

Towards an Agenda for Reparative Research

Laura Kotzur, Akorfa Comfort Gakpa, Annelise Finney, Daniel James, Johanna Grabert, Kristine Andra Avram, Kobina Amokwandoh, Kofi Mawuli Klu, Mariam Salehi, Miryam Rivera-Holguín, Nadine Benedix, Piaba Madokwe, Sabrina Keller, Yann LeGall

Reparations and reparative justice addressing global and structural injustices of European colonialism and imperialism are gaining increasing attention in studies of international politics and peace and conflict studies. 140 years after the Berlin Conference of 1884/85, which enabled the legitimisation of the violent partition and exploitation of the African continent, academic researchers and scholar-activists discussed at a workshop how to align research on reparations with reparative research methods and practices. Results of the discussion find that reparative research (1) acknowledges and works through the dialectic relationship of extraction and emancipation in academic research, through (2) continuous positioning and (3) doing justice to the past and the future. Reparative research should be (4) situated in space and politics and thus, (5) constantly navigating dynamics of collaboration and co-optation. Finally, reparative research should not only focus on violence and repression but also on (6) protest and resistance. Rather than providing clear-cut answers, the paper offers insights into the ideas, practices, and visions discussed at the workshop and serves as a work-in-progress document.

This working paper emerged from the workshop “Reparative Research: Exchanging Ideas, Practices, and Visions” organized by the research group “Transnational Conflicts” at the Center for Interdisciplinary Peace and Conflict Research (INTERACT) on 27 February 2025. Participants included academic researchers and scholar-activist discussants. All participants are co-authors of this working paper. Contact: laura.kotzur@fu-berlin.de

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Otto-Suhr-Institut für Politikwissenschaft
Freie Universität Berlin
Inhnestraße 26 / 14195 Berlin, Germany
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Towards an Agenda for Reparative Research

Methodologies and concepts of engaged, participatory, and collaborative research have been continuously developed for interpretive methods in International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies. They are a key aspect of victim-centred research in post-conflict settings and after human rights abuses (Rivera-Holguín et al. 2025) and centre reflexivity and responsibility throughout the research process, aiming to shed light on marginalised perspectives. Stemming from post-colonial, feminist, and Indigenous approaches to knowledge production, they include well-defined concepts but also more loosely organised strands of methodologies such as activist research, dialogic research, or action research, to name a few (Lottholz and Kluczevska 2024).

At the same time, methodologies of reparatory or reparative histories are emerging within historical disciplines. These research practices are understood as reconstructing historical narratives and “challenge commonplace assumptions and inherited hierarchies of knowledge and power” (Hall 2025). In the past decade, the historians Catherine Hall, Cathy Bergin and Anita Rupprecht have started to develop a politicised understanding of doing historical research: “reparatory history” focuses on rewriting history in ways that challenge hegemonic narratives and imperial miseducation, with a fundamental commitment to excavating interconnected histories that highlight reparations and, thus, a responsibility to engage with the past. Hall argues that “the emphasis is on reconstituting the past, in ways that enable thinking about responsibility in the present” (Hall 2018, 8). Thus, foregrounding conceptual thoughts of temporality and historicity is a key element of reparative methodologies in historical research. Moreover, Bergin and Rupprecht underline Hall’s focus on responsibility intertwined in a particular understanding of temporality: “The idea of the ‘reparative’ sets up a certain temporality – one marked by the interval between [...] the ‘no-longer’ and the ‘not yet’” (Bergin and Rupprecht 2018, 35). This certain temporality between the past and the future opens avenues for change and the politics of repair.

In a similar vein, Gurinder Bhambra's call for a "reparatory social science" (2022) effectively illustrates the endeavour of reparative research. She argues for "a reconstructive postcolonial vision that acknowledges the connected histories that have produced the present and seeks to address those inequalities through a commitment to global redistributive justice" (Bhambra 2022, 16). This reconstructive vision investigates how certain histories are mobilised in the present and how they shape our visions for the future, ultimately arguing for a postcolonial Europe based on interconnectedness. This shift, Bhambra argues, makes a substantial difference to understanding social inequalities, particularly regarding questions of citizenship and belonging, and recognises a colonial global world rather than simply a modern one. Bhambra argues that "a reparatory social science requires both the repair of the social sciences epistemologically as well as being invested



in the collective address of the inequalities implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) legitimated by standard social science" (Bhambra 2022, 16).

Given the increasing importance of historicity in International Relations and Peace and Conflict Studies, there is a pressing need to conceptualise reparative research methodologies specifically for studies on international politics and peace and conflict. While reparative approaches to research have so far mainly been defined in the studies of history and social science, we aim to mobilise the approach for contemporary struggles for justice in international politics – in particular to conflicts and struggles around reparations and reparative justice. In the vein of Bhambra's "reparatory social science" and cooperative research methodologies, we understand reparative research as an evolving agenda to engage with the complex interconnectedness of various pasts and their relationship to possible futures while simultaneously aiming to reintroduce an understanding of how power impacts the interrelatedness of these temporalities. Thus, aiming to align research on reparations with reparative research practices, we are convinced that joint organising and exchange between researchers, scholar-activists and community organisers around these questions is inevitable.

This working paper is the result of a workshop titled "Reparative Research: Exchanging Ideas, Practices and Visions" that we held in February 2025 together with researchers and scholar-activists working on restitution, reparations, pan-Africanism, Indigenous struggles, memory, transnational struggles for justice, and political violence. The paper aims to share the common threads of the discussions and is understood as an intermediate step in our process of aligning research subject and methodology in the study of reparations. Catherine Hall observes "reparative moments" that sometimes emerge in our present, that mark "new discoveries and provoke new questions" (Hall 2018, 7). Thus, not coincidentally, the workshop took place on the day after the anniversary of the so-called Berlin Conference that ended in February 1885. It was part of a community forum that aimed to address and challenge the conference's lasting impacts (PARISC 2025). On February 26th, 1885, the so-called Berlin Africa Conference, convened by the major imperial powers of the time, officially concluded at the Reich Chancellery, located at what is today Wilhelmstraße 92 in Berlin. This event marked a pivotal moment in the history of colonialism, as it signified a shift from fragmented colonial expansion to the systematic partitioning of the African continent, often referred to as the "Scramble for Africa." The conference resulted in the negotiated and arbitrary division of African territories among European powers, thereby providing a facade of legitimacy and formalisation to what would become a brutal regime of colonial domination, forced displacement, and economic exploitation. The political, economic, and social repercussions of this conference continue to profoundly affect the formerly colonised societies as well as the former centres of colonial imperialism to this day. In German memory culture, however, it remains mar-



ginalised (see e.g. Steininger 2025). On this occasion, the workshop recognises the manifold repercussions of this historical event, one of them being the epistemological harm in academic knowledge production.

While post-colonial methodological approaches often centre relationality and non-Western methods acknowledging the shared histories and knowledge production, we suggest that merely acknowledging connected histories risks overlooking dimensions of power. As we observe that the acknowledgement of interrelatedness could potentially also be mobilised for depoliticised future-making through policy-oriented concepts of antidiscrimination and antiracism, reparative research aims to acknowledge different pasts and their ongoing violence of what Táiwò terms the "global racial empire" (Táiwò 2022, 26). This is challenged by struggles for reparations, and, therefore, reparative research, too, aims to challenge these systemic legacies methodologically. Thus, we understand academic research as "a praxis of transformation rather than mere data collection and intellectual extraction for the purpose of knowledge production" (Tripathi, 2025) and a commitment to reparations and reparative methodologies.

We used the synthesis of our workshop discussions as a basis for this working paper, complementing them with post-hoc inputs by workshop participants, including both scholarly and activist materials and interventions. In the following, we suggest six dimensions that we have identified in the workshop as part of an emerging research agenda that centres on the reparative in research. Rather than providing clear-cut answers to the challenges we are facing, they aim to give insights into the ideas, practices and visions that we have discussed and provide food for thought. We therefore understand this working paper as an ongoing work in progress.

1. Dialectical Relationship of Extraction and Emancipation

The relationship between emancipatory academic research and extractivist practices of knowledge production presents a fundamental tension that requires recognising the violence of extractivist research while simultaneously acknowledging and employing the usefulness of academic spaces for struggles. Extractivist knowledge production is inherent in the academic system and constitutes a form of structural violence that researchers must confront directly. This form of violence is rooted in the history of the Western academy – a legacy of imperialism that pervades, in particular, the disciplines studying international politics. At the same time, academic spaces have always provided a space for critical monitoring and analysis of political and societal conditions. As imperial legacies within the disciplines are increasingly recognised and challenged, academic sites can provide the space and resources to deal with these questions. Taking this seriously demands taking responsibility for both the structural violence inherent in research and its potentially empowering and emancipatory dimensions, recognising that this is part of the struggle and



that ongoing dialogue is necessary to navigate these contradictions. As this dialectic, Kobina Amokwandoh emphasised, is inherent to the academic system of knowledge production, rather than avoiding these spaces altogether, we should aim to make use of resources and spaces with emancipatory potential. Piaba Madokwe added that questioning who the research serves and who can access it are key questions to consider within this dialectic. A shared understanding of the emancipatory potential of the co-production of knowledge only develops through dialogue and shared learning (Benedix 2023). In this vein, it is important to acknowledge that, as the International Network of Scholars and Activists for Afrikan Reparations (INOSAAR) has pointed out, the importance to “recognize the interconnectedness of all we do as part of this network, while understanding that the goals of activists and academics are often different” (INOSAAR 2021).

2. Continuous Positioning

If research genuinely aspires to be reparative, it must engage in honest conversations about how researchers are coming into the stories and sites they study. As both post-colonial and feminist approaches to research emphasise, the social position influences what one can know. Standpoint theory suggests that marginalised groups can achieve a more objective understanding of social reality than non-marginalised groups (Harding 1992). On the one hand, this requires a commitment to recognising the partiality of knowledge and spelling out its situatedness (see e.g. Salehi et al 2025). On the other hand, it demands an acknowledgement from the beginning that there is an emancipatory goal in the research that operates within the above-described dialectical relationship between extraction and emancipation. As INOSAAR has outlined above, what is understood as emancipatory often differs within and outside the academy. Thus, conversations about navigating this dialectic should be accompanied by an ongoing dedication to question the power relations in which we are embedded. As a consequence, this dialectic not only suggests a sensitive use of academic spaces but also an engaged conversation about the co-production of knowledge of researchers and scholar-activists. In the vein of “loving accountability” (Boer Cueva et al. 2024), the research process then becomes a community-building practice that is focused on the relationality and co-production of knowledge. This entails recognising our connectedness to the research and its participants – a dynamic relationship in which knowledge is co-produced. Reflexive practices are thus indispensable for interrogating the co-construction of meaning and the underlying power dynamics (Avram 2025). We recognise that there is no such thing as “finished work” in reparative research. The work is never complete and becomes part of our ongoing history, demanding continuous reflection and engagement. For instance, as part of her multi-perspectival narrative research, Kristine Andra Avram continuously documented her perceived position relative to the interviewees in her field diary, took into account references to herself in interview tran-



scripts and field notes during analysis, and reflected extensively on her multiple and shifting positionalities as part of the narrative research process (Avram 2024).

3. Temporality: Doing Justice to the Past and the Future

Reparative research sets itself apart from other forms of collaborative research methods through its profound engagement with temporality and a commitment to historicised research practice. Reparative research moves between backward- and forward-looking approaches in the present. While activist and action-based research tend to have a future-oriented and constructive vision towards social change, reparative research actively addresses temporalities, aiming to resist the danger of depoliticised, policy-oriented approaches. Reparative research acknowledges the complexity, ambiguity, and messiness inherent in representations and narratives of the past, convinced that our analysis must be founded on an understanding of multiple rather than singular pasts. This recognition also entails a rejection of linearity as workshop participants have previously argued elsewhere (Salehi 2022, Avram et al. 2025, Grabert et. al. 2025). Acknowledging the coexistence of heterogeneous and overlapping temporalities in turn opens up an expanded analytical lens that is conducive to understanding continuity and change and, thereby, to examining questions of power and resistance. Moreover, the question of temporality becomes key to understanding how people tell stories. In this regard, Avram (2025) proposes to distinguish between time – the temporal frame and perspective of a given account – and temporality – the underlying temporal configuration shaping the narrative – when examining stories from different perspectives. In staged narrative analysis, temporality thus “refers both to the way in which past and present are attended to throughout storytelling (...) and to the way past and present are assembled in the narrative with reference to continuities or to (social) changes” (Avram 2025, 29). In the vein of reparative remembering (Sriprakash et al. 2020), memory itself is fundamentally relational rather than neutral, carrying with it a philosophical duty to remember that extends beyond individual recollection to collective responsibility. Another entry point to address temporality in reparative research is thinking within conjunctures, recognising that memory, narrative, and temporality are always situated within specific historical moments and power configurations that shape both what can be remembered and how it can be told (Kotzur 2024).

4. Situated in Space and Politics

Consequently, reparative research recognises that the specific moments selected for investigation are neither free of our standpoints nor exist in a historical vacuum. Without proper contextualisation, these moments become static and potentially confusing. This contextual work itself becomes part of the constructive process of knowledge creation. In contrast to other forms of collaborative



research practices, reparative research always engages with questions of empire and imperialism, acknowledging a historical understanding of the international order that challenges dominant narratives of progress and development. For example, this approach requires breaking down the problematic binary of victim and perpetrator by recognising the complex nature of victimhood and positioning research participants as narrators situated within their broader life trajectories. Moving beyond simplistic categories allows to understand how people both experience and perpetrate violence in ways that go beyond neat categorisation. Participants from the academy at the workshop reflect that struggling with the analysis and the presentation of the findings led to in-depth engagements with research practice that can be manifold. Yann LeGall reflected on the decision to co-author in order to bring in a multitude of voices to the canon of restitution, Nadine Benedix explained how dialogic research helped to emphasise a truly collaborative research design, and Laura Kotzur reflected on the reparative impact of action research through co-organising the above-mentioned activist gathering to address the 140th anniversary of the Berlin Conference.

A narrator-centred approach, Kristine Andra Avram argues, is particularly useful here, as it can reveal how narratives differ not only across positions and perspectives but also within them and over time. Adopting a holistic approach to narrative analysis involves keeping participants' data intact rather than fragmented into isolated segments or codes, and narratives should be considered within the broader context of the narrator, their life, and the moment of telling. This method also supports a non-totalizing writing strategy when presenting findings, such as providing detailed summaries of individual narrators or using vignettes to illustrate diverse or divergent perspectives within a group (Avram 2025). These strategies preserve the complexity of narratives instead of reducing them to a single interpretation. Importantly, as was emphasised in the workshop, the very act of academic interpretation and representation inevitably violates the stories we engage with. Additionally, drawing from anti-colonial conversations within radio journalism, Annelise Finney suggests including original language alongside any translations included in a text. Doing so acknowledges that translation is imperfect and offers the original text to those able to understand it, thereby in a small way resisting the hegemony of colonial languages in academia.

5. Collaboration and Co-optation

The tension between collaboration and co-optation requires careful consideration of inside/outside strategies, alliances, and positionalities in reparative research. What is perceived by many researchers as a balancing act might be a clear picture for activists and community organisers. This is particularly important with regard to collaborations with (state) institutions. In both former colonising and colonised states, its institutions are inevitably connected to violent imperialism and colonialism. Thus, many categorically reject cooperation with these institutions. At the same time,



others tactically use it for gradual progress and to prove the legitimacy of claims for justice. Thus, reparative research should actively engage with and analyse the history, complicity, and resistance against the state, while also studying the effectiveness and usefulness of state institutions for claims for reparative justice. Constantly interrogating who research serves, who can access it, and how to prevent research from being confined within colonial educational institutions by ensuring access and relevance for diverse actors and fields is a first step into a conversation around this tension or balancing act. This involves working with networks of artists, activists, and members of the press to share stories worth telling to broader audiences, and recognising that transnational connections are crucial for building solidarity and resistance. Knowledge production then becomes part of a people-to-people interaction. However, this also involves, as Kofi Mawuli Klu emphasises, recognising that academia in non-Western institutions does not naturally represent all communities but often remains similarly unaccountable to local communities. Identifying whom to work with becomes a question of navigating a complex chessboard of power relations, but the approach remains straightforward for activist-scholars: recognising that colonial and imperial violence constitutes an ongoing war, researchers must ask what constitutes the current phase of resistance and align their work accordingly. Yann LeGall emphasised the importance of developing a macro-historical view on restitution that brings together studies of restitution and plunder with studies on violence and war, deliberately introducing questions of violence into discussions of restitution to create a more comprehensive understanding of historical harm and repair (Adjei & LeGall 2024). When research evidence can potentially build cases for restitution, researchers must actively work to prevent restitution from being co-opted by ensuring it functions reparatively for communities and supports genuine transformation.

6. Studying Protest and Resistance

Moreover, reparative research requires moving beyond the analysis of historical crimes and cruelties by centring resistance as a fundamental component of historical understanding and refusing dichotomies that oversimplify the legacy of colonial rule in postcolonial societies. It is imperative to recognise that Indigenous communities actively and passively defended their lives and societies not only through physical protest or insurgency, but through diverse “repertoires of resistance” (Domingos, Bandeira Jerónimo & Roque 2019, 12) that have visibly opposed imperial looting and plunder, and therefore are worth of scholarly interest. Besides, much of the existing academic writing on colonial plunder and its accompanying violence continues to present Africans primarily as people who were victimised, failing to adequately capture the fact that resistance has never stopped, despite experiencing ebbs and flows throughout different historical periods. This scholarly gap demands much greater attention to resistance narratives and practices that challenge dominant representations of passive victimhood. Akorfa Comfort Gakpa emphasised that it is key



to study resistance alongside histories of looting and violence and refers to Planet Repairs which is a framework that centres education in order to highlight “reparations in its revolutionary tradition” and understands “education still as one of the key sites of struggle that has to be properly contested so that communities and our issues and struggles are not marginalised or isolated, but are seen as the most important sites of knowledge production and legitimate vehicles of education” (PRALER 2022).

At the same time, to foster contemporary debates on historical wrongs and increase understanding of the mechanisms of racial oppression and colonial domination, there is a need to acknowledge a spectre of interests, shifting positions of power in international relations, and a multitude of subjects “implicated” in past and present contexts of (neo)colonial oppression (Rothberg 2019). From those who Michelle Moyd called “violent intermediaries” (2014, 68) – such as the Askaris of East African rifles who, under European rule, participated in massacres – to the deadly influence of multinational corporations like the mining industry, to puppet or unjust regimes, such as Paul Biya’s gerontocratic administration, various agents of violent extraction, the implementation of legal double standards and the muzzling of dissenting voices demonstrate that a radical stance for reparations and redistribution can no longer be driven by bicolour paradigms (see e.g. Adekoya 2023). Still, scientific engagement with the history of resistance to enslavement, autocracy, corruption, disenfranchisement and plunder must acknowledge the historical merits of grassroots protest movements, scholarly and intersectional critique, as well as take stock of their shortcomings, so that knowledge-transfer from one struggle to another can take place. Central to this reframing is the essential question of violence itself: it is only with the anchoring of protest and resistance as a theoretical lens that precious and essential distinctions between revolutionary and reactionary violence can be identified and discussed thoroughly, so imperial histories of exploitation and dispossession are embedded in the context of the on-going resistance of communities fighting colonial, imperial and capitalist oppression towards liberation and self-determination.

Conclusion

We suggest understanding reparative research as an approach to bring the above-mentioned dimensions together in both our theory and practice. Rather than presenting clear definitions of what reparative research should be, we aim to share our discussion points as an intermediate result of our thought process and practical experience. As demonstrated by the presentations at the workshop, this approach can be applied to a wide range of topics and methods. From aligning restitution with histories of mass violence, to methods of comprehensive narrative research such as staged narrative analysis, to the philosophy of memory studies – reparative research can serve as an approach to think through interlinked temporalities and positionalities, through resistance



and harm, through institutions like the academy or the state and through practices of collaboration and emancipation as well as co-optation and extraction. By suggesting the concept of reparative research, we aim to provoke new questions and thoughts on a research agenda that centres the reparative in studying reparations in international politics.

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