

# “The Truth About Truth Telling: Field Notes from Northern Ireland, Rwanda, and South Africa”

The 2023 Slomoff Lectureship

*McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global  
Studies, University of Massachusetts Boston*

**Khalil Gibran Muhammad**

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## **About the Author**

Khalil Gibran Muhammad is the Ford Foundation Professor of History, Race and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School. He directs the Institutional Antiracism and Accountability Project and is the former Director of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a division of the New York Public Library and the world's leading library and archive of global black history.

A native of Chicago's South Side, Khalil graduated from the University of Pennsylvania with a B.A. in Economics in 1993, and then joined Deloitte as a staff accountant until entering graduate school. He earned his Ph.D. in U.S. History from Rutgers University.

## **About the Institutional Antiracism and Accountability Project**

The Institutional Antiracism and Accountability (IARA) Project at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation uses research to advance antiracism as a core value and institutional norm. IARA aims to move organizations from words to action to accountability by evaluating and disseminating the best evidence for achieving racial equity in the structures, policies, and practices of institutions.

## **About the Ash Center**

The Roy and Lila Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation is a research center at Harvard Kennedy School dedicated to developing ideas and fostering practices for equal and inclusive, multi-racial and multi-ethnic democracy and self-government.

## **Editor's Note**

Professor Khalil Gibran Muhammad's remarks below were originally delivered during the Slomoff Lecture-ship at the University of Massachusetts Boston. The lecture was drawn from extensive field research for a study on global justice, truth-telling, and healing supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. His remarks have been edited for length and clarity.

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### **A PUBLICATION OF THE**

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## **Delivered on April 25, 2023, University of Massachusetts Boston**

I'd like to begin with a couple of disclaimers. As a U.S.-trained historian, I spend very little time outside of the United States other than as a traveler. But as of late, I've been to four countries in Africa and two in the U.K., doing the work that brings me to this topic. I approach this work as an outsider. I approach it as someone with a deep concern about the role of the United States in directing the pathways to transitional justice, reconciliation, or conflict resolution in countries all over the world.

As of late, the United States is not living up to its own principles and values. This is not new, but the problem has grown even more significant in recent years. The extent to which this work helps to explain what is possible, both in other places and in the United States, is what enriches the research that I'm presenting today. One last disclaimer: This work is ongoing. My team and I are in the midst of continuing to visit places. The team will be in Tulsa, Oklahoma at the end of this week, which was a site of racial violence in the United States just about 100 years ago. We will be visiting New Zealand virtually as well. That will be the last of our site visits.

So, while we have more work to do, I think there are some things that we can point to and share that will contribute to the traditions of the Slomoff Lecture Series that brings us here. First, I want to note that today's lecture is part of the broader Global Justice, Truth-Telling and Accountability Project, sponsored by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation. Some of you may know that the Kellogg Foundation has for more than 30 years led an effort of racial healing in the United States, and they support this research in part with their own goal to interrogate the fundamentals of this concept. The reason I mention that is because the countries that we are looking at have a particular valence, including timing; these countries have more recently addressed these issues. Secondly, they have more profound and notable racial divisions. There are many ways in which conflict has proceeded in many parts of the world, and reducing those differences to some form of an identity marker is a common theme across the globe. But in particular, we were interested in about a half-dozen countries, three of which I will talk about today: Northern Ireland, Rwanda, and South Africa.

My colleague, Professor Gloria Aye, as well as Erica Licht, who is our Research Director at the Institutional Antiracism and Accountability Project (IARA), have contributed significantly to this work. The broad contours of this research are interested in the relationships that come with truth-telling. And in this circularity, we're interested in the degree to which the past is described, the past is remembered, and the past is documented, forming a memorialization culture that shapes how the public is made aware of these pasts and the context in which redress occurs. Given that systemic power drives much of the conflict in the world, how do we address it?

One of the key themes of our research is the role of colonialism in setting the conditions for conflict amongst these various nations. Then, we looked at the policy space, asking what policy levers have been used in these various countries to make sense of the past in order to move forward. How have these countries redressed the harm, the oppression, and the domination, and what are the various forms that it has taken in different parts of the world?

So, the key components of our research include recognizing and investigating human rights violations, creating space for victims to tell their stories, acknowledging the accounts of past abuses on the road to reconciliation, and, finally, making recommendations. Lastly, we've interviewed dozens and dozens of people in each of these countries. These interviews have been deliberately focused to look at all sides of these issues and at multiple levels of society, from the NGO community and sector organizational leaders to government officials, scholars, architects of various forms of truth commissions and/or peace accords, think tanks, and then museums, cultural archives, and memorial staff.

As someone who is both a trained historian and also someone who ran a cultural institution that

is in and of itself a site of memory and cultural preservation, I'm keenly sensitive to the relationship of how archives themselves are part of the process of reconciliation. So, let me begin with the case of Northern Ireland. I'm not going to spend our time re-litigating the actual history because our work is about the present—the way in which the present retells the past. One of the most striking aspects of the story of Northern Ireland is the unresolved trauma of the conflicts that began in the late 1960s.



On the island of Ireland, Northern Ireland sits in the northeast corner as part of the U.K. While Ireland has been independent since 1921, Northern Ireland is an exception. Until quite recently, it has been a Protestant-dominant part of the island. Everyone is Irish-identified, but as they will tell you, “The Irish Protestants are more British than the British.” This is a country whose demographics are quickly changing; it has only recently become essentially a Catholic-majority country. With that, as well as the exit of U.K. from the EU, significant processes of destabilization have eroded much of the peace that came with the peace accords in 1998, known as the Good Friday Agreement.

By the standards of people on the ground there, the peace that came with the peace accords had a singular goal and success in mind: stopping the violence. But the infrastructure of that country, and the ability of Northern Ireland residents to fashion a collective understanding of the past, has been the work of the past 25 years. In that way, you see tremendous instability amongst formerly paramilitary groups in the country with regard to the ultimate failures to resolve some of the economic basis of change in Northern Ireland. For example, the West Belfast community, portrayed in Kenneth Branagh's recent film, “Belfast,” which took a glossier view of things in the present, is a community of low-income people who are Protestant-identified. It's dominated by people who still identify with paramilitary organizations, and it was decimated to some degree by about 5,000 prosecutions that occurred for those who had a direct part in the Troubles over that 30-year period. Here, part of the memorialization culture of Northern Ireland is muralization.

It's a striking aspect of the country. In one courtyard we visited, we saw a larger-than-life image of a fallen soldier of Protestant heritage, painted onto the entire side of a building wall. His portrait functioned as the cultural anchor of this community. To the left of that building was another image of two armed paramilitary members, pointing their weapons at the viewer. The guns followed us as we passed; it was an optical illusion. It articulated the way in which, for this Protestant community, memorialization means being able to tell their Protestant side of the Troubles—of the people who fought to defend their homes and themselves against what they claim as Catholic violence.

There is no single narrative in this story, and indeed, what is being passed on from one generation of young people to the next in this community, most of whom were born after the Troubles ended, is a sense of grievance for the losses of an increasing minority of Protestants who feel left behind.

How is the state responding to this problem today? Not 10 years ago, not 15 years ago. The state today is responding with various efforts at restorative justice. In that very same courtyard in the same space anchored by the image of the fallen soldier is a mural by an organization called STARS: Striving Toward A Restorative Society. Here, we saw the messaging often paid for by government dollars, distributed to nonprofits as a way to stem what is effectively community violence. The structural violence that came with British occupation of the island, which morphed into Northern Ireland remaining part of the U.K., led to fighting between low-income to middle-income Protestants, who had a stranglehold on the opportunities to be found in Northern Ireland.

Now resolved by a peace accord, this community is still struggling with the structural violence of British colonialism. In the face of the changing fortunes that globalization has brought to Northern

Ireland, including increased Catholic mobility and increasing numbers of immigrants from other parts of the U.K. taking the higher tech sector positions, having little more than access to an anemic non-profit sector (that is doing the best it can) is fueling a grievance.

Walking around this neighborhood, you see many older gentlemen, loitering and waiting. They represent the face of a low-income Protestant community that once, at the heyday of ship building in this industrial behemoth for the U.K. and the British Isles, would have had far better economic prospects than they have today.

Instead, what is being fueled by this sense of loss and grievance in this moment through this muralization culture, through this version of their storytelling, is an idea that they have to take back their country. We saw one mural that read, “We seek nothing but the elementary right implanted in every man: the right if you are attacked to defend yourself.” And indeed, in this portion of West Belfast, one finds the present threat of community violence significant enough that when my colleague and I were on the ground, a gentleman with a yellow vest was sure to accompany us, just to signal that we were outsiders, that we were not to be harmed. And I must tell you, that was the first and only time in Northern Ireland where I felt a little bit uneasy about where we were.

Another mural read, “The dead cannot cry out for justice. It is a duty of the living to do so for them.” This is again part of the memorialization culture through murals, where Protestants tell their story of loss. As a scholar of the United States, I think about the way in which Confederate memorialization plays out in this country and has so done so for roughly 150 years. At this point, there remains no single narrative with which to try to bring closure or achieve reconciliation.

In this same area, we saw a sign declaring, “Restore our place in the United Kingdom. No EU law. No EU court. No EU checks. End the Irish sea border—nothing less will do.” This is what the Brexit moment looks like for Northern Ireland. This is the narrative of keeping the European Union out of the business of England and Northern Ireland. Now, why does the EU matter? The EU matters in this particular story of truth-telling because the EU has been the primary mechanism for holding the politicians of Northern Ireland accountable for ensuring that there be no continued discrimination against the Catholic minority over the past 25 years. Again, it’s very important to note that that minority status is changing very rapidly and demographically no longer exists.

This is an important insight for us. The relationship of the international community—in this case, the European Union—as a primary mechanism for enforcing the recommendations of the peace process to ensure that Catholics no longer be subjected to the kinds of systemic discrimination and violence that they experienced at the hands of both the Ulster community as well as British army officials is now unraveling in the wake of Brexit. Brexit is challenging the capacity of the European Union to hold Northern Ireland accountable. Now, the extent to which it will be absorbed, which many experts say is a *fait accompli*, will of course change that, and the EU will come back into play.

But make no mistake about it: The larger context, in which right-wing movements and neo-Nazism sit at the base of the Protestant community of Northern Ireland, remains an ever-present larger global issue that is unfolding in many countries of the West as we speak.

On the other side, if you’ve been to Northern Ireland, you’ll see the peace walls. This is the part of the country where the line separating a historically Catholic community from the Protestant community required security. The peace walls have gates that rise 30 feet into the air, meant to limit the ability of Protestants who would throw incendiary devices at those who lived behind those walls, bringing harm and terror.

On the other side of those walls are the opposite stories. You find murals of Catholics who fell during the Troubles. And as is true on the other side, each one is named, with their date of birth. And

there's a plaque telling their story, which reminds people of the commitments and the bravery and the resistance. These deeds are "unequaled in the history of our struggle," it reads. "We, the Republican ex-prisoners of the greater Clonard, salute you, and your reward will only be a united Ireland."

Another fascinating aspect of this muralization culture, that is competing versions of both sides, is the ways in which on the Catholic side, the global justice movement also brings in solidarity claims for shared interests across the Atlantic. In this case, under a Sinn Féin poster, we found a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King.

And in fact, just down the road from this quote, is a huge global peace solidarity mural, which centers the African American and Black freedom struggle. At the center is Frederick Douglass, and then there's Sojourner Truth, John Lewis, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Geronimo Pratt, and, of course, the recently installed Barack Obama.

The struggle for South Africa is a source of ongoing inspiration for those on the Catholic side, who see their struggle as part of the larger struggle for global justice more generally. They see themselves, ultimately, as the victims who merit solidarity with people from around the world.

Moving on to a part of Northern Ireland which is on the northeastern tip of the island, is Londonderry or Derry. This is the part of Northern Ireland that was the site of Bloody Sunday in 1969, when a group of peaceful marchers set out to draw attention to the systemic racism the Catholics in that overwhelmingly Protestant area encountered. Catholics were about 10 percent of the population of Derry as compared to 90 percent Protestants. Their experience had all the markings of systemic discrimination, including housing, education, electoral politics, and so on and so forth. Fascinatingly, they took inspiration from the American civil rights movement, which had by that time led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965. They could not see then that we would have our own unresolved problems and unfinished business with regard to the ways in which systemic racism was not addressed by the civil rights legislation. Nevertheless, this movement evoked a trans-Atlantic civil rights movement. One man, one vote. Jobs not creed.

In 2017, Reverend Jesse L. Jackson Sr. opened the Museum of Free Derry, which is a museum in Derry dedicated to that particular freedom struggle. This is part of the broader museum, truth-telling, and memorialization culture of this country, and inside, we see again the way in which the language of the civil rights movement helps to inform their own struggle, with signs reading, "We shall overcome." These are the tools of domination. And then again, no surprise to us, they share the story of Bloody Sunday.

Before we leave Northern Ireland, I want to say a couple of things about the actual interventions used in this case. While it is clear that the state has taken a funding role in creating the conditions of possibility for truth-telling amongst various sides of this conflict, the state's primary role has been to ensure political peace, to ensure that violence would not follow political differences. The state has also funded a number of organizations that bring "both sides together." Unlike the case of Rwanda, which we'll talk about in just a moment, there is not a state-recognized version of victims and perpetrators, or survivors and perpetrators.

These nonprofit organizations create the conditions where people, or various communities at the most local of levels, come together and tell their stories. A number of books have been published about the effectiveness of this process, because there was death on both sides, because—as we've seen in the way these murals tell these stories—people lost innocent family members who were not involved in the conflict. Still, something terrible happened.

Talking to Catholics about this issue, they say that it was very difficult initially to be in these conversations with Protestants, but that in sitting in those spaces, they realized how valuable it was for them. And the same is true on the Protestant side. As an African American whose people descend from the



enslaved and the West Africans who were taken many, many centuries ago, when I first heard this, it was hard to imagine what that looks like today. But I think it's a powerful lesson for the possibility of change at the community level, which is precisely what the Kellogg Foundation hoped to do with its racial healing support.



As we move to Rwanda, we have a very different story. We have a country whose conflict derives most immediately from the relationships of World War I and the transfer of power from the Germans to the Belgians. The Belgians mapped onto previous distinctions of Hutu and Tutsi, which essentially mapped onto those who were farmers versus those who owned cattle. In other words, they reinforced a social hierarchy with social status that could be attached to about 18 original clans with heterogeneous populations that were led by various chiefs. They contained members who were self-identified Hutus and Tutsis. Hutus have always been the majority population, as you would expect in any primarily agricultural society.

When the Belgians arrived, they began to use the science of racial classification. They imposed a Hamitic theory of domination, which essentially meant that the Tutsi were more advanced because they were closer to Europeans, the natural-born rulers. Around 1959, the Tutsi leaders began to resist the influence and impact of the Belgians on their society, and as a result, the Belgians decided that they would arm and support the Hutus. The Hutus felt their own sense of grievance given the legacies of racial classification and the notion that they were permanently inferior as a population rather than people who happened to be farmers but might one day be cattle owners. That led to not one genocide in 1994 but seven genocides.

Today, Rwanda is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. It is the smallest African nation, but it is also the densest by population. Roughly 95 percent of the country is cultivated land, but as many will tell you, it is one of the safest and built-up, infrastructurally sound countries in the Global South. The explanation for this is essentially a combination of its own economy and Western development support that stays in the country. Colloquially, some people say that roughly 90 to 95 cents of every dollar stay in the country to support the economy of Rwanda, meaning that there's very little corruption in Rwanda today.

Unlike Northern Ireland, the government of Rwanda has taken a much more autocratic approach—a command-and-control approach to telling the history of the genocide. It has established a national memorial, and so rather than the very liberalized, laissez-faire memorialization culture that we find in Northern Ireland, here we find the state making significant investments in a single narrative—a single narrative that is described as the genocide against the Tutsi, not the Rwandan genocide. And by foreclosing the complexity of the genocide itself, which also included loss of life among people who were Hutu moderates and those who fought against génocidaires who were identified as Hutus and threatened with losing their lives if they did not support the genocide, there continues to be suppressed speech today.

The government of Rwanda has made it a crime to speak out against the government. We had a number of conversations with people who said essentially, “If I were to say this and be overheard, I'd be in jail,” including former government officials. This is a complexity worth considering. When I pulled up to the Kigali Genocide Memorial, I took a picture, but the next two pictures I took were deleted from my phone by security forces who saw me taking pictures. So, it's a very real situation.

And it comes with some messiness that I think is worth leaning into. At the memorial, roughly 250,000 people who died during the genocide are permanently interred. It is a massive site of

memorialization for the victims of the genocide. An estimated eight hundred thousand to one million people were killed in a roughly three-month period beginning in April of 1994. And it's important to note that there's been no other form of killing in the history of the world that's been this efficient, given the number of people who died in such a short period of time.

To that extent, the complexities of the autocratic forms of leadership of the current Kagame government make some sense. There is a significant community of Rwandan refugees living outside of the country, and the majority of those people now identify as Hutus. In the past, they identified as Tutsi because those were the people who were facing persecution over long periods of time. The region remains unstable, and the security forces are no different than our own security forces. For me, for example, 20 years ago, I couldn't catch a plane without going through additional screening simply for having a name: Khalil Gibran Muhammad. So, we shouldn't present ourselves as so much above reproach given the challenges to our own civil liberties that exist in the post-9/11 world in this country.

On the point though of truth-telling, the country of Rwanda has created the conditions for a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of the conflict. Rather than blaming Hutus for the violence, they blame colonialism. They blame the role of the West in creating the conditions that led to genocide. They also do this within the space of this official site of memorialization by broadening the understanding of various forms of colonialism that exist in many parts of the world. And as someone who studies colonialism, I take most of what they say to be an accurate depiction of the way in which colonialism has shaped the conditions for conflict in many parts of the world. That's important.

It's important because, at the same time, Rwanda—more than any of the three places that I'll talk about—has invested tremendous energy, effort, and learning into what actually happened in the country. They are committed to building an infrastructure of national civic unity that is not just an empty building with a few bureaucrats inside but very thoughtful researchers, many of whom have been educated in the West and United States in particular, to try to bring what they can to the unfolding story of what's happened in that country.

Additionally, for the first time, some of the 120,000 people incarcerated after being convicted through both a court process, which produced very few formal prosecutions, and a *Gacaca* process, which was a community-based form of prosecution, will soon return to civil society. Many of the young people who were convicted under this process have already been released. Young people today are growing up in Rwanda having to wrestle with the fact that they lost parents, or that their parents have been incarcerated, wondering what that means to them. Which means not unlike Northern Ireland, the evolving nature of the histories that have unfolded in this country, the trauma and conflict of genocide that they've experienced, will produce new challenges in the near future.

On the grounds of the memorial, you see the ways in which individuals come to remember their loved ones. Most of the enclosures that contain people do not have a visible coffin, but there is a documentation process to name those who were lost. They have a sculpture of a flame that will never extinguish. And of course, young people on field trips are brought here to learn this story. I was even told that the state insists that no head of state or diplomat from any part of the country comes to the Kigali Genocide Memorial before they meet with state officials or the President. So again, unlike Northern Ireland, their commitment to a narrative, even if constrained by a closed society or a security state, has produced stability in this country around a shared narrative of colonialism as the root of the problem.

Along the countryside, the sites of memorialization extend in all directions, from Kigali to the surrounding communities. You may happen upon Kwibuka 28, which was created on the 28th anniversary of the genocide, when we were there in 2022. And they have essentially created small graveyard sites around the countryside because so many people died. There were so many bodies everywhere and ultimately so many mass graves that for the state, the decision was to use these sites as a constant reminder

of what happened. There are places in the further reaches of Rwanda where the skeletons and remains of people rest for eternity in the physical landscape of the land, that have grown over to become a surreal representation of the genocide.

Yet and still, the commitment to the outward face of this history is definitely undeniable. One individual helped us to appreciate the very specific mechanism that the state has supported but is not leading, and that's the way in which community dialogues proceed. She is the leader of an organization called SEVOTA. Her first name is Godeliève, and Godeliève has been responsible for about 75,000 forms of reconciliation, starting with her own village, where—in the specific contours of the Rwandan genocide—neighbors killed neighbors, relatives killed relatives, friends killed friends.

And because of the specific context in which Hutu and Tutsi always lived together, the pain of loss and the not knowing what happened to loved ones, even when you knew who killed your loved one, has been the work of Godeliève and SEVOTA. SEVOTA started with women as survivors, both in terms of the actual genocide and, in some cases, of rape, and as survivors of the loss of loved ones. Godeliève recognized that there was really no effort early on for those survivors to heal, to come to terms with the trauma that they experienced.

But she soon recognized that the men and their lives could not be left unaddressed, and then she recognized that the perpetrators who were returning back to their ancestral and home villages could not be left unaddressed. And so, SEVOTA today brings all of those people together, and again, its spirit and form are almost identical to some of the same conversations we had with nonprofit NGOs who do this community-based dialoguing.

Godeliève recommended a young man whom we spoke to, who today is in his late thirties, but at 13 years old, as he told us, had killed several people. For him and for so many others, they want their stories told. He wanted us to know what he'd done, and he wanted us to know that if it were not for SEVOTA, or were it not for the ability for him to come to terms with what he'd done, he would not be the person he is today.

One of the most powerful stories in our research came from this young man. He told us that the need for healing amongst survivors means that his relationship with the victims of his crimes depends upon him regularly coming back and paying them visits, not only because he helped bring closure for what happened to their loved ones and helped discover their remains, but because he is the closest living embodiment of their loved ones. This, frankly, again, challenges the way in which many of us, as Americans in a very punitive society, think about the relationship to those who have brought so much pain and suffering. He kept insisting over and over again, "I know this is hard to believe. I know you won't believe me. Please come. Please come to the village so you can see for yourself." We were not able to take him up on his offer, but in the broader sense of things, we heard this story told in many other contexts.

And so, finally, to give some context for the academic basis for this work, the way in which the state is supporting academic research, we met with the Institute of Research and Dialogue for Peace. It is one of many aspects of the relationship of the academic community and the national government to documenting their peace process. There's also the National Center for Civics and Unity, which is an important beachhead for managing Rwanda's process. Make no mistake about it—this is not an open society in any sense. This is still a security state. But in the trade-off between an open society and stability, Rwanda is an incredibly stable society. Many of its leaders, who are even critical of Kagame, who felt that Kagame should have stepped down after his second term, still believe that leadership for Rwandans is the whole story.

So leaders can be good, and leaders can be bad. And I'm not here to pass judgment at this time as to what we should make of Rwanda's choices. I am here to suggest to you that the mechanisms that they are using for truth-telling are better than my next example, which will take us to South Africa.



South Africa may indeed be the most well-known of these examples. But the story of South Africa is also the story of Europe in Africa. It is the place where, since 1652, Dutch traders landed in the Cape of Good Hope, established Cape Town, and established the form of colonialism that we recognize in many parts of the colonized world.

They first established chattel slavery. They then eventually dispossessed the Koi and San indigenous tribes of the region and, ultimately, from the 1600s well until the 19th century, took increasing possession of land, eventually putting them in the crosshairs of Britain, who had their own claims or at least sought their own claims. This led to a series of wars, which also involved the Zulu, who famously beat the British. Broad-strokes history here, so bear with me, folks.

Why this matters is because, while Europeans still represent less than 10 percent of the population of South Africa, for the remaining populations of both Bantu-descended people as well as people who come from Indonesia, from Mozambique, from other parts of the Indian diasporic world, who today we call colored, who self-identify as Malay—they are a mixed-race people representing the presence of Europeans and the forms of migration, of kidnapping, and of slavery that evolved over the course of those 250 years before the 20th century and before we get to apartheid.

And so, the wealth of the West in South Africa is blatant and distinct relative to much of the rest of Africa. South Africa has the second largest economy behind Nigeria. But unlike Nigeria, which is an extractive economy tied to petroleum, South Africa is home to multinational corporations that dot the landscape of corporate parks between Johannesburg and Pretoria, just like you would expect to see on the New Jersey Turnpike, not too far from where I live.

This is a country, since 1994, that has been led by the Black government of the African National Congress (ANC) and has installed five presidents. The constitution itself has been a model constitution, lifting up the values of liberal democracy in an open society. And indeed, I bore direct witness to the way in which dissent is acceptable and acknowledged. I talked to those actively engaged in protesting the current government of South Africa as well as government officials who currently serve in roles monitoring corruption within the government while being accountable to community organizations like Khulumani, which is protesting the failures of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to address reparations in the country today.

What is it that South Africa is doing about memorialization? What does that look like? Number Four, a prison building located on Constitutional Hill, is also home to the Constitutional Court, which is South Africa's Supreme Court. What is fascinating about this is that this site of memorialization is a mashup of the past, the present, and the future. They took the site of one of the places of torture and pain and punishment, where Black South Africans were arrested for their political dissent, kept the prison itself as a museum, and built its Supreme Court on top of it.

And it's a brilliant way of reminding the people of this nation that its future is tied directly to its past. Today, there is a public art display showing the process of socialization for those who came inside Number Four. The statues' heads are missing because colonialism destroys the body and takes the mind. Visitors can also view the sites of solitary confinement where prisoners were kept. And just beyond the prison itself is an eternally burning flame of democracy with the preamble to the Constitution inscribed on the bricks.

What a powerful moment of contradiction to stand in this place, unlike Rwanda. Just behind this eternal flame, we saw people with Khulumani, protesting what they called "the unfinished business of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission." And they cite the ways in which today's disasters are exacerbating the legacies of colonialism, speaking of climate change, COVID, floods, gender-based violence,

poverty, crime, and inequality. For them, these forms of structural violence and neglect are direct legacies of apartheid and colonialism. And yet because the victims of apartheid have not had redress, they find themselves protesting to this very day.

Nomarussia Bonase is helping to lead Khulumani, an organization of largely low-income older persons, both men and women, although it's largely women-led. And the short version here is that the TRC only acknowledged about 22,000 victims of apartheid, who were direct victims of police or state violence. The process was narrowly conceived for the purposes of doing something rather than taking on the enormity of the impact. Desmond Tutu led this process.

There are a couple of notable failures that are acknowledged by the government and have not been resolved, and you can find them on the walls of just about any museum that you encounter in South Africa. One problem is that very few people who were identified by those 22,000 victims were in fact prosecuted and punished. Secondly, for those who sought amnesty as perpetrators, very few white people came forward to seek amnesty. And thirdly, many people who were members of the South African police and military forces are to this day paid pensions from the Black government of South Africa despite never seeking any form of amnesty to participate in the process nor being held accountable. In fact, there are just as many if not more African National Congress members who have been subjected to prosecution, and more who sought amnesty for telling what they did, usually to people who were considered informants by the white South African or Afrikaner government.

Part of the grievances that are legacy effects of the TRC process also have to do with the fact that there were promises for land distribution as well as community reparations to ensure that there would be clean water, that there would be electrification, that there would be good schooling and educational opportunities. If you spend time in South Africa today, you will recognize that much of that has not occurred. And it is people like Nomarussia who are on the front lines of that battle. After we met her on Constitution Hill, we did not recognize that we would actually see her days later, speaking at the University of South Africa because she's just that important to this battle.

And so, while the traditions of liberal democracy create the space for dissent and acknowledgment for people to express their concerns, nevertheless, the lights still go out in South Africa due to loadshedding. For the poor of that country, who are living under conditions in various townships, including Soweto, that don't look much different than how they looked 30 years ago, the mechanism for change under a Black government seems to still be wanting. The process of memorialization, while more honest, seems to not have led to justice. And yet some of the contradictions are powerful to witness up close.

For instance, Golden Reef City is home to an amusement park and a casino. But that amusement park and casino sit on the land of one of the first gold mines in South Africa. And adjacent to this early gold mine is the Apartheid Museum, which takes some of its inspiration from the U.S. Holocaust Museum on the National Mall, including being randomly assigned a ticket upon entry as to whether you are white or non-white.

I think the museum, as museums go, is both encyclopedic and effective. There is a lot of truth-telling in South Africa's museum and memorialization culture, including the degree to which the heterogeneity of political philosophies amongst Black South Africans and the differences between Steven Biko and Nelson Mandela and Winnie Mandela and so many others are told—and told in unflinching ways. There is something about the embrace of memorialization culture here that is both powerful and also limiting.

I did forget to mention one important thing about Rwanda, which matters to this point. Rwanda has attempted to solve its problem not just through a single narrative. It has also attempted to solve its problem through universal healthcare and forms of social provision that mitigate extreme forms of poverty in the country. Whereas once they conscripted people to do street sweeping, today those people

are paid. And so, while it is a poor country, it is a poor country that recognizes the relationship between economic need and structural violence, and how understanding its legacies as well as the ongoing concerns and resentments born by those legacies can be a way to mitigate future violence.

South Africa has not done the same thing, even as the museum shares stories of political prisoners like Stephen Biko. The National Museum for the country is in Pretoria, and its relationship to a shanty community that sits at the foot of the museum is striking. Again, many of the stories are very striking for the way in which they don't shy away from the issue of communist influence in the ANC as well as violence by the ANC, including Nelson Mandela himself becoming the target of the U.S. CIA. And, as many of us know, the CIA is ultimately responsible for the discovery of Nelson Mandela before he was taken into custody and put on trial.

In South Africa, Paul Kruger, an Afrikaner leader, for whom Paul Kruger National Park is named, was subjected to some political dissent in the era of Black Lives Matter. Protestors attempted to remove the statue of Kruger from his pedestal, which is why there's now a gate around it. Of course, this is a part of the contested terrain of South Africa's own reckoning with its apartheid and colonial past with regard to these new narratives of the future.

Then, there's a statue of Nelson Mandela, a smile on his face and arms outstretched. I think one of the most powerful lessons for us is to understand how Nelson Mandela has been memorialized as a singular figure. He is as close as you can get to the version of Dr. Martin Luther King who stands on the National Mall today, as a kind of monumentalized version of a rainbow nation or, in the American case, of American exceptionalism.

In both cases, the voice has been limited to simply a smiling old man who fathered this great nation. And one of the ironies of where this image of Nelson Mandela sits, at the foot of the Union Buildings, which form the parliament for South Africa with Pretoria at the foot of his large monument, is that it's occupied by Koi and San people who have been out there for more than a year to hold the ANC accountable for giving land back to those communities that lost it.

And so, this contradiction is powerful in terms of widening the scope of what has not been fundamentally redressed as compared to acknowledged. Nelson Mandela is even notable for the Nelson Mandela Mall in Sandton, which is one of the richest places in all of Africa. Apparently, it has more millionaires per square mile than any other part of Africa. And at this mall is another monumentalized version of Nelson Mandela, a statue in front of the building. But it gets even stranger because as you walk the corridors of this mall, he becomes almost a cartoonish figure. There are multiple versions of him, including one with Winnie.

I happened to be at this mall with young people who represent the Gen-Z perspective, and they simply said that Nelson Mandela is no longer a hero to them because they feel like he, and I'm paraphrasing here, sold out the country by not holding white people accountable for what happened to them. And that they gave away too much in the negotiated settlement, which the current president, Cyril Ramaphosa, was ultimately the chief negotiator for. The point is not that people will disagree. The point is that this resentment exists amongst those young people because these issues have not been solved for.

And yet, on any given day, one might be swayed by the image of Nelson Mandela's famous rainbow nation. In Cape Town especially, you can visit a local mall or a tourist location and see young children, Black and white, playing together. And today in South Africa, the Cecil B. Rhodes Memorial still stands despite the movement that Rhodes must fall. As you well know, the British imperialist who had a vision of connecting South Africa to Northern Africa, who helped to commercialize the discovery of diamonds, and who today inspires Rhodes Scholars all over the world, represents the competing histories of this pre-apartheid South Africa and this post-apartheid South Africa.

But some of those changes are unfolding. At the University of Cape Town, one hall has been renamed Sarah Baartman Hall for the name of a Khoisan woman who became an international exhibit of the exceptional inferiority of Black people for her body parts. Upon her death, her body was preserved and put on display in museums around the world to emphasize the distinctiveness of African inferiority.

Finally, I want to end with the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation. Why do I end here for South Africa? As I said to you in Northern Ireland and Rwanda, both sides come together with imperfect results. In South Africa, white people don't come to the table of reconciliation. White people have not been asked to come to the table of reconciliation. They've been given a free pass in the interest of reconciliation, in the interest of moving forward. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission process was meant to do that work, a one-time offer. Even F. W. de Klerk famously said that until the Truth Commission process, he didn't know what was going on.

Which, if you're like me, you find that impossible to believe. But the performance of ignorance, or as James Baldwin would say, innocence, remains a source of tremendous inequality in this country because whites still hold the land and the economic power. And they still hold political power because of that economic influence. There are limitations of the Black governments, and I pluralize that because the ANC may never be capable of overcoming its own choices and corruption. And there are competing Black organizations, including the Economic Freedom Fighters, who are trying to gain power, but they will not gain power as long as the West has a stranglehold on the economic resources.

To close, for South Africa, two white people are leading much of this work here. They're trying to get white people to the table; they're having limited results. But one of them told a powerful story of why he entered into this work. He's about 40 years old, and he said when he was 11 years old, his uncle, who had fought for the South African Army in Angola to fight against the Angola Freedom Movement, came home with a skull with a bullet in its head as a trophy of the kill that he'd made on the battlefields of Angola, representing the interest of white Europeans in Southern Africa.

And he said as a child, no one ever talked to him about the trauma that he experienced being exposed to that violence. And that's the work he hopes to do today. Because for the 10 percent of the population that is white, they've never come to the table of reconciliation. And hence, the future of South Africa seems to be somewhat more uncertain, as it has not yet dealt with the legacies of colonialism and apartheid besides a Truth Commission process. We didn't interview a single person who said that the United States should follow what they've done. Now, let me close where we started—with the United States.

Some of you know that the congresswoman, Barbara Lee, and the senator, Corey Booker, have called for a U.S. Commission on Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation. And just as the House bill that the late John Conyers proposed beginning in 1977, called HR40, remains in committee and has never been brought to a full vote of Congress, so too is this idea still simply on paper. And yet this Truth, Racial Healing, and Transformation Commission is a direct legacy of and in conversation with the Kellogg Foundation's own work. But if I were to tell you the version of history for the United States that matches, or at least is in conversation with, Northern Ireland, Rwanda, and South Africa, this is what it would look like.

First, we'd start with the end of the conflict. We'd start with the peace. We'd start with the end of the Civil War. And as early as 1866, a Confederate version of what comes next was a story of the federal government empowering the Negro at the expense of the white man. That the resistance to political freedom, to justice and truth made right by the legacies of 245 years of slavery, was already immediately under attack. And those of you who know the history of the United States know that reconstruction was roughly a 10-year period of federal occupation, which brought with it new constitutional amendments in response to this very resistance.

And yet when we look at memorialization culture in the United States, what we see is that most of the history of the Civil War was taken up by the Confederate side of history. Most of the history of what happened during slavery and what happened after slavery was not a story of national unity. And it certainly wasn't done in a kind of command-and-control way, like in Rwanda. It was left to a kind of laissez-faire approach, which produced a narrative of white supremacy that became a nationalizing narrative. And where it disagreed with the Confederacy, it remained passive in the face of a new narrative assault, manifested in these monuments.

The peak of building Confederate memorials occurred between 1890 and 1915, which was one generation removed from the war. The Daughters of the Confederacy led this effort to build monuments to their fathers and grandfathers who had fought in the war against the North. On the opposite side of that peak is about 1915, another generation later, when the African American community began to resist segregation. The second peak, I'll just mention briefly, is the civil rights movement. In other words, with every moment of challenge to this country, Confederate monuments have gone up in this country. And that pattern means that no matter where you are in this country, the truth of slavery and its legacies is poorly taught and understood by many Americans.

The Southern Poverty Law Center did this study on Confederate memorials, and I'm only going to point to one thing here in the interest of time, on the question of slavery being the central cause of the Civil War. When you ask students, 8 percent of students understood that key concept, 58 percent of textbooks acknowledged it, and only 39 percent of state standards in this study acknowledged that slavery was an essential cause of the Civil War. Imagine if we were talking about the teaching of the Holocaust in Germany, and only 8 percent of German students today could say that the Holocaust actually happened, that it was directed against the Jews. It would be outrageous, and the United States would be leading an effort to point it out.

Coming full circle to an issue such as reparations—the same issue that is on the table in South Africa for those who are fighting against the erasure of colonialism in terms of its impact on the present—your own colleagues, as part of the UMass system, have done some polling research to look at how many Americans believe that reparations are a good thing. They found that nearly half of Americans believe the federal government should not pay reparations to the descendants of slaves. And this “nearly half” is weighted by the fact that most of the respondents voted for Democrats, so the partisan divide on this issue is incredibly striking.

If there is a pathway to taking lessons from this period, that pathway runs through truth-telling. That pathway runs through coming up with a shared narrative of what happened in the past and a new memorialization culture that would replace the existing one. And yet 22 states have passed anti-critical race theory (CRT) bills in this country, which are bills against the teaching of race or gender, which are defined under most of these bills as divisive concepts that make white children feel bad about these histories. All but 44 states in the country have proposed various anti-CRT measures, which is to say that this problem is everywhere in this country today.

There's no pathway to justice and a lasting peace that doesn't start with truth. And the truth about truth-telling is that it's hard. The truth about truth-telling is that we don't have a perfect model in the world about how to do it. But the truth about truth-telling is if we don't figure it out, or we don't take the best that we can from what we do already know, we're not going to be better off as we hand these various countries off to the next generation.





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**iARÁ** INSTITUTIONAL ANTIRACISM  
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