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Restitution and Reparation

A Collaborative Blueprint for Justice

Preamble

Restitution refers to restoring lost or stolen assets, rights, or status, while reparation involves compensatory measures to address harm or injustice. These principles go beyond abstract notions of justice; they serve as essential mechanisms for rectifying historical wrongs and fostering healing among individuals and communities affected by systemic injustices imposed by colonial powers. While restitution focuses on restoring specific losses, reparation aims to repair systemic harm and ensure justice is served holistically. Both are crucial in addressing historical injustices and fostering reconciliation. Whether it involves returning human remains and stolen cultural goods, providing financial reparations, or rebuilding relationships after conflict, these efforts aim to repair the moral, social, and economic harm that persist long after the initial injustices have occurred. Restitution and reparation thus address a range of deeply interconnected issues. From confronting the legacies of colonial exploitation and genocides to managing the aftermath of wartime atrocities, these efforts necessitate an understanding of cultural, historical, legal, economic, diplomatic, and even psychological dimensions.

The challenges are multifaceted, requiring an understanding of history, anthropology, law, ethics, economics, and social dynamics. No single discipline has all the answers, so inter- and trans-disciplinary approaches are essential. These approaches unite diverse knowledge systems and voices to co-create innovative, inclusive, and actionable solutions. In this blog, I explore how inter- and trans-disciplinary collaboration can foster co-production of knowledge, address the needs of those most affected by historical injustices, and ultimately lead to more just and sustainable outcomes. I highlight the benefits of such collaborations and discuss how

challenges can be overcome to create a roadmap for transformative and relational ethical justice.

The Need for a Collaborative Framework

Antonio Buti's (2009) work on reparations as a restorative justice measure aligns with broader debates that have gained momentum since the 1990s. The push for reparations has been fueled by increasing recognition of historical injustices, particularly in relation to colonialism, slavery, and Indigenous rights. Governments, churches, and private organizations have been called upon to acknowledge and address past wrongs through financial compensation, formal apologies, and policy reforms. One significant area of debate concerns the Stolen Generations in Australia,[1] a term referring to Aboriginal children who were forcibly removed from their families. Buti (2009) has explored how restorative justice theories apply to these cases, arguing that reparations should go beyond financial compensation to include acknowledgment and reconciliation efforts. This stands in contrast to the fact that the Australian government has framed many of its reparations measures in terms of distributive rather than restorative justice approaches. On a global scale, discussions around reparations have extended to issues such as slavery and colonial-era abuses. For example, the United Kingdom agreed in 2013 to compensate thousands of Kenyan victims for the torture and mistreatment they suffered during the Mau Mau Uprising (1952-1956). Similarly, Germany acknowledged the atrocities of the Herero and Nama genocide (1904-1908) in 2021 and agreed to provide financial aid to Namibia as a form of reconciliation. However, many critics argue these efforts fall short of true reparations (Melber 2024a). Scholars like John Torpey (2006) have noted the increasing pressure on states, churches, and corporations to provide reparations or formal apologies for historical injustices. These debates often center on whether reparations should be legally mandated or based on moral and political obligations.

The pursuit of meaningful restitution and reparation is inherently complex, both in terms of how knowledge is acquired and understood and the philosophical principles that underpin justice and fairness. Therefore, it must be guided by insights drawn from multiple disciplines to ensure a comprehensive and informed approach. Traditional approaches that rely on single disciplines often fail to capture the nuances and interrelations of these matters. An interdisciplinary framework provides a method to break down these silos by integrating insights from various fields. However, that alone is insufficient. While interdisciplinary work synthesizes academic knowledge, transdisciplinary approaches advance this by incorporating the lived experiences and expertise of those outside academia—especially the impacted communities, government entities, media, NGOs, and activists (Manneh 2025; see also Leyh and Fraser 2019; Dixon 2017). This collaborative framework is essential for ensuring that restitution and reparations initiatives are comprehensive and grounded in the realities of those they intend to serve.

Interdisciplinary Approaches: Bridging Academic Knowledge

Consider the debates surrounding the Benin Bronzes; the Namibian-German restitution issue; the malfunctions in the restitution attempt between Berlin's Charité hospital and the Hehe-Mkwawa community (*Table Media* 2025); the controversial visit of Frank-Walter Steinmeier, the German Federal President, to the Majimaji memorial in Tanzania (Rushohora 2024); and other treasures looted during colonial conquests. Addressing these issues requires far more than a legal argument over ownership, demonstrating the power of interdisciplinary approaches. It calls for historians, archaeologists, and heritage experts to unravel the artifacts' origins and the circumstances of their removal; anthropologists to understand the cultural significance of these items to the communities from which they were taken; and legal experts to interpret the international, diplomatic, and property laws governing restitution, along with the traditions affecting the respective parties. Moreover,

economists must assess the financial implications of returning or retaining such artifacts, while ethicists and philosophers must explore moral obligations and the broader impact of righting historical wrongs.

When these perspectives merge, they provide a more comprehensive view of the problem. For example, economists and ethicists might collaborate to analyze the potential economic impact of restitution on a museum while emphasizing that moral considerations should take precedence over financial ones. Similarly, cooperation among archaeologists, heritage experts, museologists, historians, and anthropologists can help ensure that restitution efforts are culturally sensitive and grounded in a thorough understanding of the affected communities' needs. A practical example is the Benin bronze case (Merriman 2024). Benin has actively pursued the return of stolen artifacts, particularly the Benin Bronzes, which were taken during colonial rule. The country has developed heritage strategies that highlight both the economic impact of restitution and the cultural significance of returning these artifacts to their rightful home. In this process, the push for restitution is based on ethical arguments emphasizing museums' and governments' moral obligation to return looted artifacts. Legal experts navigated international laws and agreements to facilitate the return of these objects. Economists assessed the financial implications of restitution, including transportation costs, conservation, and museum infrastructure in Benin. Some discussions also explored how the returned artifacts could contribute to tourism and economic development in the country. Heritage experts, museologists, historians, and archaeologists collaborated to provide historical context and preservation strategies for the artifacts, ensuring their significance was understood correctly. Anthropologists and local cultural leaders in Benin ensured that the restitution process was culturally sensitive and aligned with the needs of the affected communities. Public discussions and exhibitions were organized to educate people about the importance of these artifacts (see also Voelz 2022; Jackson 2022). This multidisciplinary approach has helped shape policies that balance economic sustainability with ethical

responsibility.

The best practices can be drawn from an edited volume by Mario Laarmann, Clément Ndé Fongang, Carla Seemann, and Laura Vordermayer (2023) titled "Reparation, Restitution, and the Politics of Memory: Perspectives from Literary, Historical, and Cultural Studies." The editors examine these topics through the lenses of cultural, memory, postcolonial, and literary studies while also incorporating insights from philosophy, art, and literature. They highlight the renewed momentum of these debates in academic, activist, artistic, and political contexts over the past two decades. The work critiques the material and systemic conditions of societies and global relations, particularly concerning colonial legacies and their present-day repercussions. The volume also discusses the ethical dimensions of restitution, emphasizing the need for a new relational ethics that challenges Western modernity and anthropocentrism. In this spirit, I argue that interdisciplinary perspectives can provide a comprehensive understanding of the processes and challenges involved in addressing historical injustices.

Co-Creation in Action: A Transdisciplinary Path to Engagement

This approach emphasizes a dynamic, collaborative method for research and problem-solving. It highlights active participation from multiple stakeholders—academics, communities, policymakers, artists, and industry leaders—all working together to shape knowledge and create solutions. It moves beyond traditional research methods to stress mutual learning and shared expertise. It pushes discussions and actions past conventional boundaries toward real-world implementation, tangible outcomes, and practical collaboration. It underscores that the approach transcends interdisciplinary work by integrating knowledge across different fields, perspectives, and experiences in a holistic and impactful manner.

In the case of restitution and reparation, transdisciplinary examples can be drawn from UNESCO's Continental Approach to Restitution.[2] UNESCO has been fostering new types of cooperation and agreements for the return and restitution of African cultural property. A major regional dialogue in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, brought together experts and stakeholders to discuss innovative partnerships and resolve restitution cases.[3]

We could also consider the Nkaseni Restitution Land Claim in South Africa.[4] This land reform project in KwaZulu-Natal highlights the challenges and successes of restitution policies. It provides insights into communal land management and the role of government and local communities in ensuring sustainable land use (see also Basu 2016).

Yet another example is Open Restitution Africa (ORA),[5] a pan-African, women-led initiative dedicated to documenting and disseminating information on restitution efforts. By aggregating knowledge from African communities, experts, and institutions, ORA strengthens policy frameworks and fosters collaboration in returning cultural artifacts and human remains to their rightful owners. These examples highlight the significance of collaboration among governments, communities, and international organizations in addressing historical injustices. This synergy fosters a deeper understanding of historical injustices and promotes meaningful reconciliation.

As these examples show, transdisciplinary approaches, in contrast to interdisciplinary work, actively involve stakeholders beyond academia to co-create solutions. This inclusivity is vital in restitution and reparation debates, where the voices of those most affected by injustice must take center stage. Consider the discussions regarding the process and necessity of restitution and reparations for the systemic execution of the source community—a historically impacted group, often indigenous, from whom cultural artifacts, land, or other valuable assets were taken due to colonialism, war, or displacement. In restitution, it highlights the

process of restoring these items or rights to their rightful owners, recognizing their cultural significance—leaders and the looting of cultural goods in the Kilimanjaro region in the 1900s as well as in the Ruvuma region following the Majimaji war (1904-1908) by the German colonial government in Tanganyika (now Tanzania).

Video 1: Re-imaginging Sites of Memory. This is part of the Imagine Futures Project (https://imaginingfutures.world/), which I was part of and is freely available online. The Videographer was Mr Mark Kaplan.

It has been established that for any meaningful restitution and reparations program to succeed, it must involve community leaders and activists who provide insights into the forms of reparations that would be most beneficial; policymakers and legislators who have the authority to convert recommendations into actionable policies; artists and storytellers who can amplify the narratives of marginalized communities and foster public empathy; and social scientists who can measure the long-term impact of reparations on social cohesion and well-being (see the case of the Benin Bronzes and Namibia above).

Transdisciplinary collaboration creates a shared space where all stakeholders contribute their expertise and lived experiences. For example, when designing restitution and reparations programs, community leaders may advocate respecting local traditions, taboos, and protocols in caring for their ancestors and belongings while negotiating the restoration of injustices. They might also support investments in education, health, and local infrastructure as a form of reparation while economists evaluate the feasibility of these initiatives and policymakers ensure their effective implementation. Such an approach ensures that restitution and reparations are transformative rather than purely symbolic.

https://boasblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Trailer-one-final_Old-Moshi.mp4

Video 2: Old Moshi. This was part of the community and stakeholders' workshop at Old Moshi. I organised and facilitated this workshop. The Heinrich Boll Foundation funded the workshop. Video Credit: Mr Maliki Said and Miss Chrispina Nazael.

Co-Production of Knowledge: Sharing Power

Co-production is central to transdisciplinary approaches—a collaborative process through which knowledge is created and decisions are made collectively. This contrasts with the top-down models that have often characterized restitution and reparation efforts, where governments, academic experts, or institutional specialists dictate terms with minimal input from affected communities. For instance, consider the case of Germany and Namibia, in which communities were excluded from restitution discussions (Melber 2024b), leading to significant misunderstandings between the communities and the Namibian government as well as between the German and Namibian governments (Melber 2022).

Co-production fosters a sense of ownership and empowerment among participants. By sharing the stage at eye level with those directly affected, researchers, policymakers, and other collaborators can ensure that their work is relevant and responsive to the needs and aspirations of the communities they aim to serve. Co-production can be utilized to design restitution and reparation programs for victims of colonial injustices and their legacies. Survivors determine what forms of reparations should be provided—financial compensation, public apologies, or institutional reforms. In cultural restitution, Indigenous communities and direct descendants are engaged as equal partners in decisions regarding the repatriation of sacred objects or human remains, ensuring that their spiritual and cultural practices are respected. This process illustrates the shift from "doing for" to "doing with," paving the way for more equitable and inclusive outcomes.

Challenges in Collaboration and A Roadmap for Transformative Justice

Transdisciplinary research is powerful but presents significant challenges. It requires the integration of diverse perspectives. Bringing together experts from different disciplines, industries, and communities can lead to conflicting viewpoints, making consensus difficult to achieve (Eyifa-Dzidzienyo et al. 2023). Communication barriers and power dynamics also persist. Different fields possess their own jargon and methodologies which can hinder effective collaboration, especially among marginalized communities in contexts where dominant academic or institutional perspectives may overshadow others. Funding and institutional support also serve as obstacles to transdisciplinary research. Many funding bodies and universities tend to align with disciplinary research, complicating the securing of resources for transdisciplinary projects. Another consideration is the time and commitment required. Transdisciplinary projects often demand more time due to the need for deep collaboration, trust-building, and iterative problem-solving. Despite these obstacles, transdisciplinary collaboration remains essential for addressing African historical injustices.

Restitution and reparations efforts must be guided by core principles of inclusivity to harness the potential of inter- and transdisciplinary approaches. All stakeholders, particularly those most affected, must participate in the discussions. The dialogue should be equitable and adhere to the principles of transparency (ECOSOCC 2025). The decision-making process needs to be open and accountable to foster trust. Lastly, the process must be sustainable. Restitution and reparation efforts should focus on long-term impacts, addressing systemic injustices rather than providing one-time fixes. Thus, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches can facilitate transformative justice when guided by these principles. They can elevate restitution and reparations beyond symbolic gestures, creating tangible change that benefits individuals, communities, and nations.

A Call to Action

Restitution and reparations are not merely backward-looking efforts to right historical wrongs. They are forward-looking commitments to justice, equity, and healing. To achieve these goals, we must transcend traditional, disciplinary, and institutional boundaries and fully embrace collaboration. By leveraging inter- and transdisciplinary approaches, we can create a collaborative blueprint for justice—one that acknowledges the complexities of restitution and reparations, amplifies the voices of those most affected by injustices, and transforms abstract ideals into actionable frameworks. Through these efforts, we can honor the past while paving the way for a more just and inclusive future. Drawing from the Felwine Sarr and Benedicte Savoy report (Sarr et al. 2018), new relational ethics is an evolving framework emphasizing ethical responsibility, reciprocity, and interconnectedness in addressing historical injustices, particularly in restitution and reparation efforts (see also Warren 2025). It moves beyond traditional legalistic approaches by fostering meaningful relationships between affected communities and institutions, ensuring that justice is not merely transactional but transformative (Hamm 2024).

In the context of this paper, relational ethics plays a crucial role in inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration. By co-producing knowledge with those most affected by injustice, this approach ensures that restitution and reparation efforts are not dictated solely by external authorities but are instead shaped by the lived experiences and needs of impacted communities. This fosters trust, inclusivity, and long-term sustainability in justice processes. The challenges discussed above can hinder the implementation of relational ethics. Overcoming these obstacles requires transparent dialogue, equitable participation, and a commitment to shared learning. By integrating relational ethics into restitution and reparation efforts, societies can create a roadmap for ethical justice that is not only corrective but also transformative and healing.

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