

REVISING AND RE-VOICING A SILENCED PAST: TRANSFORMATIVE INTENTIONS AND SELECTIVE SILENCES IN A PUBLIC APOLOGY TO BRITISH CHILD MIGRANTS

ABSTRACT

Focusing on Prime Minister Gordon Brown's apology to British child migrants in 2010, this article proposes that public apology, as a moral and political act, is a compelling site for examining attempts to redefine and redress previously silenced pasts. Postwar child migration has been something of a silenced chapter in British history. In my research I examine one such child migration scheme, namely a project which sent select British children (aged 4 to 13) to colonial Southern Rhodesia—today's Zimbabwe—between 1946 and 1962. Through this case, I discuss two intertwined aspects of the transformative intentions of apologizing. First, the apology aims at amending the relationship between the apologizer and the victims and at remodeling the recipients' political subjectivities. Second, the apology discloses distinct, but contradictory, understandings about the relationship between past, present, and future. It emphasizes the continuous effects the past has in the present, but simultaneously purports to create a temporal break with the past, marked by a moral transformation of the state. However, although the apology aspires and has potential to give voice to those previously silenced and to re-articulate a more legitimate version of the past, its framing eliminates the broader historical context of the Empire. Thus, while partially overcoming silences, the article suggests, the apology also reproduces and reinforces others.

KEYWORDS: Silence, public apology, memory, forgetting, British child migration, colonial Rhodesia

INTRODUCTION¹

On the 24th of February in 2010, Prime Minister Gordon Brown made a public apology to former British child migrants on behalf of the nation. Brown called the transportation

of 130 000² British children to the colonies a 'shameful episode' in British history (*BBC News*, February 24, 2010). Despite the fact that this form of social policy, which combined imperial migration with child welfare, had lasted from the late 17th century until the 1970s,

it has been largely publicly unknown and more or less excluded from the standard narrative of British social history.³

My ongoing research focuses on one such child migration scheme, namely a small-scale project which shipped and permanently relocated British children (aged 4 to 13 at the time of their migration) to colonial Southern Rhodesia—today's Zimbabwe—between 1946 and 1962.⁴ The selected children emigrated unaccompanied by their parents, but mostly with their approval and consent. The children were placed at Rhodesia Fairbridge Memorial College, a boarding school and children's home, established in a disused Royal Air Force airbase outside the town of Bulawayo, and became wards of the Rhodesian state on arrival. In my research I examine the creation of a white colonial child subject and reflect on the effects and imprints of this philanthropic, state-sponsored migration scheme on the lives of former migrants today. I ask how the child migrants make sense of, reconcile, or reject the ambitions of the project; how they understand their past and come to grips with the uncertainties, disruptions and silences that mark it.⁵

The research thus explores how the migrants' experiences of their past are formed and recounted in relation to official or institutional historical narratives—or rather, the lack thereof. While similar schemes had previously been established in Australia and Canada (Boucher 2014; Harper and Constantine 2010), the Rhodesian project differed significantly from those projects. The white-ruled Rhodesian government pursued to battle what they considered a 'demographic imbalance' and a source of racial vulnerability by strongly encouraging the immigration of the 'right kind' of white migrants. The first plans to set up a project for the migration of select British children to Rhodesia were made

in the late 1930s. The scheme appeared to fit the colony's population policies perfectly, and quickly attained influential support in the country. Sir Godfrey Huggins, the Prime Minister of Rhodesia from 1933 until 1953, was a powerful advocate for the project. He considered the Fairbridge College scheme a 'very necessary adjunct to the birth rate', as well as an opportunity to refine the fabric of the colony's European population. He much preferred the idea of bringing out 'pure bred youngsters' to schooling the (local) 'poor whites'.⁶

This case reveals how eugenic influences, which played a significant part in metropolitan class politics of the time, were reflected in the colonies as concerns about the vulnerability of white rule and as a need to secure European prestige. Such political and moral sensibilities, Ann Laura Stoler (1989: 645) argues, 'colored imperial policy in nearly all domains with fears of physical contamination merging with those of political vulnerability: to guard their ranks, whites needed to increase their numbers'. But, as Huggins' musings suggest, mere numbers were not enough. What needed to be secured most firmly was the quality of whites and of whiteness, which were thought to be threatened from the outside as much as from within. While the white Rhodesian community feared competition from educated Africans, it also felt imperiled by degeneration and loss of civilization from its own ranks. Measures were taken to guard against poor-whitedom, since it was felt to compromise the standards of Europeanness of the colony (Lowry 2010: 124); its middle-class morality and respectability. Thus, fears of physical contamination and degradation, as Stoler has shown, merged with political vulnerability.

The political context sketched above had a decisive effect in determining a desirable child migrant. Whereas the much more

extensive and diverse child migration projects located in Canada and Australia may be considered moral projects seeking to benefit underprivileged children ‘deprived of a normal family life’ (Lynch 2016: 3), it was pivotal for the Rhodesian scheme that the selected children had a ‘reasonably secure and happy’ family background, as stated in the project outline.⁷ The overall requirements regarding the child migrants sent to Rhodesia were also much stricter and reflected the personal characteristics assumed necessary for maintaining ‘white prestige’ in the colony. In addition to the stated preference for children from emotionally secure home environments, the children needed to have a sufficiently high IQ, and to be of sound physical and mental health. These qualifications were considered essential for the kinds of lives that the child migrants were envisioned to lead in the future; they needed to be suitable to be educated into managerial positions in a racially segregated colonial society.

Thus, by explicitly combining physical and social mobility, the migration scheme aspired to rescue the chosen children from what were predicted as undesirable futures in Britain, and to offer them instead a ‘better life’ in a settler colony—one with potential for social advancement. At the same time, the advantages of the migratory project were to reach beyond the individual children; regarded as ‘Imperial investments’⁸, they were a means for rescuing the Empire by keeping it civilized and British (for further discussion, see Uusihakala 2017). But while the migration project’s aim was a promise of a ‘better life’ in the form of upward mobility and social standing, related not only to making, but improving and refining whiteness, for the child migrants this came at a cost. The removal from their homes and families and re-settlement into a colonial, educational

institution resulted also in experiences of loss, abandonment, hurt, uncertainty, and insecurity.

In this article, my focus is on the public apology given by the British government to former child migrants in 2010.⁹ I suggest that the apology is a compelling site for examining attempts to redefine, rearticulate, and potentially redress previously silenced pasts. As a performative and symbolic act, it has a transformative intent. I concentrate on two aspects of such intended effect. First, I examine the way the apology aims at amending the *relationship* between the apologizer and the victims of transgression. This revision rests on a proposed *moral transformation* of the state, in which the state acknowledges its responsibility for past policies it denounces as atrocious, heinous, and wrong, and from which it dissociates itself. Second, I suggest that the act is transformative in its *temporal* dimension; it re-addresses the relationship between past, present, and future, although in ways that seem contradictory. On the one hand, the public apology reveals a previously subdued past and underlines the continuous effects that past has in the present—such as transgenerational guilt and responsibility for wrongdoing, as well as hurt and grief caused by past experience. And yet, on the other hand, the apology purports to mark a temporal break with the past; it signals the closure of a previous era and the beginning of a new one. The public apology, therefore, does have transformative potential in reframing how pasts are narrated and whose voices are heard in the emerging, more legitimate, and befitting narratives. These reorientations and revisions, however, are conditional and selective in their scope. The apology invokes an alternative, yet partial version of the past.

In essence, despite its intention to give voice to those previously silenced, as well as to

articulate a version of the past which has thus far been obscure and unknown, the apology, I argue, itself reproduces and reinforces silences. By focusing on individual suffering and by presenting the child migrants as victims to whom a harm was done—a harm that might be appeased and rectified by saying sorry—the public apology sidesteps, dismisses, and silences the broader historical context of the Empire and of settler colonialism, which the child migrants were tasked to uphold. The apology, then, is framed in a way which appears to absolve and write off the wider colonial project. Tom Bentley (2016) argues that this is how colonial apologies are disposed more generally. While they offer remorse for particular events and injustices, and may articulate more balanced versions of the past, they tend to do so ‘without disavowing the wider processes and landscapes in which the atrocities took place’ (ibid.: 172).

Before moving on to analyzing the apology, I will begin by discussing how silence—on both public and private levels—has affected in the lives of the former child migrants prior to the apology. At the end of this article, I return to what public apology attempts to do, particularly in terms of relational and temporal reconfigurations, by reflecting on my informants’ analyses and critiques of the apology, and by considering the limits of colonial apology.

FROM SILENCE TO APOLOGY

As adults, many of the former child migrants have chosen not to think and talk about their past, and a more or less comprehensive silence was laid over this formative period of their lives for decades. Louise¹⁰, one of my research partners who was six years old when she emigrated, recalls:

Fairbridge was something that I had pushed aside. I didn’t want to think about it. I’d never heard of anyone else whose mother had abandoned her child like that. I was embarrassed.

David too had rarely shared his childhood past:

There are so few people who know about my background. [I don’t tell] because I don’t know how. I don’t think they’d know how to react to it. It’s beyond their comprehension. Even intelligent people. [Once] it sort of came out in a conversation, and it almost stopped the conversation dead! So you move on to something else quickly. And also the reason I don’t talk about it, Katja, is, I can’t talk about it without getting emotional and I don’t want to show that to people.

Louise and David’s reflections resemble what Paul Ricoeur (2006: 448–449) calls *forgetting by avoidance*; a strategy of evasion motivated by an ambiguous will of not wanting to know about the atrocities of one’s past. The stance is related to what Paul Connerton (2011: 73) terms *narrative silence*—the inability or unwillingness to tell certain narratives. It is commonly understood that memory is in part constituted by forgetting, or to put it differently, that remembering and forgetting are part and parcel of the same process. And, if oblivion is viewed as a constituent part of memory in normal circumstances, it seems to become all the more critical in situations where the past is tarred by violence. Forgetting is particularly magnified, Nicholas Argenti and Katharina Schramm (2010: 8; 14) argue, by experiences of colonial domination and political violence. At times, the intimidation or violence experienced

may be so incomprehensible and senseless that it simply does not allow itself for articulation. Furthermore, in post-conflict circumstances where the perpetrators live side by side with their victims, as Argenti and Schramm (2010: 16) note, the effects of vocalization may not be altogether auspicious, and the general focus may be on silencing rather than on speaking. In many situations of extreme violence, the terror may have traumatic impact on generations that have no direct experience of it. In consequence, silence, too, may endure across generations.¹¹

As Louise and David's reflections indicate, in addition to being linked to painful or baffling personal experience, narrative silence is also about the difficulty of socially sharing a past, which others are assumed unable to comprehend or else suspected to respond to in undesirable ways—with confusion, pity, outrage, or horror. It is also about understanding one's lived experience with regard to public silence and non-recognition. Except for scant archival records, it is hard to trace any kind of an official narrative or a public memory about British child migration before the early 1990s. In the colonial Rhodesian case, the silence has been further intensified by the absence of any personal historical documentation of the children's experience. Allegedly, as the Fairbridge College closed down in 1962, there was an order from authorities in London to destroy the children's personal records, and their files were burnt—a callous example of what Paul Connerton calls repressive *erasure*; forgetting forced on people (2011: 41). Thus, as one of my interlocutors put it, many former migrants feel that they have been 'written out of history'.

Regarding the fact that the Rhodesian child migration scheme was partly state-sponsored and authorized by the UK governments¹², the phenomenon might be considered a *public secret*. Michael Taussig (1999) uses this term to

discuss secrets, particularly secrets of the state. He argues that 'knowing what not to know' is a powerful form of social knowledge at the center of social power and the knowledges intertwined with those powers. Public secrets, thus, refer to things that are generally known, but which cannot be easily articulated without undoing the very sovereignty of the state (see also Jones 2014: 55; Manderson et al 2015: S184). Secrets accord power to those who hold them and may decide on their concealment or revelation.

But child migration might have been a better kept secret than that. Considering the awe with which the public has responded to the 'revelation' of the phenomenon suggests that it has been a thing known to a very limited number of the public, rather than something generally known about but kept unrevealed. It is, however, evident that some state authorities, as well as the philanthropic organizations who together administered the migration schemes, not only knew about the projects; they had been regularly made aware of the atrocities—abuse and neglect—that the child migration 'care regimes' included. Despite this knowledge, the UK governments continued to promote and finance child migration projects until the 1970s, keeping the malpractices covered up.¹³ Thus, rather than a public secret or something generally forgotten, child migration, I suggest, is a phenomenon actively, and rather successfully, silenced.

The lack of social memory and a concomitant lack of a shared narrative about child migration have meant that there has not been a model for articulating an alternative representation—or a Foucauldian *counter-memory*¹⁴ if you will—of the past either. Thus, non-recognition, oblivion, and the paucity of a historical narrative about British child migration have led the former child migrants to respond to

the public silence by active personal silencing and a dismissal of memory. However, in the early 1990s the public silence surrounding British child migration began to break. Within a few years several popular histories, reports, and documentaries on child migration came out¹⁵. They were followed by a series of alarmed newspaper articles and commentaries proclaiming that a ‘shameful secret’ and a ‘top-level cover-up’¹⁶ in British post-war social history had been revealed. For example, on July 13, 1993, a bewildered journalist of the *Independent* wrote:

It is a story that defies belief. It seems inconceivable that a British government would order the migration of tens of thousands of its children to far-flung corners of the globe, severing, at a stroke, all connection with family, country, and past.¹⁷

In the broader frame of public memory, the early 1990s was also an era of epochal transformations, such as the collapse of socialist rule in Europe and the end of Apartheid in South Africa, which were intertwined with an intense concern with the past, materializing in various forms of nostalgia, re-memorialization, restoring rituals—and public apologies. While states have conventionally used tools such as statues and the naming of sites, national remembrance days, museums, and the like to commemorate what are considered as national achievements, this era has seen a shift in how the past is grappled with (Bentley 2016: 2). Indeed, Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman (2011: 273) argue that within the contemporary mnemonic landscape, the way in which we relate to time has markedly changed: ‘Once almost arrogant, it has become painful and anxious.’ Rather than focusing on the victorious and heroic, there is at present

a public impetus to examine the shameful and embarrassing moments in national history. Political apology may be considered a prominent paradigm of such ‘post-heroic modes of social memory’ (Bentley 2016: 177)¹⁸. As a symbolic and ritual site for constructing and articulating divergent historical narratives, it has become a standard tool in processes of political transition and a response to past injustices. (Celermajer 2013: 291)¹⁹

The production of a satisfactory apology, however, is delicate and precarious, as Nicholas Tavuchis (1991: vii) notes in his seminal consideration of *mea culpa* (through my fault). By apologizing properly, he writes, ‘we acknowledge the fact of wrongdoing, accept ultimate responsibility, express sincere sorrow and regret, and promise not to repeat the offence’ (ibid.) Thus, while political apologies have become increasingly common, Danielle Celermajer (2013: 292) notes, they have also become widely critiqued. The critics dismiss apologies as ‘mere words’ which can never adequately compensate for past violence and grievance. In addition, words are not considered a sufficient guarantee of the sincerity of the speaker and the authenticity of the expressed sentiments. Further critique questions whether guilt and responsibility for past violations may be inherited from one generation to the next—and consequently whether apologies offered for wrongdoing one has not personally committed may ever be felicitous and sincere (e.g. Trouillot 2000; Ricoeur 2006).

Celermajer, however, is critical about the emphasis on emotional authenticity of the actors and acts involved in such forms of analysis. ‘Sincerity’, she writes, is ‘something of an odd criterion for assessing the efficacy of a representative political act’ (2013: 292). She suggests that rather than reflections of genuine sentiment, political apologies should

be examined as rituals of transition with potential transformative effects (see also Horelt 2014). Interestingly, these two ways of critically assessing public apologies—emphasizing either their sincerity and credibility, or their symbolic and political effects—are reflected in the ways the former child migrants themselves judge the apologies, as I will discuss at the end of this article. But before that, building on Celermajer’s suggestions, I will turn to examining Gordon Brown’s apology to the child migrants.

APOLOGY TO BRITISH CHILD MIGRANTS, FEBRUARY 24, 2010

Gordon Brown’s apology to the child migrants followed what has, over the past few decades, become a standardized form of political apologies. By and large, they are offered by an official representative of the perpetrating state, nation, or institution to the representatives of the wronged community, often in the presence of members of the media (Celermajer 2013: 291). Indeed, apologies are usually highly mass mediated events, which means that their felicitousness and emotional sincerity, as well as their efficacy in bringing about political change—such as recognition, social repair, and national inclusion—will be judged by the public along with the recipients of the apology.

Brown’s apology to the child migrants was a performance in three acts. He first delivered a formal statement at the House of Commons.²⁰ He then gave a second, more extensive declaration at an event organized at Westminster Palace, in which he directly addressed hundreds of former child migrants who were invited to the event both as recipients of the apology as well as its audience.²¹ Finally, this address was responded to by a representative of the child migrants.²² The following excerpt is

from the Prime Minister’s address to the House of Commons.

Until the late 1960’s successive UK governments had over a long period of time supported child migration schemes. They involved children as young as three being transported from Britain to Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa, and Zimbabwe. The hope was that those children (...) would have the chance to forge a better life overseas, but the scheme proved to be misguided. (...) When they arrived overseas, all alone in the world, many of our most vulnerable children endured the harshest of conditions, neglect, and abuse in the often cold and brutal institutions that received them. Those children were robbed of their childhood, the most precious years of their life (...) Some still bear the marks of abuse; all still live with the consequences of rejection. Their wounds will never fully heal, and for too long the survivors have been all but ignored (...). It is right that today we recognize the human cost associated with this shameful episode of history and this failure in the first duty of a nation, which is to protect its children. To all those former child migrants and their families (...) I say today that we are truly sorry. We are sorry that they were allowed to be sent away at the time they were most vulnerable. We are sorry that instead of caring for them, this country turned its back, and we are sorry that the voices of these children were not always heard and their cries for help not always heeded. We are sorry that it has taken so long for this important day to come and for the full and unconditional apology that is justly deserved to be

given. (...). Although we cannot undo the events of the past, we can take action now to support people to regain their true identities and reunite with their families and loved ones and to go some way to repair the damage that has been inflicted. [F]or many, today's apology will come too late for them to hear it. We cannot change history, but I believe that by confronting the failings of the past we show that we are determined to do all we can to heal the wounds.

Brown's apology has a distinct, selective scope. It is directed at migrant children, presented as the cruelly treated victims of a misguided state policy. While it asks forgiveness for suffering that the migration projects caused to the children and offers to allow voices previously silenced to be heard, it masks the conditions that enabled and enforced such projects to begin with.

With this critical observation in mind, let me now decipher what it is that the apology purports to do. How does it seek to rearticulate and potentially reconcile previously silenced pasts? I focus on two interrelated questions. First, how does the apology aim to amend relationships between the apologizer and the recipients? And second, what kinds of temporalities does the apology sketch?

REFORMING RELATIONSHIPS, ENACTING MORAL TRANSFORMATION

According to Danielle Celermajer (2013), public apology is a ritual act which orientates towards the other and may potentially alter the relationship between the apologizer and the recipient of the apology. Thus, rather than measuring public apology through the emotional state of the speaker, or even through the

possible material compensations accompanying the speech act (both of which are established ways of evaluating public apologies), Celermajer suggests a view in which the ritual action's referent is neither the individual psyche (sincere sentiment) nor the distribution of benefits and punishments (material compensation) but rather the system of meanings that patterns both of these dimensions of social reality. In reforming relationships, the apology is thus about re-affirming a broader understanding of what is good and virtuous in a society.

The apology aims to do this first by acknowledging that a moral wrong has been committed. That is, the apologizer identifies a deed in the past, which is judged as unacceptable from the present standpoint. Accordingly, Brown first identifies the assumed benevolent intent of past governments in creating *better lives* for the children by their migration, and then declares that those intents 'proved to be misguided'. Following this assertion, Brown, as a representative of the state, takes blame and accepts responsibility for the violation. Against the political figure of a 'vulnerable, suffering, and innocent child', the apology portrays past governments as responsible for acts that should have been viewed 'cruel and misguided' even at the time of their execution. Brown acknowledges a continuity of such blame by underlining that the nation needs to face its uncomfortable past. In his direct address to the former child migrants Brown states:

No-one can fail to be untouched by the terrible human suffering that sprang from the misguided child migrant schemes and the mistakes that were made by successive United Kingdom governments. This is an ugly stain on our country. It's harder still to grasp that these terrible events happened not in the opening chapters of

our history but in the living memories of most of us here today. Child migration didn't happen in the dark ages so long ago that we weren't expected to know any better. (...) As nations, we need to know these uncomfortable truths (...) [and] to recognize this shameful episode for what it was in our history.

Celermajer (2013) suggests that the apology rearranges the relationships of the parties involved through recognition of pain and memory. The acknowledgment of suffering is extensively articulated in Brown's direct address to the former migrants: '[T]oday your pain is recognized, your suffering is understood, your betrayal is acknowledged by the apology I make on behalf of our whole country.' Pain thus becomes a recognized element of the process of re-addressing silenced memories. Jennifer Cole (2004) argues that this is an important part in the ability of rituals to relieve pain. Paying attention to how memory operates as a mechanism that links individual bodies with wider social narratives, Cole suggests, might be a way to think about ritual efficacy in social healing and its connectedness to broader ideological projects (2004: 88–89). In Brown's speech the betrayal by the state does not refer merely to the pain of abandonment and the predisposition of vulnerable children to institutional violence, but also to the state's failure, and even refusal, to remember.

In addition to re-orienting the relationship between the apologizer and the recipients, the apology also readjusts the relationship between the recipients and the broader national public. By reiterating the children's pain, Brown's narrative intends to awake a sense of empathy and moral mutuality in the audience. 'No-one can be untouched by the terrible human suffering', Brown appeals. Here the popularly shared

notion of trauma—understood as the 'scar that violent events leave on individual bodies and minds' as well as an 'open wound in collective memory' (Fassin and Rechtman 2009: 2) comes to play. As Fassin and Rechtman point out, the audience is familiar with this universalized matrix of trauma and thus able to empathize with the sufferers in a kind of a 'communion in trauma' (2008: 18; see also Robbins 2013). Further, Brown brings the child migrants and the audience together by emphasizing that their experiences of abandonment and abuse happened concurrently with the lifetimes of the members of the audience. 'These terrible events happened not in the opening chapters of our history but in the living memories of most of us here today'. This proximity in time accentuates the discrepancy of memories of a partially shared recent past of the participants in the ceremony.

Saying sorry is obviously the crux of apology. The saying sorry allows Brown, as the apologizer in the name of the nation, to reposition himself within a new normative stance in which he breaks away from the transgression and confirms his commitment to a shared moral principle. He acknowledges that children's deportation violated a moral norm for which the community stands for (see Cels 2015: 353): the safeguarding of a nation's children. The violation of this norm is presented as a *betrayal* by the state. 'Today your pain is recognized. Your suffering is understood, your betrayal is acknowledged', Brown pledges. Such betrayals, argues Gabriella Turnaturi (2007: 8; cited in Crapanzano 2010: 13), presuppose a shared experience—'a We relationship'. Betrayal occurs when the relationship is attacked from within the confines of the We. Thus the displacement of the nation's children may be seen as a 'more or less intentional act aimed at destroying that relationship or withdrawing

from it' (ibid.). Finally, Brown's apology seeks to amend the relationship between the nation and the former migrants by symbolically *reversing* the displacement and the destruction of that relationship. He ends his address to the migrants by re-establishing their membership in the nation, and expressing it in terms of shared kinship: 'So, I say to you our sons and daughters here: Welcome home. You are with friends. We will support you all your lives.'

TEMPORAL PARADOXES OF PUBLIC APOLOGY

In making a clear break between the then and now, Brown takes us to the second element I want to consider, namely the kinds of temporalities that the apology sketches. There is, first of all, an assumption of intergenerational continuity and sameness between the collectivities of perpetrators and victims in the past, and the apologizers and the recipients of apology in the now. Thus, apologies extend questions of guilt, forgiveness, and atonement beyond first-hand experience of the events suffered or perpetrated, thereby also extending memory beyond experience personally encountered. Some authors, such as Ricouer (2006) and Trouillot (2000), have critiqued the possibility of stretching subjectivity and sincere emotion across time and generations. But sincerity, as Celermajer (2013: 292) observes and as I have also suggested, is perhaps not the most relevant criteria for the efficacy of a political act in terms of which the apologizer speaks in a representative, public role.

In addition to the temporal paradox of equating apologizers and the recipients of apology with perpetrators and victims of past wrongdoings, there are other temporal dimensions in the act that deserve attention. Whereas the former view suggests

a continuity—even if a dubious one—between past and present subjectivities, sentiments, and responsibilities, as transformative rituals, apologies seek to break such continuity, and to signal a temporal transformation. As temporal markers (see Trouillot 2000: 174; Celermajer 2013) they aim to create a new era or register that one has been launched. 'Today is a turning point', Brown announces. With the apology, Brown detaches his government from those of the Imperial and post-Imperial past, marking a critical junction in the course of national history. The symbolic act therefore seals child migration off to a concluded past as a 'shameful episode in history'. Paradoxically, Brown is forced to admit that this, in fact, is not possible. The past and the present are never fully detachable. The ignoble events of the past are irreversible and their effects seep into the present as 'ghosts that haunt us to this day' and as 'wounds that will never heal', as he states. Manifestly, by the very act of apologizing, Brown authorizes the continuity of guilt and responsibility across generations.

These temporal paradoxes reflect broader understandings about how the past is understood to matter in the present. That is, whether one emphasizes the many ways in which the past continues and has a bearing in the present (Coicaud 2009: 100; cited in Bastian 2013: 98), or whether one views the past as a 'foreign country'²³, intrinsically so different from ours that it cannot be understood but on its own moral terms. These perceptions have consequences for whether an apology is considered a legitimate solution for dealing with past violations. For a comparative example, in refusing to apologize to indigenous Australians for the forcible removal of children from their families, the former Australian Prime Minister John Howard claimed it was 'anachronistic to judge those who sanctioned and carried

out the removals in the past according to present values' (Bastian 2013: 99). In Howard's reasoning, there is a distinct break between the past and the present; they are two separate and irreconcilable temporalities with distinct sets of values pertaining to their times. Taking an opposite view, Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, in his decision to make the said apology, emphasized continuity and interconnectedness between the past and the present. In this view, within a political community guilt and responsibility are transgenerational and governments have a responsibility for attempting to amend the failures of their predecessors. In making the apology both Prime Ministers Rudd and Brown therefore proclaim a *double temporal logic* (Bastian 2013: 103). On the one hand they underline the continuity and inseparability of the past from the present as well as the transgenerational persistence of suffering, guilt, and moral responsibility. But, on the other hand, they both see apology as a transformative historical event: a temporal dividing break and a marker of a new beginning.

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON APOLOGY

So, does the apology do what it intends in terms of relational and temporal transformation: does it amend, heal, recognize, form a closure, and mark a new beginning? And what does it leave unsaid? When I have discussed the apology with my interlocutors, many have been dubious. Jim, for example, was not too impressed: 'I'm not sure about the apology part', he said. 'What's a politician's apology worth anyway? It's just words. To me, unless you really are sincerely sorry and I doubt he was. He was just saying things. I wouldn't have accepted that as an apology.' Clearly, Brown's apology did not convince Jim as a sincere act of atonement, one

of genuine sentiments. It was 'just words', and thus an apology he rejected. Jim evaluated the public apology with the same criteria we use for interpersonal ones: in order to be felicitous, they need to be authentic and sincere, express genuine regret and a changed moral stance of the apologizer. These aspects, he felt, were not accomplished by Brown's performance and the apology was not credible.

Joyce, for her part, believed that Brown was actually genuinely sorry in declaring the apology, but she doubted the worth of the apology in the first place. 'So what?' was what she thought:

I was like, well that's good but what is that? So that absolves you of anything? And so what you're sorry? People say they're sorry when they break a cup but it doesn't really mean much unless you go out and buy another one and say: Here's a replacement. Anyway, political apologies are just politics. They don't have any meaning. Even though I believe Gordon Brown did feel it. But you know: So what?

Although the authenticity of the sentiment behind the apology as well as its ability to grant absolution might well be suspected, for some of my informants its symbolic, ritual, and even political force lay elsewhere. It rested fundamentally in the explicitly enunciated acknowledgment of the child migrants' existence and their plight, and particularly in its documentation. Ted acknowledged the underlying relevance of public recognition, but he, too, took it with a pinch of salt:

I thought [the public apology] was a bit of a cop out myself. What I felt was this: I think a lot of Rhodesian children (...) I think they felt abandoned. And although that came across as the fact that they [the

authorities] accepted it, I don't think they do enough about it. (...) In saying that, I'm glad they [apologized]. Because at least it showed that there was some kind of recognition that this had happened. But. The same had been said in the Australian case, the Canadian thing, and the Rhodesian thing. They *knew* about this years ago. Why didn't they apologize then? Were they pushed into a corner where they had to do something? It should have been free will. 'We've done this. We're sorry.' Rather than, 'Oh, just bury it. It'll come out, let someone else deal with it.' And that's the impression I got. (...) I don't think anybody knew what to do. To be honest. If you're hit with a major problem, and this was a major problem, I mean consider the amount of children involved, it's a major problem irrespective of whether you like it or not. Silence is sometimes a cover for saying: 'Oh God, what do we do now?'

Ray had a privileged perspective to the apology, because he was one of the invited former migrants present at Brown's address. For him the words meant nothing, they were irrelevant. Neither did he consider the possible material compensation the key. The meaning of the apology was in the fact that he was not alone. In the ceremony he was surrounded by hundreds of others whom he could imagine had experienced the same. For him the meaning of the act was the public recognition of being part of a larger community and of history subdued until then.

Ted and Ray's mistrust about the apology boils down to the decades of deliberate state silencing—denial in the face of confusion and disquiet—while the state authorities were repeatedly made aware of the adverse circumstances and outright abuse that some of

the child migration operations contained. This makes the apology appear forced and feigned, an insincere act which perhaps speaks more about the state's need to reaffirm its 'liberal, normative complexion'²⁴ (Bentley 2016: 171), rather than an act that genuinely acknowledges the people it addresses and the moral wrongs it repents.

And further, in addition to avoiding a rigorous confrontation with the sediments of state silencing in regard to enabling children's migration to endure for decades, the public apology relies on broader, structural silencing. It fails to scrutinize and challenge the political structures that enabled the harnessing of children as builders of the Empire. The apology does this by narratively constructing an individualized child migrant, who is presented as at once a relatable, suffering victim, a resilient hero, and a happy home-comer. While each one of these figures in themselves might be difficult for the former migrants to recognize and embrace, there is also a peculiar out-of-timeness in the construct. This is reflected in the way the apology a-historicizes family relationships; it assumes the possibility of return, and the resumption of relationships that might never have existed. At the same time the apology erases time and eliminates the complexity of child migrant subjectivities by equating the historical circumstances of their experience and the social and political positions into which the migration placed them.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have examined the political apology to child migrants as an attempt to readdress and redress previously silenced pasts. I have discussed the possibilities and limits of apology, focusing in particular on its temporal, relational, and affective effects. Despite

shared skepticism about the genuineness of sentiment behind the apology, for many of my informants its fundamental essence rested on its documentation—the putting on record, which could be taken as an evidence of guilt and potential recommitment by the government. Thus, as Zohar Kampf (2013: 158) writes: ‘hollow, humiliating or insincere apologetic gestures and remedial acts, once expressed in public, may nevertheless have meaningful social value.’ By publicly documenting, by recognizing histories previously obliterated, and by giving voice to those previously silenced, apology may therefore have the potential for transforming national discourses and understandings about collective historical experience (Das and Kleinman 2001: 21). It attempts to do so by validating the historical existence and subjectivity of the child migrants and by taking responsibility for the transgression. It further aspires to mend and heal relationships by providing a moral narrative for a previously silenced experience. This emerging narrative, however, is inevitably selective. There is a risk of establishing a rather narrow victim-position for the former migrants, in addition to which certain voices are turned up while others are muted (see Ross 2003), which may push some migrants to the margins of the nascent hegemonic storyline.

At the same time, the responsibility and guilt of the state becomes confined to the moral wrong of ignoring and as such supporting children’s maltreatment for decades and even centuries, which paradoxically a-historicizes and decontextualizes the endeavor. As a narrative, the apology flattens temporality.²⁵ On a personal level, the apology conveys ambiguous assumptions about family and belonging by offering to help the former migrants to ‘regain their true identities’ and to ‘reunite with loved ones’. Such portrayal of the

family as an immutable constant of enduring, affective relationships obliterates the passage of time and invalidates the child migrants’ experience—particularly their senses of loss and abandonment *by* the family.

On a wider scope, the apology assumes continuity and similarity of subjectivity between 19th century child laborers on Canadian farms and the post Second World War white Rhodesian migrants with prophesied middle-class futures, thus taking the subjects out of their time and out of the political, historical realm. The apology takes part in re-narrativizing the past in a way that avoids addressing or denouncing settler colonial migration or colonial policies as such. It therefore conforms to Tom Bentley’s (2016: 7) analysis on colonial apologies in more general: ‘The core modality by which apologies discursively sanitize the colonial past is by addressing only certain aspects of the project.’ They frequently target particular incidents cutting them off from the wider processes and outlines of the colonial endeavor (ibid.: 172), suggesting that nothing was inherently wrong with colonialism itself (Gibney 2002: 280). Colonial apologies, Bentley (2016: 20) further argues, do this by reformulating them as narratives that are analogous to core legitimizing tenets of the colonial enterprise. For example, Brown’s way of applauding the former migrants for their ‘bravery, courage, and endurance’ in his direct address is suggestive of such a stance in re-affirming and glorifying the standard settler colonial plot rather than renouncing it. In this sense the apology is a narrative of the wrongdoer which might say more about the apologizer than the recipients of the apology. Thus, while Brown’s apology overcomes silences it also reproduces others. While it aims to assure that past atrocities should never again happen in the future ‘that no one should ever again journey in

sorrow without hope', it leaves untouched the colonial policies and powers that authorized child migration in the first place, one successive government after another.

NOTES

- 1 Acknowledgements: I would like to express my sincere thanks to the participants of the panel 'Silence, secrets, forgetting' that Henni Alava and I organized at the Finnish Anthropological Society's biennial conference in Jyväskylä in May 2017, as well as to the participants at the Anthropology seminar at the University of Cape Town in August 2018, in which earlier versions of this article were presented. I am also grateful for the two anonymous reviewers and the editor of *Suomen Antropologi*, Elina Hartikainen, whose generous, insightful and constructive comments greatly improved the article. Finally I am especially grateful for the time and the thoughtful and perceptive analyses that my interlocutors have shared with me.
- 2 The exact number of child migrants is difficult to ascertain. Boucher (2014) and Harper and Constantine (2010: 248) estimate that from 1869 until the late 1960s roughly 95 000 children were permanently relocated in the settler dominions and colonies. A higher number, 130 000, is often quoted in newspaper articles, which is also the estimate the *Child Migrants Trust*, a registered charity addressing the effects of British child migration, refers to. <https://www.childmigrantstrust.com/our-work/child-migration-history/>.
- 3 British child migration had originated in the 17th century, when orphaned 'apprentices' were sent to the North American territories (Boucher 2009: 914; Bean and Melville 1989: 1). In the late 19th century, the motivations and modes of child migration changed; it became something of a mass movement as various religious and philanthropic societies sought to rescue children from poor conditions, which were thought to be disadvantageous to their physical, social and moral development (Lynch 2016: 7), and to transplant them in the colonies and white dominions to the service of expanding Empire (Sherington and Jeffery 1998: xi). Historian Ellen Boucher regards this modern form of child emigration as part of the Victorian child rescue movement, which attempted to improve the lives of 'Britain's homeless, exploited, or neglected youth' (2009: 917). The charitable movements involved in child migration were grounded in modern concepts of childhood; on a conviction that children needed to be nurtured, educated, and freed from the burden of labor, and that these ideals should be extended across the classes to the laboring poor (ibid: 917–918).
- 4 Altogether 276 child migrants were sent out to Southern Rhodesia. According to unofficial student lists compiled by the former child migrants themselves, boys outnumbered girls throughout the history of the Fairbridge College—no more than a quarter of all the children were girls. Intended to be brought up into committed Rhodesian citizens, few ended up staying in independent Zimbabwe, thereby following the migration streams of other white Rhodesians, the largest numbers of whom emigrated in the early 1980s. Most former Fairbridgians currently live in the UK, in South Africa, and in Australia. Almost 30 % of the former migrants are known to be deceased.
- 5 So far I have conducted in-depth ethnographic interviews with 24 former child migrants in the UK and in South Africa, with some of them on several occasions and over a few years. I have participated in social get-togethers and reunions, where I have also met with the migrants' families. Further fieldwork will be carried out with former migrants who currently live in Australia. My informants have provided me with personal materials such as letters, photographs, diaries and autobiographic texts. I also draw on published memoirs, films, documentaries, popular histories, newspaper articles, and museum exhibitions. In addition, I have conducted archival research in the UK at the National Archives in Kew as well as at the University of Liverpool Special Collections and Archives.
- 6 D 296/K2/1/2, University of Liverpool Special Collections and Archives (ULSCA).
- 7 Proposed Establishment of a Fairbridge Farm School, 3 September 1938. DO 35/697/5, The National Archives (TNA), Kew.
- 8 'This is not a charity, it is an Imperial Investment', declared the Prince of Wales in 1934 as he donated £1000 and endorsed subscriptions to the Fairbridge Society (ULSCA D296/B4/1).

- 9 The apology was addressed to all British child migrants sent to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and Southern Rhodesia—of whom about 2000 are estimated to be alive today (IICSA: Child Migration Programmes Investigation Report 2018: 150). I analyze the apology particularly from the perspective of those migrants who were sent to Rhodesia.
- 10 I use first name pseudonyms for my informants in order to protect their identity.
- 11 The issue of intergenerational trauma (Argenti and Schramm 2010: 26) is often discussed in reference to the Holocaust survivors. For example, Nadine Fresco, in her analysis of the relationship to violent past in the lives of Holocaust survivors' children, depicts an intergenerational, mutually protective gap of silence—'silence that had swallowed up their past' (1984; cited in Connerton 2011: 73), which has separated the parents and the children. The children grew up 'in the ambiance of the unspeakable'; the parents could only pass on the wound, not the memory. In other cases, a violent past, a past that is otherwise mostly in-articulated, may become compressed into a few repeated iconic notions, which come to symbolize an entire historical narrative. For example, Vincent Crapanzano explores the effects of intergenerational silence in his research on the Harkis—Algerians presently living in France who sided with the French during the Algerian War of Independence. He argues the Harkis have lived in 'abject silence' (2010: 2); what little they have articulated has been expressed in terms of abandonment and betrayal by the French. These two notions—abandonment and betrayal—have become icons of their wounds, which their children have adopted as well, and by which they too articulate their identity.
- 12 The child migration scheme was designed, administered, and financed by three parties: the Rhodesia Fairbridge Memorial College Council/Society (a charitable organization based in London), the British government, and the government of Southern Rhodesia.
- 13 According to the topical, and very critical, Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse (IICSA) Investigation Report on Child Migration Programmes (2018), it is the UK government which is mainly to blame for neglecting to take action to put an end to children's maltreatment and abuse within various child migration schemes. This, despite the fact that the government was repeatedly made aware of such atrocities from as far back as in 1875, when the first concerned report on child migration projects in Canada had come out. The 2018 IICSA Report concludes: 'This was a deeply flawed policy (...). It was badly executed by many voluntary organizations and local authorities, but was allowed by successive British governments to remain in place, despite a catalogue of evidence which showed that children were suffering ill treatment and abuse, including sexual abuse. (...) Her Majesty's Government could have decided to bring it to the end (...) but it did not do so' (IICSA: Child Migration Programmes: Investigation Report 2018: viii).
- 14 Michel Foucault (e.g. 1977) examines memory from the premise that remembering and forgetting are at the center of power relationships in any given society. Where multiple, antagonistic versions of the past co-exist within a society (and they always will), some memories, it is argued, tend to become subdued, silenced, or excluded from the dominant national narratives. The notion of *counter-memory* attempts to capture precisely the kind of experience and remembering which is pushed to the margins and devalued from the perspective of hegemonic discourses but which may break or oppose the standard, normative versions of the past.
- 15 Perhaps two of the most influential books were *Lost Children of the Empire: The untold story of Britain's child migrants* (1989) by Philip Bean and Joy Melville and *Empty Cradles* (1994) by Margaret Humphreys. Humphreys was a Nottingham social worker working in child protection and post-adoption counseling who began to investigate child migration after being contacted by a former child migrant in Australia, who wanted help in finding out where she had come from. In 1987 Humphreys founded *The Child Migrants Trust*, a charitable organization which helps in unifying former child migrants with their families. Her book was followed by a TV documentary, a BBC mini-series, and the book's subsequent dramatization as a feature film, *Oranges and Sunshine* (2011).
- 16 For example: BBC News. UK Politics: Uncovering 'Britain's most shameful secret', May 19, 1999 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/348001.stm
- 17 Braid, Mary: The Shameful secret of Britain's lost children. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/>

- the-shameful-secret-of-britains-lost-children-tens-of-thousands-of-child-migrants-were-sent-abroad-1484622.html
- 18 Some relatively recent public apologies include two state apologies for child removal and assimilation politics in 2008: the Australian government's apology to the 'Stolen Generation'—indigenous children removed from their parents and relocated to white foster homes and institutions (Bastian 2013; Moses 2011) and the Canadian apology to indigenous children removed from their families and placed in residential schools (Funk-Unrau 2014). One example of the ambivalence of colonial apologies is the 2004 German recognition of its responsibility for the genocide of the Herero and Nama people in Namibia (although refusing to literally call it such)—a case that remains open, and is still under negotiation between the German and Namibian governments (Jamfa 2008).
- 19 The Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up in South Africa in 1995 to help to reconcile Apartheid era human rights violations may be considered a foundational space for many subsequent political apologies.
- 20 House of Commons 24 February 2010. The Prime Minister Gordon Brown's statement <<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmhansrd/cm100224/debtext/100224-0004.htm>>; Reuters: British PM apology to child migrants 24 February 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uQMJsZSz7c>.
- 21 Child Migrant Apology. Prime Minister Gordon Brown's address to the child migrants, February 24, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MEXAdmEmlM>
- 22 Child Migrant Apology: Response by Harold Haig, the secretary of the International Child Migrants Association, February 24, 2010. <https://youtu.be/H78SYmkpUHI>
- 23 'The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there' is a famous line from L.P. Hartley's novel *The Go-Between* (1953). See also the debate 'The past is a foreign country' in Tim Ingold (ed.) 2005 [1996]: *Key Debates in Anthropology*.
- 24 Celermajer notes that in Australia, apologists acknowledge that they live as members of a nation in whose name misdeeds were committed. Apologizing, thus, might not be as much about compensating for wrongdoing, as it is an expression of shame, where shame marks a recognition of ethical flaws in the identity of the collective, or rather its failure to live up to its ideal self as defined in its constitutional principles. In this formulation, apology becomes a rehabilitation for the perpetrators and their descendants rather than the victims (Celermajer 2013: 17). Similarly, Paulette Regan (2010: 50; cited in Rask 2018: 11) discusses the processes of reconciliation in the case of Indian residential schools in Canada. She views that the residential schools should be addressed as part of a broader decolonization process, which entails that settler Canadians would recognize and come to terms with the legacy of colonial violence of the country. This may be challenging as it asks people to resituate themselves in national history: 'We may resist hearing such stories partly because they challenge our own identity as a nation of benevolent peace-makers.'
- 25 I thank Professor Fiona Ross for this comment (August 14, 2018).

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