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Nayanika Mookherjee, Nigel Rapport, Lisette Josephides, Ghassan Hage, Lindi Renier
Todd and Gillian Cowlishaw

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The Ethics of Apology

A Set of Commentaries

Edited by Nayanika Mookherjee¹

Lancaster University

Contributions by:

Nayanika Mookherjee

Lancaster University

Nigel Rapport

St Andrews University

Lisette Josephides

Queen's University Belfast

Ghassan Hage

Melbourne University

Lindi Renier Todd

University of Technology, Sydney

Gillian Cowlshaw

University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract ■ On 13 February 2008, the Australian government apologized to the 'stolen generations': those children of Aboriginal descent who were removed from their parents (usually their Aboriginal mothers) to be raised in white foster-homes and institutions administered by government and Christian churches – a practice that lasted from before the First World War to the early 1970s. This apology was significant, in the words of Rudd, for the 'healing' of the Australian nation. Apologizing for past injustices has become a significant speech act in current times. Why does saying sorry seem to be ubiquitous at the moment? What are the instances of not saying sorry? What are the ethical implications of this era of remembrance and apology? This set of commentaries seeks to explore some of the ethical, philosophical, social and political dimensions of this Age of Apology. The authors discuss whether apology is a responsibility which cannot – and should not – be avoided; the ethical pitfalls of seeking an apology, or not uttering it; the global and local understandings of apology and forgiveness; and the processes of ownership and appropriation in saying sorry.

Keywords ■ Aboriginal communities ■ apology ■ collective and historical responsibility ■ forgiveness ■ racism ■ sorry ■ truth and reconciliation

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Introduction: An Age of Apology

Nayanika Mookherjee

The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia's history by righting the wrongs of the past and so move forward with confidence to the future. . . . For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture we say sorry . . . (Rudd, 2008)

On 13 February 2008, the Australian government apologized to the 'stolen generations': those children of Aboriginal descent who were removed from their parents (usually their Aboriginal mothers) to be raised in white foster-homes and institutions administered by governments and Christian churches – a practice that lasted from before the First World War to the early 1970s. This apology was significant in the words of Rudd for the 'healing' of the Australian nation. The last government under John Howard had refused to apologize to Aboriginal people on behalf of the nation in spite of the release of *Bringing them Home* (HREOC, 1997), the report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. His government argued that the people of the present generation could not be held responsible for the sins of the past. As a result the 'Sorry Day' in Australia was seen as part of a 'people's movement' to engage in an act of 'reconciliation' in the face of the failure of the government to offer an apology. The issue of saying sorry and apologizing for past injustices has become a significant speech act in current times. The British queen formally apologized to the Maoris in New Zealand for the acts of Crown authorities in violating the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi by engaging in subsequent acts of dispossession of their lands in New Zealand; and she apologized in India for the massacre of Amritsar in 1919. Tony Blair has followed suit, and apologized for the Irish famine but refused to say sorry for the current, ongoing displacement and plight of the people of Diego Garcia. The Pope has apologized on numerous occasions. At a special Mass for the Millennium, he bundled up 2000 years of Church injustice into one comprehensive plea for forgiveness and purification. He invoked crimes against Jews, women, minorities in general, and some historical episodes in particular, such as the Crusades and the Inquisition, but did not mention the crimes against homosexuals. During the 200th anniversary celebration of the abolition of slavery in 2006/7 the Church of England apologized for its role in slavery. The Japanese government continues to refuse to apologize for its running of 'comfort stations' and sexual slavery of innumerable women during the Second World War. In my own research of the public memories of sexual violence of the Bangladesh war, I have come across the demand for apology by Bangladeshis from the

Pakistani government for the genocidal events of 1971. In the context of the recent economic downturn, leading bankers in UK performed a remarkable apology. This was soon followed by news of one of them pocketing a huge pension and refusing to give that up.

The need to apologize which compels nations to confront their past runs counter to official national self-images of tolerance and pluralism (Hage, 1994; Mackey, 1999). Why does saying sorry seem to be ubiquitous at the moment? What are the instances of not saying sorry? What are the ethical implications of this era of remembrance and apology? To address these themes, as the Ethics Officer of ASA (Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth) I organized an open meeting on the ethics of apology at the recent joint international conference of the ASA, the ASAANZ (Association of Social Anthropologists of Aotearoa/New Zealand) and the AAS (Australian Anthropological Society) held on 8–12 December 2008, at the University of Auckland, New Zealand. This meeting was convened and chaired by myself and the discussion was led by a group of four panellists: Gillian Cowlshaw, Ghassan Hage, Nigel Rapport and Lisette Josephides, who all spoke briefly (for 10 minutes) before opening it up for discussions, questions and comments. On enquiring whether there might be any Aboriginal or Maori academics who could be panellists I was informed, not surprisingly, by the conference organizers that no Aboriginal or Maori anthropologists would be present at the conference. This highlights how anthropologists and anthropology as a discipline is linked to colonial histories in specific parts of the world, with the consequence that various Indigenous individuals stay away from the discipline. The prevalence of the study of anthropology within departments of sociology in South Asia is a reflection of that relationship. A shorter review of this open meeting is published in *Anthropology Today* (Mookherjee, 2009).

When thinking of organizing this open meeting and receiving support for it from other ASA committee members, I felt that this broad and specific theme is contemporary, empirical as well as philosophical, and engaged with the various manifestations of what has been seen as the Age of Apology. Further, it would link up with the events in Australia and New Zealand, as well as beyond, and be of interest to many. This commentary piece draws from the discussion in the open meeting and takes it further. Simone Abram, Secretary of ASA, suggested the song ‘Sorry’ (2008) by the folksinger Karine Polwart, which we played before the discussions started. An extract from the lyrics of the song itself captured a critique of the act of apology and saying ‘Sorry’ which is thereafter picked up in the philosophical and ethnographic contributions by the panellists:

When your time on the mountain is over
And you fall to the earth like a leaf
It won't be enough these days to say sorry
No, sorry won't pay for this grief.

The open meeting sought to explore the ethical, theoretical, ethnographic, philosophical, social and political dimensions of this Age of Apology. To do this I asked the questions:

- What is an apology? What is its function? What does it do? Specifically, what does apology *do* for those who apologize? What does it do for the injured on whom lies the onus of forgiving and forgetting once an apology is offered?
- What kinds of acts are, or are not, 'apologizable' for and how is it established that they are or are not? How is apology interpreted by different actors? What are the rituals and religious, moral connotations of apology?
- Is witnessing an apology an adequate means of accepting historical responsibility? What implications does this have for notions of guilt, pride, shame?
- Whose version of apology gains predominance? What are its links with reconciliation? Must an apology lead to reparation if it is to be at all meaningful? That is, without a subsequent act of reparation or restitution, can it be fully constituted as an apology? Does this lead to a commodification of injustice?
- What are the temporal dimensions of apology? Does its enactment lead to an erasure of the past, a forgetting of the future? What kinds of engagement or disengagement with the past(s) are necessary for forgiveness, apology and reconciliation? How does this impact on notions of membership in a national community?
- Is apology a responsibility (Levinas, 1981) which cannot be, should not be avoided? What are the ethical pitfalls of seeking apology or not uttering it? What are the various global and local understandings of apology and forgiveness? What are the processes of ownership and appropriation of saying sorry?

These and other questions were discussed in the open meeting and in the contributions in this commentary piece. Predominantly, the contributors have engaged with the theoretical, philosophical, ethnographic manifestations of the issue of apology. This discussion piece seeks to interrogate the ethics of offering and articulating an apology, and its impact on individuals, governments, communities, past and present injustices, histories. Nigel Rapport outlines two facets of apology: as a claim to knowledge and as a claim to responsibility, through the use of various illustrations relating to individual relationships. Lisette Josephides explores Derrida's (2001) idea of forgiveness and its implications for what it is to be human, using the example of recent events in Northern Ireland. Ghassan Hage highlights the possible impact of Australia's racism and the recent offer of apology through the concepts of 'being propelled' and co-propelling relationships. Lindi Todd compares the situation in post-Truth and Reconciliation Commission South Africa and post-apology Australia, and,

following Hannah Arendt (2003 [1968]), addresses the question of what the relationship can be or should be between collective responsibility and individual culpability. Gillian Cowlshaw's rich ethnographic account examines the Australian apology as 'sentimental politics' (Berlant, 1999) by highlighting various Aboriginal and white Australian responses to the apology.

Ethics of apology

Nigel Rapport

Who has the right to offer an apology?

If I frame the issue in this way I draw attention to an apology as a kind of claim. *It is a claim to knowledge and/or a claim to responsibility.*

(a) **As a claim to knowledge**, an apology says that I know of a situation which I would wish had not occurred; or else I know of a situation which I know *you* would wish had not occurred.

These are not necessarily the same, of course. I say: 'I am sorry you have joined a rock band.' You might not be. 'I am sorry your wife died.' If I am truthful in the latter utterance then in this case it is more likely that my sorrow and yours overlap. Except that my knowledge of you can never be certain: I can never be certain about what you feel sorry about. Your wife has died, you are wearing the weeds of sorrow, but you might be happy in a way, or completely happy, under the role-playing of sorrow.

As a claim to knowledge, in short, an apology is a murky affair. I claim a right to say sorry to you, but the basis of this knowledge may be highly ambiguous, both as regards what I know about my own inner motivation *and* what I know about your true sentiments, and as regards the overlap between the two.

You may receive my apology as a conventional form of politeness. It's the kind of thing to be expected when, say, a spouse dies. But if you know that I hated your wife, or that I once wanted her for myself, or that I know that you had wanted her dead for some time, then my apology might also be unwelcome: indeed, a kind of threat. I am reminding you of the distance between a conventional relationship and what we both know actually transpired between you, me and your wife.

I suppose one might describe apology as a potential form of passive aggression. 'I am sorry you joined a rock band.' 'I am sorry your wife beat you up and broke your arm.' 'I am sorry you could not defend yourself when the Nazis took away your family members.'

An apology is a claim to knowledge: as a claim it might be right or wrong. As a speech-act, moreover, it might be welcome or unwelcome, supportive or threatening.

As a social act its frisson derives, perhaps, from its ambiguity. An apology is a kind of claim to superiority. I know of something that I would wish and, conventionally, I believe that you would have wished had not occurred. I

might be welcoming you into a state of fellow victimhood – ‘I, too, have lost my wife’, or ‘I, too, might lose my wife’ – but I might also be declaring myself distant from, and superior to, a misfortune you have not had the wit to avoid. ‘I would have defended myself and mine against the Nazis.’

(b) *As a claim to responsibility*, an apology says that I know of a situation which I caused to happen or the group which I claim to speak for caused to happen. And, again, I know you would wish it had not occurred. At least, I assume this because I certainly wish it had not occurred.

And again, there are complexities here. I can apologize for something that you do not know I had a responsibility for. I can apologize for something that has not yet affected you (and so of which you are as yet unaware) but which I know will affect you: ‘I am so sorry about your job situation.’

An apology is a claim to power, a personal power or a power deriving from one’s position. It is a claim to connection with an event or with other people, whether in the past or the future. ‘I am so sorry that my predecessor, as leader of the German state, ordered the annihilation of your family.’ ‘I am so sorry that you have been condemned to judicial execution next week.’

Besides the question of truthfulness – what kind of authenticity is carried by the murderer’s apology, or even the hangman’s? – is the question of value: what is the speech-act *worth* against the acts for whose responsibility it also claims some kind of expiation?

Above all, an apology realizes a claim to connection. Either I am personally responsible for effecting something whose consequences I believe, or can conventionally assume, you would wish to have avoided. Or else I am connected by office or role or kinship or friendship or nationality or ethnicity or religion or class or gender, or mere humanity, to the perpetrator of an act whose consequences I believe or can conventionally assume you would wish to have avoided. ‘I am sorry I stole your wife.’ Also: ‘I am sorry for the stolen generations of Aborigine children and the part played by the Australian government’. ‘I am sorry for the role my fellow-Germans, or Protestants, or burghers played in the Holocaust.’ ‘I am sorry my father sacked your mother as a daily maid.’ ‘I am sorry, as a man, for the way in which women have been treated by the Church.’ ‘I am sorry that human profligacy has caused global warming whose consequence is a disastrous rise of sea level in Bangladesh.’ ‘I am sorry for human belligerence which has not brought peace to the Middle East.’ All of these instances claim to know of a connection between an act and certain deleterious consequences upon an other, but only the first claims a personal connection: ‘It was I, personally, who was responsible.’ In all the other instances, my connection to the perpetrator was impersonal: ‘I am sorry for what my fellow-official or friend or co-national or co-religionist or class-member or fellow-man or fellow-human being perpetrated.’

A claim to responsibility, one could say, is a claim to a relationship: both to the perpetrator (either myself or my fellow) and to the sufferer. And a

claim to knowledge (of something to be sorry about) is *also* a claim to a relationship.

What makes apology and its ethical status a project for current anthropological attention, I would say, is the fluxional and questionable basis of relationships in the world today. Nayanika Mookherjee sets up this panel on the 'Ethics of Apology' by depicting us as living in an 'Age of Apology', where saying sorry for injustice has become a ubiquitous speech-act. Who has the right to apologize, one might say, has become a matter of global politics or 'cosmopolitics'. 'I claim the right to apologize and to have my claim taken seriously, honestly, as a fellow human being: I am sorry *about* famine in Africa (I know it exists and cannot escape my *knowledge*); and I am sorry *for* famine in Africa (I know my wealth, Western wealth, could alleviate it and I have a *responsibility* to redirect it).' Looking at this positively, as a cosmopolitan, here is a *knowledge* of my fellow human beings that I claim whatever their culture and society; and here, too, is a *responsibility* for my fellow human beings that I claim whatever their culture and society.

The ethics of forgiveness

Lisette Josephides

In an essay-length response to questions put to him by the journal *Le Monde des débats*, Derrida (2001) refers to our times as the age of forgiveness (*le pardon*) rather than the Age of Apology, and defines the ethical problem as the obligation to forgive rather than the duty to apologize. Derrida distinguishes two different types of forgiveness: unconditional purity, as in Kant's moral law or Levinas' sense of infinite responsibility, and forgiveness for pragmatic, legal or political reasons, when a form of reconciliation is desired. This second type of forgiveness is part of the complex of apologies offered by governments and other public or corporate bodies. If apology is to be effective in these cases, reparation and repair must go hand in hand. Apologies, one may deduce from this, lead to an 'impure' kind of forgiveness.

Derrida develops his argument by posing a fourfold question: *who* is to forgive *whom* about *what*, and *who* is to arbitrate the process? As to the 'what', he answers that the sort of crime that requires forgiveness can only be a crime against humanity, against what makes us human beings ('that which makes of man a man' [2001: 34]); and this is the power of forgiveness itself. There is no merit in forgiving what is forgivable; only the unforgivable requires forgiveness. Concerning 'who' is to forgive, Derrida diffuses blame, by asking who among us, by proxy or otherwise, is not guilty of such a crime.

The most important question for Derrida is, who is forgiven? If forgiveness requires penance, expiation and the transformation of the perpetrator, then the perpetrator is no longer guilty and there is nothing

to forgive. Forgiveness worthy of the name, Derrida concludes, must be unconditional, given while there is still something to forgive. Repentance cannot be part of apology, because what is forgiven is unforgivable.

The case of Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, with all sides nursing grievances, it is not a question of apology or 'pure forgiveness' on a political scale, but of amnesties, taking chances on the future, and working towards more integrated lifestyles. The two sides (loyalist/unionist and republican) have come a long way, with Sinn Féin and Democratic Unionist Party members sitting shoulder to shoulder as first and second ministers. But at a crucial stage of the negotiations the strongest expression of mutual forgiveness was the exhortation to 'jump at the same time' – or, as each side had its more recalcitrant members, 'to be *seen* to be jumping at the same time'. Attempts at resolution, whether at government or community level, have not stressed apology or even forgiveness, but rather forgetting, forging ahead and conciliating, establishing integrated schools. It is a question of building the future.

There have been personal cases of forgiveness closer to Derrida's first type. For two days in Belfast in 2008 there was an attempt to hold a mini truth-and-reconciliation session, with Bishop Desmond Tutu presiding. Though feelings about its efficacy were mixed, some participants reported therapeutic effects, and even a burgeoning understanding of the motives of those who had maimed them or killed their relatives. The event clearly attracted the participation of people who *wanted* such reconciliation.

Another event provoked open public outcry. In January 2009, 18 months after being set up, the 'Consultation Group on the Past' launched its report. (This paragraph is based on BBC Ulster News, 28 January 2009, 18.30.) One recommendation was to offer a monetary compensation of £12,000 to the families of all those who died in the Troubles, including families of IRA members, security forces and civilians. The report was greeted with anger by some sections of the Northern Ireland community. There should be no 'moral equivalence', they argued, between the deaths of civilians and members of the security forces on the one hand and paramilitaries on the other (the expressions 'IRA scum' and 'terrorists' often replaced 'paramilitaries'). 'Perpetrators of murder' cannot be treated the same as 'victims of murder'. A spokesman for a victims' group insisted that people wanted recognition for their suffering, not money, but implied that extending recognition to the suffering of the families of paramilitaries debased the quality of that recognition. The first minister of the Assembly was reported as saying that the Commission (i.e. Consultation Group) damaged itself and compromised its findings by making this recommendation. One of the Commission's two chairmen (a cleric) was at pains to explain that the figure of the compensation was immaterial – there could be no compensation for a person's life. What members of the Commission

had learned while listening to the bereaved was that the present judicial institutions were not answering their concerns (for justice, the truth and recognition). The system, said the chairman, had to combine the need for reconciliation with other strands in order to bring order out of chaos and restore balance. The security forces could not respond to these needs. To deal with the legacy of the past, it was necessary to develop a system that blended the needs for justice, truth and reconciliation.

Acknowledgement and a sense of self

The Northern Irish example brings to the fore an important aspect of apology left untouched in Derrida's discussion: the effect of the apology on a person's sense of self. To the aims of reconciliation and reparation must be added the need to return people's humanity. Pure forgiveness is, for Derrida, a defining aspect of being human. Attaching conditions to forgiveness makes it a legal form of justice, subject to the conditional logic of exchange as a political-economic transaction based on negotiation and calculation. But when Derrida stresses forgiveness as the aim of apology, he is focusing on the responsibility of the victim to forgive, rather than the acknowledgement of the violation of her or his humanity. His concern is with humanity in its collective sense, rather the personal trauma suffered. The acknowledgement of harm done to a particular person's sense of self is quite different from a concern with the state of grace of the perpetrator. Though Derrida sees the victim's ability to forgive as the test of humanity, this is a heroic humanity whose test consists in overcoming personal vulnerability.

But Derrida does not stop there. Unconditional forgiveness is mad, yes, but if humanity is to act beyond sovereignty, forgiveness must remain a madness of the impossible. When forgiveness is a forgiveness without (state) power, unconditionality is dissociated from sovereignty and humanity has an aim beyond that sovereignty. Though the chairman of the Consultation Group on the Past did not intend his words to be taken this way, his call for a response to people's grievances that went beyond the powers of the judicial institutions may be open to many interpretations. Beyond the pastoral state performing its duty, it is to their own humanity that people must turn for forgiveness, though it may be a long time coming.

On the apology

Ghassan Hage

Evaluating the significance of the Rudd government's apology to the indigenous people of Australia cannot be but an evaluation of its capacity to contribute to the reversal of the history of colonial racism and some of its particular manifestations that it is trying to address. As such, I want to start with some anthropological questions concerning what defines our

general viability as human beings, and which offer us valuable insights into the nature of racism and its effect on the racialized person.

In my work on migration, I have taken seriously the equation of well-being with a sense of mobility that is present in common everyday statements such as 'How is it going?' This equation is present in many other languages and I have tried to work with an understanding that such language of movement is not simply metaphoric but conveys a sense in which, when a person feels well, they actually imagine and feel that they are moving well. I have called this type of imagined/felt movement existential mobility. As with physical mobility, one can experience existential mobility as a result of a force external to oneself, such as with the common migration metaphors of 'push' or 'pull', but there is a particular experience of existential mobility that humans favour: it is the feeling of being propelled.

The particularity of being propelled can be easily highlighted by looking at the difference between being propelled and being pushed. Unlike when you receive a push, when you are propelled the force that pushes you *stays with you*. It is this idea that a force is 'staying with us', providing us with both power and companionship, that we humans tend to particularly like. This is perhaps what Heidegger refers to as a being-with, *Mitsein*. We have with each other a co-propelling relation. This is not just an inter-human relation. We feel propelled, when seeing our dog bouncing in the park or indeed when we feel that all of nature is bouncing, such as on a beautiful spring morning.

It seems to me that, at its most fundamental level, racism is a negation and an active severing of this relation that exists between us and others. The deepest form of racism is a mode of perceiving the life of a category of others as a negative force in relation to ours. Racists are like the 'dementors' of Rowling's Harry Potter novels, instead of sharing with others a co-propelling relation, they suck the life out of the people they racialize.

I have no doubt that a whole history of colonial racism towards Australia's indigenous people can be written as a history of 'sucking the life out of them'. A non-racist future can be imagined when non-indigenous Australians stop being the 'dementors' of indigenous Australia and re-constitute a relation where the indigenous and non-indigenous are co-propelling each other. To my mind, the apology, while not enough in itself, has offered a space where such a relation is possible. It is both itself a propelling force and an instigator of the possibility of a co-propelling relation between indigenous and non-indigenous people.

Another general anthropological proposition that has proven of general relevance in my work is the conception of subjectivity developed by Lacan in his analysis of the 'mirror stage'. It is the idea that very early in life the self is structured by a feeling of fragmentation (a feeling of being 'all over the place') and by the setting of an ideal non-fragmented image

of the self that comes from the outside (the mirror image). I feel fragmented but everyone and everything from the outside convey to me the sense that I am a whole, so I start trying to become the whole I am expected to be. For Lacan, the subject is this very endless trying to become whole. We are constantly trying to 'pull ourselves together', so to speak. What defines our well-being here is not only the degree to which we feel we are succeeding in pulling ourselves together but also the degree of anxiety that our struggle to overcome fragmentation induces in us. Some people, because of personal or social circumstances, end up more relaxed about being fragmented than others and though, like everyone, they are trying to overcome fragmentation, they do so with less anxiety. Others feel the world is trying to get them and try to pull themselves together frantically.

The pertinence of this conception of subjectivity to understanding racialized people should be obvious. Most people who are subjected to racism experience it as a shattering force: a force that enhances centrifugal tendencies and feelings of fragmentation within them. This does not mean that racism necessarily shatters people. How shattered a person is will depend on their social and psychological resources. But there is no doubt that people subjected to racism have to engage in a greater psychic effort to pull themselves together, which comes at an immense social and psychological cost to them.

So, what can one say about the apology in relation to such a situation? The first thing one can note is that indigenous people, like most racialized people, are often made to feel that they are living in a hostile environment where they constantly feel vulnerable, and as such their pulling themselves together is always done with a great sense of anxiety. As such, there is no doubt that the apology has helped create a less hostile environment than the one perpetuated by the previous conservative government by its very refusal to apologize. Furthermore, the apology offers what we can call a 'space of self-constitution', a space which offers a shelter from the fragmenting forces of racism and helps the racialized to pull themselves together with greater ease. Again, this can only be seen as an offering with a positive potential.

Whether the positive potentials of the apology eventuate will depend on social and economic developments that the apology cannot affect. What is certain, however, is the poverty of thinking of those who see the apology as 'symbolic' as opposed to 'practical'. The apology will have and has had real practical consequences. It might not be about giving indigenous people jobs or better resources, or dealing with the various social pathologies that are poisoning their communal life. But it certainly is about reconstituting the psychological injuries that colonial racism has inflicted and continues to inflict on them. The healing of these injuries has serious practical consequences on their capacity to play an active role in reshaping their lives.

Space for reflection? Inciting apology in South Africa

Lindi Renier Todd

In February 2008 media attention in South Africa was drawn once again to debating acts of racism still prevalent in the post-*apartheid* era, this time triggered by the airing of a video put together by students, of a men's hostel at the University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein. The video surfaced following a series of student riots at the hostel concerning its recent integration policies, and featured mock student initiation rituals (forced drinking, ridicule in sport, force-feeding inedible food) involving older black cleaning staff at the hostel as the initiands of four white Afrikaner students. It concludes with footage of one of the staff members cleaning in a kitchen, with Afrikaans text in the foreground stating: 'At the end of the day, this is what we really think of integration!' The camera operator asks her what the Sotho word '*sefebe*' means, to which she replies and is asked to repeat herself three times, 'whore maid'. These form the final words of the video.²

The film sparked outrage from various quarters, leading eventually to the closure of the hostel, criminal charges of *crimen injuria*³ being filed against the four students involved (ongoing) and contributed to the resignation of the University Rector. Reading news weblogs following the story, it is evident that to some the incident was a stark reminder of ongoing power relations and mindsets reminiscent of an *apartheid* era that many had hoped had disappeared in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). An added element catalysing the heightened moment of public reflexivity was the serendipitously timed parliamentary apology issued by the Australian government (13 February) under Prime Minister Rudd, to the country's indigenous people for the injustices suffered by them under successive governments in the past.⁴ Indeed, the chairperson of the South African Human Rights Commission, Jody Kollapen, maintained that the TRC had not created 'sufficient space for the ordinary South African to reflect' on their roles within *apartheid* (Kassiem, 2008), and called on South Africans to follow the Australian example by issuing an unconditional apology for events in the past.

In direct response to Kollapen's call, the student video and the Australian apology, Karl Gostner created a blog entitled 'Apartheid Apology'. In his opening post he issued his apology for *apartheid* as a white South African, recognizing that while he had not been directly involved in actions supporting the regime, he had benefited from the system that had discriminated against others: 'I am sorry that it happened. I am sorry that I didn't help to make it end sooner. I am sorry that today I don't do enough to counter its effects' (Gostner, 2008). Implicit in both Kollapen's appeal and in Gostner's response – articulated in his hope that the blog would become a 'public record of white South Africa's shame at apartheid and our commitment to building a new society' (2008) – is an assumed

connection being drawn between an acknowledgement of past injustice and/or personal benefit from a system endorsing discriminatory practices and a concomitant eradication of racism or further future discrimination. Responses to both similarly re-raise the question of what the relationship can be or should be between collective responsibility and individual culpability. Hannah Arendt's work on collective responsibility in post-Holocaust Germany has insights which are worth briefly exploring here.

According to Arendt there are two conditions necessary for collective responsibility. In the first place, the responsibility must be for something an individual has not done themselves, which, second, means that they are held responsible for past actions on account of their being a member of the group, a part of the collective (2003 [1968]: 149).⁵ Accusations of blame would ideally place responsibility on the polity to remain cognizant of this past when recreating or reasserting a sense of community for the future. In other words, in order to create a socially responsible collective for the future, the past should not be forgotten. Arendt writes about this as assuming a sense of 'worldliness' which does not embrace guilt. Collective guilt, in her terms, is self-indulgent and self-gratifying and cannot be a political response. Instead, she insists on a division between individual personal guilt and collective political responsibility.

Arendt's model does not distinguish between individuals (as beneficiaries) within a system and relies to a certain extent on the members of the collective being willing at some level to distance themselves from their (previous) social world (however all-encompassing), find it wanting and envisage alternatives to it. The means of achieving this would be through informed critique of the system. In Kollapen's view the TRC had not achieved this goal, nor had it created a 'space for reflection' on the previous system necessary for the acceptance of collective responsibility (in Arendtian terms).

A first reading of Gostner's blog and the majority of the responses it generated suggests that it did not provide this ideal space. That is, if we interpret 'space for reflection' here as essentially benign – arguably Kollapen's desire, as he sees this as smoothly paving the way towards an apology. The blog received most of its responses between March and April 2008, with the latest post added in September. Comments on the whole were angry, condemning the idea of apology, forming personal attacks on the initiator and seemed to unearth respondents eager to display their racist credentials in a public forum. To Gostner, the blog was veering towards becoming a shameful display of continuing racist beliefs in the country, rather than his wished-for 'record of white South Africa's shame'. From the opposite side of the spectrum, weblog responses to the students' video by some called for their immediate deaths, their exportation (to where remained unclear) and their erasure from Afrikanerdom as shameful relics, with any respondents attempting to approach a discussion of the issue being summarily condemned. In both online spaces informed

critique disappeared, together with any possible distinction between individual personal guilt and collective political responsibility.

If we are aiming to achieve an Arendtian 'worldiness' as a political response to past injustice, more robust spaces for reflection need to be created and sustained in the public domain, able to work through the distasteful and malignant in the same forum as the benevolent and compassionate. Australia's government is the most recent settler nation to have chosen to make a formal apology to its indigenous people for policy decisions taken in the past. As the country marks the first anniversary of the apology, it remains to be seen how it will move forward from its moment of euphoria. In her edited volume examining questions of collective responsibility and the remembering of the past in four settler nations, one of Coombes' central points is that settler nations are shaped by their dealings with indigenous peoples (2006). We should anticipate, therefore, that this shift in government response to the past will continue to 'mediat[e] in highly significant ways their shared colonial roots/routes' (2006: 1–2, see Todd, 2008). Looking at the South African example, however, key to this mediation should be the creation of spaces for reflection in which the book of the past is kept open, with the expectation that disturbing and at times hostile views need to be heard in order for informed critique to be able to take place.

A multiplicity of meanings: an ethnographic reflection on Kevin Rudd's apology on behalf of the nation, to Australia's Indigenous peoples in January 2008

Gillian Cowlshaw

In Aboriginal English the concept of 'sorry' refers to a collective, socially generated expression of mutual regret. 'Sorry business' is the term for a period of communal mourning and ritual after a death. 'Sorry my country' is intoned or chanted, an expression of longing and desire towards place for which one also holds communal responsibility. When the idea of a national apology to Indigenous people was broached in Australia, this *social* exchange of grief and regret, sorrow and remembrance, was being invoked, at least by some. But national apologies are a public, political, cosmopolitan event, and Australia's 'sorry' was transformed into an abject apology from one category of people to another. Mutuality was lost. This apology was thus a severely limited example of being 'open to the other' in Levinas's sense.

National apologies to injured minorities are social in a different sense. Far from interpersonal expressions of regret or remorse, they are a form of 'sentimental politics' in Lauren Berlant's (1999) phrase. They are a phenomenon of our time, a seductive, feel-good strategy contrived and promoted by governments. The apology to Indigenous Australians was eagerly responded to by a nation seeking redemption.

Kevin Rudd's apology was unstinting and received widespread and emotional applause. It was a much anticipated moment, a stepping into the moral high ground so clearly abandoned by the previous regime. A shift in public perception meant that this action, along with the shift in refugee policy, gave Australian people '*something to do* in response to overwhelming structural violence' (Berlant, 1999: 54), in this case the vividly revealed past of destructive government policies and the consequent serious flaw in the nation's character. Resistance was minimal. The complex and somewhat ambiguous phenomenon 'the stolen generations' was repeatedly invoked as the symbol of a shameful colonial past and the foundation and reason for the apology. The concurrent, bitterly divisive, debate about the maintenance of emergency interventions into remote Aboriginal communities (implemented by the previous government without consultation or negotiation), was temporarily silenced by the apology.

The 'political' nature of this apology was clear from the fact that Aboriginal people themselves were asked to contribute to and approve of its wording. At a reconciliation group in Western Sydney one Aboriginal elder expressed disgust: 'I'm not going to tell them how to apologize to me. They ought to know what they did wrong.'

Many weighty intellectuals hailed the apology with grand sentiments and solemnly noted its historical significance as healing the soul of this still predominantly white nation. For many it was a turning point, a hugely meaningful national moment that brought tears, gratitude, a sense of relief and shared moral pleasure. I was in Redfern, an inner city suburb that was the centre of Aboriginal activism in an earlier era and is now automatically identified with urban Aboriginality. As in other centres, a huge outdoor screen was set up to broadcast the apology to a seated, standing and milling crowd. Many Aboriginal people wore 'Thank you' T-shirts and the atmosphere was heavy with emotion, goodwill and a sense of celebration. People smiled at strangers and applauded as they listened intently and wept openly.

Later that day I listened to radio reports from all over the country, where celebrations had been intense. Jackie Huggins, a Queensland historian and public figure, epitomized the mood when she said that for the first time she was happy to call herself an Australian rather than an Aboriginal person. Many commentators revisited shameful elements of Australia's past and felt a burden had been lifted from the nation's citizens. The Opposition Leader Brendan Nelson's response had also been broadcast and, at many venues, the audience was reported to have angrily pulled the plug on his equivocal and guarded endorsement because it was so discordant with the prevailing generous mood of confession and forgiveness.

The nation seemed uniformly sorry and Aboriginal people seemed unified in their gratitude. Sentimental politics does not welcome complexity, ambiguity or the suggestion that it may not be so easy to repair the damage done in the past, so dissenting voices went unreported. But later

in western Sydney an Aboriginal man dismissed the apology saying, 'Words are easy; we will see what they will do for us.' Some years earlier thousands of Australians marched over city bridges as huge white SORRY's were written across the sky. A suburban Aboriginal man said, 'They were paid to do that.' He did not believe the sentiments were genuine, having no idea that people had privately contributed funds to hire the sky-writing planes. Such negative, mean minded responses may be nurturing victimhood, but they also pierce the unified national satisfaction that the apology carries. They illustrate the alienation of segments of the population from cosmopolitan discourses. The most fraught and damaged Indigenous families show little awareness of the national excitement about their past and present conditions and are disconnected from the national mood.

Unreported dissent also came from non-Indigenous Australians. Some rural white men enacted elaborate apologies to each other in spontaneous satirical performances of 'Soree-ee', mocking the very idea of a national apology. Bloggers derided the idea of apologizing for wounds inflicted long ago and pointed out that English orphans shipped to Australia were also injured. A common view was that 'we' had *meant* well, and the fallacious story that, 'These kids would have been killed by the tribe for being half caste if not removed', was repeated. Such mythologizing, in stark conflict with the preferred national story, continues to denigrate Aboriginal people in overt or covert ways, responding with contempt to their special status as the nation's favourite wounded subjects.

Examples of scepticism, suspicion and resentment of the 'sorry' utterance demonstrate that a nation does not change overnight. The majority of Indigenous people remain alienated from the rest of society, despite vigorous and sustained attempts to bring them within the nation's embrace. Many regularly experience hostility. But while a powerful apology from the Prime Minister does not change structural inequality it can be a tool or weapon to use in the attempts to include 'Aboriginal history' in the mundane, ordinary facts of 'Australian history'. The apology can also act as a riposte to those who, as one Indigenous social activist complained to me, raise an eyebrow or roll their eyes (in irritation, disbelief, rejection) when the suffering of Aborigines is mentioned. The apology is useful baggage in such everyday ideological struggles. Rather than cementing victimhood as some have feared, it allows for the shuffling off of the sense of injury that has been nurtured for decades. Gracious acceptance ushers in a more active political position for engaged Indigenous people.

National apologies contribute to ongoing attempts to reconcile peoples who were separated and made enemies by discriminatory laws and policies. Thus accusation of political opportunism or insincerity is irrelevant. The vitality and viability of collective social life is confirmed through the rhetoric of interpersonal identification and empathy which can have real, if sometimes equivocal, effects.

Conclusion

Nayanika Mookherjee

Before arriving in Auckland for the ASA 08 conference I briefly stopped by in Sydney. Given my own research interest on 'war-babies' and the parallel that is offered in the 'stolen generation', I had watched the poignant, moving film *Rabbit-proof Fence* (2002) in 2008. During the brief Sydney visit, I noticed the presence of Aboriginal Australians predominantly only as touristic experiences. In stark contrast to the invisibility of Aboriginal Australians in their own country, on arriving in Auckland, one would come across the Maori language in the very welcome sign to visitors arriving in the airport. Maori immigration officers checked our passports. What impact does this recognition of indigenous communities have on the recognition of migrant communities and multiculturalism? Could that be a reason why certain kinds of migrants and multiculturalism have fared better in Australia than in New Zealand? If a society is to be understood, judged on the basis of how it treats its minorities, as a South Asian, Indian I am all too aware of the fraught problems and prejudices with which indigenous communities are treated in the subcontinent. Referred to as 'tribals', 'adivasis', the politically, regionally and socially heterogeneous indigenous community in India, has been recognized constitutionally. However, injustice and deep-seated prejudice towards them by the Indian state and society continue to the present day. Gayatri Spivak's translation and analysis of Mahasweta Devi's powerful short stories (Devi, 1994, 1997, 2003) raises questions precisely about the place of the tribal on the map of national identity, their land rights and human rights, the 'museumization' of 'tribal' cultures. Hence, when colleagues at the ASA asked me where the ethics in the theme of apology is, it reminded me how the discussion of apology throws into question debates about morality, brings to our attention that relationships are shifting and in a flux. Above all it is the ambiguity, the uncertainty that it produces, as highlighted by the earlier commentaries, that suggests the significance of this social, political, cosmopolitan act. The focus on apology might not seem 'anthropological', but it engages with important theoretical and ethnographic debates relating to speech-acts, the role of emotions, the state, governmentality, violence and reconciliation. The examination of the apology highlights the experience of racism as a shattering force, and the psychic effort needed to pull oneself together. The social and psychological cost of this could be enormous. In the Australian case, the lack of mutuality in offering apology stopped short of Levinas's point of being 'open to the other'. One had to accept the apology as it was being offered. Here apology is an unwelcome gesture, as it is a claim to recognition or a claim to a relationship which one wants to deny. One doesn't want to be what others want one to be by their act of apology. As Cowlshaw suggests, it enabled 'the shuffling off of the sense of injury'. What is lost in this is, a sense of melancholic longing for one's nation that

the word 'Sorry' can come to take the place of among the Aboriginal communities.

It is also important to reflect on the refusal to apologize and the relationship that has with temporality – of that of past, present-ongoing and future injustices. In the discussion, John Gledhill cited the refusal of the British government to apologize and pay compensation to the people of Diego Garcia in the context of ongoing global state terror, while offering apologies for the Irish famine. In this instance, the apology becomes an important tool of power, which blocks out the past, present and future connections to sustain grievances over injustices. This highlights how the ritualistic aspects of reconciliation might seem empty after a certain point. While an apology cannot change past injustices it would be unfair to see it as a completely fruitless process. If one's estranged father dies after a prolonged terminal illness without saying sorry and seeking one's forgiveness, that pain of not being able to forgive the one who has wronged for the lack of an apology from the latter, hauntingly stays with oneself. The ones who have been wronged definitely need an apology as a start.

The apologizer may feel good by offering an apology and seek forgiveness from one's self. For many Aboriginal communities in Australia, there was no more need for explaining one's sense of injury as with this sorry, the injurious party had acknowledged the hurt. As Professor Larissa Behrendt mentioned in her talk on 19 March 2008 in response to the apology: 'The day was also important for many of the Aboriginal people I spoke to around the country because they were heartened at just how many non-Indigenous Australians obviously believed that the day was significant and important to them too.' Speaking on the occasion of the first anniversary of the apology, Behrendt (2009) suggested that the apology stood for a maturing of the relationship with Aboriginal people and also directed one to the hope of a country Australia could be. For Rudd to leave a legacy he needs to go beyond the merely symbolic and the apology has been a significant symbolic gesture. As Behrendt (2008) notes:

Rudd will always be remembered for the unequivocal apology he delivered the 13 February 2008 but it is what he does next that will define his legacy. As the aunts in my community said to me after I graduated with my doctorate, 'That's great, Bub, but what are you going to do next?'

While some have considered the apology to be a healing process others in Australia consider it to be a smoke-screen – for the Australian government to deepen a policy of assimilation. Aboriginal academics and activists have been severely critical of Rudd's apology, which was offered only to the Stolen Generation, and is 'very easily stitched into the national mythology, especially the national mythology regarding Indigenous stuff in Australian history' (Foley, 2008).⁶ This is particularly the case given the continuation by Rudd of the Howard government's policy of federal intervention in the Northern Territory. Others have referred to the apology as a 'cut-price

sorry' (BBC, 2008) as, unless it's accompanied by some sort of meaningful form of compensation or reparations for past wrongs that have been committed, then it is a farce. Along with a meaningful offer in terms of reparation and compensation, Foley suggests that a post-apartheid South Africa style *truth and reconciliation commission* would help facing up to the truth, instead of glossing it over in a single speech. This is similar to the South African demand for an apology in Todd's commentary. On being asked how the apology should be taught in Australian universities, Foley (2008) says:

It should be taught in Political Science classes as an example of the duplicity and deceit of politicians. And it should be taught in psychology classes in terms of how a nation appeases itself of its guilt. And it should be taught in drama school as a classic example of Australian political comedy. And it should be taught in driving school as a magnificent example of defensive driving and evasive tactics and manoeuvres. It should also be taught in kindergartens as a fairy tale.

The articulation of the apology claims to insert a hiatus within ongoing relationships, suggests Rapport, similar to the euphoric electoral victory of President Barack Obama. The apology addressed a huge gap in a discursive realm and opened up a phase with the possibility of new things. Maybe it is the possibility of healthy narcissism, as suggested by Ghassan Hage – that one is capable of doing something good – that needs to be fostered as positive politics. Overall, Rapport focuses on the cosmopolitan who has the knowledge and responsibility of/for fellow human beings to offer apology and the implied claims as to what their culture and society are. Cowlishaw shows that it is this 'cosmopolitics', and cosmopolitan discourses relating to the apology, from which segments of the Australian Aboriginal population are alienated. Subjection to long-term racist experience as a shattering force, as highlighted by Hage, has itself made these communities immune to the effects of the momentous event of the apology. If, as Josephides points out following Derrida, only the unforgivable requires forgiveness, the onus is again on the victim to forgive rather than the acknowledgement of the violation of her or his humanity. Maybe it is to their own humanity that people must turn for forgiveness, though it may be a long time coming. Or perhaps Todd's suggestion – that through Arendt's 'worldliness', through an informed acritique of the system which acknowledges past injustice and/or personal benefit from a structure endorsing discriminatory practices – can lead to a concomitant eradication of racism or further future discrimination.

The hugely expensive film *Australia* (2008), starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Jackson, is a mixture of the Western and romantic genres, set in the context of the Second World War. Released in November 2008, the film centres on an aboriginal child Nullah, played by Brandon Walters, who is looked after by Kidman. The film, directed by Baz Luhrmann, was made by Rupert Murdoch's Fox Corporation and cost about \$90m (£59m). The

Australian Tourism Export Council contributed the other \$40m hoping maybe that the film would provide a landscape for new tourism and 'a new Australian past' (Greer, 2008). Australian tourism has been promoted in the past by an advertisement titled: 'Where the Bloody Hell are you?'⁷ The 2009 version of these advertisements for Tourism Australia has been directed by Luhmann and features, for the first time, an Aboriginal child played by none other than Brandon Walters. Could this performative aspect of apology (without addressing the issue of reparation) as a form of governmentality in contemporary public cultures be possible only in a post-apology era? And if so how helpful is it?

Notes

- 1 A British Academy Overseas Conference Grant supported Nayanika Mookherjee's participation in the ASA conference and Open Forum on Ethics of Apology.
- 2 The video can be seen online at the *Mail and Guardian* website: <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2008-02-29-free-state-four-crimen-injuria-probed>
- 3 *Crimen injuria* in South African common law is defined as the act of 'unlawfully, intentionally and seriously impairing the dignity of another', see Clark (2003).
- 4 In doing so, the country sought to leave behind the legacy of the previous federal government's refusal, and in turn became the most recent settler nation to have issued an apology for the harmful policies of its past (see Rudd, 2008).
- 5 Furthermore, Arendt argues that it is impossible to live without a collective. In similar terms, Karl Jaspers states that political responsibility should be divorced from personal blame and insists that members of a polity accrue common benefits and so should also be held commonly accountable (1961: 40).
- 6 Thanks to Jeni Thornley for bringing Foley's and Behrendt's work to my attention. Jeni's documentary, *Island Home Country*, deals with race, Australia's colonized history and how it impacts into the present (see <http://www.jenithornley.com/>).
- 7 See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn0lwGk4u9o>

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■ **Nayanika Mookherjee** is a Lecturer in the Sociology Department at Lancaster University and the Ethics officer of the ASA. She received her PhD in Social Anthropology from SOAS, London University. Funded by the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, her book, *The Spectral Wound: Sexual Violence, Public Memories and the Bangladesh War*, is forthcoming with Duke University Press. As a Leverhulme Research Fellow (2009–10) she will continue her project: *Arts of Reconciliation*. [email: n.mookherjee@lancaster.ac.uk]

■ **Nigel Rapport** is Professor of Anthropological and Philosophical Studies at the University of St Andrews, where he directs the Centre for Cosmopolitan Studies. His most recent books are *Of Orderlies and Men: Hospital Porters Achieving Wellness at Work* (Carolina Academic Press, 2008), and the second edition of *Social and Cultural Anthropology: The Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2007). [email: rapport@st-andrews.ac.uk]

■ **Lisette Josephides** is Professor of Anthropology at Queen's University Belfast. She received her PhD from University College London after lengthy fieldwork in Papua New Guinea. Her latest book is *Melanesian Odysseys: Negotiating the Self, Narrative and Modernity* (Berghahn, 2008). [l.josephides@qub.ac.uk]

■ **Ghassan Hage** is Future Generation Professor of Anthropology and Social Theory at the University of Melbourne. He has published widely on the comparative anthropology of nationalism, multiculturalism, racism and migration. [ghage@unimelb.edu.au]

■ **Lindi Renier Todd** is an anthropologist whose recent doctoral work has included researching Afrikaner identifications in post-apartheid South Africa, in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. She currently teaches anthropology at the University of Sydney, Australia. [Lindi.Todd@uts.edu.au]

■ **Gillian Cowlishaw** holds an Australian Professorial Fellowship at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). Recent books are *Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race* (Blackwell, 2004) and *The City's Outback* (UNSW Press, 2009), both ethnographically based studies of relationships between Indigenous and immigrant Australians. [Gillian.Cowlishaw@uts.edu.au]
