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# Apology and Social Harmony: The Pedagogy of Regret

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*Abstract: The delivery of formal apologies for harm done to generations of citizens by government policies and practices has provided a spectacular focus for processes of social healing and sustainability to potentially develop and take root. In the Australian context in particular, the notion of Apology has been at the forefront of federal government policies for the term of the current parliament. While the judiciousness, wording and delivery of such Apologies have been the subject of intense debate and disagreement, it would seem that there is a social catharsis benefit that flows from these types of public acts of contrition. The question that arises, however, is how to make such emotional attachment to social healing sustainable - how might the underlying motivational forces be sustained? One possible way is through formal educative means; that is, through the enfleshment of reconciliation plans with genuinely transformative educational work. This paper suggests a number of possible paths for a temporally-located event - an Apology - to become an on-going component of community renewal through schooling.*

Keywords: Education, Social Sustainability, Apology, Reconciliation, Critical Pedagogy, Transformative Practice

## Introduction

**I**N THE CURRENT era, in times of what Zygmunt Bauman (2000, 2007) calls liquid modernity, very few of the social forms, structures, processes and projects of early, solid, modernity hold their shape for long:

*Forms, whether already present or only adumbrated, are unlikely to be given enough time to solidify, and cannot serve as frames of reference (2007, p 1).*

In fact, the way Bauman sees it, the flow of the social has barely time to solidify into any recognizable shape before it is subject yet again to the shearing forces of change:

*[P]atterns of dependency and interaction. . are now malleable to an extent unexperienced by and unimaginable for, past generations; but like all fluids they do not keep their shape for long. Shaping them is easier than keeping them in shape. (2000, p 8)*

This paper looks to both the need for and possible ways of enacting a process of maintaining - of making sustainable – a form (shape) of national compassion and regret (involving processes of community reconciliation) that might make for a reconstruction of social health and well-being. While Beck (1999, 2005) might see many of the formalized institutions of modernity such as the nation-state, the school, the family and categories of class as “zombie institutions” (institutions that are at once dead yet living), there is a strong argument that the salvation role education, and schooling within that, might play in helping to anchor some of the flows of modernity long enough to allow some shapes and forms to solidify is one not

to be lightly dismissed or discounted. Genuinely transformative pedagogical practice is one desperately-needed vehicle for the embedding of an ethos of care and compassion into both community consciousness and everyday social relations and practice.

While this paper is not the place to engage in any in-depth discussion of the nature of community in the current era, it is important to sketch one view that connects directly to the function of events such as Apologies in these times. Bauman (2000) described the typical form of contemporary community as that of the explosive community – volatile, transient, single-purpose, exterritorial and precarious. Sub-sets of such communities are what he terms “cloakroom” and “carnival” communities (p200), forms of communal engagement and solidarity that coalesce around and generate commitment of communality from insiders around very specific and isolated events:

*Cloakroom communities need a spectacle which appeals to similar interests dormant in otherwise disparate individuals and so bring them all together for a stretch of time when other interests – those which divide them instead of uniting – are temporarily laid aside, put on a slow burner or silenced altogether. Spectacles as the occasion for the brief existence of a cloakroom community do not fuse and blend individual concerns into ‘group interest’ ...the illusion of sharing which the spectacle may generate would not last much longer than the excitement of the performance. Spectacles have come to replace the ‘common cause’ of the heavy / solid / hardware modernity era. (p. 200)*

The notion of the Apology as Spectacle is one that underpins the arguments in this paper, and motivates a consideration of possible paths for avoiding Bauman’s concern that

*One effect of cloakroom/carnival communities is that they effectively ward off the condensation of ‘genuine’ (that is comprehensive and lasting) communities which they mime and (misleadingly) promise to replicate or generate from scratch (p. 201)*

At the very least, it is hoped that by seeding the furrows of uncertain community orientations with transformative critical education, the prospect of drawing strength from the Spectacle with a view to extending the life of cloakroom or carnival communities might become possible.

African-American social activist, educator and writer, bell hooks, in exploring the relationship between Self and Place from a racialised perspective talks about the importance of developing beloved communities:

*When we create beloved community, environments that are anti-racist and inclusive, it need not matter that those spaces are diverse. What matters is that should difference enter the world of beloved community it can find a place of welcome, a place to belong. (hooks, 2009, p183)*

Such communities are wound around the desire to construct *a place of reconciliation, a place to come together, a way to return home* (2009, p228). For hooks, the vital underpinning ethos of community building and sustainability is that of care, and in this she has been influenced by the work of Kroecker:

*Krocker emphasizes the importance of creating a “community of care” so that our relationships with one another can be “governed by conviviality rather than suspicion, by praise rather than blame” (hooks, 2009, p.228)*

In communities of care, social relationships and daily life practices are built around what she terms “rituals of regard”(p 229). It is into the category of such rituals that formal community-based apologies should be positioned.

Apology in this sense can be seen as both Ritual (in effect, as the performance of symbolic regret) and as Spectacle, Bauman’s liquefied substitute for social movement or cause. Transmogrifying Spectacle into daily Ritualistic practice becomes a crucial task in developing community sustainability, and it is through a pedagogy of regret that such transformation might occur. The role of educative practices in moving a one-off expression of concern and regret into something akin to a baseline community ethic is one that needs to be embraced and applied.

Following hooks’s work a little further, the role of the educator, the teacher, in all of this becomes crucial. Current dominant (hegemonic) views of the effective teacher reside in the authoritarianism and individualism of neo-liberalist social ideology and in the discourse of technicism. Here, the teacher’s role is largely one of maintaining order (“discipline”, frequently masquerading as “respect” and “patriotism”), instilling job-readiness skills and dispositions (“real-world relevance”) and ensuring compliance with the dictates of increasingly nomadic capital (“loyalty”) and the consumerism that accompanies and feeds that.

Insightful and impassioned critiques of such a view of the teacher and of education (see, for example Giroux, 2008), share a common concern that the construction and performance of teaching and curriculum in neoliberal terms provide little space for the development of critical civic competencies and orientations on the part of students, thereby diminishing the communal stocks of vision, hope and pro-social activity. It is in this alternative role for education that critical pedagogical theory and practice (see Kincheloe 2008) become increasingly imperative.

Hooks connects a different image of the teacher to the work of genuine community building: the teacher as healer, and in this she draws upon the teaching of Thich Nhat Hanh and expresses a view of the effective teacher as a self-actualised, self-knowing, connected person (hooks 1994, p 15). Hooks suggests:

*...working toward a form of wholeness, a concept that also connotes restoration, integrity, and processes of overcoming/transcendence. Hence, the teacher / professor as healer is one who strives to encourage wholeness. (Yancy, 2009, p.36)*

How might the teacher *qua* healer and community of care builder, utilize occasions of Spectacle to help develop an on-going concern for social wholeness?

### **Apology as National / Community Spectacle**

As an example, I will draw upon the recent Australian experience with Apology as a social ameliorative, symbolic though it might be. On February 13<sup>th</sup> 2008 and on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2009 the Australian Prime Minister issued formal apologies on behalf of the Government, the Parliament and the people of Australia to two groups: the Stolen Generation and the Forgotten Generation respectively.

While formally expressed as an apology to Indigenous Australians affected by government policies of the forced removal of Indigenous Australian children from their families over many decades (thereby creating what has come to be called the Stolen Generation), the 2008 apology has been widely, if largely unthinkingly, treated as a symbolic apology for all atrocities, wrongs and discrimination enacted against Indigenous Australians by a series of Privileged Generations (my capitalization). The significance of the National Apology to the Stolen Generations—symbolic or otherwise—is of such magnitude that the Australian government maintains free and full access to a recording of the event (see <http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/video-national-apology-to-the-stolen-generations>).

The Apology stands as a major marker of a time of heightened concern for non-Indigenous Australians to come to terms with the concrete realities of race relations and racially-based disadvantage in their country. The term “reconciliation” has been used to describe such a process, and as if to acknowledge the largely symbolic nature of the sentiments underpinning this social purgative, “practical reconciliation” has emerged as its action-based extension. By way of example, the Queensland State Government followed the symbolic intent of the Apology with a three-year action plan (Queensland Government Reconciliation Action Plan 2009 -2012).

The act of making formal apologies for past government policies that have come to be seen as unjust, hurtful, cruel and alienating to and of their purported beneficiaries was again witnessed in November 2009 when the Prime Minister issued a bipartisan apology to the Forgotten Australians – almost 500,000 (almost exclusively white) children placed in institutional care, largely orphanages and children’s homes, or placed in foster care and made Wards of the State between 1930 and 1970. Included in this number was a group of poor children from the United Kingdom who were relocated around the then British Empire, including Australia. Similar to the case of the Stolen Generations, many of these children of the Forgotten Generation experienced physical, emotional and sexual abuse at the hands of government and church agencies and private individuals.

In Bauman’s terms, both of these events present as clear instances of Cloakroom Community Spectacles: they brought many members of the community together for fleeting moments of *faux* solidarity and community, such moments lasting little beyond “*the excitement of the performance*” and certainly failing to lead to “*the [fusing] or [blending of] individual concerns into group interest*” (Bauman 2000, p 200).

I would like to draw upon the first of these apologies to consider the ways in which a critical transformative educative response to the Apology as Spectacle might help move towards a more sustainable social healing process. A starting point is to consider the range of emotional responses the apology threw up.

## The Emotions of Apology

There is little argument that the Apology was a very significant symbolic event for the Australian community. Analyses of just how important it was have entered the public record, even in mass media locations, and has been subject to a growing body of analysis by social commentators:

*..white Australians are only too willing to nowadays to admit to the sins of the past.  
The popular response to Kevin Rudd’s apology to the stolen generations signalled an*

*openness in attitudes that would have been unthinkable even a decade ago.* (McDonald 2010, p 17)

The emotional response by those directly connected to the recipients of the apology was unambiguous: relief, affirmation and release. For example, the principal of a large local secondary (high) school spoke of indigenous students who told him of their tears as he spoke of the Apology and the reason for its delivery at a special school assembly. What seems to have been particularly important for these students was that the school – a place where the official curriculum, “commonsensical” views of indigenous students and unthinking racism within the student body makes life difficult for Indigenous Australian students at best – was the acknowledgement by the school, through its senior figure, the principal, of their suffering and that of their families and people. Finally, it seems, their history was visible and “true”. (A short recorded interview with this principal about his reaction to the Apology is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G1PqQnhICaQ> ) .

The emotions attaching to the majority section of the community on whose behalf the apology had been issued were far more uncertain and ambiguous. It is probably reasonable to assume that the large majority of the non-Indigenous community supported both the wording and the sentiment of the apology, but there was sizeable enough number of community members for whom the apology generated feelings of a far less positive nature. Typically, spectacles such as Apology seem to evoke the following emotional responses in the apologizing group:

### **Ambivalence**

Despite its high profile status in the national consciousness, the Apology did provoke in the more cynical sector of the community a certain sense of ambivalence. This revealed itself in questions regarding the actual productive or concrete change that a symbolic act such as the apology might actually achieve. It also underpinned a response rooted in ongoing racist assumptions and expectations: What is the point of apologizing to a group of people who aren't by nature destined to achieve or be any different from how they are presently?

### **Guilt**

One of the more divisive aspects of the Apology was its tendency to provoke feelings of guilt on the part of members of the apologizing group. Guilt-induced reactions to the Apology seem to lead to either an aggressively-defensive reaction (“Why should I be made to feel guilty about actions of my ancestors?” “Those of the present can't be held accountable for the actions of those of the past”) or a more morbid sense of contrition (“I feel so guilty over what's happened that I must find ways to compensate”). This latter response by and large manifests in individual angst, and rarely in genuinely collective anxiety.

### **Fear**

Based on the guilt some felt, fear as a driving emotion in the reaction to the apology came from a number of quarters. The most obvious form fear took was in repeated expressions of apprehension over the possibility / likelihood of claims for compensation and other forms of reparation on the part of the “victim” group. There was, however, another type of fear:

that of the anxiety of an exposure of a past that had been effectively stage-managed to appear relatively innocent, if not pristine, in terms of race relations. This presentation of the past had worked for a couple of centuries to promote the image of the civilizing patronage of white settler / colonizer culture. With the apology came the necessary conclusion that perhaps all hadn't been so rosy and civilizing for the colonized after all.

### **Contrition**

Probably the most commonly expressed (and presumably, felt) emotion falling out of the delivery of the apology was that of contrition: genuine remorse over events of the past whose effects had continued on into the present. Contrition by itself is a largely self-centered reaction to an event, an outpouring of sorrow over one's actions. In many ways, such a response is akin to moral purging and catharsis – a way to empty the system of personally and socially toxic detritus clogging the arteries of the body politic. While a more pro-social response to the apology than some of the others, contrition in itself retains a focus on the perpetrator and her or his feelings and emotional well-being rather than aiding the victim of the event.

### **Regret**

Regret presents as the most potentially productive emotional response to the apology insofar as it admits of a knowing appreciation of the effects of the act apologized for as well as evoking a desire for reconciliatory (and, occasionally, compensatory) action. Regret carries the notion of remorse and grief, but at the same time connotes a concern for penitence or atonement; in other words, a need to make amends or to put things right.

### **Transformative Educational Practice – Pedagogy of Regret**

*Education reflects what a society values through the development of a set of experiences where we share our histories and ways of understanding with our youth (Villegas et.al 2008, p1)*

If we accept this statement of Villegas and her colleagues' view of the education-social connection - and it is a largely non-controversial position – then what happens in schools is of the greatest importance in reorienting the community towards compassion and collective concern and away from neoliberal imperatives of indecent individualism. It requires a pedagogical response to the challenge of converting the transience of the Spectacle of the cloakroom community into enduring – sustainable – Rituals of Regard that might be the hallmark of the community of care. Imagining a pedagogy of regret and enacting it through the Apology is an example of how this challenge might be taken up and progressed.

It is through a focus on the action dimension of regret that more positive, genuine and enduring effects might flow from the symbolic Spectacle of Apology. In this, transformative educative practice becomes central to the task of institutionalizing sustained strategies of racial /ethnic relationship renewal.



## Sketching a Pedagogy of Regret

More specifically, and using the apology to the Stolen Generations as the case instance, what might be some points of focus of a pedagogical approach to parlaying the transience of the Apology as Spectacle into a more sustained ethic of care? I would suggest three major strands of work present as central to the task, all of them rooted in an acceptance of the development of a critical citizenry as a (probably *the*) major purpose of education and schooling. There is a basic knowledge, a conceptual and an imaginary dimension to such a pedagogy.

A formal and critical educative response to the Apology requires a certain knowledge base upon which to construct an understanding and appreciation of the need for on-going civic work to transform the symbolic into the concrete. One aspect of this knowledge-base consists of the subordinate histories and social geographies of those towards whom the Apology has been directed. A pedagogy of regret must commence with a deepening understanding by all students of the multiple histories of the country, not just those sectional narratives that pass as the “official knowledge” (Apple 1993, 2000) of the history curriculum. The state of awareness of the perpetrator or apologising group assumes primacy in this type of work. In the case in point here, the dominant (coloniser) culture consists largely of those who would be identified racially\*<sup>1</sup> as Whites. It is on behalf of this group that the Apology has been made, and because of the extant power differentials and relationships within the Australian community, it is largely to this group that the focus of pedagogical work in pursuit of an ethic sustained regret must be aimed. Here, there are two main emphases: one, an enhanced consciousness of the ubiquity of race as a socially-based feature of human identity in general and the specificity of White as a racial location in particular; the second an awareness of how a dominant discourse of difference maintains social separation within a community. This work would, of necessity, need to focus on narrowing the zone of difference separating Self from Other.

Second, conceptualising reconciliation as a concomitant outcome of a genuine process of apology is necessary to avoid the parking of the symbolic apology in a cul-de-sac of Spectacle. Pedagogically, this would require a consideration of the scope of reconciliation as a process of peace-making, whereby the central question of exactly what is to be reconciled assumes centre stage. There appear to be four points around which reconciliatory activity might occur:

- White and Black relationships need to be reconciled. This would involve acknowledging past injustices; exposing current fears, uncertainties hopes and hesitations; and generating a sense of common purpose in overcoming the social, economic, cultural, psychic, and economic alienation exploitative social relationships have thrown up over the past two centuries;
- Black and White histories need to be aligned and merged to enable a more complex, multi-storied recollection of the past to be formulated. A truly polyvocal history would disrupt the major narrative that positions the White colonial adventure in Australia as one of a civilizing force. Such a disruption opens up the space in a reconstructed discourse of colonization for the colonized to be accorded respect, admiration and agency;

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “race” here to name a socially-constructed category of identity, not as a reference to any biologically-determined characteristic. The second of these uses of the term has been generally debunked and eschewed, its pernicious ideological function having been widely exposed.

- White guilt needs to be reconciled with the practicalities of such a revisioning of the past, humanising the present and building a vision of a more equitable and sustainable future. Whites need to be able to acknowledge the advantage and privilege that flow from the wrongs of the past and the present, but not in a debilitating, defensive way. For the dominant sector of the community, the past needs to be reconciled with the present in ways that re-direct energy tied up in guilt-drenched explanations and justifications towards a socially-ameliorative project ; and
- Black anger needs to be reconciled with a need to move beyond the past into a preparedness to form alliances with the broader community in taking the Apology forward. Moving beyond does not, of course, entail forgetting the past and excusing the present, but it does require both of these to be retained as provocation to sustainable social change – to accepting the Apology (even as Spectacle) as a necessary but by no means sufficient redress for injustices and racially-based disadvantage.

The third component of a pedagogy of regret requires a civic education project that focuses the public imagination on the possibilities of a sympathetic and compassionate community. In this regard, hope becomes the core community sentiment and characteristic. A community that has genuinely been able to expose its errors, wrongdoings and injustices and that looks to not just apologise for but ensure such things never happen again is an agentic community reconciled with itself around Hope. Giroux argued that the primary task of critical educative work is to “*make despair unconvincing and hope practical.*” (1988, p 128). Further, “*this is a notion of education fashioned in more than critique and Orwellian pessimism; it is a discourse that creates a new starting point by trying to make hope realizable and despair unconvincing*” (1988, p109) . It is what Paulo Freire described as a pedagogy of hope (2004). One of the first pedagogical aims in this regard would seem to be that of ensuring a civic acknowledgement that the project of turning the Spectacle into a reality is one of communal or shared responsibility. Imagining community in new, reciprocally beneficial ways features as a central aim of a pedagogy of regret.

## Conclusion

That the project of realizing communities of harmony and justice is one that is always in process of becoming is readily apparent. This is not a utopian adventure, looking to work from a blueprint of an ideal community. Harmonious, non-exploitative and sustainable communities are by nature emergent communities and the role of education and teaching in this project is an obviously crucial one. But the obvious and the apparent do not necessarily carry with them a sense of the urgent or the imperative. This is the basis for hooks’s point that *[w]ounds will not heal if left unattended* (1996, p 213).

Realizing the potential contribution that forms of educative practice derived from a desire for social betterment – in this case, through engaging pedagogies of regret – might make to the emergence of sustainable communities of care constitutes a crucial step in the process of generating a healing environment. That task is not one that fits happily with currently dominant discourses of education that valorise the technician and the utilitarian . Consequently, educators who see a social transformational role for and purpose in their work will require the resilience that genuine civic courage (Giroux 1988, p 142 ) releases.

An appropriate pedagogical response to Spectacular events such as the Apology is an essential step in the development of some forms of solidity and semi-permanence in Bauman's liquid times. Sustainable, democratic social relationships and the communities of care that might grow out of these require educators to consider their work carefully in the light of the imperative of such a task, lest we find ourselves, Groundhog Day-like, revisiting time and again the Spectacle of Apology.

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