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# The Ethics of Memory: What Does it Mean to Apologize for Historical Wrongs

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## EDITORIAL

### **The Ethics of Memory: What Does it Mean to Apologize for Historical Wrongs**

Lorraine Kasprisin, editor

Although many of our controversial scenarios stem from current events, we invite authors to examine more deeply the historical and cultural undercurrents that give rise to them. As we were constructing the theme for this issue, a number of events were occurring: the United States Congress was holding hearings on reparations for slavery, students at Georgetown University had discovered that their Jesuit founders had sold 272 enslaved persons in 1838 to raise funds for the college and were demanding reparations for the descendants, Chancellor Carol L. Folt apologized for the profound injustices of slavery at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, students across a number of universities were calling for the removal of Confederate statutes, and the United States Supreme Court was once again addressing the affirmative action question. With a renewed consciousness, apologies for historical wrongs to mitigate suffering and talk about reconciliation entered into our contemporary discourse.

During the 116th Congress (2019-2020), a subcommittee of the judiciary committee in the U.S. House of Representatives was considering a bill H.R. 40, the Commission to Study and Develop Reparation Proposals for African-Americans Act, that was introduced on January 3, 2019. Such a Commission was to be charged with examining:

...slavery and discrimination in the colonies and the United States from 1619 to the present and recommend appropriate remedies. Among other requirements, the commission shall identify (1) the role of federal and state governments in supporting the institution of slavery, (2) forms of discrimination in the public and private sectors against freed slaves and their descendants, and (3) lingering negative effects of slavery on living African-Americans and society.

On June 19, 2019 the subcommittee held hearings. We reprinted a transcript of the testimony by Ta-Nehisi Coates that was delivered before the congressional hearing on our journal's blog. Readers can read the testimony at:

<http://journalofeducationalcontroversy.blogspot.com/2019/06/congressional-hearing-on-hr-40-on.html>

Coates' influential 2014 article "The Case for Reparations" in *The Atlantic* revived the issue of reparations for slavery and its legacy.

Our call for papers sought to provide historical, cultural and moral clarification and illumination to these emerging incidents. We posed the theme and question as follows:

### **Theme: The Ethics of Memory: What Does it Mean to Apologize for Historical Wrongs**

To apologize for a wrong committed can imply any number of things: that one has committed a wrong against another, that the wrong was done intentionally, that one committed the wrong with malice, that one is consciously aware of doing the wrong, that one has remorse, that one is seeking to right the wrong, that one feels a sense of guilt over committing the wrong, and/or that one is seeking redemption and reconciliation. But what does it mean for a state to apologize for an historical wrong that was committed long before its present members were born, but who may still continue to derive benefits from that wrong? Recently, a university chancellor apologized for his university's role in past racial injustices and acknowledged the “profound injustices of slavery” as he sought to reconcile the past with the present and the future. College protests around confederate statues stir conflicts between arguments over historical injustices and historical heritage. Historical figures who laid the foundation for the enlightenment principles embedded in the founding documents are found wanting in the ethics of historical memory and identity. And the Supreme Court’s current reconsideration of affirmative action brings the issues back into the legal domain, as courts grapple with how to redress the effects of slavery and Jim Crow on educational opportunity. Alternatively, authors may find that the conceptual framework that embeds our question carries certain assumptions that ignores a framework that would center experiences like the Japanese-American internment camps or the Native American Boarding Schools rather than foregrounding them. Would placing the experiences of those who have been wronged central to our inquiry change the very way we pose the problem. How does the very notion of apology even look from the perspective of those who have suffered these wrongs? Words and their meanings have histories and continue through lived experiences that are named and experienced differently. For instance, racialized and other marginalized communities often refer to ‘wronged’ as historically and generationally traumatic—perhaps a different metaphor that communicates suffering is needed? In the midst of what is often highly contentious confrontations, this issue of the journal is seeking articles that can bring moral clarification and rigorous discernment to the topic.

Our authors responded from a number of different perspectives encapsulating different times, populations and methodologies. Readers can get a sense of the diverse interpretations of the question we posed, the scholarly disciplines applied to illuminate it, and thoughts about possible solutions through the abstracts of their papers below.

- 1. Allusive, Elusive, or Illusive? An Examination of Apologies for the Atlantic Slave Trade and their Pedagogical Utility,** Esther J. Kim (College of William and Mary), Justin Krueger (University of Texas at Austin), Anthony Brown (University of Texas at Austin), Heath Robinson (University of Texas at Austin)

This critical essay explores the topic of slavery within the context of public apologies.

Drawing from both the historical lens of cultural memory (Le Goff, 1977/1992) and the critical race theory construct of interest convergence (Bell, 1987), the authors offer critical examination of the following questions: (1) Where do collective apologies fit in the narrative of slavery in the US? (2) What affordances might they offer to the social studies at the intersection of curriculum, instruction and the historical memory of enslavement? (3) What do apologies for slavery in the present potentially reveal about contemporary social and political relations as narratives? Central to the aims of this paper is an effort to situate recent engagements involving revisions to the historical memory of enslavement as US institutions attempt to atone and offer regrets for historical associations and affiliations with the Middle Passage and transatlantic slave trade.

**2. Making Sense of and with “Profound Regret”: Howard County Board of Education’s Apology for a Racially Segregated Public School System**, Rachel Garver (Montclair State University), Benjamin Nienass (Montclair State University)

In November 2012, the Board of Education of Howard County, Maryland approved a proclamation that expressed “profound regret that the Howard County Public School System maintained segregated and unequal public schools both prior, and subsequent to” *Brown v. Board of Education*. The proclamation describes Howard County’s slow response to comply with the 1954 decision, such that the school system was not officially desegregated until eleven years later in 1965. Through the analysis of stakeholder interviews and board meetings, we explore the various ways and the extent to which the Board of Howard County’s apology was bestowed with meaning. We argue that the apology was utilized as a narrative device to define the role of the Board, delineate the injustice committed, establish (dis)continuity between past and present injustices, and work out who has been wronged. Stakeholders used *de jure* segregation as a lens to understand contemporary *de facto* segregation and reflected on its continuing harm to current members of the community. We conclude by discussing the potential of public apologies as forms of governance that mold responsible and responsive public officials.

**3. How Historical Context Matters for Fourth and Fifth Generation Japanese Americans**, L. Erika Saito (National University)

Japanese Americans have a longstanding history in the U.S.-- comprising of more than five consecutive generations. Yet generational research on this ethnic group is understudied (Meredith, Wenger, Liu, Harada, & Kahn, 2000; Pang, 2007). By connecting the historical experiences of previous generations of Japanese Americans to the present, findings on how history has impacted this population can be applied in other ethnic multi-generational groups in the United States.

An Ethnic Identity & Generational Status Model was developed by the author that was influenced by Jean Phinney (1990), Handlin (1951), Mannheim (1927), and Matsuo (1992) to support the varied roles that contribute to ethnic identity formation: history, family,

education, and society. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the historical influences of fourth and fifth generation Japanese American identity.

Forty participants who identify as fourth or fifth generation Japanese American on at least one side of their family through purposive snowball sampling were interviewed using an open-ended questionnaire. This study will examine the historical responses from the interview protocol. Therefore, the research question in this paper asks, "How does history influence the ethnic identity of fourth and fifth generation Japanese American adults?"

**4. A case for unforgiveness as a legitimate moral response to historical wrongs,**  
Hollman Lozano (Simon Fraser University)

The emergence of forgiveness as the preferred mechanism through which historical wrongs are addressed within reconciliation discourses has meant that for the people who cannot forgive or will not forgive, there are no alternatives other than insisting on forgiveness until it hopefully one day arrives. As such, the point of unforgiveness is to constitute an agentic space where the people who cannot forgive can articulate their stance in ways that not only allow them to articulate their resistance to the injunction to forgive, but also constitute alternative spaces whereby they can articulate their stance in inclusive ways. If we constitute alternatives to the hegemonic injunction to forgive, we might be able to open spaces whereby those who are excluded from the reconciliatory discourses, manage to participate and enrich the spaces of reconciliation while refusing to partake of the calls to forgiveness.

**5. Anti-Affirmative Action and Historical Whitewashing: To Never Apologize While Committing New Racial Sins,**  
Hoang V. Tran (Florida Atlantic University)

Apologies, official or otherwise, for historical wrongs are important steps in the road towards reconciliation. More difficult are historical wrongs that have yet to be fully acknowledged. The reemergence of affirmative action in the public consciousness via the Supreme Court represents a striking example of the ways in which our collective consciousness has yet to fully account for our past educational sins: segregation and income inequality. This essay explores the multiple consequences to our historical memory when the anti-affirmative action narrative continues to dominate the public discourse on racism in education. I offer a renewed focus on 'fenced out' as the deterministic consideration of racism in education. In doing so, our historical memory and contemporary consciousness regains the potential to differentiate between admissions grievances, and ongoing racist practices such as de facto segregation and income inequality in education.

We also have a spirited exchange between a review of a recently published book and the author's response to it. Both the author and the reviewer further illuminate our understanding and raise new questions for us. In reviewing Kerry T. Burch's book, *Jefferson's Revolutionary Theory and the Reconstruction of Educational Purpose*, reviewer Tony DeCesare raises the dilemma we have

all been facing lately. How should we treat an important historical figure who gave expression to our most fundamental democratic ideals while at the same time was acknowledged to be a slaveholder himself. The author responds that a critical pedagogy should pursue the contribution that Jefferson's revolutionary theory can make to our own pursuit of educational purposes and renewal by retaining this productive tension and confronting and interrogating the contradictions? Perhaps, we should explore this question in a future issue of our journal.

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