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Sources of Shame, Images of Home

Introduction

In “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation: The Politics of Being at Home in the World,” Catherine Lu aims, we might say, to rescue the concept and practice of reconciliation. Reconciliation is central to many people’s understanding of how we should respond to political catastrophes and to grave structural injustice. From the Truth and Reconciliation Commission assembled in South Africa after the apartheid system of racial segregation was overturned, to the Commission assembled in Canada to examine wrongs committed in the Indian residential school system, to the campaigns for reconciliation and national healing in the United States in the aftermath of the police killing of George Floyd, calls for reconciliation have accompanied calls for justice.¹ Nevertheless, theorists have raised trenchant criticisms of reconciliation, arguing that reconciliation is incompatible with the demands of justice, or that it imposes excessive burdens on those who are victimized or oppressed. Lu aims to develop a novel conception of reconciliation that avoids these criticisms and accounts for reconciliation’s distinctive significance. Put briefly, she claims that reconciliation aims to address agents’ alienation from the unjust social institutions and practices that structure their lives; it aims, in other words, to enable these agents to *be at home* in their social worlds.

In these comments, I will present two kinds of challenges that Lu’s account faces. Both challenges have their source in forms of shame and fear that are apt to discourage socially privileged agents from participating in the process of reconciliation that Lu describes. To be clear, I present these challenges in a constructive spirit. The idea of being at home in one’s social world, which Lu develops in her chapter, is undoubtedly important, and Lu’s application of this idea to questions concerning the nature and

significance of reconciliation is highly illuminating. My hope is that thinking through responses to the challenges that I discuss will deepen our understanding of the grounds for engaging in reconciliation at all, the relation between our ideals of reconciliation and our ideals of justice, and the burdens that may be associated with the pursuit of these ideals.

Rescuing Reconciliation

Lu's project of rescuing reconciliation has both critical and constructive dimensions. The first, critical dimension, which Lu develops in detail in her book *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics*,² involves identifying what has been "deficient in contemporary ideas, discourses, and practices of reconciliation."³ On the one hand, Lu argues that some conceptions of reconciliation may be rightly criticized because they demand too little of the prevailing social order. More precisely, these conceptions fail to call for the punishment of wrongdoers, the compensation of victims, or—crucially—the "structural transformation" of unjust societies.⁴ For example, consider a society that is working through the aftermath of its legal enforcement of racial segregation, and suppose that this society creates a truth and reconciliation commission to facilitate the transition to a more just and stable regime. If the commission focuses on acknowledging past wrongs and "closing the books" on past injustice, but it neglects the task of overturning "oppressive and dominating practices, conditions, and relations in contemporary social structures," then it employs a conception of reconciliation that demands too little of the unjust society in which it operates.

On the other hand, some conceptions of reconciliation demand too *much*, whether morally or psychologically, from victims of injustice; in particular, they call on victims to sacrifice their "individual rights, needs, and interests" in order to serve the aims of reconciliation.⁵ Such conceptions may make these excessive demands because they focus, inappropriately, on achieving "a kind of social unity" that leaves too little room for "disagreement and dissent," or because they focus, inappropriately, on achieving

some apolitical, medicalized form of “individual psychological healing” from the “traumatic experiences” associated with political catastrophes.⁶ For example, a process of reconciliation that calls on the survivors of genocide to forgive the perpetrators for the sake of some rarefied ideal of social unity may be criticized on these grounds. A survivor of Rwandan genocide, whom Lu quotes in her discussion, criticizes such a conception when he states that “I don’t understand this word ‘reconciliation’ . . . If a person comes to ask for my forgiveness, I will pardon him after he has resuscitated the members of my family that he killed.”⁷

In light of these criticisms, we might ask why we should care about reconciliation at all. In Lu’s words, “what value does reconciliation have that is distinct from justice? Especially in cases of clear wrongdoing, why not just focus on justice instead?”⁸ These important questions, to which I will return later on, frame Lu’s discussion in “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation,” and they bring us to the second, constructive dimension of her project. Lu points out that there is nothing essential to the concept of reconciliation “that renders it inevitably regressive, rather than emancipatory.”⁹ Furthermore, many people in societies throughout the world already understand their moral and political obligations to the victims of injustice in terms of reconciliation. So, she argues, we have good reason to “provide an alternative, more normatively and politically cogent reconstruction of reconciliation”; we have reason, that is, to rescue the concept of reconciliation, rather than abandon it.¹⁰

Lu proceeds by distinguishing justice from reconciliation and then developing her novel and illuminating account of the latter. Put roughly, while promoting justice in the wake of political catastrophe involves rectifying certain kinds of agential and structural *in*justice, reconciliation involves “responding to various kinds of alienation” that are revealed or produced by such injustice.¹¹ Drawing on the work of Rahel Jaeggie, Lu describes alienation as a kind of disruption of our capacity to identify with the lives we lead—a disruption of our capacity to express ourselves, and to see ourselves reflected, in what we do. Lu is fundamentally

concerned with what she calls “structural alienation,” a kind of “estrangement from the social/political order” that arises when unjust institutions and practices “define in objectionable ways” the social identities and roles that we can inhabit, the forms of agency that are available to us, and the aspirations that we might pursue.¹² Such alienation undermines our capacity to flourish and to participate in our society in meaningful ways. On Lu’s view, reconciliation is a process that aims primarily to fashion new or altered institutions and practices, and thereby remedy agents’ structural alienation from their social and political order.

As it is commonly understood and valued, reconciliation involves repairing damaged relationships among agents or social groups that were previously at odds. Lu’s account preserves this vital feature by stating that reconciliation proceeds by way of a “reparatory dialogue between the contemporary inheritors of an unjust past.”¹³ More precisely, the politics of reconciliation involves a kind of open-ended debate between victims and perpetrators of political catastrophe, or between those who are marginalized and those who are privileged by unjust social and political institutions and practices. Participants in this debate offer, from the standpoint of whatever social position they occupy, narratives and images of their society, including representations of the society’s history, its professed ideals and the success or failure of its efforts to realize those ideals, the identities and roles that are available in the society, and so on. To use one of Lu’s central metaphors, these participants offer different, and sometimes wildly discordant, conceptions of their society as a kind of *home*—a setting that grounds the “meaning, coherence, and stability” of their social lives and supplies much of the background in light of which they develop and pursue their aspirations. As they confront and respond to one another’s representations of home, “agents who participate in the project of reconciliation embark on remaking and potentially transforming” their social world in a manner that remedies their alienation from that world.¹⁴

Although participating in this sort of reparatory dialogue can

bring the promise of a new and better social world, it can also involve a considerable cost, namely, the loss of one's identity. As Lu points out, engaging in a struggle over narratives and images of one's social and political home can involve confronting profoundly unsettling representations of that home, and of one's place in it. In particular, when agents who occupy privileged social positions, and who assume that their society's grave injustices are confined to the remote past, engage in such a struggle, they must confront the searing narratives and images of their social world—and of *themselves*—that issue from their marginalized counterparts.

Consider, for example, James Baldwin's discussion, in *The Fire Next Time*, of White Americans' aversion to clear-eyed narratives of their country's subjugation of Black people. Baldwin notes that many White Americans associate their racial identity with "hard work and good clean fun and chastity and piety and success," and they maintain this image of themselves by "brain-wash[ing]" themselves into believing that their Black compatriots, who are "treated like animals," are essentially inferior, and therefore "*deserve* to be treated like animals."¹⁵ To engage seriously in any form of racial reconciliation, these White Americans would have to begin by recognizing Black people's humanity and looking honestly at Black Americans' subjection to lynching and mob violence, at their subjection to police brutality and unjust incarceration, and at their systematic exclusion from opportunities to gain decent housing, health care, education, and employment. To these White Americans, this initial step would feel like waking up one morning "to find the sun shining and all the stars aflame"; it would be "terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality."¹⁶ More generally, the sort of struggle over narratives and images of home that is, on Lu's view, central to the process of reconciliation poses a grave threat to privileged agents' understanding of themselves and their social world, and so engaging in this sort of struggle is apt to arouse such agents' shame and fear. I now want to discuss two kinds of challenges that Lu's account faces in virtue of this threat.

Transformation without Reconciliation?

The first challenge concerns the grounds for engaging in the process of reconciliation at all, given Lu's characterization of that process. On her view, reconciliation aims to enable agents who are alienated from their social and political order to develop suitable narratives and images of their social world and to draw on these representations of home in order to lead lives with which they can identify. And—crucially—this process proceeds by way of a reparatory dialogue between agents who are marginalized within the unjust order and agents who occupy more privileged social positions. But, in light of privileged agents' aversion to such dialogue, there may be a broad range of cases in which marginalized agents would be best able to develop and employ suitable narratives and images if they abandoned or limited the attempt to communicate with their privileged counterparts and focused instead on generative dialogue with one another. In such cases, we might ask why any of us, especially those who are marginalized, should care about reconciliation as Lu understands it.

To clarify the kinds of cases that I have in mind, I will consider some historical examples of Black American communities that developed narratives and images of home, employed these representations in ways that mitigated—in limited but important respects—their alienation from their social world, and did so without engaging in the relevant sort of struggle with more privileged communities. In his essay collection *Shadow and Act*, Ralph Ellison notes that he and other Black boys in the community in which he grew up, namely, Oklahoma City during the early 1900s, drew on music and literature to fashion new identities and aspirations.¹⁷ Spurred on by their “voracious reading,” their exposure to the “exuberantly creative” improvisation of southwestern jazz musicians, and their observation of local Black preachers, bootleggers, businesspeople and so on, Ellison and his childhood friends improvised “patterns to live by.”¹⁸ Indeed, they developed conceptions of their own possibilities that “went against the barbs and over the palings of almost every fence which those who controlled the social and political power had erected to

restrict our roles in the life of the country.”¹⁹ This sort of improvisation enabled Ellison and his companions to “humanize” their social circumstances and—crucially—to “evoke a feeling of being at home in the world.”²⁰

To take a different, and normatively more fraught, example, the Nation of Islam—a Black nationalist organization founded in the United States—developed an elaborate set of religious myths and symbols; and during the 1950s and ’60s, many Black Americans appealed to these myths and symbols in order to craft and adopt new social identities, roles, and aspirations.²¹ Put briefly, the Nation taught that Black Americans, who had been cut off from knowledge of their lofty history, were experiencing a kind of “hell” on earth, and White people, who occupied positions of social and political power, functioned as a kind of “devil” in that hell.²² However, God, who was Black, would soon end White people’s reign and make Black Americans whole.²³ Many Black Americans embraced these myths and symbols and appealed to them to fashion new ways of living. Taking note of such transformations, Baldwin claims, in *The Fire Next Time*, that the Nation was

able to do what generations of welfare workers and committees and resolutions and reports and housing projects and playgrounds have failed to do: to heal the drunkards and junkies, to convert people who have come out of prison and to keep them out, to make men chaste and women virtuous, and to invest both the male and the female with a pride and a serenity that hang about them like an unfailing light.²⁴

More broadly, the Nation supplied interpretive resources that marginalized Black Americans used to transform their lives, and to create something new with which they could identify.

Finally, during the late 1960s and early ’70s, the Black Panther Party produced visual art, introduced language, and embodied narratives and images that enabled its members to craft and adopt new identities and aspirations. Founded in Oakland,

California—a city in which Black residents faced “residential segregation, poverty, unemployment, and police brutality”—the Panthers worked to promote Black Americans’ liberation.²⁵ The Panthers exposed community members to transformative art and language through a newspaper that they published and distributed throughout the United States. In addition to presenting a program for Black liberation and reporting on progressive activism, the paper included visual art that depicted the beauty and humanity of ordinary Black people—everyone “from the Christian to the brother on the block”—and depicted resistance to oppression.²⁶ Furthermore, the paper supplied alternative representations of the police who terrorized Black communities, depicting these police as “pigs” who were to be ridiculed rather than feared.²⁷ Finally, by developing community programs that provided food, medical care, community defense, legal aid, and education, the Panthers embodied narratives and images of Black self-determination. Elaine Brown, who chaired the Party in the 1970s, explains in an interview that the aim of these programs was not merely to meet community members’ material needs, but also “to influence the minds of people, to understand . . . that if they could get food, that maybe they would want clothing, and maybe they’d want housing, and maybe they’d want land, and maybe they would ultimately want some abstract thing called freedom.”²⁸ As with Ellison and his friends’ early improvisation and the Nation of Islam’s ministry, reflecting on the Panthers’ programs helps us understand how marginalized agents might develop transformative narratives and images of home, without engaging in the sort of struggle with more privileged agents that, on Lu’s view, is central to reconciliation.

My discussion of these examples has an important caveat. Members of the marginalized Black communities that I described were able to generate transformative representations of home, but they were able to *use* these representations to reshape themselves and their social worlds only in limited respects and for limited periods. Indeed, all three of the communities that I described were debilitated by unjust actions and policies: Thriving Black communities in Oklahoma during the early twentieth century

were subject to lynching, the violence of White mobs, and legally enforced racial segregation;²⁹ and members the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther Party were harassed, systemically misled, imprisoned, and even assassinated by American law enforcement agencies.³⁰ Members of these communities could not fully or stably realize the transformative potential of their representations of home because these injustices were not substantially remedied.

This caveat helps shape my formulation of this first challenge. On Lu's view, reconciliation—which aims to address agents' alienation from their social order, and which proceeds by way of debate between the oppressed and the privileged—is distinct from justice, which aims, in the wake of political catastrophe, to remedy agential and structural *injustice*. In the cases I am now considering, the most reliable way for marginalized agents to develop transformative representations of home may be to forgo or substantially limit interpretive struggles with their privileged counterparts and to focus instead on communicating with one another; but, in virtue of the injustice that these marginalized agents endure, their efforts to use such representations to reshape themselves and their societies may be thwarted. In such cases, we might ask—adapting a question that Lu uses to frame her own discussion—why we should care about the process of reconciliation that Lu describes. Why not (1) call on these marginalized agents to develop transformative representations of home primarily by engaging in dialogue with one another, and (2) call on all decent members of the society to pursue *justice* by whatever means are available?

Lu supplies an initial response to this question when she points out that engaging in the process of reconciliation that she describes can be a means of promoting justice. More precisely, achieving reconciliation can “provide or strengthen the motivational bases for agents to do justice, or redress injustice, at all,” and it can help determine “how they pursue justice, or how they conceive of justice.”³¹ But this response invites further questions. First, to what extent and under what conditions do marginalized agents' interpretive struggles with their privileged counterparts

promote justice in the kinds of cases I am now discussing? Second, is the value of this process of reconciliation purely instrumental in these cases? In other words, does this value simply fade away when reconciliation's usefulness for promoting justice has been exhausted?

Shame, Love, and the Burdens of Reconciliation

Suppose we provide a satisfactory response to the first challenge, which concerns the grounds for engaging in Lu's process of reconciliation at all. This leads us to a second challenge, which concerns the psychological burdens that marginalized agents may have to endure when they engage in this process; and this second challenge, like the first, is grounded in privileged agents' aversion to struggles over representations of home. Recall that Lu criticizes some conceptions of reconciliation on the grounds that they make excessive psychological demands on people who are victimized or oppressed. Such a conception might, for example, call on the survivors of genocide to forgive the perpetrators for the sake of achieving some form of social unity, or some form of individual psychic healing. As an alternative to these approaches, Lu develops an account on which reconciliation aims not at some highly demanding form of social unity or at individual agents' psychological transformation, but rather at addressing agents' alienation from the unjust institutions and practices that structure their lives. On this view, reconciliation proceeds by way of the kind of interpretive struggle that I have been discussing. The problem that I now want to consider is that, in virtue of privileged agents' aversion to such struggles, marginalized agents' successful participation in the process of reconciliation, as Lu describes it, may sometimes require the same kinds of psychological burdens that Lu wishes to avoid.

Baldwin's work offers an exceptionally clear characterization of the psychic forces that tend to render privileged agents unwilling to examine their society with clear eyes, and it offers an illuminating discussion of the burdens that marginalized agents must bear if they wish to subdue those forces and remedy their

devastating effects. Consider Baldwin's early characterizations, which I discussed in the previous section, of the shame and fear that White Americans are apt to feel when they confront honest narratives of their society's treatment of Black people. Baldwin insists that it is possible for Americans to prevent White racism from undoing the country, and to create a racially just community. But White Americans' shame and fear, which dispose them to avoid clear-eyed appraisals of their society's racial injustice, threaten to derail this transformation of American society. So, Baldwin claims, resisting and overcoming White racial domination involves coping somehow with this shame and fear. He argues that, in order to cope with these attitudes and curtail their devastating effects, Black Americans must take on a radical burden: They must exhibit a certain form of *love* for their White compatriots.

Baldwin describes this love in the opening section of *The Fire Next Time*, which takes the form of an open letter to his nephew. He writes that

There is no reason for you to try to become like white people and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that *they* must accept *you*. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that *you* must accept *them*. And I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love. For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it.³²

Later, he adds that those White Americans who deny “with brutal clarity” their Black compatriots’ humanity “are your brothers—your lost younger brothers. And if the word *integration* means anything, this is what it means: that we, with love, shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing reality and begin to change it.”³³

Put all too briefly, Baldwin calls on Black Americans both to bear witness to the devastating impact of White racism *and* to

accept White Americans as their brothers and sisters—as dangerously deluded members of a kind of American family. Regarding their White compatriots in this way can enable Black Americans to withhold hatred and contempt and to cling to a kind of faith in the possibility of creating a better world. And—crucially—when White Americans recognize that their Black compatriots view them with clear eyes, and nevertheless accept them as brothers and sisters, this may ease White Americans’ psychic pressure to avoid honest appraisals of their society, and of their own positions within that society. It might enable them, in other words, to begin to face their social reality and, together with their Black compatriots, to work to change it.

Now return to Lu’s account of reconciliation. In order to engage successfully, in the face of America’s racial injustice, in the process of reconciliation that Lu describes—that is, in order to engage with White Americans in the kinds of interpretive struggles that I have discussed—Black Americans would have to cope with the very same manifestations of White shame and fear that Baldwin describes. If Baldwin is right that coping with this shame and fear would require Black Americans to love their White compatriots—that is, to regard them as brothers and sisters, to withhold hatred and contempt, and to hold onto faith in the possibility of creating a better social world with them—then, in this important instance, Lu’s account of reconciliation also calls on marginalized agents to bear radical psychological burdens. Indeed, it calls on these agents to bear the kinds of psychological burdens that the account is designed to avoid.

To be clear, I am not claiming that Lu’s account should be rejected on these grounds. I cannot discuss Baldwin’s views in detail here, but I believe that his call for Black Americans to bear witness to the truth and exhibit love for their White compatriots in the course of pursuing racial justice can be justified, despite the associated burdens. It may be that a call for marginalized agents to exhibit such love for their privileged counterparts in the course of pursuing Lu’s reconciliation can be justified as well. I will not try to settle that question here. Rather, my claim is

that the distance between the conception of reconciliation that Lu develops and the conceptions that she criticizes and rejects because they demand too much from those who are victimized and oppressed may be much narrower than it initially appears.³⁴

1 Lu discusses each of these examples in “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation,” chapter 1 of this book.

2 Catherine Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

3 Lu, “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation.”

4 Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation*, p. 212.

5 Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation*, p. 186.

6 Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation*, p. 186.

7 Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation*, p. 186.

8 Lu, “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation.”

9 Lu, “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation.”

10 Lu, “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation.”

11 Lu, “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation.”

12 Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation*, p. 189.

13 Lu, *Justice and Reconciliation*, p. 193.

14 Lu, “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation.”

15 James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998), 681.

16 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998), 294.

17 Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: Random House, 1995), pp. 49–55.

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- 18 Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 53.
- 19 Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 52.
- 20 Ellison, *Shadow and Act*, p. 54.
- 21 See Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), pp. 155–168.
- 22 Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, pp. 155–168.
- 23 Malcolm X, *Autobiography*, pp. 155–168.
- 24 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 316.
- 25 Robyn C. Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come: Black Power, Gender, and the Black Panther Party in Oakland* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 14.
- 26 Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*, p. 72.
- 27 *Eyes on the Prize*, episode 9, “Power! (1966–68),” directed by Louis J. Massiah and Terry Kay Rockefeller, written by Steve Fayer, Louis J. Massiah, and Terry Kay Rockefeller, aired January 29, 1990. PBS, 2006, DVD.
- 28 *Eyes on the Prize*, episode 9, “Power! (1966–68).”
- 29 See Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982).
- 30 Spencer, *The Revolution Has Come*.
- 31 Lu, “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation.”
- 32 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, pp. 293 and 294.
- 33 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, p. 294.
- 34 I am grateful to Catherine Lu and Saira Mohamed for helpful discussion.