

A STORY TOLD IN A WHISPER, OR THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF ATONEMENT

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Abstract

This article analyzes the novel *Sorry* by the Australian writer Gail Jones in light of contemporary theories on decolonialism and the coloniality of power. It discusses how the novel addresses major issues that are central to an understanding of the Australian past and its history of colonization, exploitation of indigenous peoples and gendered subjects.

Keywords: Australian Literature; Decolonization; Gender; Race and Ethnicity; Indigenous Peoples

“A whisper: sssshh. The thinnest vehicle of breath. This is a story that can only be told in a whisper. There is a hush to difficult forms of knowing, an abashment, a sorrow, an inclination towards silence.”

Gail Jones, Sorry (2007, p. 15)

I

With the meaningful words quoted above, the Australian writer Gail Jones opens the much acclaimed novel *Sorry*, published in 2007, a powerful fictional narrative that critically rewrites the Australian past and exposes its history of colonization and the unsettling imbrications of gender and colonial power relations. Jones explores in this novel the impact of a system, which the Argentine feminist critic María Lugones, in her article “Coloniality of Gender,” defines as a “modern/colonial gender system,” that affects the lives of subjects who try to survive in a world in which both gender and race relations are, in the critic’s words “powerful fictions,” always considered in relational terms. By fictionalizing a story that revisions a significant and

traumatic moment in Australian history that took place in the 1930s and 1940s, Jones makes use of the literary text to foster a strong post-colonial, or decolonial, as some critics might argue (Mignolo, Quijano, Lugones), critique in tune with the aim to elaborate alternative histories and critical protocols of writing and reading the historical and cultural constructs that have traditionally informed our visions and perceptions.

Diana Brydon argues that “[f]ictional imaginings, stories and poems remain some of the most powerful modes we have for entering and engaging difficult ways of knowing and thus stretching our imagination in the way that will be necessary for addressing the challenges now facing our interconnected world with globalization” (10). Nevertheless, the Canadian critic cautions the readers to the fact that these literary productions “cannot stand alone” (10), that is, they cannot on their own provide the necessary critique of a most complex situation we observe on our daily endeavors. Brydon continues: “They need to be placed in dialogue with other modes of inquiry such as those

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developed within the civil, social, market, and physical spheres once confined for analysis to the social and natural sciences" (10). In this sense, it is relevant to highlight the role of literary and cultural studies critics who must analyze these texts conceived within the limits of a national literature in "an emerging global dialogue" (Brydon 10). Analyzing Jones's literary text in a global dialogue implies a critical exercise that while being aware of the danger of easy translatability of different cultural situations manages to situate it within a complex web of relations that have, in many countries, worked to justify colonial relations in terms of gender, race and ethnicity.

This essay aims at discussing Jones's novel *Sorry* in light of this prevalent web of power relations that have informed the construction of colonial gender as well as racial and ethnic relations.

II

If Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak is right when she affirms that postcoloniality, as we understand it nowadays, is, in fact, the failure of decolonization, as I think she is, this movement of critically rewriting and rereading the foundational myths and emblems of our culture works as a means to question the manner through which the "colonial matrix of power"—to use an expression used by Walter D. Mignolo — acts in terms of dislocation and relocation ("La opción" 20). Mignolo refers to a necessary exercise towards a "grammar of decoloniality," that is, the struggle for the decolonization of knowledge and epistemology, facing a praxis that ponders about decoloniality in theoretical and also ethical and political terms ("Delinking" 346). Brydon, however, claims that although she has long preferred decolonizing agendas to postcolonial ones, she has more recently wondered whether in the context of the twentieth century decolonization has become a "zombie category," that is, a ghostly category, like a trace or a haunting, "incapable of addressing what is at stake in changing relations of inquiry, injury and responsibility" (9). As Brydon properly observes, these are issues that Jones's *Sorry* addresses by approaching "the difficult forms of knowing that Australians need to engage" (9).

In this sense, it is relevant, as Spivak alerts us, to remain vigilant ("Attention: Postcolonialism" 166) in the sense that it is necessary to be aware of the workings of this colonial matrix of power, as well as of the possible illusory constructions of political and ethical engagements, and the complicity and responsibility of our position as critics, intellectuals and theoreticians whether we align ourselves with "post-colonial" and "decolonial" thinking or not. It means, as Spivak has argued elsewhere, to make room for a continuous process of learning with and from the other—usually the subaltern whose discourse has been appropriated and has often been silenced—insisting on the critical process of "a persistent unlearning of the privilege of the postcolonial elite in a neocolonial globe," that is, an unlearning of one's privilege as loss (*An Aesthetic Education* 72).

For my purpose in this work, it is especially relevant to highlight the imbrications and the intersectionality between the categories of gender, race/ethnicity, class and sexuality as well as the epistemological blindness and violence that both Spivak and Lugones refer to as being responsible for maintaining unchanged the structures of the coloniality of power. As discussed by Anibal Quijano, the constitutive structure of the global capitalist system of power is organized precisely around two major axes: the coloniality of power and modernity. The coloniality of power is understood, in Quijano's words, in terms of "the social category of 'race' as the key element of the social classification of colonized and colonizers," seen in terms of a naturalized understanding of inferiority and superiority. As such, race "pervaded and modulated the basic instances of the Eurocentered capitalist colonial/modern world power to become the cornerstone of this coloniality of power" (25).

By expanding and complicating Quijano's system that puts together coloniality, power and modernity, Lugones includes gender as a constitutive element of this understanding of coloniality in terms of multiple relations of power that are interconnected through intricate relational structures. Lugones argues that the separation of race and gender distorts that which lies in the intersection of these categories, that is, the inherent epistemological and ontological violence against women. Lugones also claims that it "is only

when we perceive gender and race as intermeshed or fused that we actually see women of color.” For her, “the axis of coloniality is not sufficient to pick out all aspects of gender” (374). This hidden scope of gender that Lugones discusses—and that Quijano’s work does not recognize—legitimizes the relevance of “the gendered construction of knowledge in modernity” (377-78).

If, as Lugones states, following Quijano’s lead, the system of coloniality, constructed historically from the event of European colonization, does not refer solely to a control of racial classification, but rather permeates the whole system of control imposed upon subjects in terms of gender, race, subjectivity and knowledge, it is significant to analyze what we have been calling post or decolonial fictions in this light. Such an analysis reveals not only the gendered production of knowledge and meaning, but also the imbrications of this gender system with the coloniality of power as a constitutive paradigm, as well as the fact that, as Lugones argues, “[r]ace is no more mythical and fictional than gender, both [are] powerful fictions” (383-84) in the sense that they are often traditionally constructed in a troubling paradigm of superiority and inferiority. Both of these constitutive aspects of subjectivity and identity act to preserve what Spivak has termed, and as we shall see, “reproductive heteronormativity,” as a stronghold of nationalism (*Nationalism and the Imagination*).

Along these lines, as Brydon claims, “*Sorry* may be read as taking seriously Spivak’s injunction for white beneficiaries of colonialism to understand our privilege as our loss” (17), that is, the novel may be read as foregrounding a deep concern with the acknowledgment of national responsibility by those in colonial societies who have been awarded privileges on account of one’s gender, race and ethnicity.

III

In *Sorry*, Gail Jones seems to be aware of the place she occupies as a writer and an intellectual and, especially, of the danger of claiming to be speaking for the subaltern as silenced others—a concern repeatedly voiced by Spivak in her renowned critical essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak.”

In a note at the end of the book, Jones claims:

I would like to acknowledge that Aboriginal Australians are the traditional custodians of the land about which I write, and that their spiritual and material connection with the land is persistent and precious. This text is written in the hope that further native title grants will be offered in the spirit of reconciliation and in gratitude for all that indigenous Australians have given to others in their country. (231)

And she adds, when she proceeds to thank other people who contributed to her writing the novel, that the “forms of solidarity in writing are many” (231). This acknowledgment is an important step, in my view, in a novel that claims to be concerned, in its thematic structure, with atonement and also, I argue, with solidarity, that is, with the need for reconciliation and for the expression of gratitude. In an interview with Rob Cawston, Jones states that “to bring out a book called *Sorry*, it’s my form of activism, I suppose, to say this is still an issue.” She also claims that the novel works as an “allegory about cultural forgetting.”

The very title of the novel is related to this call and responds to a national trauma. The word “sorry,” as the writer explains in a note published at the end of the novel, “has dense and complicated meanings in Australia” (229). It is the word, as the first person narrator who alternates telling the story with a third omniscient narrator explains, that expresses their grieving for the lost ones, “the sorry-time of mourning someone in their own community” (113). The note also explains that for “Aboriginal people, ‘sorry business’ is the term given broadly to matters of death and mourning. It refers to rituals, feelings and community loss.” On the other hand, National “Sorry Day,” an annual event celebrated between 1998 and 2004—later renamed as National Day of Healing for All Australians—became emblematic of a historical injustice and national trauma caused to a generation of Aboriginal peoples who were harmed, exploited and discriminated against. They also had their children taken away, removed and mistreated in the name of a federal policy of forcible assimilation. These generations of young children later became known as

the “Stolen Generations.” “Apology to the Indigenous Australian ‘Lost Generation’” was only given in 2008 by the labor party minister Kevin Rudd. The previous Prime Minister, John Howard, from the liberal party, who was in power for nine years, had uttered the words “I am sorry,” but had refused to accept responsibility for past wrongs.

Written before Rudd’s much expected apology to the Indigenous people of Australia, *Sorry* may be said to belong to a post-colonial fictional genre that critic Sue Kossew terms the “Sorry Novel,” that is, the kind of novel “whose main feature is to rework, rewrite, or reimagine history in order to make a political point about the present” that would be put in direct contrast to a recurrent narrow version of history dominated during conservative political years that denied any sense of colonial guilt or shame (172). Gail Jones, as a non-Indigenous Australian writer, Kossew claims, has used her novel “to resist the *comfortable* narrative of the past,” thus engaging with “the idea of an apology to the stolen generation and/or with the concept of reconciliation” (172-73). However, Kossew asks meaningful questions when analyzing the genre of “sorry novels.” She inquires about the role these writings by non-Indigenous writers play in the process of healing and reconciliation and asks if telling stories do help heal these wounds in a productive way. Most importantly, she claims for a necessary questioning about the possible “pitfalls of saying sorry” (174). These questionings also resonate in this work which attempts to address the issue from the perspective of Lugones’s theorization, that is, in terms of the impact of the intersectionality of gender and race/ethnicity to the constructed paradigm of the coloniality of power.

To say sorry, to atone, to show the solidarity that was once given to her is, thus, what Perdita, the major character and one of the narrators, has to face. But before she is able to do that she has to revisit her past and that of her nation and acknowledge,¹ what Lugones has stated in theoretical terms, that race and gender shape unequivocally the coloniality of power of which she is, even unwillingly, a part of. But first she also has to heal, to break a natural “inclination towards silence” (Jones 15) caused by the traumatic experience which

left her with a stutter that paralyzed her speech and a memory loss that paralyzed her actions. Her task, as she mentions in the opening of the novel, is “to gather, quietly and honourably, all that is now scattered” (16) through her storytelling for, as she states it, “[t]elling makes it so” (40):

I developed my stutter at ten, after my father’s death... In my mouth syllables cracked open and shattered, my tongue became a heavy, resistant thing, words disassociated, halted and stuck. It was easier, I found, if I spoke at the level of a whisper... I had not until then thought myself so made up by words. I had not known how fundamentally a child might be recreated. (22)

The daughter of a failed English anthropologist, specialized in Aboriginal ethnography, who firmly believes in the superiority of races, and of an unstable Englishwoman whose inspiration in life was none other than Shakespeare, Perdita Keene, born in Australia in 1930 and raised by Aboriginal women who worked in the house, believed she “was a mistake, a slightly embarrassing intervention” (16) in the lives of her parents. Inspired by Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*, Stella, her mother, tellingly, in allegorical fashion, named her after the protagonist’s lost child, the one to be blamed, even indirectly, for her mother’s death. However, in this novel, as we shall see, the so-called “lost” child, eventually becomes responsible not for the mother’s death, but rather for the father’s, in an emblematic reversal in relation to the source of maternal inspiration.

Unlike the Shakespearean story that provides the reader with a happy ending, Perdita’s life takes a different turn as she is forever marked by the murder of her colonial anthropologist father, her witnessing the episode and the subsequent arrest of her aboriginal best friend, whom she considered a sister, Mary—one of those children belonging to the so-called Stolen Generation—who is sent to a convent and later employed by white people. The shameful stutter and the memory loss she experiences soon after this episode signal in physical and psychological terms the trauma forever imprinted in body and psyche.

Only through her telling, years later, first to Doctor Oblov, the speech therapist she is sent to, in order to help her overcome her stuttering, and later to the reader, after she has somewhat recovered from her momentous speech problem, will the full meaning of her experience and her own responsibility in it become evident. Against the meaningful background of WWII and the role played by Australia in this war as well as the history of the nation and its policy of assimilation, Perdita's story is revealed to uncover the colossal injustice committed towards those historically excluded peoples.

Not only does Mary suffer the plight of those children taken by force away from their people, but she is also, while still an adolescent, repeatedly raped by Perdita's father. In the scene which records his murder and is forever encoded in Perdita's mind, Mary is once again raped and the daughter comes to her rescue by then killing the father. Needless to say, it is Mary who assumes the blame for the murder, with Stella's unremitting complicity. As Mary explains later: "No one believe the word of a bush blackfella. Unless,' she added, 'they're confessing a crime'" (215).

In the scene of her remembrance and her final revelation, Perdita

broke down and sobbed. She sobbed uncontrollably for what she believed was her heartless forgetting. She sobbed for her mother's deception and her own self-delusion, and saw how Stella had not disabused her of her mistake, but in some ways supported it. She sobbed for Mary's extraordinary sacrifice, and for Billy Trevor's mute and lonely witness. (207).

In the end, as was the case of the injustice done to the children of the Stolen Generation, "there was no atonement" (216), no possible reparation at the end of the day. The most painful realization, however, comes when she becomes aware that "she should have said 'sorry'" to her friend and sister, but she does not do so: "*How long a time lies in one little word?*" she quotes echoing, one again, the Shakespearean lines she had learned as a child (216). She has finally acknowledged that she "must now remember her forgetting" (220) and must painfully accept her own complicity with the

injustice made, for the damage done to Mary cannot in the end be undone. What was not said or revealed cannot be reinscribed. History cannot be overcome in the same way that Perdita cannot go back in time and undo the harm done. It is, as Kossew observes, "both a personal trauma and also a national one" (179). As Brydon states as regards to what she sees as the important relation of enquiry, injury and responsibility in post-colonial and decolonial thinking: "We know the damage that has been done but we do not know how to repair it" (6). However, this painful and unsettling narrative seems to imply that, even if there was the possibility of atonement and the recognition of an ethics of apology, as Kossew points out (175-76), to simply "perform a convincing 'act of apology'" (176)—which in itself would be questionable—is beyond Perdita's grasp.

In this scene of colonization provided by the novel, both race and gender, in tune with Lugones's theorization, are proven to be a powerful reenactment of the colonial matrix of power in a relational way. Stella and Perdita are both victims and persecutors of a gender system that oppresses women, while Mary remains three times removed from the supposedly ideal for both her race and class. Along the same lines, while Nicholas embodies, in Manichean fashion, the typical colonial subject in his disregard for otherness and his blindness to the social, cultural and historical stereotypical position he occupies on behalf of his nation and gender, Billy, the deaf-mute boy Perdita befriends as a child, in his muteness and exclusion, is feminized and thus sides with both Perdita and Mary in their peripheral social positioning.

IV

In the long run, it is only the novel as a process of telling, remembrance and refusal to forget—the story told at least "in a whisper"—that stands as a possibility of atonement. Perdita does learn with her traumatic experience and its consequences and with "the shape that affections make" (224). She learns also to unlearn her privilege as loss, about which Spivak theorizes. It is a kind of loss that is translated first as silence, emblematically as aphasia, as an inability to utter that

which had in the past the power to make things right. Second, it is a form of epistemic violence towards the other, the silenced subaltern, in this case one clearly marked by gender and race. She also has to learn and acknowledge her complicity with the norms of a system of reproductive heteronormativity (Spivak, *Nationalism*) inserted into a modern/colonial gender system, and above all she has to understand her own responsibility for all that has happened.

Writing (or telling) about her traumatic experience becomes the means through which such unlearning and acknowledgment takes place for Perdita. Writing is, in Kossew's words, the only means through which it is possible "at the very least, [to] perform a communal act of ethical engagement" (181). However, the ethics of apology, to which Perdita could not respond in time, will be forever lost to her. In this sense, Perdita's shame emblematically mirrors that of her nation and her plight allegorically evokes that of Australia.

Note

1. See Kossew's argument that in Jones's novel, "the personal functions as an allegory of the nation" (178).

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