You’re so sweet”
And leans in and
Kisses her on the forehead,
As others look on.
She feels his spittle on her skin,
Marking her like a flag planted
In a newly claimed space,

A heavy, historical hand
Intended to suppress, shut down,
Silence.

And with a pat on the back,
He says, "Congratulations,
You should be proud of yourself."

The way this man expanded both physically and vocally was dramatic. The response of the other women in the room to become smaller and more silent was also dramatic. He became the centre of the room; free to speak and move and be. Others became less free, their voices and bodies muted. I became curious about the impact of white-centring and by paying attention in public spaces, I began to see it repeatedly. I witnessed this same experience of white bodies and voices expanding in public shared spaces until the others in the room were forced to centre them. Brown bodies retreated to the physical margins of the room. Brown voices became quieter.

The white people did not seem to be engaging in this way maliciously. They seemed to be experiencing a white privilege of owning space. They colonized the space, absentmindedly. McIntosh (1992) explained, in her definition of white privilege: "After I realized the extent to which men operate from a base of unacknowledged privilege, I understood that much of their oppressiveness was unconscious" (p. 29). In Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) call for diversity in the literature we share with students, she noted that without sharing diverse stories, children from the dominant group "will grow up with an exaggerated sense of their own importance and value in the world - a dangerous ethnocentrism" (p. 1). The world centres white stories, white perspectives, white bodies, and white voices so regularly in our textbooks, our curriculum, and our televisions that people forget to challenge it. We often absent-mindedly accept this white centric life; it infuses itself into the micro and macro of our lives.

I began to refer to this white expansion in public spaces as "colonizing the space." I see this action as an element of white privilege (McIntosh, 1992) - freely and comfortably expanding physically and verbally into a space, resulting in the displacement and silencing of others and the centring of self.

Absentminded

At a poetry and photography show about
Black Womanhood
I stand looking
At the exquisite exhibition of Blackness
Looking to find myself in the art
When suddenly a shadow clouds the photos.
Looking around, I find a white man
Standing
Absentmindedly
In front of the light

Casting a shadow of
His own image
Onto the beautiful Black women.

Absent-minded
“So preoccupied as to be forgetful of one’s immediate surroundings”²
Absent-mindedly centring himself
He draws my attention to
Him
Away from the beauty of Blackness
He takes over the space,
With his white body, and
“Absence of mind”
A “habitual or temporary forgetfulness” of colonization.

I stand awkwardly
A minority (again)
In this show about Black womanhood.
Two white men grab chairs and put them down
Pushing me out of the way
Almost as if they did not see me
I am pushed
Behind a big white pillar that
Divides the room
But holds up the roof.
A habitual or temporary forgetfulness of colonization.
We gather here
In a public space dedicated to
Centring Black Womanhood,
These white men centre themselves in the space.
They say, “sorry” as I am pushed aside, but
They put their chairs there anyway.

The Beautiful Black poet
Grabs the microphone,
These white men,
Move their chairs to the front
Sitting,
Relaxed and comfortable
Arms and legs outstretched

² (Absent-minded, n.d.)

Absent-mindedly accepting their seats
In the front row
Centred
Ready to enjoy this Black woman exposing her pain.

Looking around the room

i look for the few
Black women in
attendance

i find them

at the back of the
room

sitting on the floor

quietly watching from
the margins of the
room.

Absentmindedly colonizing the room,
The white people snap and clap and cheer
As the poet challenges the role of the colonizer.
They are so comfortable taking up space
Physical

and

Auditory

Space

Anxious to
Answer questions
During the artist's talk back,
Absent-mindedly taking up space with their own
White bodies, white voices, white views,
During this exhibit of
Black Womanhood.

Freire (1970/2000) explained: "the oppressor's consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination" (p. 58) and further that "the more the oppressors control the oppressed, the more they change them into apparently inanimate 'things'" (p. 59). At the exhibit of Black womanhood, the white men that I encountered moved around me like I was simply another pole holding up the roof. I doubt they would remember that I was there. I imagine they would describe the experience as one of supporting Black womanhood. This notion of absent-mindedly colonizing the space is linked to the white privilege of feeling free in every space----free to expand, free to be the centre, free to speak. "Those in the center, those who occupy a dominant status such as whiteness, experience the center not so much as a

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consciously acknowledged status, but rather a complex of features in their social experience that have surrounded them since inception” (Hitchcock & Flint, 2015, p. 1). It is a white privilege to be raised believing that the centre is yours.

This freedom is related to a sense of privilege to own spaces as “an inalienable right, a right they acquired through their own “effort” and their “courage to take risks” (Freire, 1970/2000, p. 59), whether real or imagined. Hannah Drake (2018) noticed this free ownership of space and the inanimation of others when she was pushed off the sidewalk repeatedly. She called on others to engage in a challenge she called it the “Do Not Move Off the Sidewalk Challenge: Holding Your Space in a White World.” She shared direct connections to the way she noticed white people’s freedom to expand on the sidewalk and the Jim Crow laws that demanded that Black people concede the public space and step aside, if a white person was approaching (Stetson, 2011). This privilege, the freedom to own and control space is akin to “colonizing the space,” the expansion of some at the expense of the displacement of others. Vivek Shraya (2018) shared that, in the university classes that she teaches, she finds that often the first student names and voices that she knows are those of white male students because they are often the most vocal. She explained that her response is to make a conscious effort to know the names of women of colour in her classes. This is one of her ways of decentring whiteness in her classes. Accordingly, she makes a conscious effort to disrupt the colonizing of space.

Colonizing the Space³

Colonization
 The process
 Whereby microorganisms
 Inhabit
 A site
 Without causing a detectable host
 Response
 Involves persistence
 At the site of
 Attachment
 Migrating to
 Settling In
 Making another place
 Into a national dependency
 Cultivating, tilling, inhabiting
 A method of absorbing and assimilating
 Destroying any remnant of the cultures
 That might
 threaten
 the territory.

³ Found poem shaped from (Colonize, 2008; Colonization, 2019; Colonize, n.d.; Vincent & Hall, 2012)

Whether through biology or anthropology the definition of colonization explains an inhabiting, settling in, and expanding in a place with the effect of displacement of others (Said, 1994; Teelucksingh, 2006; Mohanty, 2003). Colonization is the history of European expansion into Turtle Island and the displacement of the Indigenous peoples of this land. Colonization is the history of Western Europe's forceful, often armed and brutal, expansion into the countries in Africa, Asia and the Americas. Through the macro view of colonization, we see that people lost their land, their languages, their culture, their families, and often their lives. I also see the micro expansions of colonizing our present, shared, public spaces as a continued form of the macro process of colonization. This speaks to the continuance of colonization through macro and micro acts. George Sefa Dei (2014) explained,

Colonialism has economic, spiritual, material, psychological, and emotional consequences for the colonized. It is not only the seizure/dispossession of Indigenous lands and property and wealth through colonialism, but there occurs a colonization of the mind and perversion of the values of Europe as superior to those of the colonized/ Indigenous worlds. (p. 241)

I realized that I have come to expect this white expansion in our spaces and often cease to acknowledge it. This expectation points to a colonization of mind that I have learned. When I mentioned this phenomenon to other women of colour⁴, we shared that we had each come to expect this colonizing behaviour as “normal” and it did not “cause a detectable host immune response” until we examined it with each other. This connection to the experiences of my friends and colleagues reinforced for me that I was not alone in what I was experiencing. The experience of colonizing the space became commonplace to the point that we ceased to see it. Through pointing to this element of white privilege through poetry, I hope to acknowledge, name, and challenge this element of colonization.

Reclaiming Space through Authenticity

I approached broadening my understanding of colonizing the space by paying attention to bodies and movement in public spaces. I participated in a two-day workshop on Authentic Movement (Adler, 2002). The aim of authentic movement is to dwell in the place between our movement and what moves us. The teacher taught me to seek the movement that is authentic to me, to note how my body moves without judgement, interpretation, or projection. I learned that to engage in Authentic movement, one moves with closed eyes. In this practice, the group takes turns witnessing the other movers, holding space for them to be authentic.

During the workshop, there were several white men who moved so loudly - running, stomping, tumbling, and jumping - that I found my own movement shrinking and becoming guarded. With my eyes closed, I needed to protect myself. I moved closer to the edges of the room, in the margins. I could hear them moving freely throughout the centre of the room. I found that my movement became less authentic to me and more of a response to what I was hearing and sensing from them. I decided to deliberately try to find my own way of reclaiming my

⁴ This does not represent a scientific study, but rather the sharing of stories between friends and colleagues reinforced for us that we were not alone in our experiences. The women I spoke to were from varied ethnic backgrounds - Trinidadian, Sri Lankan, South East Asian. They were from varied ages from aged 25-45. I also observed this reaction in Black women at multiple public events that I have attended.

authenticity, within a white public space. I joined a movement group of six white women. Now, we meet to move authentically. We meet to hold space for each other to find our authenticity in movement and witness each other to hold that space open. We aim to suspend judgement, interpretation, and projection. Our goal is to gaze benevolently upon each other. I practice finding my own authenticity; exploring ways of freeing myself to fly up and out from the margins within an all-white space. The following poems and stories document my journey to finding myself within colonized spaces.

The Caged and the Free: A Continual Journey

Finding Authenticity: Week One

I sit, witnessing the other movers. I hold the space open for these white women to move in their own way, to use space in their own way. I am overwhelmed with the relief given by the expectation to suspend judgement and interpretation. The freedom from interpreting their actions to keep myself safe waves over me. I usually feel guarded and read the room to look for possible danger, looking for smiles that are actually snarls (Duchscher, 2014). But here my job is to release the tension of judgment and interpretation. I am called on to free myself of that cage. I release a breath that I did not realize I was holding, and cry.

*Shhh... quiet your tears listen
to your ancestors...*

Outside

Dancing

I teach

A curious and excited group of

White dancers

I share my culture with them

The beautiful contributions of

Funk

Black Culture

A Black woman stands outside the class

Looking through the window

She starts to groove to the funk rhythms

Her rhythms

She follows the class

She shares every step

Every weight change, spin, slide

Every groove

From outside

Looking in.

Seat at the Table

Waiting on my daughter's dance class to end,
I settle into the open table in the waiting room,
Setting up my computer
I start to work.
Slowly a loud group of white people joins me
First a man puts down his paperwork
And introduces a woman to his child
She also takes a place at the table.
They take their places as though I am not there
They spread their bags and papers out on the table
as if they own it.
Soon four more white people arrive,
Loudly greeting each other
Owning the room
The white parents of students taking hip hop lessons.
White parents who have bought my culture and gifted it to their children.
I say,
"Sorry, do you have this room booked?"
No, we just always meet here.
We're having a board meeting.
"Is it fine for me to stay and quietly work here?"
Awkward glances flash around the table.
Teeth gritted in smiles, they say, "Oh, I'm sure that's fine."
Their volume increases.
I pack up my stuff and leave.
They say nothing.
(Did they notice that I left?)
Now I perch on a stool, with my computer on a cocktail table
In the lobby.
The table is slightly too high for me to type.
Upstairs I can feel the white board meeting,
Sitting comfortably at the table.
They bought my culture and my place at the table.
And I am in the lobby,
Disrupting my own work,
Writing a poem about them.

*Shhh... quiet your rage and
listen to your ancestors...*

*“It’s important, therefore, to
know who the real enemy is,
and to know the function, the
very serious function of racism,
which is distraction. It keeps
you from doing your work.”*

(Toni Morrison⁵)

Rosa refused to move.
I move every time.
Rosa said No.
And started a movement.
Simply by refusing to move.
How did I get so far from what she fought for?
Am I a disgrace to her legacy?

Shhh... listen

*“I think one has to even
abandon the phrase “ally”
and understand that you are
not helping someone in a
particular struggle; the fight
is yours.”*

(Ta-Nehisi Coates⁶)

I pack up my things
And return to the room
Confidently planning to take
My place at the table,
But
When I get there,
They have closed and locked the door.
I return to the uncomfortable table
I left in the lobby
But now,
White people have taken over that table too.

⁵ (Morrison, 1975, p. 7)

⁶ (Gay, 2015, para. 16)

Finding Authenticity: Week Two

A new white woman joins the group. She says she knows me. She says she is familiar with my work. It's not for her. I find myself suddenly centring her in everything I do. I feel her presence with all my senses. With eyes closed, I sense her body moving across the room. I hear her every utterance. I feel her eyes watching me. My body explodes with sharp jarring movements, claps, and convulsions. I catch her eye before we leave and my back clenches in pain. I leave and spend the week with "bowed head, and lowered eyes, shoulders falling down like teardrops."⁷ I hexed myself by centring her.

I seek a massage. A beautiful Black woman unclenches my back with her strong, warm hands. She laughs and gives me water, reminding me to stay hydrated. She massaged me back into me.

Shhh... listen

"This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves, where we move in solidarity to erase the category colonised/coloniser. Marginality as site of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there. Enter that space. We greet you as liberators."

(bell hooks⁸)

Reclaiming Space for Ourselves and for Each Other

I answered the call.
The artist's call
For us,
The othered,
To be an extension of his body,
To share their voices,
Through his voice,
Through our voices,
To Name an Other⁹.

⁷ (Angelou, 2015, p. 178)

⁸ (hooks, 1989, p. 23)

⁹ (Gibson, 2019) - I participated as a performer in Jeffrey Gibson's "To Name an Other" Exhibit performance.

His soft brown face welcomed us,
His wide brown arms held us,
His gentle brown voice coached us
To come together.

He fed our bodies and our desperate need for connection,
Through drumming and explosive words,
We flocked together.
He wrapped us in the colours of the sky,
and held open a space for us,
A public space
For us.

We spoke
To each other
With each other
For each other
As others
And found
That we were no longer
Other.

His wide brown arms
His soft brown voice
His strong brown words
Held our otherness
Together
Until there was
No other.

Shhh... listen

*“Continue
To be who and how you are
To astonish a mean world
With your acts of kindness.”*

(Maya Angelou¹⁰)

¹⁰ (Angelou, 2015, p. 291)

Finding Authenticity: Week Three

There is a mirror in the room. I look into my own eyes and witness myself. Today I hold space for myself, giving myself permission to be my authentic me. My movement is mine alone. Suspending judgement, interpretation and projection, I play, sing, slide, sweep, and rise with freedom. "Leaping and wide, welling and swelling I bear in the tide"¹¹ and find myself. We each move in and out of the centre. Holding space for each other. I finish by looking into my own eyes, thanking myself for giving permission to bring all of me into the space.

Shh... listen

*"For to be free is not merely
to cast off one's chains, but to
live in a way that respects
and enhances the freedom of
others."*

(Nelson Mandela¹²)

Centring Ourselves

A group of young Black faces and bodies
Drop in
To learn about Funk
I see an opportunity
To point to their beauty
The beauty of Black culture and history that
Shaped this dance style
A dance style that shaped their world and their bodies
I share the names of Black idols
The voices of
James, Betty, George, Aretha,
Soon their young voices ring out in the class too,
I turn their questions into suggestions,
They guide the movement,
I share the moves of
Don, Jimmy, Skeeter Rabbit,
The young bodies absorb them and recreate their movements anew,
I call on the class to switch places,
Calling these young Black bodies forward,
Slowly they move from the back of the class to the front,
Smiles and laughter ringing out,

¹¹ (Angelou, 2015, p. 179)

¹² (Mandela, 1995, pp. 624-625)

They lead the class,
 Their class
 Taking ownership over their culture
 Centring themselves.

“Continue

In a society dark with cruelty

*To let the people hear the
 grandeur*

*Of God in the peals of your
 laughter*

Continue”

(Maya Angelou¹³)

Finding Authenticity: Week Four

Eyes closed; I am a mover. After weeks of listening inward to how I need to move, I begin to expand within myself. I move my brown body in my own way, trying to find and express my own *Black Girl Magic*. I feel a sudden rush of joy up my spine. I feel every vertebra in my own strong back bone, giggling. This awareness of joy makes me laugh. And laugh. And laugh. Soon, I am doubled over with joyful abandoned giggles. Free.

I open my eyes. I find that I am in the centre of the room. Four pairs of eyes witness me. They too begin to laugh. I allowed my true self to be centred. In return they centred me too.

We all laugh. Flying Free.

Reflecting on the Journey (thus far)

When I began considering the notion of colonizing the space, I simply felt angry. I also felt helpless. In many of the experiences, the white people expanding in spaces had positions of power. To reclaim my space with them held the threat of sacrificing myself. For as George Sefa Dei (2014) explained:

“To claim space is a political act. Not every space is easily accessible. We have gate-keepers who not only discipline unwanted bodies who show up in guarded spaces, but also use their power and privilege to open the space to particular bodies.” (p. 246)

The process of writing this paper has challenged me to find the places where I can reclaim my space. When I see opportunities to find my place, I now say “yes.” Slowly, this choice and the practice of reclamation is building a power within me. More and more, I found myself retreating

¹³ (Angelou, 2015, p. 292)

to spaces of colour, spaces lead, taught, and shaped by people of colour. I began to question: Am I being drawn to segregation? bell hooks (1994) wrote of the benefits and beauty of her own segregated schools where they read Black authors and learned Black history. Is this the answer? Or by pointing to colonizing the space, is it my job to offer a solution too? I looked for answers in the words of my ancestors; authors who I turn to for guidance, authors who make me feel seen. Toni Morrison (1975) spoke to me:

Life is short. Freedom is in my mind. That's where one is free. There's always some other constriction. But the very important point is to do the work that one respects and to do it well, and to make no compromises in its authenticity, and to do it better the next time. And what Primus said is the key; an artist's role is to bear witness, to contribute to the record, the real record, of life as he or she knows it, perceptions that are one's own. That way it will work whether or not we have become Black presidents. (p. 9)

I do not think that segregation is the answer. It is unrealistic. My whole life is integrated. We are integrated beings, interconnected. However, spaces lead and shaped by people of colour do offer an opportunity for me to decolonize my mind. I cannot change colonization. Nor is it my job alone to do so. There are people who hold much more power to make decisions over our public gathering and can open the doors for decolonization. Franz Fanon (1961/1963) argued that decolonization must come from the bottom up. However, through my own doctoral research I have learned that I will never change the places/spaces of the rungs on the ladder of hierarchy (Duchscher, 2018). As a woman of colour, I can point to my experiences of colonization, I can change myself, but I cannot be responsible for all the changes. We are in this together. As Mohanty (2003) explained, "decolonization involves profound transformations of self, community, and governance structures. It can only be engaged through active withdrawal of consent and resistance to structures of psychic and social domination" (p. 7). By reflecting on my experiences of witnessing the colonizing of different spaces, I experienced the start of a transformation of self. I journey to transform the way I act and react in colonized spaces when and where I can.

Examining the phenomenon of colonizing the space as it works as a public and often unacknowledged cage, I learned to celebrate the songs we can sing of freedom. I aim to decolonize myself by first finding myself and then giving myself permission to expand and express myself in public shared spaces. Gathering with people of colour, I can find my own beauty and strength. I can gather with people of colour and hold space for them to find their own beauty and strength¹⁴ - centring ourselves. We can be mirrors for each other, giving each other permission to bring our whole selves into the space. Once I can step confidently into the world cloaked by my awareness and celebration of my own Black Girl Magic, I can learn to laugh with abandon and expand in my own authenticity. Maybe I'll discover that by centring myself in the space, others will centre themselves too. We can aim to hold space for each other. We can lift each other's voices. We can make space for the magic in each other. Until there is no other.

Ubuntu - I am because we are.

¹⁴ In this paper, I have tried to challenge the colonization of space through my writing choices:

- I centre authors of colour and women by only directly quoting from their works.
- I capitalize *Black* where it refers to more than a colour but to the collectivity of people from the African diaspora.
- I call on Black authors with their full names.

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