articles

ABORTIVE RITUALS

Historical Apologies in the Global Era

Michel-Rolph Trouillot
University of Chicago

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Collective historical apologies are increasing worldwide. Navigating ambiguously between moral, historical and legal grounds, these rituals of apology create pastness by connecting existing collectivities to past ones that either perpetuated wrongs or were victimized. This assumed continuity projects onto these collectivities aspects of ahistorical, liberal subjects, who must now not only address historical wrongs in pragmatic terms (such as compensation) but repent *on the global stage. However, these apologies are destined to be abortive rituals, whose very conditions of emergence deny the possibility of transformation.*

Prelude: The crusaders of forgiveness

They are the crusaders of the twenty-first century. Caught between a present they denounce and a past they did not live, they vow to shape a future in accordance with their faith. Devoted Christians, they chose Jerusalem for their millennial rendezvous, but their march started long before and their hopes will live long after. They believe that faith requires action now more than ever. So from Cologne to Istanbul, from Vienna to Beirut, from Macedonia to Palestine, they followed the path of war, just like other Christians before them.

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But contrary to the crusaders of long ago, they did not carry a sword. Nor did they carry guns like other Europeans and North Americans before them. Humbly yet honourably, they carried a message. They gave it to the Imam of Cologne, to Turkish delegates to the European Parliament, to passersby in Slovakia, to the mayor of Beirut, and to Chief Rabbi Yisrael Meir Lau of Jerusalem. Again and again, to all Muslims and Jews they met along the road, they repeated that same message: 'I am sorry.'

The Reconciliation Walk, as its organizers call it, started on Easter Sunday 1996, in Cologne, Germany, the very town from which the first crusade began its bloody march in the spring of 1096. In a solemn commemoration at the cathedral of Cologne, 150 Christians, mostly evangelical Protestants, vowed to retrace the path of the early crusaders all the way to Jerusalem. Reaching over 2000 miles and nine centuries of tension, they aimed at reconciliation with all non-Christians. Since 1996, more than 2000 participants have joined the initial group. Breaking down into small crews, numbers dwindling or reinforced as they cross unquiet borders, town after town, they have apologized for the crimes committed in the name of Christ since the first crusade.

To many of us caught in the mundane demands of modern life the Reconciliation Walk may seem like repentance gone amok, historicity gone childish. Yet, we may want to pause and wonder why the marchers seem to have been taken more seriously by the political and religious leaders throughout the Middle East than by those in the countries whence they came. Further, we cannot easily dismiss the walkers' apology on empirical or technical grounds. Their starting point that a historical wrong was committed is a quite reasonable interpretation of the facts we know. Their statement of repentance is in as good a form as any now offered or demanded.[1]

The peculiarity of the Reconciliation Walk comes from the time and road travelled since Pope Urban II gave the initial order for the first Crusade in 1095 in what is now Clairmont-Ferrant. The material traces are thinner, the descent lines more blurred than in most cases of collective apologies. Thus few of us can relate to the need for an apology, let alone think of its modalities, especially from outside of the Middle East. It took a religious sentiment, faith, rather than an abstract principle (such as a transcendental notion of right) or a pragmatic sense of reparation to propel the marchers. Raw faith – if such a thing exists – is what bridges an otherwise insurmountable gap between past and present for these walkers. Yet that others may question this particular bridge only reveals that all apologies require such a temporal bridge. Further, since the difficulty here is the adequacy of that bridge in linking collectivities with spatial-temporal borders that are fuzzy in the extreme, the Reconciliation Walkers, aberrant as they may seem, bear witness to an age where collective apologies are becoming increasingly common.

1 'Nine hundred years ago, our forefathers carried the name of Jesus Christ in battle across the Middle East. . . . On the anniversary of the first Crusade, we also carry the name of Christ. We wish to retrace the footsteps of the Crusaders in apology for their deeds and in demonstration of the true meaning of the Cross. We deeply regret the atrocities committed in the name of Christ by our predecessors. We renounce greed, hatred and fear, and condemn all violence done in the name of Jesus Christ.'

Rituals in history, rituals for history

The Reconciliation Walk is only a small and peculiar case within an ongoing wave of collective apologies. Since the late 1980s an increasing number of collectivities throughout the world seem to face one another, demanding, offering, denying or rejecting the explicit recognition of guilt for offences committed from a few years to many centuries ago. Any offer, any request, brings out another one. There is little indication that the wave is likely to stop in the near future.

This essay focuses on the conditions of possibility of that wave. I am not addressing the relative merits of cases on moral or legal grounds – others have engaged in that important exercise. Rather, my interest is in the wave itself as a phenomenon unique to our times, which both reveals and impels new stakes in the construction of collective subject positions and identities – and therefore new takes on historicity. Taking all cases of collective apologies – offered, denied, accepted or requested – as part of an ongoing trend, I want to explore some of the historical and conceptual constituents of that trend.

Some prime constituents are the subjects involved. Collective apologies in our late modern age imply a transfer to collectivities of the attributes that a dominant North Atlantic discourse had hitherto assigned to the liberal subject. Ever since the independent self emerged in liberal discourse in the seventeenth century, it has accumulated a number of properties and attributes, from identity to free will to personality. I contend that the attribution of features of that liberal self to states, ethnic groups and nations is a major condition of possibility of collective apologies as late modern rituals.

Second, this transfer of attributes from individual to collective subjects testifies to the changes in historical perception that make it possible. Third, this transfer and those changes project the protagonists against the background of a global stage where the apology takes on its full significance. We may not have reached the universal history dreamed of by Enlightenment thinkers, but collective apologies are increasing in part because offers, demands, denials or rejections are all projected on to a global stage which is now the ultimate horizon of a new historicity.

In that framework, no case is insignificant on legal merits alone since the task is to explore the conditions that make it possible to enunciate any request, offer, denial or rejection with some resonance. Indeed, cases where the actual perpetrators or victims of the initial wrong are absent from the scene – of which the Reconciliation March, or plantation slavery in the Americas, however different on other grounds, are archetypes – assume great significance in that context. Clearly, no white person alive today took part in plantation slavery, just as none of the Reconciliation Walkers took part in the Crusades. Similarly, no direct victim of these past wrongs is around to ask for

compensation. The moral or legal case for redress – as well as for an admission of guilt – can be made only through a genealogical construction, that is, on a particular composition of the subjects involved and on a particular interpretation of history.

The implication is not that cases with more historical depth are less clear-cut on moral grounds than cases that can firmly stand the test of law – where individual victims, witnesses and perpetrators are alive and identifiable as individuals. Rather, exactly because of their moot legal prospects, cases that span long periods of time reveal both the needs and the difficulties inherent in the constitution of collective subjects. They expose more clearly the fact that collective apologies are rituals in history, for history, which engage their participants as doers and as narrators, thus on both sides of historicity. Yet collective apologies cannot fulfil the promises of their purported assumptions and fail to reconcile these two sides of historicity even as they claim them both. They are abortive rituals, meant to remain infelicitous.[2]

2 The conceptualizations of the past, of history and historical authenticity, as well as the crucial differentiation between subject and agent that inform this essay, are all developed more fully in Trouillot (1995).

A past for the present

We can conceptualize apologies as illocutionary events denoting to an addressee the repentance of a speaking subject. As such, they belong to a loose family of related speech acts, the members of which should be differentiated on the basis of the particular affects they claim to project, the kinds of acknowledgements and relations they presume and the consequences for which they call.[3]

As transformative rituals, apologies always involve time – even apologies between individuals. They mark a temporal transition: wrong done in a time marked as past is recognized as such, and this acknowledgement itself creates or verifies a new temporal plane, a present oriented towards the future. Strictly speaking, I cannot apologize for a wrong being – or about to be – inflicted, although I can excuse or explain myself. I can only apologize for things already done. My apology sets a temporal marker between those things – and the past to which they belong – and a present characterized by my new relation to my interlocutor. It creates a new era: I repent, let us now be friends. Or, it registers that a new era has indeed been launched: I can now tell you how remorseful I am, I was wrong. In short, apologies are premised on the assumption that the state of affairs to which they refer does not, or should not, obtain in the present of the actors involved. In claiming a past, they create pastness.

Pastness is, of course, a relation, in the same way that distance is a relation. In the case of an apology, that relation involves four positions and two temporal planes: the perpetrator and the victim in a first temporal plane – the past; and the repentant and the addressee in a second temporal plane – the

3 In English vernacular, the noun 'apology' (even more than the French 'excuse' or the Spanish 'excusa') covers a wide range of speech acts, not all of which denote a repentant subject. Similarly, much like the French 'désolé', the adjective 'sorry' can express from sadness and sympathy to commiseration and contrition, requiring Spanish translations as different as 'triste' and 'arrepentido'. Clearly, not all instances where these words are used meet the criteria for

a formal apology as conceptualized here. However, the family resemblance between these various acts creates a space for ambiguity crucial to the following discussion.

present. The necessary differentiation of these two temporal planes correlates to a double recognition of numerical identity across time: the perpetrator is the repentant apologizer; the victim is the addressee (Figure 1).

To put it schematically, as transformative rituals, apologies require at least six distinguishable operations: (1) the establishment of a wrong; (2) the creation of a temporal plane by way of the creation of pastness; (3) a first operation of numerical identity involving perpetrator and apologizer; (4) a second operation involving victim and addressee; (5) an utterance conveying some form of remorse or repentance; (6) the production of a partial or complete erasure, ideally verified by both sides.[4] In this formal scheme, the first two operations set the stage. The last two produce a transformation of that stage. The double recognition of numerical identity (steps 3 and 4), which links the two temporal planes, thus emerges as a necessary condition of the transformation promised by the ritual. Indeed, it distinguishes the apology proper from related speech acts that express commiseration without implicating the speaker in the first temporal plane. At its most felicitous, an apology turns the perpetrator's expressed regret into remorse acknowledged by the addressee.

4 Of course, this formal order does not necessarily reproduce the actual chronology of all apologies.

Two points need to be made about this felicitous performance. First, it is always culturally specific: what obtains as a satisfactory expression of remorse between two parties involved in an automobile accident in New York may not work between two Caribbean peasants involved in a land feud. Second, the dual need for numerical identity across time is met between two individuals on pragmatic grounds in part because of the need to assume spatio-temporal continuity on both sides.[5] Yet while all human beings need such an assumption of continuity in order to go through their daily lives, the issue of identity through time remains a perplexing one for philosophers since Hume and Locke first reopened it (Hume 1748; Locke 1690; Wiggins 1967). What makes any particular 'the same' if that particular is going through changes (Ferret 1996)? Further, if that particular is imbued with consciousness, how much does this consciousness account for its sameness (Alexander

5 I wronged my neighbour yesterday. I apologize this morning as we bump into each other on our way to work. In so doing, I am assuming that my neighbour is my neighbour by eliminating all other possibilities as too complicated. There is no way for me to *know*, but I need that assumption for the continuity of my routine.

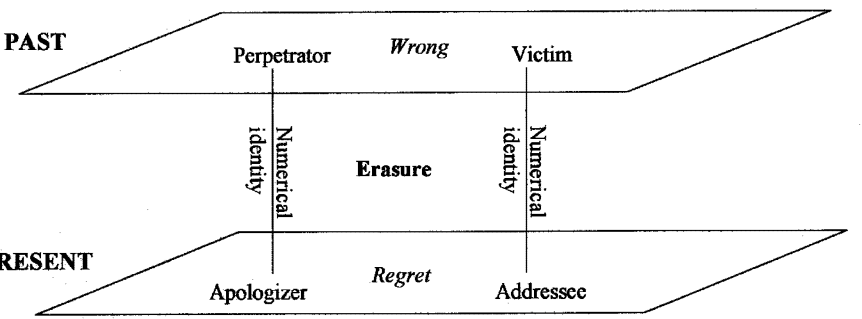

Figure 1 The structure of apology

1997)? How can I be the same, thus a perpetrator, and yet different, thus repentant?

Whatever the answers we provide to these questions, new problems arise when the particular is a collective subject. To start with, collective subjects never meet each other physically as both collectives and subjects. They cannot therefore assume identity on pragmatic grounds as do individual subjects.

Collective subjects are by definition historical products. They cannot precede their own experience. They are not naturally given. This means that we cannot assume the first temporal plane of a collective apology to be a zero degree of history in which the particulars existed as such in an eternal present. We need to establish their existence within that past. We need to establish when and how our perpetrators – Latin Christendom, the white race, the Japanese nation or the Hutu ethny – became single historical actors, responsible, as independent subjects, for the wrongs committed in that first temporal order. Second, we need to replicate the operation in the present, aware of the new difficulties of this second temporal order. What is Christendom today, regardless of what it may have been in 1492? Third, and only after the first two operations, we can try to demonstrate a numerical identity between perpetrator and repentant subject. Christendom has changed, yet it is still the same: it must apologize. Then, of course, we would need to repeat the steps on the other side of the wrong and establish the numerical identity of victim and addressee, to make sure that repentant Christendom is indeed apologizing to the right entity.

In short, when we move from the individual to the collective, that which involved at least six distinguishable operations now requires eight steps, four of which become highly problematic since they involve the construction and continuous identification of collective entities that are necessarily historical. Needless to say, few individuals and even fewer collectivities go through these complicated operations even at times of historical crisis. Historians, philosophers, legal scholars or political leaders themselves rarely adhere to this tangled procedure and the many steps that it implies.

This, of course, is my point. On purely formal grounds, collective apologies imply more than a simple jump from the one to the many. To be felicitous and transformative, they require a perplexing relation of identity between subjects who are themselves already very difficult to construct as subjects. They further require that we maintain these constructions while recognizing their historical nature.

The difference between agent and subject is crucial here because the basis on which we construct both historical continuity and responsibility – and thus acknowledge the legitimacy of a spokesperson – for collective agents and subjects is different. On pragmatic grounds we do assume the identity of groups and institutions through time, as agents.[6] Indeed, we rightly allow the possibility for an agent who is not an individual person to shoulder some form of

6 I expect my bank to honour my cheques regardless of changes in its personnel. On agents, actors and subjects, see Trouillot 1995:23 ff.

responsibility for past actions without assuming an affective register in the encounter between perpetrator and victim. Thus agents representing collectivities can be held accountable, and that accountability is central to the possibility of historical reparations. Yet to speak of subjects is to invoke affective characteristics that are hard to encompass with the public sphere of late liberal representation and accountability – in spite of Habermas (Markell 2000). To put it simply, it is one thing for a state or a bank – as agent – to provide compensation, it is something else for the state – as subject – to commiserate or show remorse. The identity requirements for the two gestures are different.

Not surprisingly, then, collective apologies have not been a hallmark of human history. Indeed, *they have been rather rare.*[7] During most of its history humankind dealt with clashes between groups and the aftermath of these clashes mainly on pragmatic terms. To be sure, morality, justice and their absence – as lived and defined in specific times and places – played their role in prolonging or ending those clashes. Yet even when such clashes solidified into long-term feuds and enmities, the expression or resolution of these enmities rarely took the new ritualized forms that typify our times. Indeed, an inherent feature of this ritual wave of collective apologies is its very novelty. Why here? Why now?

We catch a glimpse of an answer when we go beyond the easy attraction of the 'why' and its linear causality for a richer examination of the 'how'. If the formal requirements for collective apologies to obtain as felicitous performatives and transformative rituals are so complicated as to make them rare in history, what makes so many apologies historically possible today? Do current apologies somehow manage to meet the complicated formal requirements outlined above? If not, how do they bypass them?

The public discourse that shapes the formulations of current proposals for or against apologies is revealing here. Why should Germany apologize for the atrocities of the Second World War? Because Germany is not 'a normal country', and indeed it may never become one according to Gunther Grass, who himself is seen to stand as 'the painful consciousness of Germany'. Even if the legal grounds for and implications of German collective guilt are complicated, some legal experts acknowledge that an apologetic attitude helps to clean 'the moral stain on the German soul'. Some Japanese, in turn, reject the proposition of an apology for wrongs committed during the same era because such a collective admission would taint Japanese 'dignity'. However, such retreat into dignity may make it harder to eradicate 'the guilt that haunts Japan'. Meanwhile, of course, a minority of North Americans favour an apology for plantation slavery because it may indeed reinstate the soiled dignity of perpetrator or victim.[8]

The repeated references and appeals to dignity, pride, shame or guilt in the media, and in the legal and scholarly literature, point to a symbolic overlap

7 There is no record that apologies between human collectivities immediately and automatically followed the quite ancient recognition of such collectivities. Nor did collective apologies become normalized in the nineteenth century when the consolidation of the ideal of the nation-state placed specific names, and putatively solid borders and identities, throughout the North Atlantic.

8 I have synthesized here a number of articles, mostly from print media. See 'Un citoyen écrivain', *Le Monde*, 1 October 1999; 'Guilt haunts Japan', *New York Times*, 30 November 1998.

in current debates over collective apologies. Behind that language of an internally renewable guilt is a fundamental assumption about the nature of the collectivities discussed, an assumption reinforced by the language itself.

Collective apologies today circumvent the difficulty of establishing numerical identity across time by setting up their subjects as particular kinds of individuals. Ethnies, races, states and especially nations have character, personality, consciousness, will, memories and desires – notably the desire to join in a new collectivity with similarly inclined individuals. Above and across its inner discordant voices, the discourse of collective apologies tends to treat collectivities as if they were a kind of organic particular. Further, the model for the construction of this new kind of particular is a folk composite of the individual subject of liberal discourse.

The North Atlantic liberal as collective subject

Although practices that personalize collectivities by ascribing to them attributes constructed to define or describe individuals may be as old as human society, they took on a different import after the global rise of the North Atlantic in the sixteenth century. As North Atlantic hegemony moved from the Iberian states to Northern Europe, the physical overlap between state and nation, already premised in various versions of the absolutist state, reached a new threshold of both material and symbolic concreteness in the nineteenth century.[9] By the middle of that century, political issues were increasingly couched in nationalist language, and the emerging social sciences, in turn, were becoming increasingly state-centric (Wallerstein et al. 1995). Divergent interests aside, social theorists and politicians both assumed the state–nation conflation and sold it to a general public. The habit of treating collectivities as fixed entities, already entrenched in the spheres of knowledge and power (Wolf 1982), slowly made its way into North Atlantic common sense. The stage was set for collectivities, especially nation-states and ethnic groups – now taken as fixed entities – to be treated as individuals. Yet although some historians and anthropologists ascribed to these individualized collectivities attributes of the subject (such as national character), both the public at large and international law rarely went beyond the need to treat collectivities or institutions such as the state as responsible agents.[10]

Indeed, neither the nineteenth nor the first three-quarters of the twentieth century – which saw an increase in demands for international reparations – witnessed anything close to the wave of apologies that marks our times. Again, this is not surprising when we look back at the formal requirements for a collective apology to obtain as a felicitous performative. Since visions of the person vary considerably across and within populations (Carrithers et al. 1985), any vision of the individual as even remotely constituted in history

9 Louis XIV's famous 'L'Etat c'est moi' assumes a process of francization that dates back to at least Francis I. The long process of Spanish 'unification' suggests similar assumptions. Indeed, it is against the background of France and Spain as spectres that Machiavelli set up a unified Italy as both an assumption and a wish to fulfil.

10 Academic disciplines played different supportive roles in different times and places. For instance, from the 1930s to the 1980s, the most popular

versions of North American anthropology promoted in different ways notions of culture as closed, integrated or personality-like systems, twice removed from the sociological, playing an indirect yet important role in reaffirming the treatment of collectivities as a kind of individual (e.g. Benedict 1946; Geertz 1973).

doubles the requirements for the construction of a collective self that could survive its own history. In short, most visions of the individual make it nearly impossible to move easily from agent to subject and to generate a collective apology as a felicitous transformative ritual.

But let us suppose that the individual self is an unencumbered one, existing prior to its environment and fully formed on its own terms. Collective selves with full attributes of the person become much easier to build on that model since all historical constituents of – and limits to – a fixed identity of the subject have disappeared.

Current collective apologies are premised exactly on that supposedly autoregulating and unencumbered self. Those who propose or request them increasingly ascribe to institutions and collectivities attributes unique to the subject – such as mood, memory, moral responsibility and feelings, down to the possibility of repentance – rather than the practical liability and communal responsibility through time that has long been an attribute of agents. Further, the current wave of apologies does not simply treat collectivities as individuals but as a particular type of individual; more exactly, as a liberal person. Finally, *not any form of liberalism will do*. Rather, behind the discourse about collective apologies today stands the figure of the person in the composite vision of classical liberalism. It is a vision that ties Locke to Kant rather than Montesquieu to Rousseau or to current proponents of a more communitarian liberalism (Sandel 1982; Shklar 1984; Taylor 1992; Walzer 1983). It is a liberalism of rights rooted in the individual. The collectivities projected in these apologies are not merely subjects. Rather, they are subjects with specific attributes that evoke in turn or together the subject of the market, the subject of civil or criminal law, the ego of psychology, and indeed, the ultimate subject of liberal individualism, an individual united by the memory of past actions yet unburdened by any history that precedes its consciousness.

A caveat is in order. I am not suggesting a single vision of the self among individualist philosophers, let alone a single descent line between intellectual constructions and a coherent popular version now consciously shared by all the populations involved. I am not claiming global cultural change as intellectual history trickling down to the masses. Rather, I would insist that these theorists and these populations overlap through time and space by way of practices – including linguistic or other highly symbolic practices – which, in turn, reinforce, cancel or modulate certain philosophical viewpoints. Practices both require and impose a vision. They help to rearrange a particular field of forces.

If we see the global domination of the North Atlantic since the sixteenth century as setting up exactly a unique field of forces – perhaps the first global one in human history (Trouillot 2000) – we can also see that practices embedded in this field of forces generate or reinforce conceptual overlaps. From the

Caribbean to China, from the spread of plantation work regimes to the diffusion of modern state forms, from the rise of English as lingua franca to the daily renewals of Evangelical commitments, overlapping bundles of practices continue to push forward particular visions of the self.

Central here is the spread of North Atlantic Christianity and its penitent practices. In spite of denominational differences in liturgy and theology, these penitent practices share fundamental assumptions about the redemptive possibilities of singular individuals and the capacity of particular speech acts to actualize this redemption. Yet more obviously material practices, such as wage labour, also presume and reinforce particular framings of the individual. The more such practices spread, the more the visions they embody – and the core they share – compete, on the ground, with pre-existing or parallel visions of the self. Whatever dominant notions of the self may have been in China, Kashmir or sub-Saharan Africa (Carrithers et al. 1985), these localized notions must now accommodate a composite figure of growing international reach.

Key to that composite figure is the unity of consciousness long ago assumed by Locke on the basis of memory of past actions. Here again a reading of the media is useful. Thus a discussion of Jane Taylor's play, *Ubu and the Truth Commission*, by Desmond Tutu and Wole Soyinka at Emory University boiled down to their conceptualization of the nation as individual, with Tutu arguing that the nation was a single individual both guilty and innocent and Soyinka advocating the position that the nation was composed of two individuals, only one of whom was guilty.[11] Closer to Tutu's position, a commentator in the *Glasgow Herald* reads the apology that British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, offered for the Great Famine of Ireland in terms of a soul-searching exercise into memory land:

> The apology that Tony Blair made in Ireland last year for Britain's role in the Great Famine had been a long time coming. It had taken a century-and-a-half for one country to look into its soul and admit its crime against another. The Irish nation, however, has been no swifter to look into its own soul to examine its reactions to that holocaust.[12]

The soul of nations – quite a different construct from Montesquieu's spirit – has become, at once, the site of that memory-consciousness and the engine behind both the recognition of past failures and the will to reach a higher moral plane. One need not espouse all the tenets of postmodernism to note with appropriate humour that in the media, debates about collective apologies and notions of soul and character have become pastiches of pastiches. Thus 'nearly 136 years after President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery remains the unhealed wound on the American soul.' Thus newspapers in both South Africa and the United States attribute to

11 Special thanks to Brian Axel for providing me with a videotape of that debate.

12 'A time to live, a time to die, a time to talk', *Glasgow Herald* 10 December 1998.

Bishop Desmond Tutu the belief that 'acts of contrition are good for the soul of the "rainbow nation".' But 'is Japan on the verge of baring its soul?'[13]

The 'soul' here is free to choose. Character is self-designed. Inner regulation is in command of change. The collectivities projected in the current wave of apologies are framed outside of history – except of course the history of the encounter on which the apology is premised. Not that this framing denies all historicities. Rather, it requires a particular kind of historicity, notably the possibility of freezing chunks of an allegedly unified past, as in the storage model of memory and history (Trouillot 1995: 14–18). In other words, history is both denied and heralded.

On the one hand, history is denied as an experience constitutive of the collectivity: no structure precedes the subject. Thus, not accidentally, the current wave favours collectivities assumed to be altogether obvious, eternal and continuous through biological reproduction, such as races and ethnic groups. On the other hand, the history that ties the initial wrong to the possibility of – or need for – an apology is brandished as the sole relevant story. Steeped in a language of blood and soul, collectivities are now defined by the wrongs they committed and for which they should apologize, or by the wrongs they suffered and for which they should receive apology. Further, the historical necessity of joining a collectivity of collectivities best known as 'the international community' prompts these newly redefined subjects to play out the liberal social contract on a global scale. Collective apologies today are global apologies inasmuch as they are projected onto a global stage.

13 'Book reviews', *The Boston Globe*, 27 September 1998; 'White South Africans apologize for Apartheid via internet', *The Arizona Republic*, 4 January 1998; 'Stop the denial, says Hosokawa; Prime Minister wants Japan to face its past', *Los Angeles Times*, 17 August 1993; See also 'The Far East', BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, 24 September 1984; 'China still trails Russia in what matters most', Editorial Desk, *The New York Times*, 2 July 1998; 'Comment', *Independent* (London), 15 February 1999.

Local stories, global stage

The spectacular developments in communications that marked the last two decades of the twentieth century have made possible the creation of a virtual yet global stage on which historical actors – both individual and collective – play out scenarios that are shaped in part by the nature of the stage itself. The 'global village' may be an illusion but, if so, it is an illusion through which an increasingly large part of humanity takes consciousness of the new links and hierarchies created by an unprecedented alliance between capital and technologies of communication. The 'international community' may be communal only in name, shaped as it is by sheer economic and military force from the North Atlantic, but it remains a powerful trope for the recognition of a new moment in world history.

Particular to this moment is the virtual acceptance that 'the whole world is looking at me', a privilege once reserved for the most powerful, who even then retained the right to reject that gaze. That gaze, now virtual yet increasingly hard to escape, global in its pretensions yet parochial in its instrumentalities,

frames all discussions of collective responsibility today. It thus helps to set the stage on which collective apologies are performed.

Future historians may debate if, when and how our newest born imagined collective, 'the international community', solidified in the minds of a majority of humankind. One can safely suggest that the notion has yet to be inscribed fully in the daily routine of a majority of human beings. At the same time, the endless repetition of this vague and changing concept each and every time collectivities, states or trans-state institutions are involved, the repeated tactical deployment of the phrase, gives this imagined super-community practical and symbolic value.[14] Media references are so frequent that examples may be superfluous here: mentions of the omnipresent 'international community' now punctuate all discussions of collective apologies, even those otherwise framed in the most parochial terms.

14 To be sure, the notion harks back to the Age of Revolutions when various documents from France, the United States or Haiti took 'humanity' as an audience and the 'opinion(s) of mankind' as an arbiter.

Further, similar mentions accompany the construction of collective subjects even in cases where the reference does not seem to make much sense on practical grounds. Thus in reversing a Federal Court decision and allowing three war crime cases to resume, the Canadian Supreme Court felt compelled to admonish the lower judges: 'What is at stake here, in however small a measure, is Canada's reputation as a responsible member of the community of nations.'[15] Beyond the legal merit of the case, the highest judicial body of the Commonwealth was pointing to the symbolic value of the virtual global gaze.

15 'Nazi cases to resume', *Canadian Jewish News*, 1 October 1997.

Quite differently, yet as evocatively, the reprobatory gaze of this newly imagined international community is constantly evoked in reference to political leaders – notably in the south – whom we know to have the tacit approval of the leaders of that community or who clearly care little about such approval. Thus, rejoicing at the creation of the East Timor Independent National Commission on Human Rights, yet doubting its effectiveness, a local commentator warned the Indonesian authorities that they 'should realize that they are now being tried by world public opinion'.[16]

16 'More problems in East Timor', *The Jakarta Post*, 20 April 1999.

It is in front of this nebulous entity that collective apologies are being requested, denied, accepted or rejected. Part witness, part audience, this international community functions like a Greek chorus in late modern virtual reality. It is the ultimate listener, presumed yet unseen by the actors, so limited as enforcer yet so powerful as a trope. Some of its limitations come from the nature of apologies as rituals. If, as mentioned above, felicitous apologies between individuals always obtain in a culturally specific context, by whose cultural criteria should a collective apology be judged felicitous? Appeals to the international community as witness presume but cannot deliver this alleged 'global culture'.

Still, with the development in communications, this assumed international audience helps remove one major obstacle to the performance: the difficulty for collectivities to meet face to face. The virtual chorus is there to fill the gap in communication between the groups involved, wherever they are. Only

through it do the actors speak to one another. Thus, it is unfair to ask if Mr Clinton's near apology for slavery was directed at Africans or at blacks in the United States.[17] It was directed at neither group, although it spoke of, and implicated, both of them. Mr Clinton spoke to the world in an internationally televised speech.

Central here is that world, a ghost community, yet the calibrator of a relevance deemed at the same time unique and universal. For on the victim's side one must claim both a unique memory of a unique experience, and the universal relevance of that uniqueness.[18] On the perpetrator's side one must deny or validate that very same combination with the whole world witnessing. The internet plays its role in this disrobing of souls on a world stage: an amazing number of apologies have inspired web pages, pro and con, official and unauthorized. The Reconciliation Walkers, although harking back to the Middle Ages, keep the world informed of their activities through web technology. The South African Truth Commission has set up a web page, a virtual 'confession box', so that white South Africans can publicly yet privately apologize for apartheid. The enhanced gaze, in turn, feeds new symbolic demands. The debate about slavery in the United States provoked a demand for a Jim Crow apology. Thus the hit parade of victims and penitents continues, each claim or denial topping the other.

It is tempting but wrong to think that such victims are not real because of the display. The very concrete issue of reparations does matter, at some times more than others. Yet there is an inherent irony – as well as many practical obstacles – in framing that issue in the language of collective apologies. The very discourse of liberal individualism, the tropes of which now allow for the projection of apologetic collective subjects, is fundamentally opposed to the recognition of collective rights, including therefore reparative 'affirmative' actions. Further, we need to sever the matter of reparations from the linear relation between time and responsibility which assumes that the effects of past wrongs are necessarily more concrete when the actual victims are still on the ground. That approach rests on a legalistic framework and on a notion of guilt, both of which reproduce the reduction of collectivities to individuals. Yet just as historical authenticity can obtain only in the present of the actors (Trouillot 1995: 148–51), historical responsibility cannot hark back to an original sin that the collective-individual supposedly committed. Rather, it needs to take into account the structures of privilege unleashed by a history of power and domination and to evaluate the current losses induced by the reproduction of these structures.[19]

In short, the matter of collective reparations cannot be assessed on the basis of supposedly cold and ahistorical standards of justice shared by a suddenly unified world. At the very least, it requires an active notion of justice (Sandel 1982; Shklar 1990; Walzer 1983; Yack 1996). At best, it should be addressed frontally as a historical and *political* issue.

17 'Clinton's comments on slavery and on mistreatment of Africa seemed directed at African-Americans, not Africans', *The Arizona Republic*, 29 March 1998.

18 For an incisive discussion of that model in relation to the Holocaust, see Chaumont (1997); also Trigano (1989).

19 As I put it elsewhere: 'The historicity of the human condition requires that practices of power and domination be renewed. It is that renewal that should concern us most, even in the name of our pasts. The so-called legacies of past horrors – slavery, colonialism, or the Holocaust – are possible only because of that renewal. And that renewal occurs only in the present. Thus, even in relation to The Past, our authenticity resides in the struggles of our present. Only in that present can we be true or false to the past we choose to acknowledge' (Trouillot 1995: 151).

Yet the dual tendency to present passive justice and shared individual guilt as the defining moments of collective apologies, while stressing the merits of globalization, functions exactly as an obstacle to any such political debate about the reproduction of historical structures of which globalization itself is an example (Trouillot 2000). Just as the rhetoric of sharing pain within state boundaries obscures relations of power in the national imaginary (Berlant 1999), the emphasis on shared feelings of remorse obscures the reproduction of worldwide structures of inequality. The emphasis on passive justice, in turn, sets up the current wave of apologies as the expression of a global legal sea change with ritual overtones. However, that legalistic framework cannot reconcile its universalistic pretensions and the ritualistic and affective dimensions of the apologetic gesture. Apologies are inherently about affect. Yet liberalism encounters overwhelming difficulties in 'making affect safe for democracy' (Markell 2000). To be sure, the legal framework within which the cases that now involve collective apologies are argued is changing fast within and across state boundaries. In addition, notions of sovereignty and polity keep changing. These two sets of changes, in turn, parallel efforts to redeploy affect within or across the laws of nations. Yet jurisprudence is not the drive behind the wave. Rather, that wave can be read as the ritual overflow of a political impasse in this moment of world history when the inability to face structures of inequality – or even to find a language that describes those structures and their consequences – eventuates in the repetition of gestures that cannot meet their own criteria of performance. From within that perspective, both the ritual and the forensic difficulties of collective apologies reflect the global spread and the unevenness of late liberalism. I will conclude by insisting on the consequences of that unevenness for collective apologies as rituals.

Abortive rituals

From a symbolic viewpoint, indeed, collective apologies offer an inherent ambiguity: the request, the offer, the rejection or the acceptance of an apologetic gesture deemed to be felicitous inasmuch as it claims to tie two collective subjects, yet incapable of fulfilling that claim because of the nature of the subjects involved.

The fundamental problem is not one of hypocrisy, although sheer hypocrisy does play a role in the construction of the international community as Greek chorus.[20,21] My point, however, is subtler. Apologies can be read as rituals in the strictly anthropological sense of a regulated, stylized, routinized and repetitive performance that tends to have both demonstrative and transformative aspects. Their transformative aspect depends fundamentally on a dual identity relation across temporal planes, easily met on pragmatic grounds in individual apologies. Yet in collective apologies, identity is always

20 To be sure, couching the issues in terms of a collective blame that clearly cannot be shared, the legalistic frame, and the liberal drive behind the wave all revive the suggestion of an inherent connection between hypocrisy and liberal democracy (Shklar 1984; Thompson 1996).

questionable. It is hard to establish on formal grounds, hard to assume on pragmatic ones. The problem is bypassed through formulas that patch upon collective subjects attributes of a particular kind of liberal individual. Yet the repetition of these formulas has yet to convince the populations involved that the problem has been solved. Think about going to a mass not doubting the sincerity of the priest, but doubting whether or not he is truly a priest regardless of what he himself may think. Beyond the matter of Mr Clinton's own sincerity, a common point of discussion in the debate about his near apology for plantation slavery was whether or not he had the power to apologize for it. Or even commiserate. To whom? And, especially, in whose name?

Until and unless the liberal formulas now fundamental in the changing constitution of collective subjects manage to convince the populations on both sides that identity obtains in ways that make the performance meaningful, collective apologies will have little transformative power. For now at least, they are born without the capacity to meet their inherent purpose. The very formulas they use to create their collective subjects – the attribution of the features of the liberal individual – though successful in placing these subjects on stage, make it impossible for them to act. Thus collective apologies are meant not to succeed – not because of the possible hypocrisy of some of the actors but because their very conditions of emergence deny the possibility of a transformation. They are abortive rituals.

In that context, the Reconciliation Walk, which appears as one of the oddest apologies within the current waves and with which this essay began, takes on a different significance. 'We may not be guilty of the Crusaders' sins, but are nevertheless responsible to repair the damage in any way we can' says Lynn Green, an early organizer from Britain.[22] The problem with the Reconciliation Walkers is not only in the distance between the alleged wrong and the present. It also inheres in their determination to bridge that gap and to assume on both sides identities that are impossible to demonstrate on logical grounds or to make up on pragmatic grounds. The walkers are true believers. They mean their apology. Unlike most current cases of apologies offered, rejected, or denied, their whole enterprise makes sense only if it is meaningful to them. They are indeed performing what is, at least in their own minds, a felicitous ritual, a mid- if not pre-modern religious dance with full transformative power. Perhaps they convinced some of the individuals whom they met face to face, as opposed to their internet interlocutors; but can they convince any collectivity? The rest of the world chuckles: we never *really* meant this, did we?

21 When P.W. Botha toured Europe in 1985, members of the party that accompanied him confided to journalists that their most pleasurable discovery was what they saw as European hypocrisy *vis-à-vis* South African apartheid. 'Europe no longer really cared about apartheid. European leaders had gone through the motions of criticism, but were now making it clear that this was all it was: a ritual' ('Fighting talk on apartheid – but no action', *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, 31 March 1985). 'Ritual' in that journalistic language suggests a conscious dissimulation, hypocrisy at its fullest.

22 *The Nashville Tennesseean*, 27 June 1999.

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