

The Lived Experiences of Place Severing and Decolonial Resurgence in Vhembe District, South Africa

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Globally, environmental degradation has reached unprecedented levels. In South Africa, indigenous forest have been lost to mass land conversions under previous colonial and apartheid administrations. These changes have affected social ecologies, engendering experiences of place severing and giving rise to grass-roots community struggles in response. This case study aimed to explore and describe participants' psychological experiences of place severing in South Africa's Vhembe District. Thirteen individual and three focus group interviews were conducted between May and July 2019. Thematic data analysis was performed, revealing that epistemic violence and material severing lead to dialogical disruptions that, in turn, contribute to intergenerational community-level distress. In response, the community-based organization Dzomo la Mupo offers alternatives that resist and transcend the coloniality that underpins place severing.

KEYWORDS

Coloniality, decoloniality, epistemic violence, epistemic justice, deforestation, land dispossession

1 | INTRODUCTION

Today, around 75 percent of the world's land has been converted destroying local ecologies (IPCC, 2019). Colonialism and postcolonial development agendas have largely driven this profound destruction. Communities in the Global South and Souths of the North who are at the forefront of these extractive intrusions are resisting multiple forms of violence (Gómez-Barris, 2017). Be that as it may, psychology has largely neglected the importance of these socio-political histories of land in its theorizing (Barnwell, Stroud & Watson, 2020; Jones & Segal, 2018). Despite there being recognition of the psychological distress associated with disruptions to the relationship with place owing to land injustices (referred to as *place severing* by Barnwell et al. 2020), the experiences of coloniality in relation to place severing are not well understood either. Therefore, this decolonial inquiry seeks to demonstrate how histories of settler colonialism and coloniality in subsequent social orders underpin some communities' experiences of place severing in the Vhembe District in Limpopo province of South Africa. Additionally, decoloniality is not only concerned about how coloniality shapes experience in society today. It is also for the re-existence of different lifeworlds, which seeks to de-link from coloniality altogether (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Thus, the article also demonstrates the salience of the resurgence of place-based dialogues that have played a crucial role in a local community decolonial struggle in Vhembe District.

Decolonial concepts of modernity/coloniality and coloniality/decoloniality are essential to understanding the centrality of coloniality to place severing experiences and decolonial resurgence. First, *modernity* is a decolonial concept that emerged in Latin America that names the narrative fiction and violent rhetoric that posits that there is one progressive Eurocentric pathway in history (Mignolo, 2011). According to this myth, following a different path deems communities as inferior, underdeveloped, and primitive. This is not the case, but the energy behind this violent rhetoric is powerful and has threatened indigenous knowledge systems, as the case study shall describe. Thus, decoloniality draws attention to this violence of coloniality, which is considered the inseparable dark side of modernity's linear and Eurocentric logics of progress. *Coloniality* – also represented as *modernity/coloniality* – is a decolonial concept rooted in Aníbal Quijano's (2000) works. Maldonado-Torres (2020) explains that coloniality refers to how colonial logic in today's society conceives and constitutes power, being, and knowledge. Decolonial theorists use the term "coloniality" as shorthand to refer to European colonialism's interrelating legacies and practices that underpin modernity (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Central to the violence of coloniality is the colonial difference, which argues that Eurocentric knowledge, practices, and modes of being are superior to other lifeworlds, deeming the latter invisible and inferior (Maldonado-Torres, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Theorists named this Eurocentric logic after the locus of enunciation, namely the territorial, institutional, economic, and linguistic location of historical actors who believe their way of being as the only correct ways of engaging with others in the more-than-human world (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). According to Mignolo (2021), Eurocentrism is historically grounded in Christian conceptions and images of the world that claim the totality of truth and judge what is good and evil, projecting this onto other lifeworlds.

Christian evangelizing missions facilitated colonialism's global epistemic expansion by violently unsettling indigenous ecological knowledge. This colonizing way of being in the world is essentially a white supremacist ideology that is, by nature, an anti-Black/indigenous epistemology because the Black/indigenous subject is unable to retain centrality of spirituality, knowledge, power, and being (Maldonado-Torres, 2016, 2019). The locus of enunciation – territorial positionality – is also undermined. For the colonizer, there is a "need to devalue, diminish, and shut off any other [perceived] totality [of knowledge] that may endanger an epistemic totalitarianism in the making" (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018, p. 195).

Epistemic violence is a term used in this paper to describe a form of harm to the epistemic territories of different ways of knowing and, in turn, being that is produced through the totalitarian process of asserting this

form of violence (Vázquez, 2011). For instance, indigenous peoples' epistemic territories that are intergenerationally constituted relationships with place are devalued, diminished, and harmed through the totalitarian logic of modernity/coloniality (Tuck, McKenzie & McCoy, 2014). This is not an abstract matter, social orders driven by the logic of modernity/coloniality have historically relied on land grabs predicated upon the erasure of these historical bonds to land to ensure domination and economic exploitation (see: Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Mellet, 2020; Million, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Decoloniality posits that psychological distress comes from the assertion of racialized epistemic violence (Stevens & Sonn, 2021). Thus, this paper posits that the dialogical disruption to place-based relationships that contributes to these colonial wounds should be a site for decolonial inquiry within psychology.

Mignolo (2021) argues that the lived experience of how coloniality is felt is essential in resisting and de-linking from today's experiences of coloniality. Million (2013, p. 61) refers to this knowledge as *affective knowledge* and there is a strong emphasis on this form of knowledge within decolonial literature. Moreover, decoloniality as an option among many potential pathways is for the mutual flourishing of all life and what the Zapatista in Mexico refer to as a world of many worlds (de la Cadena & Blaser, 2018; Escobar, 2020). Thus, exploring how coloniality takes form affectively in relation to place severing can help re-historicize distress, and suggest ways by which psychology can support the transition towards a pluriversal world. What is certain is that this pluriversal world calls for cognitive justice, which is the right to and recognition of co-existing and different knowledges that makes up different lifeworlds without being subject to the violence of modernity/coloniality. Decoloniality (and cognitive justice as part of this project) requires listening to, affirming and re-existing practices rooted in localized, place-based histories, epistemes, cultures, languages, and politics (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Icaza & Vázquez, 2013; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018).

Thus, this paper presents a qualitative critical place inquiry case study in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province in South Africa to contribute to broader decolonial inquiry in critical psychologies. This case study explores and describes the experiences of coloniality that underpins place severing experiences and demonstrates how decoloniality is taking form in response to place severing within this specific context.

2 | CRITICAL PLACE INQUIRY

The qualitative case study relied on a critical place inquiry approach. In critical place inquiry, the researcher focuses on "emplaced" data and understandings, aiming to foreground interdependent relationships between people and place in the analysis (Tuck & McKenzie, 2014, p. 99). Critical place inquiry centers on emplaced subjectivities, which may include experiences of physical changes to the place and metaphysical transformations to the relationship with place. For instance, these studies may focus on memories or a person's interpretations of historical events, sense of community or place relationships, and spirituality (Cele, 2006; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). As a form of decolonial inquiry, critical place inquiry engages specifically in place-centered topics neglected by mainstream research, such as the importance of land to identity, indigenous erasure, racial justice, and modernity/coloniality. Critical place inquiry uses a range of methods, and the current research study relied on phenomenological approaches that prioritized the lived experience of those interviewed. As a methodology, critical place inquiry was appropriate to answering the central research question that sought to historicize and describe community psychological experiences of place severing and decolonial resurgence in the Vhembe District of Limpopo Province in South Africa. The subsections that follow will identify the case study, present participant characteristics, and describe the data collection and analysis procedures.

2.1 | Case Study Identification

Vhembe District is an agricultural (including timber) and tourism hub for local and international markets. Most of the district's land was converted during colonial administrations or under apartheid when the region formerly known as Venda was declared a *bantustan*, i.e., an administrative zone created by the former National Party for Black South Africans that stripped many of their citizenship (Mamdani, 2018). These land conversions were synonymous with land grabs, forced removals, and mass deforestation, leaving many today still dislocated from their ancestral lands. Although Venda was reintegrated into South Africa in 1994 and renamed the Vhembe District, the paper will show that these histories' psychological legacies are still present today. Figure 1 illustrates the location of the Vhembe District in South Africa.

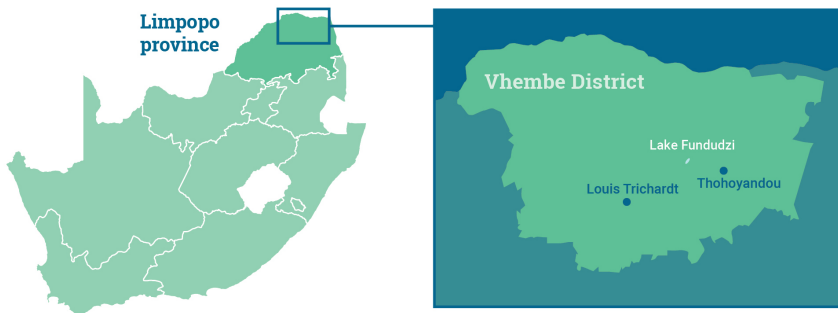


FIGURE 1 Vhembe District location (credits: Garret Barnwell)

Within this history of dispossession, the case study focused on communities with ancestral connections to the *Zwifho*, or sacred natural sites, that make up a social-ecological network across the district. *Zwifho* can encompass waterfalls, rivers, rocky outcrops, or indigenous forests. They are places where *Vhadzimu*, ancestral spirits, live and rituals must take place. Barnwell, Makaulule, Stroud, Watson & Rubson (2021) have shown that *Zwifho* anchor memories and shaped local epistemologies, knowledge, governance structures, and intergenerational community identities. According to oral histories, Nwali (the creator) chose specific clans within the first peoples, the *Vhongwaniwapo*, as guardians of the *Zwifho*. Many of the community members who identify as *Zwifho* guardians belong to a community-based organization called *Dzomo La Mupo* (DLM), meaning the “voice of Mupo,” or all of creation that is not human made. DLM's decolonial actions are described in this case study and demonstrates the resurgence of epistemologies and lifeworlds that are resisting coloniality, and demonstrating a different path to modernity/coloniality.

2.2 | Participant Characteristics

The primary author conducted semi-structured interviews comprising 13 individual interviews (5 female; 8 male) and three focus groups that totaled 22 participants (14 female; 8 male). Four of these participants were individually interviewed and also included in a focus group, bringing the total sample to 31 rather than 35. The members who were interviewed in both individual and group interviews held considerable knowledge about social-ecological changes and specific leadership, spiritual, cultural, or knowledge roles. The average age of participants was 58 years old. Thus, many participants witnessed apartheid's land-based political violence as young people. Today, as elders, they are

responsible for handing down indigenous knowledge to young people. In this way, elders' insights are invaluable to resisting modernity/coloniality.

No refusals or dropouts took place within the study sample. All participants identified as Tshivenda speakers, the primary language in the Vhembe District. Of these, 26 participants (84%) identified as *Vhongwaniwapo* (first peoples to place) and expressed a familial link to the Zwifho, particularly Lake Fundudzi, Phiphidi waterfalls, or the sacred forests or mountains of Zwifho zwa Nethathe (Thathe sacred forest), Zwifho zwa Magoro (Magoro hill), and Zwifho zwa Vhutanda (Vhutanda sacred grove). The focus groups took place at Zwifho zwa Magoro, Zwifho zwa Thathe, and Zwifho zwa Vhutanda, and all focus group participants identified as being *Vhongwaniwapo*.

2.3 | Data Collection

Field data collection took place between May 2019 and July 2019. Nelson Mandela University granted ethics approval. Participants provided informed consent after agreeing to the aim and study procedure, which were described in both Tshivenda and English. Mphatheleni Makaulule and Dima Rubson, Tshivenda speakers with expertise in traditional knowledge systems, were cultural interpreters, community coordinators, and critical reviewers. Purposive sampling assisted in identifying specific communities and individuals that could answer the central research question. The researchers asked questions about the psychological distress associated with adverse place-based changes as well as community responses to these forms of distress. The primary author contacted potential participants through the community-based organization DLM and traditional leaders. The interviews lasted between one to five hours and took place within contextual sites, such as ancestral territories or land from which communities were forcibly removed during apartheid, to emplace experiences.

Furthermore, communities helped identify important spaces and instances of environmental degradation, both physically and abstractly, through personal descriptions and memories. The primary researcher took photographs and testimonies to record these processes. All interviewees consented to be recorded. These recordings were translated from Tshivenda into English by an outsourced professional Tshivenda translator who signed a non-disclosure agreement to protect participants' identities. *Vhongwaniwapo* cultural interpreters also translated specific words, such as *Zwifho*. The primary researcher checked the accuracy of quotes together with cultural interpreters. For some quotes, cultural interpreters and the primary researcher agreed that publication would retain the original Tshivenda word since its English translation would not convey the depth of meaning. Appendix 1 contains a glossary of these key Tshivenda terms. Additionally, the primary researcher utilized South Africa's Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000 to access mineral prospecting rights documents (Republic of South Africa, 2020). This process helped to triangulate community concerns about mining prospecting that were raised during interviews in the absence of publicly available information on mineral prospecting in and around the Lake Fundudzi sacred site (Directorate of Mineral Regulations: Limpopo Region, 2018).

2.4 | Data Analysis

The primary researcher conducted inductive coding as a non-directive form of coding that allowed for meanings to organically emerge (Mihas & Odum Institute, 2019). Groups of shared meaning were clustered into the following themes: 1) dialogical disruptions (historical events), 2) place severing experiences (psychological distress), and 3) decolonial resurgence (community responses to place severing). Data were recoded for consistency. These meaning clusters assisted in identifying, clarifying, and describing place severing. The paper used decolonial theory to assist the interpretation of emerging information. Cultural translators double-checked the findings and interpretations, and

the primary author presented the initial paper to DLM's executive committee to ensure contextual relevancy. Lastly, in the presentation of quotations from interviews, an anonymized key is used to protect participants' identities owing to the potential for victimization that land and environmental defenders have experienced in South Africa. Individual participants are identified by *P* and a number (e.g., P1 or P6). The same logic is applied for groups (e.g., G1 or G3). Where possible, non-identifiable biographical characteristics are shared.

3 | FINDINGS

The findings present the main themes related to experiences of place severing and decolonial resurgence. Dialogical Disruptions (see 3.1) gives a psycho-historical description of the dialogical disruptions between interdependent dialogical relationships between people and place due to epistemic violence (see 3.1.1) and material severing (see 3.1.2) associated with colonial expansion and ongoing legacies of coloniality. Place Severing Experiences (see 3.2) then presents participants' psycho-logical experiences of distress related to place severing at the time of interviewing. The theme subsequently highlights two domains of distress: social distress (see 3.2.1) and ancestral distress (see 3.2.2). Lastly, Decolonial Resurgence (3.3) describes how DLM is engaged in decolonial resurgence, which involves processes of de-linking (see 3.3.1) and re-existing (see 3.3.2) indigenous knowledge systems and practices. The theme demonstrates that decolonial resurgence has a significant role in psychological healing, which is rooted in the movement towards cognitive justice.

3.1 | Dialogical Disruptions

In Theme 1, participants historicized their experiences of place severing by attributing it to histories of colonialism and coloniality within subsequent social systems (i.e., apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa). Each subtheme first focuses on the historical events and then describes more recent experiences of place-based dialogue disruptions that have unsettled epistemic territories. Theme 1 identifies two interdependent mechanisms (i.e., epistemic violence and material severing) that participants perceive to contribute to their current distress, which Theme 2 will then describe in detail.

3.1.1 | Epistemic Violence

Epistemic violence relates to the lived and intergenerational experiences of ancestral land that have roots in settler colonialism and Christian Eurocentric epistemologies. Participants described forms of epistemic violence that were seen to contribute to the unsettling of the dialogical relationship with epistemic territories. An elder (P13) explained that these disruptions started when settler-colonists first arrived in the Vhembe District around 1836 (Nemudzivhadi, 1998). Participants explained that the expansion of Christianity's violent civilizing mission – which deemed African ways of being as inferior – severed local communities' relationships with the more-than-human world, ancestry, and Zwifho. Each of these relationships are considered fundamental to Vhonganiwapo epistemic territory. A senior female elder with specific spiritual duties (P2), known as Vhomakhadzi in Tshivenda, described:

Christianity came and disconnected people from Mupo entirely. People of the Zwifho, we go to the forest because it is our temple. They [settlers] said it is wrong to do prayer in the sacred site... It is to disconnect the people from understanding that Mupo is about our spirituality.

The above statement highlights the logic of coloniality that seeks to erase specific knowledge, practices, and beliefs while considering Christian epistemologies as the only legitimate way of being. Participants described how settlers forced communities to renounce traditional worldviews, which were actively demonized during settlers' "civilizing missions" across the Vhembe District. For instance, some participants described how settlers forced some chiefs to destroy their beaded necklaces that symbolize ancestral lineages and chieftainship. However, chiefs, such as the late Khosi Netshidzivhe, refused to destroy his beads in the act of defiance.

Participants thought that this process of severing people's connections with the Zwifho was purposeful and allowed for the settler-colonial accumulation of wealth. It denigrated and de-spirited place-based connections, facilitating mass extraction. Participants explained that this denigration was needed because traditional governance structures would not allow for the destruction of entire ecologies. Thus, Christian evangelization and dispossession through epistemic violence were fundamental for the broader colonial economic project.

According to most participants' historical accounts, settlers pressuring people to convert to Christianity negatively affected place-based relationships with Zwifho and Vhadzimu. These relational disruptions unsettled intergenerational community identities. For instance, activities that gave meaning to community identity, such as ancestral rituals conducted at sacred sites, were demonized. In addition, settlers deemed those who followed traditional beliefs "uncivilized," which resulted in social marginalization among increasingly Christianized communities. Those who continued to practice traditional beliefs did so at the expense of participating in the changing landscape and economy or had to do so covertly – as many of their ancestors were said to have done.

Although colonialism and apartheid ended, most participants recognized that indigenous beliefs and practices continue to be stigmatized. A senior traditional healer explained that communities themselves now demonize ancestral practices. Vhomakhadzi explained that many people living in the area today have converted to conservative forms of evangelical Christianity. Thus, people were still said to be scared of expressing their desire to follow traditional practices. Their fear is not unfounded since there is also a history of targeted violence and killings of those who community members deemed witches in the late 80s. However, it must be said that some forms of Christianity have integrated traditional African beliefs and played a role in revolutionary struggles, but an analysis of this is beyond this paper's scope

Participants in all groups spoke emotively about these dynamics. These lived experiences of epistemic violence are at the center of psychological dimensions of the colonial wound in Vhembe District. All participants expressed that the stigmatization of their traditional knowledge and practices, as well as the attempted negation of sacred natural sites' sanctity, constituted intergenerational psychological harms that still take place today. "It makes me feel very sad and angry. But for me, I know that I am aggressive. I went through so much criticism and cruelty when people hated me for our traditional spirituality and beliefs," Vhomakhadzi expressed (P2).

3.1.2 | Material Severing

The second subtheme addresses the material severing that has contributed to place severing distress. Together with the experience of epistemic violence, the physical destruction of Mupo and the dispossession from Shango (ancestral territories) and Zwifho have disrupted intergenerational community place-based dialogues within this epistemic territory.

A senior female elder recounted: "When people [settlers] started to be allocated pieces of land [by the union government], that was the beginning of this major destruction in Mupo" (P13). The expansion of settler colonialism dispossessed many Black people from their land. In addition, successive waves of settler colonialism destroyed much of the indigenous ecology as it converted land for agricultural purposes. Participants attested that these processes hin-

dered communal enactments by creating barriers to accessing specific sacred or meaningful sites after dislocation (i.e., distance, private property ownership, and policing). Additionally, the physical fracturing of communities (i.e., forceful removal and segregation) hindered communal relationships to sacred sites. These barriers to communal place-based enactments physically disrupted ancestral connections, social relationships, and livelihood functions. This unsettling of local lifeworlds through material severing left communities vulnerable to further epistemic violence that, in turn, reinforced the dialogical breakdown between people and place.

Although recent experiences of distress are rooted in intergenerational histories of colonialism, most participants lived experiences of dislocation was during apartheid. Through apartheid-era violence and unconscionable segregation policies, the reclassification of land for agricultural purposes through the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act No 18, mass deforestation, defaunation, and forceful removals were possible. Participants explained that the apartheid regime consolidated its power and wealth by forcefully removing them and occupying their land for settlers' benefit. In addition, white supremacist logic of coloniality deemed Black South Africans inferior and Mupo a "natural resource" – a term rooted in modernity/coloniality that commodifies and objectifies lifeworlds – underpinned apartheid.

Most participants had directly experienced mass indigenous deforestation during apartheid. For example, a Bhavenda (male elder) in the Tshidzivhe community focus group explained: "The pine tree plantation started during the apartheid era when they [the apartheid government] forcefully took it [the land] from us" (P5G1). Participant 13 continued: "You know the whole area around Lake Fundudzi and the whole area around the sacred forest, Nethathe... The Vondo and the Thathe people were removed from there to make way for forestry". Participant 12 described the violence that accompanied these processes:

People were not given enough time to move, to prepare; they were just told that they are being moved. They lost their livestock, such as goats, they ran to the forest. People [were not able] to go back to take back their belongings. That was very painful.

An indigenous beekeeper, who is also a community elder, explained that the forestry industry around Lake Fundudzi destroyed 55 km² of indigenous forests over a matter of days to make way for pine and eucalyptus plantations. Many of the Zwifho came under direct threat. A traditional healer compliments these testimonies by drawing attention to the sacred sites: "They wanted to destroy the sacred forest of Thathe because they wanted to plant and extend the area of planting – the blue gum trees and the pine trees" (P1). This physical violence facilitated ecological exploitation and severed the dialogue between communities and place. Settler colonists also used coercion to steal land, as participant 1 explained: "During the apartheid time, if you react, then they [the government] will shoot you down. They will gun you down, and they will kill you." Participants described how the destruction of homes, dislocation from Zwifho and Shango, and settler emplacement on ancestral territories limited the ability to return to ancestral places. Settlers established plantations, farms, and settlements in the wreckage of lifeworlds and, in turn, participants explained that entire communities were displaced to "uninhabitable" places. Figure 2 depicts a deforested plantation site with some remaining indigenous forests in the background. Communities used to occupy the surrounding land.

When interviewed, one chief made clear that there are perverse economic incentives underlying land dispossession that was made possible by colonial differentials: "The intention was to displace them [Black people] so that they [the government] can find free labor. It [can be] compared to slavery. They wanted them [Black people] to work on their [white people's] farms now for free while destroying their communities" (P4). Participants expressed feelings of oppression and dehumanization. A male elder drew attention to the racial injustices of the mass deforestation: "The domination was done [to] Black people only" (P1). He continued: "It was complete exploitation [of] our forefathers."



FIGURE 2 Pine plantations (photograph credits: Garret Barnwell)

Thus, dehumanization and exploitation characterize these geospatial points of extraction that are created through epistemic violence and material severing that seek to destroy epistemic territories.

Despite the fall of apartheid, there are still several unresolved land disputes today that perpetuate place severing experiences, and most Zwifho are not protected. Today, modes of dispossession have taken on different forms. For instance, in 2019, the Limpopo Province Department of Mineral Resources granted prospecting rights to a local company in an area containing the sacred sites of Lake Fundudzi and Thathe forest (see: Bloom, 2020 and Directorate of Mineral Regulations: Limpopo Region, 2018). This took place regardless of Lake Fundudzi being South Africa's first national heritage site recognized for its significant cultural landscape. Thathe forest falls within Lake Fundudzi's protected five-kilometer radius buffer zone. Figure 3 illustrates the overlapping of the mine prospecting rights with the Zwifho.

The mine prospecting rights were still active when conducting interviews, and participants reported that the company did not consult the community, as required by law. The lack of community participation in the decision to grant prospecting rights was a participatory and procedural injustice that constituted a form of dispossession that, in turn, exacerbated historical traumas. One of the female elders explained: "The biggest threat is the mine. If they

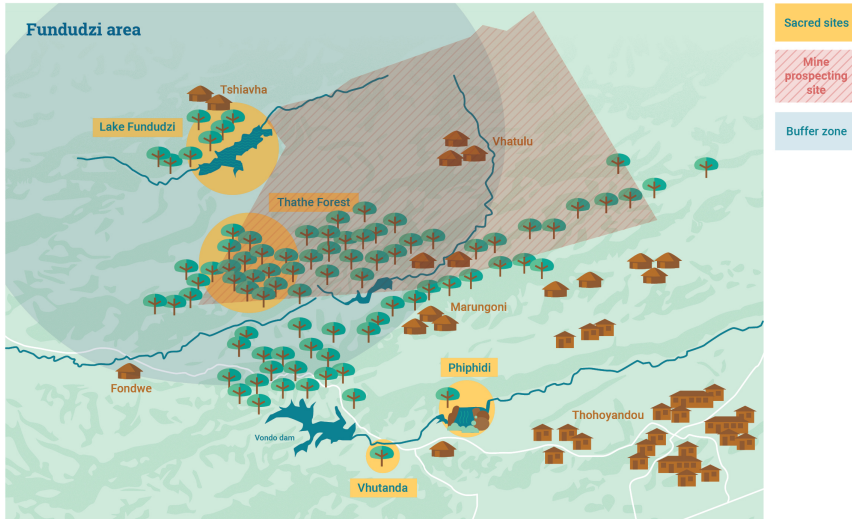


FIGURE 3 Mine prospecting site overlapping with Zwifho (credits: Garret Barnwell)

[government] allow them to mine, we will be stranded, we will be sick, and the village will be dry. People will get sick [because] the water that we'll be drinking will be polluted" (P12). This granting of prospecting rights without community participation is a consequence of a colonial logic that treats communities and sacred spaces like open-access systems for exploitation. DLM and other community members overturned the mine prospecting rights by lobbying traditional leaders. It is still unclear how the Department of Mineral Resources granted the prospecting rights without public participation. In addition to this example, participants raised concerns that non-indigenous rituals, alcohol consumption, extractive forms of tourism, and recreational activities at the Zwifho exacerbated ongoing distress. The lack of recognition, participatory and procedural justice caused profound distress for communities.

3.2 | Place Severing Experiences

The communal psychological consequences (i.e., place severing experiences) of the dialogical disruptions discussed in Theme 1 are significant. Theme 2 highlights these place severing experiences and details social distress (2.1) and ancestral distress (2.2) as dominant expressions of the psychological dimensions of coloniality's wounds.

3.2.1 | Social Distress

The reconfiguration of social structures and land, and, in turn, livelihoods disrupted modes of enacting social identity and contributed to the psychological distress. For instance, Participant 2 stated: "Everyone feels sad about that plantation because people were removed [from there] and they left their farms and everything they had." The disruption to land tenure also increased dependency on the industries that were complicit in dispossession and other forms of collective violence. Participant 1 explains: "People were farming before and were eating indigenous food. After [being displaced], they [those displaced] came to settle on the matchbox [small stands] area... We were stopped from farming

to work under them.” He continues: “We were forced to work on the plantations because people were blocked from planting the maize. People did not have their fields anymore.” A local chief explained the consequences of identity disruptions that contributed to social distress:

The community also lost its identity because immediately, if you're removed, you no longer stay the same. Then, there was the displacement of families, sisters, and brothers. They were breaking away from each other. So, the social cohesion that African people had – used to have – was broken. Those values that they used to have were broken (P4).

A senior elder from the Magoro clan explained that the resettlements subsequently created tension between communities: “The very same thing created ... enemies... hatred... We used to live together in harmony. We'd even share food with the neighbors [from other ethnic groups/clans]” (P3G3). Participants expressed that the dislocation caused “pain” (P1G1), which was also perceived as “a wound that cannot be healed” (P4G1). One of the senior elders in from the Vhutanda clan subsequently remarked: “[The] community at large, they felt hopeless and worthless.” All participants reported different affective responses to the dialogical disruption and loss, including anger, despair, grief, helplessness, and hopelessness. The Magoro clan attributed at least one suicide to these events. A chief from another community illuminated:

There was a lot of emotional strains on the community because it [the dislocation] immediately breaks families; it breaks communities, breaks their humanity, breaks their wellbeing... The fact that you use your land even to play on, even worship on, to even bury your people on, you are being chased away. On its own, it has a very big psychological impact on our community (P4).

3.2.2 | Ancestral Distress

The harm to the communal relationship with land also extended to ancestral practices that concerned Vhadzimu at the Zwifho. A Vhakoma, or mother of a chief, described: “We couldn't practice our traditions, and this is where the disconnection to our traditions began” (P12). The disconnection allowed for the colonization of the lifeworld, a Makhadzi explains: “disconnecting from the culture created individualism and the individualism disconnected people from culture” (P13). Participants also expressed that this disconnection led to negative shifts within the relationship to the more-than-human world. Vhomakhadzi explains: “There was a huge impact on the environment and also a huge impact on people's minds because once you make people disconnect from Mupo, they no longer respect it” (P2).

Although most participants continued dialogues with Vhadzimu regardless of adversities, the feeling of a loss of connection with ancestors or their disturbance was a consistent subtheme. For example, a Makhadzi of the Tshidzivhe clan outlined: “We are worried because we are disconnected to the traditions of our ancestors” (P11). In addition, a Vhomakhadzi explained:

When I wake up in the morning, we connect with the Vhadzimu, but we wake up in a place... [with]... no trees, no forest, there is no blanket of the mountain, where I mean the blanket is the trees, [no place] where I can see the sunrise without any problem or disturbance... This is the time to connect with the Vhadzimu. If there is destruction, how do I connect? We feel like the Vhadzimu is not there (P2).

It was not only a lack of access to Zwifho, but the threats to Zwifho and Vhadzimu that caused this distress.

A senior elder from the Vhutanda focus group explained: “Our wells have dried up because they have removed the forest, and now our sacred place [is] now out in the open” (P1G2). Continued threats to the Zwifho contributed to intrusive feelings associated with ancestral concerns. One elder explained: “It worries me a lot because my ancestors don’t want noise. They [forestry workers] are always sawing trees or making noises. They evoke Vhadzimu, which affects me” (P12). Participants also experienced distressing dreams that reflected fears of disaster and degradation. For instance, Participant 3 in the Tshidzivhe group reported: “I even get dreams at night when I am sleeping [about] what is going to happen when there’s heavy rain because people are removing rocks and trees...[for]... money.” Participants explained that communities’ health is interdependent on the Zwifho’s sanctity and Vhadzimu’s wellbeing and the destruction caused existential distress: “People in this village are very concerned because they are involved in Mupo, they don’t want it to be destroyed” (P3).

A Vhakoma described her psychological distress: “I feel very sad. It’s only that [there is] nothing I can do and I cannot stop them...the loss” (P12). One of the chiefs associated with the same Zwifho expressed: “that [the disconnection from sacred sites is] painful to me.” The vast majority of people reported disrupted sleep or place-based dreams. One of the senior Makhadzi noted: “If there is disorder there in Zwifho zwa Thathe, I will struggle to sleep or have strange dreams, or I will dream about being in a huge forest” (P6). Another Makhadzi similarly added: “When I think about my dreaming being in the forest, I think it also worries me” (P11).

However, it was not only elders who lived through the initial displacement that experienced distress but also future generations. A young woman in the Vhutanda group explained: “I feel like I am disrupted by what occurred in the past even though I wasn’t born. I feel that my wellness and the core of my being would be better off than what I am now” (P7G2). She also expressed that the dislocation from Vhadzimu caused her distress: “I feel sad because I am far from my ancestors, from our sacred place.” Like others, she also dreamt of the Zwifho:

The place we are staying at now is not nice like the place which is near our ancestors. I even asked my elders why can’t come back and stay here with our ancestors? They said it is not that easy and that there are many plantations here, and we don’t even know how we can do that. I even have dreams about that place because I have seen it, the place where my elders were forcefully removed [from].

3.3 | Decolonial Resurgence

This last theme focuses on how DLM is engaged in healing these experiences of place severing through decolonial resurgence. The emergence of DLM, which has about 200 mostly female members, centers around the relationships formed between people from different communities within the Vhembe District who shared various ancestral links to Zwifho. DLM emerged in 2007 through the work of Mphatheleni Makaulule, the daughter of the traditional healer Makaulule Ratshili Aron, and was formalized as a non-governmental organization in 2015. DLM’s practices “restore roots [to ancestral and cultural connections],” and participants expressed that their communal practices profoundly affect communal healing. From members’ perspectives, DLM’s actions “restore order” where “disorder” exists. Modernity and its Eurocentric ways of being were seen as introducing disorder, such as the destruction of traditional lifeways, disconnection from ancestors, and other forms of violence. DLM is engaged in decolonial healing that simultaneously affirms, recollects and restores knowledge and practices, and restitutes ancestral relationships with Zwifho and Shango. In this way, DLM addresses the interdependent epistemic violence and material severing that transmits place severing. The subthemes in this section describe these emergent and community-led processes that require re-existing place-based dialogue at communal and ancestral levels. The two subthemes will highlight how DLM de-links from coloniality and re-exists the communal as a process that has contributed to healing place severing.

3.3.1 | De-linking

DLM has become a container that holds the intergenerational traumas of place severing and offers opportunities for solidarity, reflection, witnessing, and communal action. The mutual accompaniment provided by DLM supports healing. Bakó and Zana (2020, p. 10) explain: "If the trauma prompts sympathy and solidarity from the [group] environment, if [that] environment is empathic, and reflects that this [transgenerational] trauma is indeed a trauma, this aids the healing process." DLM focuses on safeguarding traditional knowledge and ancestral connections through communal action. DLM's members reinforced one another's' desires to continue ancestral connections and co-create generative lifeworlds. Within this coalition, members can also resist the othering and demonization that has been tied to continuing these practices since the introduction of settler colonialism.

This resistance of coloniality and mutual reinforcement of other lifeworlds is not easy, and some participants reported experiencing cognitive dissonance, specifically difficulty integrating internalized Christian worldviews while also holding ancestral beliefs and engaging in place-based resurgence. DLM is nevertheless a supportive decolonial space where community members work in solidarity and with mutual care to move through these traditional knowledge-affirming experiences.

In addition, the containing space creates conditions for bottom-up conscientization processes where members critically reflect on their social conditions and act upon them to transform their experience of distress. A specific methodology that DLM calls "ecological mapping" is used to enable this conscientization process. For example, DLM members use ecological mapping to re-exist knowledge. As part of this, members may walk the land, together recalling, the original paths of rivers or the plants and animals that used to live there but also the cultural, ecological, and spiritual significance of places along the way. The contrast of these memories with the present-day ecology, in which rivers may have ceased to flow and local flora and fauna may have disappeared, highlights what disables the flourishing of traditional knowledge and practices. Participants can then refuse and resist oppressive conditions. Instead, they can strive for the affirming, reconstituting, re-imagining, and re-existing of knowledge, practices, and relationships that make up epistemic territories.

For instance, Participant 10 describes how ecological mapping led to the re-introduction of rituals, which also made forms of oppression more obvious. Participant 10 explained: "When we were doing our rituals — it was like now — the owners of that plantation are ruling us because we couldn't just go there as we pleased." The constant questioning and comprehending the coloniality makes visible what to refuse and resist against and, in so doing, also facilitates the de-linking process.

Although there are concrete forms of resistance that members engage with, such as opposition to new mining projects, much of DLM's work describes the underlying violence of modernity/coloniality. Vhomakoma emphasized this in her interview, expressing: "modernization, this is what disconnects us." De-linking is a psychological process that seeks to examine the roots of distress. In this case, de-linking involves de-idealizing modernity and uncovering coloniality's epistemic violence against indigenous knowledge that contributes to distress. The process of conscientization is communal and recognizes that much work is related to decolonizing the mind. For instance, a senior traditional healer expressed: "We have never had our hands tied up. No one is tied up. Only our mind has been tied up" (P1).

3.3.2 | Re-existing

This second subtheme presents three examples of re-existence processes in which DLM engages. DLM's actions are powerful and seek to restore place-based dialogues. A crucial part of this de-coupling from the logic of coloniality is the

re-existence of indigenous knowledge systems and dialogical connections with place. A traditional healer summarised: "To decolonize, we are standing up... to take ownership again of this place." DLM does so by re-linking epistemologies and restoring the communal – including human, ancestral, and more-than-human life. While de-linking aims to prevent harm and create conditions for flourishing, the re-linking process is a crucial movement towards cognitive justice, community sovereignty, and – in turn – psychological healing and emancipation.

The first process of re-existing concerns the restitution of land that aims to address material severing. One royal family member reported: "There is very strong connectivity between people and the land. We understand issues of the land as very close to us, like our own oxygen that we breathe. It brings happiness to people." Most participants expressed restitution of stolen land is essential for healing. Land restitution would ensure one crucial way of reclaiming sovereignty over land and may allow for possibilities to re-constitute what has been made destitute. Participants explained that the community can also rebuild wealth and communal power through this reconnection with place. Although it is not the only way to re-exist knowledge and ancestral relationships, the restitution of land is perhaps one of the most efficient ways of doing so, because many Zwifho remain on land that does not belong to their traditional guardians, making access to the sites as well as other sacred sites difficult.

For instance, some participants expressed that they had to first notify authorities at some sacred sites before visiting them. When participants gained access to the sites, security personnel would keep a watch while community members conducted rituals. In addition, participants said that some burial sites are now situated on what has become commercial farms. Farmers would let the community onto their lands, participants reported, only to later destroy the burial sites. Therefore, the state's lack of recognition of communities' land tenure rights disempowers communities, and in turn, thwarts some possibilities for cognitive justice. The absence of recognition by authorities may also place these sites at direct risk of harm, thus perpetuating the colonial wound.

Multiple land restitution cases have been filed in South Africa's Land Claims Court to re-establish an ancestral connection to Shango (ancestral territory). Although land restitution cases are fraught with challenges, these actions represent practical steps to decolonize land itself. Figure 4 depicts a collection of land claims (main and top), tools found in the former homes of participants that now lie in plantations (bottom left), and the walls of a family home in the pine plantation (bottom right).

The second example is the affirmation, recollection and re-existence of communal ancestral practices at Zwifho. This knowledge was also re-existed through the processes of eco-mapping previously described and emerges through the sense of relationality created. They have also worked with traditional leadership to affirm and re-exist rituals that have been conducted at these sacred sites. A focus group member in Tshidzivhe described: "We lost touch with our traditions. DLM helped us, and we remembered the past". This re-existence of the sacred also involved restoring the sovereignty of the Zwifho. To do so, DLM has established principles with local communities to protect sacred sites. DLM has also been working on formally protecting the Zwifho by nominating the sites for protection through the South African Heritage Resource Agency, which is in charge of protecting heritage in the country.

Lastly, DLM has established indigenous tree nurseries and is engaged in seed sharing to re-establish cultural landscapes and promote food sovereignty. The saplings grown at these nurseries are planted around sacred natural sites to create buffer zones to protect the sites against external intrusions, including those from the surrounding pine plantation as well as climate change. A senior Makhadzi expressed: "it heals these wounds of the past a little bit, when I go to the nursery and see these trees and when I see that the trees that I have planted in other villages are growing that make me feel good... It helps us flourish spiritually." Figure 5 illustrates seed nursing and seed sharing. Vhokoma reported: "We are living the way they used to. We are following our ancestors' steps so that we don't lose track of their teachings."

There is clearly a desire for this affirmation and re-existence of intergenerational place-based dialogues. For



FIGURE 4 Land Restitution (photograph credits: Garret Barnwell)

instance, a young focus group member expressed her desire for these teachings: “What I would like to see happening to us the youth is that elders must guide us and tell us if we are wrong, and also show us our customs, they must tell us if you do this there will be consequences. Because now we are living in a modern way, we are no longer living like before.”

4 | DISCUSSION & CONCLUDING REMARKS

The paper fills an empirical gap within critical psychological literature about the experience of place severing in relation to coloniality. The case study clearly describes how epistemic violence and material severing can contribute to dialogical disruptions between people and place that may unsettle epistemic territories. Participants saw this violent process as being deliberate, as did Black consciousness leader Stephen Bantu Biko during apartheid. He noted: “To justify its exploitative basis, the Anglo-Boer [settler] culture has at all times been directed at bestowing an inferior status to all cultural aspects of the indigenous people” (2017 p. 45). This is not unique to South Africa. Gómez-Barris (2017) has



FIGURE 5 Reforestation and food sovereignty (photograph credits: Garret Barnwell)

also shown how coloniality is part of the relations in places where mining, logging, and other forms of capitalist extraction take hold in Latin America/Abya Yala. What is important in these territories is that modernity conceals coloniality, which sanctions domination, conflict, and epistemic violence (Gómez-Barris, 2017; Mignolo, 2016; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Thus, coloniality is the dark underbelly of modernity that drives extractive economies, governance systems, political and social orders that take structural form within society and create and dictate unjust social relations of class, race, and estate (Quijano, 2007). The current paper also demonstrates that these histories impress upon people's lives contributing to profound community-level psychological distress. Critical psychology should be concerned with these psychological experiences that are taking place all around the world.

What has been foregrounded are forms of distress associated with disruptions to communal and ancestral dimensions of intergenerational community identity. These findings complement other research, such as Skosana (2019), that found layers of loss and identity disruptions associated with land injustices in South Africa. However, the paper's emphasis on understanding the nature of distress is not only to understand how coloniality operates, but importantly to demonstrate how it could be resisted. Indigenous territories are decolonial spaces of resistance against mass extraction of labor, resources, and knowledge (Gómez-Barris, 2017). In addition to place severing, the

paper highlighted the importance of communities' dialogical relationship to place – including social, ancestral, and ecological dimensions – to decolonial resurgence.

In an address to students and faculty at Nelson Mandela University in the Eastern Cape, South Africa, Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2019) reflected on the contextual particularities of South Africa and possibilities for decoloniality. He noted that “Black ancestry” may be important to the decolonial struggle in South Africa, particularly in the process of re-humanizing oneself through the recognition of these ancestral connections in some ways. In line with Maldonado-Torres' (2019) reflections, the findings show that grassroots community organizing groups such as DLM are already engaged in these decolonial struggles. The current case study shows that the re-existence and affirmation of ancestral place-based relationships contribute to a broader communal process of decolonial healing. Furthermore, the case study highlights that place-based connections that include the recovery of ancestry are critical – at least in this context and to DLM – for cognitive justice. Place-based resurgence, a form of political or cultural resurgence that centers land, to affirm and reconstitute indigenous lifeways are also used by many indigenous groups in the world to strive for cognitive justice (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014; Elliot, 2018; Simpson, 2016; Tuck & Yang, 2012). However, to be clear, this is an option among many other options for resisting epistemic injustices.

Recent experiences of distress described by participants in the article also draw attention to histories of coloniality and everyday expressions. DLM assists members in making sense of their everyday experiences of distress associated with coloniality through communal processes and, in so doing, emergent collective forms of healing take hold. DLM's actions demonstrate that healing is a psychological, communal, and political act that – at least in this case study – includes the re-existence of place-based and ancestral dialogues. Although decoloniality is against the dynamics of modernity/coloniality, it does so because it is centrally for the flourishing of multiple different lifeworlds (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Thus, decoloniality is for cognitive justice, where knowledge and different lifeways are allowed to flourish free from oppression and coloniality (de Sousa Santos, 2018; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). This desire for cognitive justice is central and fundamental to the healing processes described by participants and DLM's actions. The experience of DLM suggests that healing is inseparable from justice, which requires decolonial action at both material (e.g., land restitution) and metaphysical levels (e.g., rituals, epistemological reconstitution). Psychology can learn from such approaches that deeply listen to how coloniality manifests in everyday experiences and what communities desire to be made reconstituted (Mignolo, 2021). What participants have shared demonstrates clearly why psychology could support this process, as it is in this affective knowledge that coloniality/decoloniality is understood. However, psychology must first confront how coloniality is reproduced within psychology to avoid inadvertently perpetuating harm (Fernandes-Jesus, et al., 2020; Fisher, 2019). Nevertheless, with these considerations in mind, the current paper not only adds to a re-historicized psychological understanding of distress but associates itself with the broader decolonial turn in critical psychologies (Boonzaier & Van Niekerk, 2019; Fernandez-Jesus et al., 2020; Stevens & Sonn, 2021).

Additionally, in *Against War*, Maldonado-Torres (2008) suggests that we should also be considering the moral content of our actions. Reflecting on the works of Fanon, Maldonado-Torres positions decolonial love as an alternative option to coloniality. Cognitive justice through communal acts is critical to the expression of decolonial love that sees the self as being for the mutual flourishing of other life. In the findings, we see that DLM's actions as reflecting these principles. Decolonial love seeks to dismantle coloniality that perpetuates violence and hinders the production and reproduction of indigenous lifeworlds. It also centers principled acts of relationality and communality for mutual flourishing. What is healing moves beyond the interiority of the psyche to being in commune with others, including place, the more-than-human world, the ancestors, and future generations. Instead of the individualised and isolating the self, the process of decolonial resurgence opens up to community (Lugones, 2003). In the case of DLM, the expression of decolonial love as the giving of self to the other is not only the human other, but more-than-human

others (e.g., Zwifho, Mupo and Vhadzimu) who are mutually re-existing lifeworlds. Western psychology has largely played a part in delegitimizing such relationships. Decoloniality would require that psychology re-engages ethically in formulating ways to recognize re-existing, and reconstituting these other relationships that make up the pluriversal world.

5 | APPENDIX I: GLOSSARY

Bhavenda are male elders

Dzomo La Mupo (DLM) means the mouth or voice of Mupo

Khosi means the chief

Luvenda is the language spoken by the Vhavenda people

Makhadzi are royal aunts

Mupo is all of creation that is not human-made

Shango means territory

Tshivenda are practices and indigenous ways of life

Vhadzimu are ancestral spirits

Vhakoma is the mother of the chief

Vhomakhadzi are women who are responsible for spiritual connections and rituals

Vhongwaniwapo are considered to be the first peoples in the area

Zwifho is a sacred natural site where Vhadzimu (ancestors' spirits) are found

Authors' Contributions

GB led the field data collection, conducted the analysis, and finalized the first draft. MM and MR helped identify participants, provided cultural interpretation, and critically reviewed the paper. Finally, LS and MW provided supervision and editorial support.

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