

Epistemic Reparations

Current reparation processes neglect survivor and victim storytelling and remembrance of human rights violations. Reparations require codifying “a right to be known” and offering survivors and victims of human rights violations platforms for telling their stories.

EXISTING TOOLS FOR ADDRESSING INJUSTICE ARE FALLING SHORT

Over 40 countries have created truth commissions in the aftermath of civil war, authoritarian rule or institutionalized injustice to achieve reparations for those harmed. Among the most well-known is South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which held public hearings and collected testimony from nearly 21,000 victims of apartheid over seven years. Evidence suggests the commission contributed to reconciliation and democratization processes in South Africa. By opting for an alternative path to justice that emphasized telling and hearing the truth over punishment and retribution, it became a model for other countries seeking transitional justice. In the years since, other truth commissions have operated with the hope of resolving past wrongdoings and conflict. Colombia’s recent peace negotiations, for example, stemmed from official state recognition of victims and perpetrators of violence.

However, most reconciliation processes still focus on retribution and compensation, neglecting individuals’ right to share their stories about acts of violence committed against them as a form of reparative work.

THE RIGHT TO BE KNOWN

A potent vehicle for fostering peace and justice, reparations can take on many forms beyond monetary compensation. In 1997, the United Nations (UN) Commission on Human Rights established three principles for hold-

ing the perpetrators of human rights violations accountable—the “right to know,” the “right to justice” and the “right to reparation.” The “right to know” means victims and their families have the right to know the truth about the circumstances in which human rights violations took place and, in the event of the victim’s death or disappearance, the victims’ fate. However, victims still lack the right for their personal stories and experiences to be known. The absence of epistemic reparations—or a “right to be known”—often robs victims of the opportunity to tell their stories, receive acknowledgement for violations against them and heal.

The term “epistemic reparations” was coined by Jennifer Lackey, Wayne and Elizabeth Jones Professor of Philosophy at Northwestern University, to describe the right for surviving victims of injustice and their families to be known—to experience the transformative potential of telling one’s story and being heard. Among the most illustrative examples of epistemic reparations is the case of Lucas Baba Sikwepere, who had the opportunity from South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission to recount the violence he endured at the hands of an apartheid-era police officer. After sharing his experiences, he remarked, “I feel what has been making me sick all the time is the fact that I couldn’t tell my story. But now...it feels like I got my sight back by coming here and telling you the story.” While he remains legally blind by the state-sanctioned violence he experienced, Sikwepere described being heard as a profoundly transformative experience.

Victims of human rights violations are not the only beneficiaries when states and societies acknowledge individuals' experiences of injustice. Individuals' stories have been a galvanizing force behind many powerful social movements. The chant "[Say Their Names](#)," for example, became a unifying theme during the protests following the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and other Black Americans who died at the hands of the police.

INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH GROUP INVESTIGATES REPARATIONS FOR LOCAL AND GLOBAL INJUSTICES

Researchers and civil society leaders across the globe are now working together to incorporate epistemic reparations into globally recognized frameworks for holding the perpetrators of human rights violations accountable. The [Epistemic Reparations Global Working Group](#)—established through a unique Idea Incubation Process led by [Northwestern University's Roberta Buffett Institute for Global Affairs](#)—aims to create a more holistic, survivor- and victim-centered framework for understanding reparations that includes the recognition of the "right to be known" for those who have experienced human rights violations. The group comprises lawyers, historians, philosophers, educators, journalists and activists united by their mission to lead a transnational effort to create opportunities for survivors and victims to share their stories with a broader public.

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With members from the United States, Canada, Ukraine and South Africa, the group's work targets areas where there has been a complete

absence of epistemic reparations or where epistemic reparations failed to contribute to reconciliation and sustained peace. For example, in partnership with victims of apartheid-era violence in South Africa, the group is focusing on the voices of those left out of the original Truth and Reconciliation Commission through spring 2024 events in Johannesburg that will organize dialogue between Apartheid activists, descendants and artists through workshops, interviews and poetry readings. They are also working with Indigenous communities in Canada, particularly those who suffered from gross human rights violations in residential schools, to host storytelling events and examine the politics of recognition from Indigenous communities' perspectives. In Chicago, they are working with victims of carceral and racial violence, enabling incarcerated people to share their experiences with the public through multimedia storytelling projects.

Through these efforts and others, the group aims for the UN Commission on Human Rights to recognize "the right to be known" as an inalienable and collective right alongside the "right to know." By expanding the "right to know" to include the "right to be known," the group hopes to advance a survivor- and victim-centric approach to reparations that contributes to justice, peace, reconciliation and healing worldwide.

DEVELOPMENTS TO WATCH

The Epistemic Reparations Global Working Group is collaborating with curators and advisors at the [Winnipeg Art Gallery-Qaumajuc](#) as they produce a traveling exhibition showcasing the gallery's work to rename pieces in its collection that were originally labeled with racist or derogatory language. The group will later host an interdisciplinary workshop exploring the intersection of epistemic reparations and museum curation, which will generate a framework for galleries and museums around the world to consult in efforts to decolonize their collections. Through this initiative, the group seeks to foster awareness of the role that renaming and reframing can play in achieving epistemic reparations.

In the United States, a [growing number of cities](#) are piloting reparation programs to compensate Black Americans for the legacy of slavery and discrimination, including Evanston, Illinois, where Northwestern University is located. Beginning in 2020, the [Evanston Reparations Committee](#) became the first government body in the U.S. to enact a sustained reparations policy for African Americans—[committing \\$10 million](#) toward Black residents harmed by segregationist housing policies and [acknowledging the city's role](#) in perpetuating racial discrimination. The Epistemic Reparations Global Working Group is collaborating with this committee to introduce reparative initiatives focused on truth and reconciliation in Evanston by facilitating a forthcoming event to provide those directly or indirectly affected by the legacy of racial discrimination in the city with an opportunity to share their stories and experiences.



Epistemic Reparation Global Working Group co-leader Professor Jennifer Lackey introduces the group and its mission at the annual Northwestern Buffett Idea Incubation Showcase.

A burgeoning global network of reparations advocates shows promise for building further momentum around the movement worldwide. In 2022, a first-of-its-kind [global reparations summit in Ghana](#) brought together scholars, artists and activists to develop a global advocacy agenda and reparations strategy. The resultant [Accra Declaration](#) calls for the UN to help organize a global summit of colonial governments, financial institutions, corporations and other organizations that propagated and benefited from enslavement to advance a process of truth, justice and accountability. The declaration suggests that in the coming years, epis-

temic reparations—a critical new framework for empowering victims and generating broader recognition of human rights violations—stand to gain attention on this global stage.

Soon, the Northwestern Buffett Institute's Epistemic Reparations Global Working Group will launch the Epistemic Reparations Digital Hub, an online platform for disseminating the stories of the victims of human rights violations whom they seek to support. Through art exhibits, theater productions, digital archives, publications and multimedia projects, the group aims to foster the right to be known and contribute to justice, peace and reconciliation processes worldwide.