

Episteme Writing Workshop*

June 24–26, 2025, Skukuza, South Africa

TUESDAY, JUNE 24TH

5:30-12:00 Morning Safari

1:30-3:00 Presenter: Veli Mitova, University of
Johannesburg

3:00-4:30 Presenter: Cameron Boulton, Brandon University

4:30-6:00 Writing

6:00 Dinner

WEDNESDAY, JUNE 25TH

9:00-5:00 Writing

5:00-6:00 Working Group Meeting

6:00 Dinner

THURSDAY, JUNE 26TH

9:00-10:30 Presenter: Jennifer Lackey, Northwestern
University

10:30-12:00 Presenter: Sarah Wright, University of Georgia

1:00-5:30 Afternoon Safari

6:00 Dinner

**Generously supported by Cambridge University Press and Northwestern
University*

Introduction
Jennifer Lackey
Northwestern University

This book is about stories so I will start by telling you one.

About a year and a half ago, I found myself at Stateville Correctional Center, a maximum-security men's prison 40 miles southwest of Chicago, waiting to greet one of the recent graduates of the Northwestern Prison Education Program (NPEP). This fact alone was not unusual, as I had spent countless hours at Stateville over the past decade, teaching in and serving as the Director of NPEP. But what marked this moment as different from all of the others is that I was standing on the other side of the wall—the one that separates the unfree from the

free—to welcome James Soto home after 42 years of imprisonment. James is the longest wrongfully incarcerated person in the state of Illinois, having spent his twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties in some of the darkest corners of the United States for crimes he not only didn't commit, but also for which police coerced witnesses—through targeted arrests, interrogations that involved the deprivation of sleep and food, and threats of facing the death penalty—to point the finger at James.¹ Bearing witness to James in his first moments as a non-incarcerated person, in plain clothes and what has since become his signature fedora, and being able to hug him without the unrelenting surveillance and interventions of correctional officers, was extraordinary and unforgettable.

In the weeks and months that followed his release, however, James grappled not only with the challenges of a world utterly foreign to the one he left behind at the age of 19, but also with conveying to others the weight of the injustices and violations that he suffered. In one interview, he said, “Just imagine, you know you're innocent, yet nobody's hearing you, nothing's being done,”² and in others he described the “horrendous conditions”³ of prison: the aggression, violence,⁴ deadly heat,⁵ rodent and cockroach infestations,⁶ lack of clean drinking water,⁷ and profound loss.⁸ Yet despite all of this, the hardest part of

incarceration, according to James, is something less tangible and in many respects deeper—it is being broken down into a “numerical existence,”⁹ being robbed of one's true story, being seen as someone or something entirely at odds with who one is, being regarded as not a human or a person. As if speaking directly to those who subjected him to over four decades of this total erasure of his identity, James says “I am a human being. I am a person.”¹⁰

My last book, *Criminal Testimonial Injustice*,¹¹ examined how stories can be stolen from people in a myriad of ways, especially by the criminal legal system in the United States. Backed into a corner, lied to about the evidence in question, threatened with the death penalty, more time in prison, or the loss of one's children, desperate, confused, and terrified, people will say just about anything. Not only will eyewitnesses confidently point to someone whom they know did not pull the trigger—as in James's case—but suspects will falsely confess to the most violent of actions, innocent defendants will plead guilty to unimaginable crimes, victims will recant reports of life-altering assaults and violations, and those who are convicted will express profound remorse for things they simply did not do. The resulting testimony then plays a massively oversized evidential role in the American criminal legal system, grounding convictions even in

¹ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/05/04/jimmy-soto-wrongful-conviction/>.

² <https://news.wttw.com/2024/01/18/you-know-you-re-innocent-yet-nobody-s-hearing-you-jimmy-soto-looks-future-after-serving>.

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/jimmy-soto-lawsuit-chicago/>.

⁴ <https://sites.northwestern.edu/npep/2024/01/10/a-journey-to-justice-pondering-42-years-in-prison-with-james-soto/>.

⁵ <https://abc7chicago.com/post/protestors-rally-chicago-after-stateville-correction-center-inmate/15090690/>.

⁶ <https://capitolnewsillinois.com/news/communities-commission-push-pritzker-admin-for-more-prison-plan-details/>.

⁷ <https://capitolnewsillinois.com/news/communities-commission-push-pritzker-admin-for-more-prison-plan-details/>.

⁸ <https://abc7chicago.com/post/protestors-rally-chicago-after-stateville-correction-center-inmate/15090690/>.

⁹ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/05/04/jimmy-soto-wrongful-conviction/>.

¹⁰ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/05/04/jimmy-soto-wrongful-conviction/>.

¹¹ Lackey (2023).

the face of powerful counterevidence, for instance, or serving as the central factor for the granting of parole.

I call the wrong inflicted in such cases *agential testimonial injustice*, where testimony is *extracted* from a victim in a way that bypasses, exploits, or subverts his epistemic agency¹² and is then afforded an unwarranted *excess* of credibility. Epistemic agency is commonly understood as grounded in a person's responsiveness to reasons or evidence. If you come to believe that the death penalty should be abolished because I present compelling arguments on behalf of this conclusion that you appreciate, then I have respected your epistemic agency in bringing about this result. In contrast, if I hack into your social media accounts and inundate your feeds with anti-death-penalty propaganda to elicit this belief, then I have bypassed or subverted your epistemic agency. I am not engaging with you as a rational agent who can recognize and respond to the force of reasons, but rather, I am treating you as a puppet whose psychology can be shaped and molded according to my aims. While talk of epistemic agency in relation to beliefs is not new, what I showed in *Criminal Testimonial Injustice* is that similar considerations can be extended to speech, especially to testimony offered in the criminal legal system. In particular, epistemic agency is exercised with respect to a person's *testimony* when it is responsive to reasons or evidence. If you admit guilt for harming a person because I present reasons that you find persuasive about the power of restorative justice, then I have appealed to your epistemic agency to elicit this speech. In contrast, if I get you to admit guilt for a harm that you didn't inflict through coercive threats of life in prison or deceptive promises of leniency, then I have exploited or undermined your epistemic agency. I am regarding you as a mere epistemic means to my desired end rather than as an epistemic

end in yourself. I want you to say certain words, perhaps to acquire evidence to press charges or to affirm a conviction at a parole hearing, and you're not regarded as a knower whose autonomy and dignity deserve to be respected, but as a source of epistemic outputs that I can exploit and use.

Within the American criminal legal system specifically, I show that agential testimonial injustice is found from start to finish, with ignorance and malice, aimed similarly at defendants, witnesses, and victims, through small acts of influence and will-crushing threats, engulfing the innocent as well as the guilty. Whether a suspect is being interrogated or a victim is reporting a sexual assault, an eyewitness is making an identification or a defendant is seeking parole, testimony is extracted from individuals through processes that compromise their epistemic agency and is then unreasonably regarded as representing the testifiers' truest or most reliable selves. In this way, the State treats its citizens as instruments to be used and exploited to meet its desires and ends, constructing narratives that are often life-shattering for their characters and rendering the testifiers in question complicit in the resulting undoing.

Importantly, however, these narratives inflict distinctively epistemic wrongs themselves, ones that go beyond the extraction of the testimony and the excess of credibility it is then afforded. Focusing on false confessions in particular, Northwestern Prison Education Program student Scot Miller poignantly conveys this when he writes, "[a]n extracted false confession creates a false narrative of that person's life. In other words, the extracted confession turns a person's life into a lie. That lie is then believed over the truth of that person's life, victimizing him over and over again. This seems to be the ultimate crime—stealing the essence of someone's life while they yet breathe" (personal

¹² The first appearance of the concept of "epistemic agency" in the philosophical literature is in Reed (2001).

correspondence). Scot is here drawing our attention to the distinctive power that the story about his life itself has, which is not only false but also renders him unknown in deep and lasting ways, thereby involving additional violations that cry out for understanding. This is crucial to recognize, especially in a case like James's, where the agential testimonial injustice is inflicted on the eyewitnesses but the false narrative, and the wrongful conviction that it grounds, are suffered by him.

This is one of the starting points of the current project. Consider, for instance, some of the different ways in which wrongful convictions create and promote stories that block the main character from being known. There are stories that render who he truly is invisible—perhaps denying his innocence, ignoring his honest and trustworthy character, or marginalizing his loving relationships. There are stories that demonize or distort him—perhaps as being a liar, a murderer, irredeemable, or monstrous. There are stories that are extracted from him—perhaps of guilt, responsibility, and remorse. There are stories that he is prevented from telling due to his vilification and isolation—perhaps about who he is today or who he plans to be tomorrow. There are stories that attempt to justify how he is treated—perhaps as deserving of the brutal and inhumane conditions of his incarceration. There are stories that are taken from him—perhaps of what he could have accomplished or who he could have been had he not been wrongfully convicted. In each case, the epistemic agency of the subject of the stories is compromised in violating and unjust ways. While *Criminal Testimonial Injustice* provides an analysis of the distinctive epistemic wrongs involved in creating these sorts of stories in the criminal legal system, the present

book focuses on how to understand the epistemically reparative work called for in response.

Of course, even if there are dimensions of these epistemic wrongs that are unique to the American criminal legal system, being unknown in these ways is not. Across historical periods and global spaces, entire peoples, cultures, communities, as well as the individuals within them, have been robbed of their stories—have been erased, silenced, vilified, and distorted. The effects of colonialism, for instance, epistemically devastate not only existing and possible stories, but also storytellers, bodies of knowledge, traditions, practices, languages, and so much more. Generally, then, one of the questions at the heart of this book is this: if stories are being stolen in widespread and pernicious ways, aren't we obligated to give them back? If epistemic agency is systematically bypassed, exploited, or subverted, don't we have duties to cultivate, repair, or restore it? If people are unknown in deep and unjust ways, shouldn't we come to know them?

While this is the background for the current project, I begin the first chapter not with recounting these epistemic wrongs but, rather, with accounts from different survivors of the reparative power of being known. The aim is to set the stage for looking forward—for understanding the normative force of the call to give victims their stories back.¹³ In the pages that follow, I argue that those who suffer gross violations and injustices that result in or constitute not being known due to invisibility, vilification, or systematic distortion¹⁴ are wronged in distinctively epistemic ways and have the *right to be known* as *epistemic reparations*.

I develop the right to be known by drawing from a framework provided by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights

¹³ Because some prefer being referred to as “survivors” and others prefer “victims,” I will, for the most part, use these interchangeably when discussing those who have been subject to gross violations and injustices except when it comes to those who are deceased, where I will use only “victims.”

¹⁴ Of course, this “or” is not exclusive, as not being known can involve invisibility, vilification, and systematic distortion. I also leave open the possibility that this list is not exhaustive and that there are other epistemic wrongs that call for being known as a form of epistemic reparations.

that outlines the rights of victims of gross violations and injustices, one of which is what they call the *right to know*. In particular, they argue that victims and their families have the right to “know the truth about the circumstances in which violations took place and, in the event of death or disappearance, the victims’ fate” (United Nations 2005). I argue in Chapter 1 that this framework from the UN is illuminating not only for what it includes, but also for what it leaves out. Importantly, it highlights that there can be a right to a distinctively epistemic good, such as knowledge, and that it is one that is generated by a gross violation or injustice. Unlike me, for instance, members of an ethnic group victimized by genocide have the right to know whether there was state involvement, whether their loved ones were murdered, where their bodies are located, and so on. At the same time, the UN’s framework fails to include what I argue is an equally critical dimension—what I call the *right to be known*. These same members of an ethnic group have the right to have their stories of violation and injustice be given proper uptake, not only so that others bear witness to their suffering and restore their status in the community, but also so that there is an accurate and complete public or historical record. If victims have the right to know about an atrocity, but no victims themselves contribute to the record of the atrocity, then it is virtually impossible that the information conveyed and documented will be reliably produced. A historical record of genocide told only by perpetrators, for

¹⁵ Since many instances of not being known discussed in this book can be traced, to various degrees, to the impact of colonialism, it is worth highlighting that much decolonial work stresses the importance of the general point here—that the colonized should be producers of knowledge, rather than merely consumers (Chatterjee 1997), that they should be centered when it comes to knowledge generation relevant to their geographical and socio-political location (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2018), that they should be regarded as epistemic authorities in these areas (Mitova forthcoming), and so on. Given this, we might understand

instance, will almost certainly be distorted, biased, and incomplete. In addition to the right to know, then, the UN’s framework crucially needs to be expanded to also include the right to be known.¹⁵ Both rights, I argue, can be captured by an account of what I call *epistemic reparations*,¹⁶ which I characterize as intentionally reparative actions that take the form of epistemic goods given to those who have been epistemically wronged by parties who acknowledge these wrongs and whose reparative actions are intended to redress them.

Before saying more about what I will do in the following chapters, let me highlight what I will *not* be doing. Despite the fact that the title of this book is *The Right to Be Known*, I will not be saying much at all about how to understand rights in general. This is because I will be taking as my normative starting point the framework found in the UN’s report from the Commission on Human Rights. Given that victims of gross violations and injustices have the right to know, my view is that they also have the right to be known. Otherwise put, my account holds that the grounding of the right to know also grounds the right to be known. This approach has at least two advantages. First, much of the most original work in this book centers around the introduction and development of the “right to be known” and “epistemic reparations” and so it makes sense to devote attention to understanding these phenomena rather than rights in general, which have already been discussed broadly and extensively for

some of these claims as the colonized having the right to be known as acts of epistemic reparations.

¹⁶ The first instance of the term “epistemic reparations” can be found in Lackey (2021) and is further developed in Lackey (2022). There are related, but importantly different epistemic concepts in the literature, which I will discuss in Chapter 5, such as “epistemic amelioration” (Almassi 2018), “epistemic amends” (Song (2020), and “epistemic redress” (Hull 2022).

centuries. Second, the goal of this project is not merely or even primarily to formulate abstract academic theories but, rather, to develop a framework for real change in the world. To this end, the United Nations is said to be the “one, universal organization in the world...that can set globally accepted standards and norms of behavior” (Sills 2002, p. 1). Since the UN sets as a global standard that victims of gross violations and injustices have the right to know, my aim here is to make clear that this standard should also include the right to be known.

In what follows, I will make the case for epistemic reparations, which I understand as being politically and legally weighty in the same way that other kinds of reparations are. Just as we would not use the term “reparations” to describe what is needed to make up for the moral wrong we inflicted on a friend for breaking a promise to take her shopping so, too, I think that we should not use the term “epistemic reparations” to make up for ordinary, everyday epistemic wrongs, such as not giving a co-worker the amount of credibility she deserves in her area of expertise, or failing to properly attribute an idea to a community member. To be sure, these sorts of wrongs may normatively demand reparative work—some moral, some epistemic, and some both. But it would be odd for your friend or co-worker to ask for “reparations” precisely because they have political and/or legal heft, with paradigmatic cases involving governments or institutions being required or expected to engage in them, including through various forms of legislation and policies that target deep, pernicious systemic injustices. While I will argue that there is also normative pressure for each of us to engage in epistemic reparations even when we are not ourselves

perpetrators or complicit in the perpetration of the epistemic wrongs in question, this is still to be distinguished from the broader category of “epistemic repair” or “epistemic redress.” The latter may be helpful or necessary in striving for a world that is more epistemically just and may be crucial for interpersonal relations at the collective and individual levels but they are nonetheless importantly different from what is at issue in this book.¹⁷

Since the focus in this book is on epistemic reparations that have the same sort of political and legal weight as, say, material reparations, I will largely focus on gross violations and injustices that are systemic and perpetrated by groups or other collectives, such as the epistemic wrongs inflicted through the criminal legal system in the United States, colonialism and apartheid in South Africa, and the Residential School System in Canada. This, of course, does not preclude individual actors who played powerful roles in the violations from bearing direct responsibility for engaging in epistemic reparations as well. In addition to the State, for instance, a specific prosecutor who deliberately concealed evidence favorable to the defense may be culpable for epistemically repairing some of the harm suffered by the defendant who ends up wrongfully convicted and incarcerated because of this, or a particular apartheid officer may also bear responsibility for epistemic reparations for victims of violence that he inflicted while working for the South African government. But in both cases, they are part of a much larger system of injustice targeting specific groups of people.

At the same time, what originally brought me to this project was sitting in hallways and classrooms of prisons in America listening

¹⁷ For ease of expression, I may use terms like “epistemically reparative” or “epistemic repair” but unless otherwise noted, I will be discussing epistemic reparations only in the sense of what is owed in cases of epistemic wrongs that result from or constitute gross violations

or injustices. I should also note that although I will be developing an account of epistemic reparations, many features of the framework could be extended to a broader view of epistemic repair.

to the stories of the trauma, violence, heartbreak, and horrors inflicted by the carceral system, along with the epistemic devastation that comes in their wake. While similar themes often emerged, most of these conversations were one-on-one, with particular incarcerated individuals, many of them students I have been in community with for over a decade—people I have come to know, love, and admire. I often saw unfold before my very eyes the power of bearing witness to their stories: the shifts and transformations of the lenses through which they view themselves, others, their pasts, their possibilities, their futures, their legacies. And so while just about everything I say in the pages that follow about the right to be known and epistemic reparations apply just as much at the level of groups, many of the stories will be about specific individuals, both because this is how I found my way to this work and because of the power and insight they convey.

It is tempting to regard epistemic reparations as involving a simple “one-and-done” transaction. If I let my friend use my car and she unlawfully sells it, then seeking restitution in a civil case may ask the court, in part, to restore me to where I was before my car was sold. Requiring that I be paid the fair market value of the car when it was borrowed is a straightforward one-time transaction that aims to make me whole. But in the central cases at issue in this book, there is no “one-and-done” transaction that sufficiently provides epistemic reparations. There is, that is, no single act that would restore victims and survivors to where they were or would have been epistemically in the absence of colonialism, racism, or an unjust criminal legal system. As Naomi Roht-Arriaza asks in the case of reparations more broadly, “[w]hat could replace lost health and serenity, the loss of a loved one or of a whole extended family, a generation of friends, the destruction of culture of an entire community” (2004, p. 122). In the epistemic case, what single act could possibly sufficiently make up for the effects of, say, deep, widespread, and pernicious

intergenerational invisibility and distortion of an entire group of people, along with their language, culture, and practices, or even decades of the vilification of a single person, such as James Soto? And yet, despite this, this book is not one of despairing about what is not possible. Instead, it is about building a theoretical framework for engaging in the *ongoing process* of providing epistemic reparations. It is about developing the tools for holding governments and institutions responsible for the distinctively epistemic wrongs inflicted by their actions and inactions. It is about recognizing that focusing on only the ideal of total epistemic reparations, or on only the deficiencies of each particular act, can lead to retreating, inertia, or complacency. It is about seeing that it is not only perpetrators—whether collectives or individuals—who need to engage in the business of making up for the epistemic wrongs of the past, but each one of us as well. It is about the urgent need to roll up our sleeves every day and make whatever contributions we can, however small, to bearing witness to, and restoring the status of, victims of gross violations and injustices. It is about exploring concrete ways to engage in the process of providing epistemic reparations by federal, state, and local governments and other institutions—including, among many others, working with survivors to facilitate truth and reconciliation commissions, community dialogues, restorative justice circles, venues for recording stories, memorials, storytelling workshops, and educational materials—and by individuals—including, again among many others, working with survivors to support the creation of their narratives through a variety of mediums, listening and learning from them, providing platforms, sharing their stories, and amplifying their voices. But how, it may be asked, do I reconcile the inability to truly make up for the scale and depth of many of the epistemic wrongs at issue in this book with the demand to nonetheless engage in the work of providing them? Is this a call to take up work that is destined to be futile? By way of response, notice, first, that

epistemic wrongs that result from or constitute gross violations and injustices typically involve ongoing harm. The vilification of Black men in the American criminal legal system, for instance, is often traced to the history of slavery and Jim Crow, revealing the deep and ongoing intergenerational epistemic effects that gross violations and injustices often bring in their wake.¹⁸ But rather than simply exacerbating the tension at issue, this further supports the need for viewing the demand of epistemic reparations as similarly ongoing. More precisely, moving away from a strictly *act-based account* of reparations—where there are discrete acts on each side of the wrong and repair—to a *process-based account*, where there are ongoing processes on each side of the wrong and repair—alters expectations in ways that can be motivating rather than deflating. The work of epistemic reparations does not fit into a “one-and-done” transactional model precisely because the wrongs themselves often don’t fit into such a model. And so shifting over to seeing our engagement in this epistemic work as an ongoing process may similarly shift our expectations about what each single act needs to accomplish. This brings us to the second feature of the framework developed in this book that helps with the tension between the magnitude of the wrongs at issue and the call to immediate action: while the duties to engage in epistemic reparations fall on each of us, there is often *discretion* in how we fulfill many of them. As I develop in Chapter 5, the relevant duties are on a spectrum, with perfect epistemic duties lying at one end, which those who bear responsibility for the epistemic wrongs in question, such as perpetrators, must fulfill. At the other end lie imperfect epistemic duties, which we all need to fulfill regardless of whether we are responsible for the relevant epistemic wrongs, but there is latitude in how we do so. And in between lie duties that have normative force of greater specificity than standard imperfect

epistemic duties but less so than their perfect counterparts, such as those involving complicity and special relationships. Given this, although we cannot look at the epistemic wrongs that arise from or constitute gross violations and injustices as distant problems of others, we also need not shoulder the burden of addressing every single one on our own. Just as the imperfect duty of charity in the moral realm requires that we ought to engage in some charitable giving as a member of the moral community, with discretion permitted in how we do so specifically, the imperfect epistemic duty here requires that we know some relevant survivors of gross violations and injustices, with latitude in how we do so specifically. This is crucial, as there are countless victims who should be known as acts of epistemic reparations, and yet it is simply not possible for each of us to do all of this epistemic work on our own.

Finally, and related to the previous two points, if engaging in epistemic reparations is an ongoing process and we each have at least an imperfect epistemic duty to do something, then it is obvious that a single act of epistemic reparations will almost certainly be only *partial*, leading to a greater appreciation of the need for *collective action*. Recognizing that one group or person may not be responsible for righting all of the wrongs of, say, the vilification of Black men in the American criminal legal system but that we nonetheless can and should play our part in doing so makes clear that each act will be only a step in the reparative process. In this way, doing nothing because it won’t be enough or because it is someone else’s problem should be replaced with doing something, even if it is a small gesture, because it will be part of an ongoing collective process that we all have at least the imperfect duty to participate in. Indeed, it is only through collective action that we will be able to make substantive progress on the deep, pernicious epistemic wrongs at issue in this book.

¹⁸ See, for instance, Alexander (2012) and Forman Jr. (2017).

While this book is devoted to reparations that are epistemic in nature and, even more specifically, on the right to be known, I should emphasize at the outset that this framework is fully compatible with the necessity of other kinds of reparations. Making the case for the importance of knowing survivors of gross violations and injustices does not in any way diminish the need to also provide material reparations—such as monetary compensation or the return of land—political reparations—such as the restoration of citizenship or voting rights—psychological reparations—such as relieving suffering, anger, or a sense of violation—moral reparations—such as recognizing and restoring the dignity of victims and reaffirming or reestablishing the moral order of a community—and so on. Sometimes we see, say, the material without the epistemic—a check is handed to a survivor of police violence with no one bearing witness to who he is or the suffering he endured—and other times we see the epistemic without the material—a truth and reconciliation commission is held for stories of violations to be shared without any monetary compensation for the intergenerational economic devastation suffered by the survivors. But just as many gross violations and injustices inflict harms that reverberate across communities, generations, and every dimension of individual persons, so, too, do reparations need to be communal, intergenerational, and multi-dimensional. At the same time, I focus my attention on the epistemic side here not only because it has been virtually entirely absent from both academic and non-academic discussions of reparations, but also because it is frequently highlighted by survivors as vital for repairing gross violations and injustices. In this way, my goal is to provide a framework for understanding

the distinctive features of epistemic reparations, especially the right to be known, to add to our grasp of the ongoing wrongs and corresponding reparative work that needs to be undertaken. As noted earlier, I defend the view that those who suffer gross violations and injustices that result in or constitute not being known due to invisibility, vilification, or systematic distortion are wronged in distinctively epistemic ways and have the right to be known as epistemic reparations. I will be relying on paradigmatic cases of gross violations and injustices rather than providing anything like an analysis of them. In other words, rather than spending page after page asking, is this really a gross violation or injustice, I will for the most part simply begin with examples that clearly are ones. Not only is this in keeping with what is found within the framework of the UN itself,¹⁹ it also avoids devoting an excessive and what I regard as an unhelpful amount of attention to the gray or borderline cases, leaving the real work of this project to the forward-looking goal of understanding epistemic reparations.

Moreover, because I focus almost entirely on actual rather than fictionalized cases in this book, just about all of them will have multiple kinds of normativity at play. Consider, for instance, a group or individual who is vilified by the criminal legal system in America or systematically distorted by apartheid in South Africa. Does the wrongdoing involve the moral dimensions of the criminal legal system and apartheid, the epistemic dimensions of vilification and systematic distortion, or both? The answer here, as well as elsewhere throughout the forthcoming chapters, is both. This is because the actual cases involving real people that

¹⁹ As the United Nations Human Rights Council Complaint Procedure notes, “[r]esolutions or decisions of the General Assembly, the Human Rights Council and the Economic and Social Council do not contain any clear definition of...‘gross violation’.” The Council goes on to provide the following rough characterization: “‘gross violations’, refer

to violations of civil and political and economic, social and cultural rights, occurring in any part of the world and under any circumstances....”

(https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/HRBodies/ComplaintProcedure/ComplaintProcedurebooklet_E.pdf).

breathe life into this project are fused with the moral and the epistemic.

But, it may be further asked, should we describe, say, a wrongful conviction as a moral gross violation that results in the epistemic wrong of vilification or does being falsely demonized as a murderer itself constitute an independent gross violation? I do not find it particularly useful to settle this question, as the account holds that epistemic reparations are owed whether a gross violation or injustice *results in* or *constitutes* not being known due to one of the epistemic wrongs identified. So, either way, the wrongfully convicted survivor has the right to be known. Given this, splitting hairs to carve up that this, over here, is entirely moral and that that, over there, is entirely epistemic, or creating artificial thought experiments to ask whether there are pure moral wrongs or pure epistemic wrongs that fall within the framework, will make little difference to the central aims of this project.

At the same time, the book is on the right to be known, and so my primary focus is on the distinctively epistemic features of the phenomena at issue, especially those that are often connected with gross violations and injustices. After developing the central dimensions of the epistemic reparations framework in Chapter 1, I turn, in Chapter 2, to the power that stories have to both epistemically wrong and to serve as the corresponding epistemic reparations called for in response. As we saw earlier in the quote from Scot Miller, for instance, a false narrative that fuels a wrongful conviction inflicts an additional epistemic wrong on victims, one that shapes who he is taken to be and ultimately who he is able to become. He may not be recognized as a reliable narrator of his life, or even as a storyteller at all, and so his epistemic agency may be denied. He may have a vilified story extracted from him through manipulation or deception, and so

his epistemic agency may be bypassed or erased. He may be coerced into providing a distorted story that serves the needs of the State, and so his epistemic agency may be exploited or coopted. Fulfilling his right to be known involves promoting an epistemically reparative counterstory, one that is not only truthful but also cultivates the centering or restoring of his epistemic agency.

But crucially, I show that it is not only false stories that can rise to the level of inflicting a gross violation or injustice demanding of epistemic reparations. I support this through the introduction of the concept of “misknowing,” which applies when only a narrow, one-dimensional set of facts are centered about a person or persons, often focusing on those that are most injurious. I show further that misknowing is often caused, fueled, and exacerbated by what I call “flat stories,” which are agentially closed and depict the subject in static, one-dimensional, and psychologically simplistic terms.²⁰ I illustrate this through the role that narratives play in the United States criminal legal system, which I take to be a paradigmatic case of misknowing that is driven by flat stories. For instance, even for someone who is guilty of murder, the public narrative of him is often that he is essentially a murderer, only a murderer, and always a murderer. This is because defendants—whether innocent or guilty—are vilified and distorted by the media, relegated to isolated carceral settings that are under nearly constant surveillance, and afforded very few avenues for communication with the outside world. This results in demonized images, labels, and narratives, developed and promoted by the criminal legal system and the media, socially locking defendants into these stories, sometimes for life.

Consider, for instance, Donald Trump’s recent post on his Truth Social site from May 4, 2025 in which he writes that he is

²⁰ Of course, both individuals and groups or collectives can be misknown.

“directing the Bureau of Prisons, together with the Department of Justice, FBI, and Homeland Security, to reopen a substantially enlarged and rebuilt ALCATRAZ.”²¹ The goal, according to Trump, is to “lock up” those he calls “the dregs of society, who will never contribute anything other than Misery and Suffering.”²² A day after the post, Stephen Miller, White House Deputy Chief of Staff, was defending Trump’s plans to Fox News’s Laura Ingraham, saying:

There are people in this country, as President Trump has said, who will do nothing with their lives but rape, maim, and murder. They cannot be rehabilitated, they cannot be saved, they cannot be coached into some better way of living. They are always going to hurt. They are always going to steal. They are always going to attack. We need a place in this country where we can send people to visually demonstrate the total separation from society—the fact that they are not going to live among us and will never live among us.²³

These sorts of comments promote flat stories about many people with criminal convictions in the United States, especially those involving so-called “violent offenses.” They are depicted as one-dimensional—they do “nothing” with their lives but rape, maim, and murder; psychologically simplistic—“they cannot be rehabilitated, they cannot be saved, they cannot be coached into some better way of living,” claims that are often defended with

the view that at least certain people with criminal convictions are *essentially* violent or “deviant”; and static and agentially closed—they “will never contribute anything other than Misery and Suffering” because “They are always going to hurt. They are always going to steal. They are always going to attack.” These flat stories are themselves often fueled by “recidivism stories and statistics”²⁴ that cultivate “fearmongering” about protecting the public from “dangerous people.”²⁵ However, while the Bureau of Justice Statistics reports very high recidivism rates—over 75% of those released from prison are rearrested within the first six years²⁶—data show that people convicted of “violent offenses are...among the least likely to be rearrested for any crime, convicted of any crime, or incarcerated for any crime.”²⁷ Indeed, “people with rape and sexual assault convictions have the lowest overall...re-arrest rate of any offense group.”²⁸ In New York, for instance, only about 2% of people were reincarcerated for sex-related crimes within three years of release. Moreover, arrests are often driven by race, neighborhood, and economic status rather than by level of criminal activity. Given all of this, it is reasonable to conclude that while the sorts of flat stories found in the comments by Trump and Miller contribute to laws and policies that inflict catastrophic amounts of harm on people, they are largely unwarranted. When such stories rise to the level of constituting gross violations and injustices, my view maintains

²¹

<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114452025916969327>.

²²

<https://truthsocial.com/@realDonaldTrump/posts/114452025916969327>.

²³ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/trump-posts-wild-villains-rapists-monsters-rant-from-stephen-miller/>.

²⁴ Recidivism rates can also be highly misleading, as they often also include “technical violations” of probation or parole. The Council of

State Governments, for instance, estimated that in 2021, 29% of prison admissions nationwide were for such technical violations.

(https://projects.csgjusticecenter.org/supervision-violations-impact-on-incarceration/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2024/01/Supervision-Violations-Impact-2024_508.pdf.)

²⁵ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/trainings/recidivism.html>.

²⁶ <https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/2018-update-prisoner-recidivism-9-year-follow-period-2005-2014>.

²⁷ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/trainings/recidivism.html>.

²⁸ <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/trainings/recidivism.html>.

that epistemic reparations require “rounder stories,” which are agentially open and portray a person or persons in dynamic, multidimensional, and psychologically complex terms.

In Chapter 3, I explore how the process of talking, listening, and learning provides a model of a particularly powerful form of epistemic reparations. While there are many different ways to come to know someone, I show that there can be epistemic disadvantages to *perspective taking*, which involves imaginatively occupying the perspectives and experiences of others, and epistemic advantages to *perspective sharing*, which involves others sharing their firsthand perspectives and experiences with others either directly or indirectly. Talking, listening, and learning is a form of perspective sharing and the interactive nature of this process can make it epistemically generative for both those who are telling their stories and those who are appropriate listeners, leading in many cases to “coconstructed” narratives. An appropriate listener response of, say, compassion or outrage may facilitate a survivor’s own account of what happened shifting from self-blame to the centering of systemic injustices, thereby resulting in a narrative that is coconstructed by both speaker and listener. This, in turn, can lead to the repairing of epistemic wrongs, the creation of new narratives and new identities, and, ultimately, the development of new selves.

Crucially, however, the primary focus of this book is on *knowing* survivors of gross violations and injustices. In many paradigmatic cases, knowing involves some sort of listening and leads to a deeper understanding of the person in question. But knowing is distinct from both listening and understanding. I can listen with

no uptake at all—no shifts in my beliefs, attitudes, or perceptions. I can listen to someone wrongfully vilified and continue to believe with the same degree of conviction and hatred in my heart that he is a monster. Even if the person does not pick up on this and so feels that the wrong has been partially repaired, this might be an instance of psychological reparations, but it would not be epistemic reparations. Epistemic reparations *need some reparative shift in epistemic states* and listening, by itself, does not necessarily do this.²⁹ At the same time, understanding³⁰ as the minimum needed for epistemic reparations is too demanding. For instance, understanding is said to involve knowledge of causes³¹ or modal relationships,³² a grasp of how various pieces of information relate to one another,³³ or a certain set of abilities.³⁴ But I can know a survivor of carceral injustice as an act of epistemic reparations through his story of emotional trauma without, say, knowing the corresponding causes or modal relationships and without having a set of abilities for grasping how all of the dimensions of his narrative relate to one another. Especially when it is clear that individual acts are steps in an ongoing process of epistemic reparations it should be similarly apparent that each act does not require anything as specific or demanding as understanding. And since the scale and depth of wrongdoing in the cases at issue here make the question of completing the process distant or idealized, it is not necessary to answer whether understanding is needed for complete epistemic reparations in general.

There is another reason to prefer knowledge to either listening or understanding here. Given that the normative starting point of the framework developed in this book is the one found in the

²⁹ This is why the title of Chapter 3 is *Talking, Listening, and Learning*, where the “learning” involves the talking and listening leading to the conveying or creating of knowledge.

³⁰ I will not here wade into the discussion of whether understanding is just a species of knowledge.

³¹ Lipton (2004).

³² Grimm (2014).

³³ Zagzebski (2001) and Kvanvig (2003).

³⁴ Hills (2009).

UN's Commission on Human Rights outlining the rights of victims of gross violations and injustices, the right to be known parallels the existing right to know. The UN argues that victims have the right to know, for instance, what happened to their loved ones during a genocide or whether there was state involvement in their murders. While it would clearly be too weak to say that survivors merely have the right to listen in such cases, as knowledge crucially also involves truth and evidence, it would also be too specific or demanding to say that they have the right to understand, as it may in fact never be possible to grasp how all of the pieces of a political and social situation led to mass atrocity. Knowledge fills the space between these two ends of the epistemic spectrum. But if victims have the right to know, then they should also have the right to be known—to be recognized as epistemic agents themselves rather than as mere receptacles of knowledge that has already been produced. Their stories should be given proper uptake, their voices should be amplified, their status in the community should be restored, and they should be contributors to the historical record of the violations or injustices in question.

In Chapter 4, I specifically explore how to understand what it means to know someone as an act of epistemic reparations, and I characterize two different ways of doing so: *bearing witness* and *restoring status*. While knowing someone in a bearing witness sense minimally requires a victim's story, which needs to be appropriately anchored in reality, being given proper uptake, knowing someone in a restoring status sense instead focuses on the perception of a victim and his relations within his relevant communities, involving, for instance, his name being "cleared," his reputation being repaired, or his appropriate status being cultivated or restored. And as noted earlier, a framework for

understanding the corresponding duties to know such victims is developed in Chapter 5, one that carves out space for both perfect and imperfect duties and that applies to both perpetrators and non-perpetrators.

In a recent interview, James Soto asks, "What really is the measure of justice for someone who has [wrongfully] spent 42 years in prison?"³⁵ and then quickly responds, "I don't know if we can actually put a metric to that." It is both this sort of question and response that inspire, fuel, and guide the pages that follow. There are wrongs so violating and unjust in magnitude, depth, and impact that they entirely defy repair. Even focusing on only James and the epistemic dimensions of what he endured, how do we comprehend or calculate the damage of 42 years of him being regarded as a murderer, a monster, a number, a criminal, a non-person? 42 years of having his epistemic agency erased while a false and vilifying narrative of his life is curated, extracted, and promoted by the State? 42 years of the contours of his life being shaped and distorted by a story that is utterly foreign to who he is and what he values. Yet just as James raises the seemingly impossible question of what justice might look like in his case, so, too, we need to collectively ask this question every single day with respect to every gross violation and injustice, even when the weight of the violence and cruelty in the world threatens to crush us individually. Perhaps even more importantly, we need to listen to and learn from survivors themselves—across time periods, geographical locations, and circumstances—about how to bear witness and contribute to the restoration of their status. For it is only through each of us doing our part as members of both local and global collectives, and coming to know those victims most impacted by injustice, that

³⁵ <https://www.cbsnews.com/chicago/news/jimmy-soto-lawsuit-chicago/>.

we will begin to truly grasp what epistemic reparations demand and, in so doing, to reimagine what is possible.

As James studies for the LSAT with the hope of attending law school so that he can focus on exonerating other people with wrongful convictions, it is fitting to bring this introduction to a close with a call to action in his own words about what fulfilling his right to be known might involve: “I want to change the paradigm of this horrible experience to make it a positive thing.... I want to be known as someone who helped.”³⁶

³⁶ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/2025/05/04/jimmy-soto-wrongful-conviction/>.