

Imagining Justice: The Politics of Postcolonial Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Julie McGonegal

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Throughout *Imagining Justice*, Julie McGonegal manoeuvres strategically and tenaciously to locate her subject in the terrain of postcolonial critique. Her concerns are fictions of interracial and interethnic reparation and reconciliation that have emerged in the recent past as powerful discourses in the narration of nation. These scripts demand the attention of political and cultural theorists, McGonegal argues at the outset, because they are symptomatic of the problems of ethnic and racial hegemony in the twenty-first century. They also confront readers with the problems of securing justice for the victims of colonialism and racism. Yet they are controversial, and particularly so for postcolonial criticism. Wole Soyinka’s pithy description of these as symptoms of a “fin de millénaire fever of atonement”(x) is one memorable example of the concern that reconciliation does little to secure redress and compensation for victims of slavery, colonialism and apartheid in Africa, the Holocaust, genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, or the authoritarian regimes in Argentina, Uganda and Chile. In this book, McGonegal devises a postcolonial methodology to profile four case-studies in particular: the Japanese Canadian internment and movement for redress, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the “Sorry Movement” in Australia, and ethnic strife in Sri Lanka.

McGonegal is good at mapping critiques of the politics of reconciliation. These are diverse, and they arise from very different political positions. From the Right are concerns about the “culture of victimization”(xi)—Australians will immediately recall the concerns about the focus on indigenous dispossession and reconciliation that prevailed during the History Wars of the Howard government in the recent past. From the Left—for example Mahmood Mamdani’s powerful critique of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa—are allegations that the politics of reconciliation focus on individuals as victims and perpetrators, with insufficient recognition of systemic and institutionalised brutality. For Mamdani, the links between conquest and dispossession, racialised power and privilege, the perpetrator and the beneficiary, remain unaddressed and without redress. It is precisely this connection between the politics of reconciliation and the legacies of colonial conquest and domination that preoccupies McGonegal, and drives her argument that these are matters of concern for postcolonial criticism.

There are two vectors in her argument. One emerges in a chapter “Notes toward a Theory of Postcolonial Justice and Reconciliation”

that is concerned with the specifically postcolonial critiques and possibilities of reconciliation. The critics include not only the aforementioned Mamdani and Soyinka but also Simon During and Benita Parry, whose arguments are symptomatic of the difficulties in reconciling the politics of academic postcolonialism and reconciliation. During argues the reconciliatory turn displaces critical, anti-colonialist critique and accelerates the replacement of postcolonialism with globalization studies. Parry is also critical of the politics of reconciliation in the absence of social and material transformation and reparation. Whilst recognising these critiques and acknowledging the tension between “reconciliation” and “resistance”—for example the uses of discourses of reconciliation for the purposes of national consolidation rather than social and political transformation—McGonegal argues for the positive ideals of negotiation, conciliation and reciprocity and their capacity to engender alternative models of justice to those of secular modernity, and pursues this argument in a series of negotiations. For example, she turns to anti-colonial thinkers, Gandhi and Tutu, for their radical challenge to private and individualised notions of forgiveness, which draw on local and indigenous traditions and enable social agency and resistance. Here too she explores alternative models of justice to those authorised by the institutions of secular modernity, exploring notions of forgiveness elaborated in recent Euro-American theory (Derrida and Kristeva) and questioning what poststructuralist and psychoanalytic theory has to offer a postcolonial theory of forgiveness.

The second vector is how literature relates to debates about justice, forgiveness and reconciliation. This is often a point of tension in postcolonial criticism, where extensive discussions of social and political theory in one or two chapters are a precursor to readings of selected literary texts, trusting “discourse analysis” to engineer the connections between the two. *Imagining Justice* follows this model, with chapters devoted to a series of close hermeneutical readings of individual novels: David Malouf’s *Remembering Babylon*, Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* and *Itsuka*, and J.M. Coetzee’s *Disgrace*. With the exception of *Obasan*, there is no evidence of how, if at all, the production, circulation and reception of these fictions play a role in thinking about reconciliation even within the limited circuits of highbrow literary culture. Having said this, McGonegal’s approach to how literary texts can mediate the limits and possibilities of forgiveness and reconciliation by imagining alternatives to normative conceptions of justice is compelling, and it includes some speculations on the capacity of literature to explore different ways of thinking. She insists that the ethical and moral dimensions of literature and the practice of an ethical criticism affirm the capacity of narrative to “embody or explore the meanings and struggles of the human condition through the provision of surrogate experiences . . . it acknowledges the text’s central meanings, while negotiable and provisional, can be identified and approached through perceptive reading” (9). The readings of Malouf, Coetzee, Ondaatje

and Kogawa are good—good enough to send me back to read *Anil's Ghost* again and to think about waves of Sri Lankan asylum seekers now. If there are places where the association between literary activity and acts of forgiveness seems overstated, McGonegal's insistence on the distinctive place of reading in the work of *imagining* justice is persuasive, and it opens the way to further postcolonial thinking on reconciliation and forgiveness.