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Decolonial Epistemic Authority Reparations*

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Abstract

According to a recent move in social epistemology, certain types of epistemic wrongs require distinctively epistemic reparations. For instance, if you have been wrongfully convicted of murder, you have not only the right to various kinds of economic and social reparations but also the ‘right to be known’ (Lackey 2022) – crudely, the right to tell the true story about yourself and be listened to. In this paper, I extend this framework to the context of epistemic decolonisation. I argue that the key decolonial epistemic reparations are reparations for the undermined epistemic authority of the colonised. I call these ‘decolonial epistemic authority reparations’ and develop five constraints on a plausible account of them. If the argument is compelling, it will advance both the epistemic reparations framework (which does not talk to the decolonisation literature at present) and the project of epistemic decolonisation (which does not yet canvass epistemic reparations).

Keywords: Epistemic reparations; epistemic decolonisation; epistemic injustice; epistemic authority; right to be known; epistemic marginalisation

1. Introduction

According to a recent move in social epistemology, certain types of epistemic wrongs require distinctively epistemic reparations. For instance, if you have been wrongfully convicted of murder, you have not only the right to various kinds of economic and social reparations but also the ‘right to be known’ (Lackey 2022) – crudely, the right to tell the true story about yourself and be listened to. Correspondingly, the perpetrators of this wrong have the duty ‘to bear witness’ (*ibid.*).¹ More generally, epistemic reparations concern ‘intentionally reparative actions in the form of epistemic goods’ meant to redress the original epistemic wrong (*ibid.*: 62–3).

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¹Examples of neighbouring concepts are Ben Almassi’s (2018) ‘epistemic repair’, George Hull’s (2022) ‘epistemic redress’, and Seunghyun Song’s (2021) ‘epistemic amends’. For a fuller map of precursors and neighbours to epistemic reparations, see Lackey (*forthcoming*: fn 2).

In this paper, I extend the epistemic reparations framework to the context of epistemic decolonisation. According to a popular view, such decolonisation involves the reclamation of the right to theorise from one's own geographical and socio-political location, in line with the distinctive interests and conceptual schemes endemic to this location (e.g., Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018). This right requires the acknowledgement of the epistemic authority of the colonised, which was wrongfully denied by the coloniser (Mitova 2020). If this is correct, however, epistemic reparations are an obvious requirement of epistemic decolonisation, a requirement that has been overlooked by scholars of both epistemic reparations and decolonisation. In this paper, I fill this theoretical lacuna by pinning down the key epistemic reparations needed for epistemic decolonisation, and develop constraints on a plausible account of such reparations.

I proceed as follows. In section 2, I outline an uncontroversial view of epistemic decolonisation and argue that it calls for an account of what I dub decolonial epistemic authority reparations (DEAR, for short). In section 3, I introduce the basics of Lackey's notion of epistemic reparations. In section 4, I isolate three intuitively distinctive features of DEAR that a plausible account should further articulate. I then pin down DEAR further by looking at cases of botched DEAR and cases in which DEAR seem altogether inappropriate (section 5). I conclude by making explicit the constraints on a fully worked-out DEAR account to which these arguments point (section 6).

I should stress that the aim of the paper is not the ambitious one of developing a substantive *account* of decolonial epistemic authority reparations, but merely of starting this work by making it plausible that we need such an account and setting constraints on it. Modest as this aim is, I hope that realising it will contribute to both the literature on epistemic reparations – by introducing an important kind of reparation for systemic injustice, and to decolonial scholarship – by articulating a central and overlooked requirement on successful epistemic decolonisation.

2. Epistemic decolonisation and redress

The topic of epistemic decolonisation has attracted considerable attention in the last three decades, with the natural consequence of an explosion of conceptions, which differ greatly in the detail.² However, for the purposes of the present argument, it is enough to think of this kind of decolonisation in terms of the agreed upon core of the notion – the recentring of the knowledge enterprise to the geographical and socio-political location of the previously colonised. This key feature is most explicitly articulated in African philosophy.³ But it is also implicit in mainstream decolonial work from Latin America, such as Walter Mignolo's (2009) repudiation of the universalist, putatively location-neutral conception of knowledge pushed by the Global North.⁴

Epistemic recentring crucially involves the restoration of epistemic authority to the previously colonised. One compelling argument for this claim is that the epistemic authority of the coloniser – the thing that allowed him to deny epistemic authority to others – was never in fact *epistemically* earned. It was, instead, illegitimately claimed and imposed on others in virtue of the colonial relations of social and material domination.

²To give just a handful of examples of participants from three colonial sites: Africa – Hountondji (1997), Mbembe (2015), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Ramose (2002), Wiredu (1998, 2002); India – Bhargava (2013), Chakrabarty (1992), Chatterjee (1997), Nandy (1983), Mahbubani (2001), Spivak (1999); Latin America – Dussel (2014), Mignolo (2009), Grosfoguel (2007), Quijano (2000).

³See, for instance, Hountondji (1997), Mbembe (2015), Mitova (2020), Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018), Ramose (2002).

⁴See also Grosfoguel (2007) and Quijano (2000).

As such, the claim to epistemic authority of the coloniser and the denial of the epistemic authority to the colonised is inextricably linked with the material and epistemic exploitation (Mills 1997) and extraction (Alcoff 2022) that defined colonialism. Consequently, no genuinely reparative epistemic authority acknowledgement will be possible without the corresponding acknowledgement of this link. (This is a natural consequence of the normative dimension of epistemic reparations which I discuss in sections 3 and 4.1 – that they involve the right to know the original wrong *as a wrong*.)⁵

Acknowledging the epistemic authority of the colonised has two basic dimensions. First, it requires recognising⁶ the previously colonised as the chief epistemic authorities on the theorisation of the experiences and intellectual interests of their location. Thus, for instance, Magobe Ramose insists that they should be foregrounded as the authors of ‘an authentic and truly African discourse about Africa’ (Ramose 2002: 1).⁷

The second dimension of the acknowledgement of epistemic authority is that the previously colonised must also be recognised as epistemic partners in the conceptualisation of, and solutions to, global problems. Thus, for instance, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni argues that ‘globalising knowledge from Africa’ is an essential part of epistemic decolonisation (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018: 4). And Partha Chatterjee (1997) insists that the colonised should be, and should be recognised as being, producers (as opposed to mere consumers) of knowledge.⁸

Something that goes curiously unnoticed in these discussions is that the restoration of epistemic authority, along with other epistemic goods that were taken by colonisers, must surely involve not just the successful redistribution of those goods but also the redress of the epistemic wrongs that were involved in the original wrongful distribution of these goods. Now, it could be argued that one reason why such a requirement has been *rightly* overlooked is that decolonial scholars’ predominant concern is with the perspective of the colonised and the positive goods that need to be attained at this point, rather than with what the previous colonisers need to do.⁹ But this can’t be quite right for at least two reasons.

First, decolonisation is not some historically neutral implementation of a new epistemic order, which simply specifies a bunch of epistemic goods to be attained. It is very much a response to the deep distortions and wrongs of colonialism. This is obvious

⁵This point could be made not just for the epistemic authority of historical colonisers, but more generally for the authority of the current Global North, which equally rests on the exploitative and extractivist dimensions of slavery and colonialism. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this point.) If the account of DEAR were to be extrapolated to looser senses of colonialism (e.g., data colonialism, see end of section 2), this point would be a good place to start.

⁶One objection to the language of acknowledgement and recognition is that such language belongs to the very colonial thinking we are trying to jettison. (See for instance Coulthard 2014.) I have not yet worked out how to talk about redress for non-recognition without using the language of recognition, but a fully worked-out account of DEAR will have to engage this point.

⁷For just a handful of other arguments for this point, coming from standpoint and critical race theory, see Dror (2023), Du Bois (2007/1903), Harding (1991), Longino and Lennon (1997), Mills (1997), and Toole (2022).

⁸To be clear: these remarks are not meant as an argument for these dimensions of epistemic decolonisation, but simply as evidence that they are typically accepted by epistemic decolonisation scholars. For those who do not accept this view of decolonisation, the paper’s conclusion should be read as a conditional: if we accept this view of decolonisation, we are committed to the DEAR constraints I defend here.

⁹This thought is inspired by Gaile Pohlhaus Jr’s (2020) argument that theorising epistemic oppression should be done in the first instance from the perspective of the oppressed, rather than focusing – as much of the epistemic injustice literature does – on the perspective of the oppressor and what they need to do to redress oppression.

from the way many rationales for epistemic decolonisation start with these distortions and wrongs as the chief motivation for decolonising.¹⁰

Second, if we take seriously what I called the second dimension of epistemic authority restoration – the idea that it involves the acknowledgement of the colonised as producers of globally relevant knowledge – then redress again becomes an obvious necessity. For without such redress, there would be no acknowledgement of the fact that the colonised have been up to now marginalised in this space; hence, the project of *restoring* their authority would become meaningless. Restoration implies that something used to be there and should be recovered.

Notice that this notion of epistemic decolonisation is a response to a very specific conception of coloniality as tied to structural injustices deriving from historical colonialisms. Perhaps decolonial reparations can target looser conceptions of colonialism such as, for instance, Global North domination of the World Bank, the US control of the world's reserve currency, or what is sometimes termed 'data colonialism' (e.g., Arora et al 2023). But the present paper remains neutral on this issue.¹¹

The bottom line is that a conception of epistemic decolonisation (understood along the above lines) which is silent on epistemic redress is incomplete. The question then becomes what such redress would look like. Given the central role of epistemic authority restoration in epistemic decolonisation, it would make sense to think of the key such redress in terms of this authority. I call it 'decolonial epistemic authority reparations' (DEAR). The rest of the paper starts on the task of theorising DEAR by developing some constraints on a plausible account of them.

3. Epistemic reparations

In this section, I spell out the basics of Jennifer Lackey's notion of epistemic reparations, on which I will draw to build up the constraints on DEAR.

According to Lackey, epistemic reparations are 'intentionally reparative actions in the form of epistemic goods given to those epistemically wronged by parties who acknowledge these wrongs and whose reparative actions are intended to redress them' (Lackey 2022: 62–3). Lackey situates this notion in the 1997 United Nations framework of the right to know. This is 'a right to the truth' about gross human rights violations, which the UN ascribes to the victims of these violations, their families, their community, and society at large (Lackey *forthcoming*: § 2). The right, thus, has both an individual dimension, belonging as it does to individual victims, and a collective dimension since it can belong to a society or a victim group, since we have a corresponding collective duty to ensure that such information is available to all. One basic requirement of epistemic reparations is that such information is made available. But the right to know extends also to the *normative* aspects of the information – that the violations are acknowledged *as* violations, as *wrongs*. Standard epistemic reparations of this kind then include public apologies, memorialisation, and education (*ibid.*).

Lackey argues, however, that the right to know captures only one aspect of epistemic reparations. Such reparations, she argues, also involve the more fundamental 'right to be known' – the right that victims have 'to be a giver of knowledge to others about their own experiences' (2022: 56). This right is more fundamental than the right to know:

¹⁰Chimakonam (2017), Etieybo (2016), Tobi (2020).

¹¹Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point. (See also fn. 5.).

Before we can properly acknowledge and apologize, memorialize, and educate, we need to listen and bear witness. We need to know victims, not as merely a means to the ends of fulfilling the right of others to know, but as an end itself. (Lackey *forthcoming*: § 2)

Lackey's account of epistemic reparations has grown increasingly nuanced. For instance, she initially geared epistemic reparations around wrongs in which the victim was 'misknown' in the sense of being *falsely* perceived in a particular way, such as a person who has not committed a murder but is convicted of it. But she has recently developed a more complex account of misknowing, which also allows for being misknown for something bad that one *has* done, but being known *solely* for it (*ibid.*).¹² The example she gives is of a person who has committed a murder decades ago, who is now an upstanding member of the community, but who continues to be known solely as a murderer. In such cases, too, Lackey argues, the person is misknown in a way that epistemically wrongs them, and hence deserves epistemic reparations that ineliminably involve their right to be known.¹³

It is not my aim here to go into the finer detail of this complex account. Instead, I would like to use its basics as a framework for isolating the distinctive kind of epistemic redress that is owed to the colonised in the acknowledgement of their rightful epistemic authority, an acknowledgement which (I argued in section 2) is integral to epistemic decolonisation.

4. Decolonial epistemic authority reparations

In this section, I pin down the conceptual contours of DEAR by discussing three features that together make it a distinctive kind of epistemic reparation. Let me start by giving an example of when DEAR are obviously needed. Traditional healers at many colonised sites have been discredited as witchdoctors by the colonisers for centuries, and continue to be marginalised within the field of medicine despite the official end of colonialism many decades ago.¹⁴

¹²This possibility is foreshadowed in Lackey (2022: n. 40).

¹³The 'right to be known', the quote above which mentions knowing victims, and talk of being misknown, all make it sound as though 'know' is not being used in the propositional sense – so-called 'knowing that' (Ryle 1945) – that is the focus of current analytic epistemology, but rather in the sense of knowing a person. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for making me realise this.) This appearance is misleading, however, as should be clear from the definition of the right as one to be a giver of knowledge to others about one's own experiences, as well as from my earlier description of it as the right to have the true story of oneself known to others. In these expressions, 'knowledge' and 'know' are being very much used in the traditional propositional sense. A slightly different concern may emerge when we start talking about the knowledge that traditional healers contribute to the global knowledge economy. Here the term 'knowledge' may be thought to deviate in another way from analytic epistemology's use – knowledge as *factive*. Given the non-naturalist metaphysics underpinning traditional medicine, whether what traditional practitioners produce is knowledge in the *factive* sense is a thorny issue and one which I will leave to the side for the purposes of this paper.

¹⁴Let me give the unfamiliar reader an idea of what traditional healers are. (Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this helpful suggestion.) Take the 'Sangomas' of South Africa. Their basic function is to look after the physical, social, and spiritual well-being of a patient. Notably, this includes the patient's relationships with their community, ancestors, and other supernatural beings (Sogolo 1998). Sangomas' specific skills and functions are complex and often hard to understand without a grasp of the full African cosmological picture, on which the natural and supernatural are seamlessly causally interrelated. For instance, a Sangoma 'uses altered states of consciousness, spirit possession, and sometimes out-of-body spirit flight to gain knowledge about any problem at hand' (Cumes 2013: 58). And they prepare the substances (plants and animal) which

Since epistemic decolonisation requires recentring knowledge and restoring epistemic authority, traditional healers have one of the best claims to DEAR – epistemic reparations for being wrongfully denied epistemic authority. What is it exactly that they have a claim to? At least three things, I now argue, which can *prima facie* serve to jointly characterise DEAR. The first two clearly situate DEAR within the epistemic reparations' framework; the third potentially makes it a unique form of epistemic reparation.

4.1. Feature 1: the right to know and the right to be known

The first feature of DEAR is that, like all epistemic reparations, DEAR involve both the right to know and the more fundamental right to be known. Intuitively, we all have the right to know about the best medical practices available to us. Crediting traditional healers with their rightful epistemic authority thus entails the right of all citizens of India, for instance, to have access to information concerning traditional medicine in India. This has been, in fact, an explicit part of the WHO's policies on traditional medicine at least since 2009, where WHO urges member states 'to respect, preserve, and *widely communicate*, as appropriate, *the knowledge of traditional medicine, treatments and practices*, appropriately based on the circumstances in each country, and on evidence of safety, efficacy and quality' (WHO 2013: 20, my italics).¹⁵

Notice, though, that the way this right is articulated here does not yet count as epistemically reparative, since it does not canvass what I earlier called the normative aspect of this right – our right to know of the longstanding epistemic marginalisation of traditional healers and of other epistemic wrongs perpetrated against them, such as widespread intellectual appropriation of some of their medical knowledge (in line with the epistemic and material extractionism of colonialism I discussed in section 2). As it stands, the WHO recommendation just says that we have a right to share their knowledge (in ways constrained by respect and knowledge-preservation). It mentions nothing about classic reparative actions such as memorialisation, public apologies, or education. Thus, while the WHO *starts* work towards promoting the right to know, the promotion is not yet epistemically reparative. DEAR would also feature this normative dimension of the right to know: a community which does not acknowledge the epistemic wrongs of its past can never properly decolonise.

In addition to DEAR involving the right to know, it clearly also involves the right to be known. This, too, is gestured at by the WHO in the context of traditional healers. One of its recommendations is '[r]ecognizing traditional medicine as one of the resources of primary health care services that could contribute to improved health outcomes, including those in the Millennium Development Goals' (*ibid.*: 19). Here it looks like at least a version of the right to be known is being honoured – the right for traditional healers to be known *as experts*. Such a right is, surely, essential to the restoration of epistemic authority in obvious ways: if we do not credit the experts of the colonised with expertise, we deny them epistemic authority in both ways I distinguished above – authority over theorising in line with their interests and epistemic partnership in solutions to global problems.¹⁶

they use to heal – so-called *muthi* – channelling the right spirits into them, and mediating between patient and these spirits in the realisation of the *muthi*'s powers (see, e.g., Ashforth 2005: 212–3).

¹⁵For evidence that a similar right is inscribed in the earlier WHO's Traditional Medicine Strategy and Action Plan 2000–2005, see Le Roux-Kemp (2010: 284).

¹⁶For an argument that traditional healers should indeed be classified as experts regardless of whether we agree with the non-natural metaphysics that underpin their practices or whether we think that their practices are medically effective, see Mitova (2024).

This links in important ways to Lackey's articulation of the right to be known as both a counter to being misknown and as more fundamental than the right to know. Concerning the former, for centuries, traditional healers were not only not granted the status of experts but actively misknown as 'witchdoctors' in ways that enforced pernicious colonial narratives: in order for the 'Civilising Mission' that characterised the colonial project to succeed, the colonised had to be seen as savages, their metaphysics as superstition and their science as witchcraft (Ashforth 2005). The right to be known involved in DEAR, then, concerns being known against this backdrop of misknowing. This right is more fundamental than the one to know, because it pays tribute to the epistemic authority of the colonised 'as an end in itself' rather than a means to others' right to know.

4.2. Feature 2: irreducible collectivity

The second feature of DEAR that I wish to foreground is that the right to know and to be known has an irreducibly collective dimension. This is so especially when it comes to the normative dimension that I isolated in section 3 – that the colonised were wronged by not being known as epistemic authorities. The source of this irreducible collectivity is the fact that DEAR essentially involve differently situated social groups – the colonised and their descendants, on the one hand, and the colonisers and theirs, on the other. Since the wrongs of colonialism were structural and collective in character, they cannot be repaired by individuals alone. Thus, for instance, it is not enough that I bear witness as an individual to the story of another individual. Although such bearing witness is important for repairing individual relationships that have been damaged by colonialism and its legacy, they are not reparative of the kind of epistemic authority that needs to be restored for epistemic decolonisation to succeed. This is because the colonised were denied this authority as a group, by a group. Reparative work must, hence, happen between these groups if it is to succeed. This is what I mean by DEAR having an irreducibly collective dimension.

Taking this dimension seriously means that we can't have a fully worked-out account of DEAR until we have collective accounts of group victimhood, group epistemic wrongs, and group reparative action/bearing witness. In the absence of such accounts, we will not be in a position to specify in philosophical terms the precise target of our reparative efforts, the kinds of wrongs that need redressing, or the sorts of actions we need to undertake in order to redress them.

I should say that this task will not be easy, as the groups involved here would be quite special by the lights of current theories of collective agency and group responsibility. What these theories mean by 'group' are things like corporations and universities – highly structured entities that involve a constitution, spokespersons, voluntary membership, and are appropriately held responsible for their actions (List and Pettit 2011) and for their beliefs (Lackey 2021). The groups relevant for DEAR lack most of the typical features of group agents of these kinds: they are not structured entities, membership in them isn't voluntary, and they lack any formal features (such as spokesperson or a constitution) in virtue of which to hold them accountable.¹⁷ Since

¹⁷This is not to deny, of course, that there are vibrant debates in social ontology more broadly about the nature of the social identities, such as race and gender, which serve to delimit these groups. (To take just a handful of examples, see Alcoff (2006), Haslanger (2016), Mallon (2004), Mills (1997), and Taylor (2013).) What I am claiming here is that these groups are not theorised *as* groups, in the way philosophers of groups do. For an argument that, nonetheless, much of the heavy lifting in these theories is being done by the unacknowledged group dimension, see Mitova (forthcoming).

being held accountable is a precondition for one of these groups – the perpetrator – to be liable for epistemic reparations, an account of DEAR will have to have a story about what makes such groups liable to responsibility judgements in a way that warrants the demand for group reparation. It is not my aim to settle these issues here.¹⁸ The point is that a fully worked-out account of DEAR will have to engage in them.

This collective feature makes DEAR a clear instance of epistemic reparations as Lackey conceives of them and begins to gesture at its distinctness. It makes it a clear instance, because Lackey, too, canvasses a group dimension to epistemic reparations when she insists that the right to know is ‘both individual and collective’, ‘and the bearers of these rights are victims, their families, and *communities*, “*society*,” or “*a people*” (Lackey *forthcoming*: § 1, my italics). The collectives that Lackey is pointing to here are as special as the ones that DEAR features, thus also raising questions about how they can be bearers of duties or rights. At the same time, what arguably distinguishes DEAR is that they *essentially*, or *irreducibly*, involve such collectives. Moreover, the DEAR collectives are even more unstructured since they involve groups across generations. Thus, for instance, we hold to account the white people of South Africa for colonial and apartheid wrongs which stretch back for generations. If this is right, then the collective dimension of DEAR clearly links it to other epistemic reparations while giving it a measure of distinctness.

4.3. Feature 3: the role of prejudice

The final and perhaps most distinctive feature of DEAR is that certain kinds of prejudice will block genuinely reparative work. I have in mind, in the first instance, what Larry Blum calls inferiorising racism, which involves both ‘*treating* the racial other as inferior or of lesser value’ and ‘*viewing* the racial other as inferior’ (Blum 2002: 210, my italics). Given the well-documented role that this kind of racism played in propagating colonialism and its wrongs, I submit that it is not possible to properly fulfil our duty to bear witness for epistemic authority wrongs while remaining racist in this sense. It was precisely by treating the colonised as intellectually inferior, irrational, and so on, that colonialism laid a claim to its hegemonic and unmerited epistemic authority over the colonised and denied them their legitimate epistemic authority. So, no genuine reparation is possible if the attitude remains.

Contrast this with the paradigm of epistemic reparations: when a judge wrongfully convicts a Black person of murder, they could arguably later bear witness to the victim’s true story, and therefore make epistemic reparations, while remaining racist all along. Of course, if the original wrongful conviction was driven by racism, then this would be impossible, but even then, the DEAR case would be different: there is a *conceptual* connection between inferiorising racism and the denial of epistemic authority to the colonised; it is partly what it is to be a racist of this kind that you deny the other equal epistemic authority. In contrast, the connection between racism and a wrongful conviction is a causal one. Thus, reparation gets blocked differently by racism in the two cases.

It may be thought that this is not a genuine distinguishing feature of DEAR, because Lackey also suggests that at least for certain acts of bearing witness, ‘[p]erhaps a particular emotional or affective response is called for or a certain kind of understanding’ (Lackey *forthcoming*: 20). But this suggestion is different from the current one in at least three ways. First, in the case of DEAR it is *necessary* that a certain attitude is absent, while Lackey is much more hesitant about the necessity of an affective response. Second, DEAR, at least as I have characterised them so far, don’t require a *positive* attitude, but rather the *absence* of prejudice. And finally, prejudice is not necessarily *affective*. Indeed,

¹⁸I have started on an answer in Mitova (2021).

Blum explicitly distinguishes inferiorising racism from an affective kind of racism, which he calls ‘antipathy racism’ (Blum 2002: 210). Perhaps the requirement here is closer to Lackey’s suggestion that we might need a certain kind of understanding for some epistemic reparations (*ibid.*). But as she leaves this quite tentative, it is difficult to tell.

Inferiorising racism makes most vivid how certain attitudes can block genuine reparation. But as several philosophers have warned, this kind of racism isn’t the only or even currently the most prevalent one. What Linda Martin Alcoff (2023) and Blum (2023) himself term ‘cultural racism’ is equally a threat to DEAR. Cultural racism is marked by ‘a continued willingness of whites to attribute negative characteristics to blacks, but to view those characteristics as cultural, rather than biological, in character’ (Blum 2023: 350). At a more structural level, cultural racism is ‘a distinct alibi or legitimating ground given to justify exclusion and domination’ (Alcoff 2023: 249), which serves to ‘explain discriminatory patterns by which material resources flow around the globe’ (*ibid.*: 250). Although such structures don’t share the biological essentialising of the races that went hand in hand with the inferiorising racism of colonialism, they still replicate the relationship between epistemic and economic oppression that characterised colonialism – the basing of epistemic authority on exploitation and extraction (as discussed in section 2). They are, thus, equally incompatible with genuine DEAR, since it is this relationship that is in need of repair in the first place.

The brief discussion of these three features has hopefully made a beginning on pinning down the notion of decolonial epistemic authority reparations. First, they involve the right to be known and to know in similar ways to the ways discussed by Lackey. Second, they involve an irreducibly collective dimension that calls for collective accounts of group victimhood, group epistemic wrong, and group bearing witness. Finally, they require, as a conceptual matter, the absence of certain kinds of prejudice such as inferiorising or cultural racism.

5. Botched decolonial epistemic authority reparations

In this section, I continue to pin down DEAR by discussing cases of botched DEAR and cases in which DEAR are altogether inappropriate.

5.1. Smothering reparations

Let me start with an example of botched epistemic reparations that is clearly *not* a case of DEAR. I have in mind situations in which wronged parties are ostensibly given the space to tell their story – thus appearing to exercise their right to be known – but are then constrained within this space in ways that in fact block genuine reparation. For instance, Keo Mbebe (MS) convincingly argues that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa was a site of unjust epistemic reparations, because it constrained victims of apartheid to tell their stories in ways that promoted the national narrative of unity and forgiveness. And Lackey (*forthcoming*) considers cases in which victims of carceral injustice are invited to tell their story in settings that are clearly inimical to the supposedly restorative aims of the storytelling.

Such cases involve clear miscarriages of epistemic reparations: they only ostensibly offer the space for the exercise of the right to be known, but in fact smother this right by dictating the terms of the storytelling instead of enabling the right bearer to set these terms.¹⁹ Such miscarriages are not miscarriages of DEAR. Although they involve

¹⁹They also place the victim in the kind of double-bind that Nora Berenstain (2016) argues accompanies epistemic exploitation – cases in which the privileged demand to be educated as to the nature of the

epistemic authority, in the sense that they smother the victim's right to tell their own story in their own way, epistemic authority *restoration* is not the target of the epistemic reparation in the first place. It is thus not a form of DEAR. I have discussed it in order to give a taste for how uncontroversial instances of epistemic reparations can go awry. I now move to two ways in which DEAR can do so.

5.2. Epistemic authority whitewashing

The first kind of cases are ones where epistemic authority is supposedly being restored to the colonised, but is in fact being sabotaged. A neat example, to my mind, is the status of traditional healers worldwide. In 2023, the WHO had its first-ever Traditional Medicine Global Summit. This looked like a huge move forward towards the Global North crediting traditional healers with the kind of epistemic authority of which colonialism had robbed them. However, a brief look at how the summit was conducted quickly shatters this illusion. Their website tells it all. First, the image on the Summit's Agenda page²⁰ depicts a bunch of white women in various stages of badly done push-ups, being helped by a coach. This immediately suggests that traditional medicine is a sort of large yoga class for privileged bored people. Perhaps this was just an aesthetic blunder on the part of the webmaster, one thinks. But the page on the External Advisory Group²¹ quickly confirms the initial impression that traditional medicine is not being given its due epistemic authority. For the entire panel, from the co-chairs down is made up of Professors and Doctors all based at *universities* around the world. This is hardly an acknowledgement of the expertise of traditional healers who do not work from universities and have historically been suppressed precisely by such institutions, with the standard contrast being between science, based at formal institutions, and traditional medicine.

Thus, what initially appears a good candidate for decolonial epistemic authority reparations – the acknowledgement of traditional healers' right to be known as experts – turns out to be what we might call epistemic authority whitewashing. This is not an isolated phenomenon. For instance, in South Africa, traditional healers have a council that is supposed to be equivalent in legal and epistemic status to that of western medical doctors. But in practice it is neither. A telling symptom is that employers are not forced to accept medical certificates issued by traditional healers due to the health ministry's not yet having passed the correct legislation (Lackey *forthcoming*).

There are two kinds of resource in the feminist epistemology literature for making slightly more formal the epistemic wrong involved here. First, Patricia Hill Collins (2017) argues that institutionalising liberatory resources inevitably defangs them of their original emancipatory powers. She gives the example of the way the notion of intersectionality has been co-opted into academia and has lost the original emancipatory powers for which Black feminists developed it. Similarly, Emmalon Davis (2018) argues that when the epistemic resources of the oppressed get appropriated by the powerful, they quickly get repurposed to serve dominant interests. Something similar seems to be

oppression they inflict on others. The double-bind in this case is this: if the victim doesn't tell her story, she will enforce both misconceptions about her oppression and stereotypes against herself; if she does tell her story, on the other hand, she will be disbelieved.

²⁰<https://www.who.int/initiatives/who-global-centre-for-traditional-medicine/traditional-medicine-global-summit>.

²¹https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/campaigns-and-initiatives/who-global-centre-for-traditional-medicine/external-advisory-group-for-traditional-medicine-global-summit-biographies.pdf?sfvrsn=bcc23288_3.

happening here. By supposedly crediting traditional healers with western-style epistemic authority, we make them more palatable to Global North institutions like the WHO. But the authority ascribed in this way is hardly genuine authority, as we once again get experts from these institutions to dictate the terms of and shape knowledge production.

5.3. Tokenising DEAR

The second instance of botched epistemic authority reparations that I would like to discuss might be termed ‘tokenising reparations’. A neat example is the way in which many philosophy departments in previously colonial sites have ‘decolonised’ their syllabi.²² To take Africa as an example again. For a long time, a massive debate within African philosophy revolved around the question of whether African philosophy is indeed philosophy (Hountondji 2009). Mercifully, this debate is now over with pretty much everyone agreeing that its terms were dictated by a Global North-centric view of what philosophy is supposed to be (Ikhane and Ukpokolo 2023). However, instead of properly Africanising the philosophy curricula, many universities in Southern Africa at least have either introduced African philosophy as a single module or added the odd African reading to their existing modules. This undermines any intended epistemic authority restoration to the long-maligned African philosophy tradition on at least three levels.

First, against the backdrop of all other modules featuring largely Global North readings and being called simply ‘political philosophy’, ‘ethics’, or ‘epistemology’ with no geographical specification, introducing a single African philosophy module maintains the hegemonic epistemic authority of the Global North. This location-neutral stuff, it says, is global philosophy, with African or Indian philosophy just being a little culturally specific quirk. Second, it essentialises African thought, by assuming there is just one kind of African philosophy, instead of the vast plethora of rich and different African traditions. (See e.g., Momoh 2003 for a sampling.) And finally, it tokenises particular African philosophers and particular African philosophy fields, by making them stand for these rich and diverse traditions and philosophical fields, such as ethics, epistemology and so on.

One way of specifying the epistemic wrong involved here further is by situating it in the epistemic oppression scholarship. For instance, Gaile Pohlhaus (2020) argues that certain forms of epistemic inclusion deepen the epistemic oppression that they are meant to redress in the first place.²³ Including these thinkers as mere representatives, while seemingly restoring epistemic authority to the African tradition in fact withdraws such authority from both the tradition – by essentialising it – and the thinkers themselves – by tokenising them.

²²This is arguably also true for many departments worldwide, but I focus on colonial sites because the claim I am arguing for is most obviously true there. That said, I am not completely sure about how exactly the argument I develop here would travel to Global North curricula. For instance, an anonymous reviewer has asked if the argument implies that it is OK for such places to simply add ‘Western’ to ‘ethics’, ‘political philosophy’, etc., and teach those alongside African ethics, political philosophy, and so on. The answer seems relatively straightforward for colonial sites, such as the ones I discuss here: this seems OK, as long as the majority of philosophy modules taught are devoted to African thinkers (in the African context in which I run the argument). This aligns with my understanding of epistemic decolonisation as a recentring of the knowledge enterprise to the here and now of the previously colonised. But the issues seem more complicated for Global North sites, and a full account of DEAR will also have to work out these complications.

²³Another potential resource could be Emmalon Davis’s (2016) argument that certain kinds of credibility excess – in this case, over-crediting certain thinkers as representatives of whole traditions – could constitute testimonial injustice.

It could be argued at this point that we should be a bit more careful here. In particular, we should distinguish various ways in which the above reparations are deficient. For instance, adding some African readings or an African philosophy module seems to be simply an incomplete, or partial DEAR: it starts the work of restoration but simply isn't there yet. In contrast, other botched DEAR, such as the whitewashing variety, are actively harmful by either slowing down reparations or deepening the injustices they are meant to redress.

While I agree that such a distinction would be useful for theorising DEAR in general, I do not think that either of the two ways of botching DEAR that I have discussed here falls in the suggested partially reparative category. It may *look* like introducing some African readings is better than nothing, a start. But the measure of whether an action amounts to a DEAR is not whether we have made a start on decolonising generally, but whether the epistemic authority of the original victim is being restored. In the cases above it isn't even partially restored. On the contrary, as I have argued, it is wronged in further ways by tokenisation and essentialisation.

5.4. *Reparative saviourism*

The final theoretical space I would like to explore by way of characterising DEAR concerns cases in which DEAR are altogether inappropriate. The most obvious such case is when the coloniser is no longer in power, and so does not have any authority to perform the necessary reparative actions. Such actions, recall from section 3, are supposed to involve the giving of epistemic goods by the wrongdoer to the wronged: they are 'intentionally reparative actions in the form of epistemic goods *given* to those epistemically wronged by parties who acknowledge these wrongs'. But in these situations, the coloniser is no longer in a position to give such goods. To assume that they are, would be both a diagnostic and a normative mistake.

It would be a diagnostic mistake for the ex-coloniser to think that they should or could achieve reparation. Although the damage is clearly due to colonialism, what is needed is something more like self-healing than reparation. It is up to the previously colonised to restore their own epistemic authority if they wish to do so.²⁴ And it would be a normative mistake for the ex-coloniser to attempt the reparative work in these spaces, because it would mean assuming authority that she doesn't have. This would be to precisely enforce the kind of paternalism that drove and enabled colonialism in the first place. Moreover, it would be to insist on foregrounding the importance of the coloniser in ways that deepen the epistemic marginalisation we are supposedly trying to redress.²⁵

The precise normative contours of this sort of case – what we might call 'reparative saviourism' – will partly depend on the current power location of the previously colonised. For instance, in Nigeria, there are literally no white people left, and so there is no one to do the reparative work there.²⁶ On the other extreme, the previously colonised within certain Global North sites – most prominently, the First Nations people of the

²⁴This last clause is essential, as imposing epistemic or moral duties on the victims of wrongdoing would be to assume the oppressive attitudes that we are trying to repair here.

²⁵This is the obverse of Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò's (2022) point that blaming the coloniser for all African ills tends to undermine the agency of Africans.

²⁶This is not to say, of course, that coloniality isn't alive and well there. As long as historically colonial structures of domination remain in place – where these can also be epistemic – coloniality persists. For instance, in Nigeria learners at many schools are still punished if they communicate in anything other than English, the language of their coloniser. I take this as a prime example of persistent coloniality, and I am not alone (see e.g., Tobi 2024).

Americas and Australia – are still largely epistemically marginalised. In between, we have more ambivalent places. For instance, in South Africa, although the political power is entirely in the hands of the previously colonised, a lot of epistemic (as well as economic) power still resides with the former coloniser. All these spaces will have their own normative nuances when it comes to how much DEAR are appropriate, what kind, and from whom. My aim is not to specify these nuances but to make obvious the need to do so when theorising epistemic reparations for the epistemic authority of the colonised.

6. Conclusion: DEAR constraints

I hope to have made a case here for a specific kind of epistemic reparations that I have argued are key to any effort towards epistemic decolonisation. If the above arguments are on the right track, five constraints on an account of this kind of reparations emerge.

First, such an account should canvass both the right to know and the right to be known, where these rights have an irreducibly normative aspect – we should know the original wrong as a wrong, and our duty to bear witness must involve bearing witness to the wrongness. Second, DEAR are irreducibly collective, thus requiring collective accounts of group victimhood and group reparative action, where the groups involved are the untheorised ones based on social identity. Third, and most distinctively, DEAR are conceptually (as opposed to merely causally) blocked by the presence of the kinds of prejudice originally kindling colonisation. And so, an account of DEAR needs to explicate this connection. Fourth, such an account must give us a principled way of distinguishing genuine DEAR from putatively reparative efforts that in fact sabotage genuine reparation. And finally, such an account should specify conditions for the appropriateness of DEAR in order to avoid furthering paternalism and other epistemic wrongs which it is the business of epistemic decolonisation to redress.

These are no more than preliminary constraints, of course. But I hope that setting them out has carved out a theoretically fruitful space that will be of interest to both decolonial scholars and epistemic reparations theorists.

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