

## Race and Reconciliation: Redressing Wounds of Injustice (Book Review)

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### **Abstract:**

A review of the book "Race and Reconciliation: Redressing Wounds of Injustice" by John B. Hatch.

**Keywords:** book review | race | politics | racial reconciliation | social justice

### **Article:**

Race and Reconciliation: Redressing Wounds of Injustice. By John B. Hatch. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2008; pp. 420. \$90.00 cloth; \$38.95 paper.

In John B. Hatch's *Race and Reconciliation: Redressing Wounds of Injustice*, the author travels a rhetorically-inspired path to teach his readers and understand himself how the tragic legacy of slavery had escaped, until rather recently, earnest expressions of regret, apology, and social change. Hatch documents international and local instances of reconciliation that have inspired a new rhetoric of reconciliation defined as "a dialogic rhetorical process of rectifying wrongs and healing relationships between parties, in ways that promote their common good" (p. 9). In a fluid, engrossing tome, Hatch blends communication theories and their philosophical underpinnings, to recent global and national events about which many readers will likely be unaware, to underscore the processes by which racial reconciliation has at last found hope and promise in the United States.

Central to Hatch's proposition is that discourses of reconciliation can pave the way to difficult and dialogic conversations surrounding the existence and remediation options for racial disparities, systemic injustices, and material reparations. To do so, communities need to embrace an ethical coherence in peace-inspiring activities. The task requires confronting social and psychological barriers, acknowledging past human rights violations, pursuing truth bound in facts and history, offering symbolic gestures of contrition, seeking opportunities for forgiveness,

and imagining the conditions under which the transformation of relationships could occur as a matter of justice.

Race and Reconciliation is written for communication scholars and academics of other disciplines studying the democratic possibilities for peace amid violence. It is a book that speaks as well to political leaders and community activists working to advance social justice to remedy the disparities among racial groups that continue to grow despite well intended social services and remediation efforts that have fallen short of making adequate progress. Hatch draws from the discourses of Benin, West Africa's 1999 Leaders' Conference on Reconciliation and Development, as well as recent reconciliation initiatives in Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina to illustrate the power and influence of particular discourses to inspire more generalized action within local politics, state legislative action, and national priorities.

Attentive to the contributions of critical race theory, communication ethics, and religious rhetoric, Hatch seeks to recover the arts of apology, forgiveness, and grace as building blocks for a more honest, reconciled understanding of the legacy of slavery as it relates to the current and pressing economic, social, and political conditions. He relies on the work of Mark McPhail, Erik Doxtader, Kenneth Burke, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Paul Ricoeur, among others, to consider the overlapping, contingent relationships between expressions of apology, the ethical imperative posed by the other, and the transformative potential of discursive routes to healing. Hatch asks:

On what basis and in what forms does reconciliation meaningfully mediate between a tragic (or even melodramatic) ordering of the world into black-and-white (in) justice, in which wrongs demand retribution or rectification, and a comic communalism that regards oppressors as mistaken and seeks to restore harmony through enlightenment? (p. 13)

The answer, Hatch contends, is not simple, formulaic, or singular. Instead, what is needed is an expansion of our reconciliation vocabulary and action options, a more serious look at our vast reservoir of epideictic discourse options, and an embracing of rituals for healing that allows entry of the sacred into public deliberation efforts.

Though the theoretical arguments are compelling, for some readers the lengthy detail in this first section may evoke some measure of impatience. Admittedly, Burkean scholars will reason that there is no amount of information, pontification, or gratitude that is considered too much to read in considering the dynamics of logology and the tragicomic, but for most others a more cursory reading of these ideas in chapters 2 and 3 can yield sufficient fluency in the arguments Hatch forwards.

Following a review of the scholarly contributions and insights into reconciliation, readers are given a behind-the-scenes look into why U.S. Representative Tony Hall's slavery apology resolution that was first presented to the House of Representatives in 1997 failed to pass. Hatch documents the activities of Hall, an Ohio Democrat, in the continuing efforts to elicit a formal U.S. apology for slavery, including Hall's participation in Benin, West Africa's three-day

conference of American and European leaders to consider their responsibilities for the historical wrongs of international slave trade. Hatch then details the rhetorical means by which Hall and other conference participants considered reconciliation both as an epideictic event and a long-term process by which relational, organizational, social, and mass mediated messages could be discussed.

Against those who would argue reconciliation is really just a shortcut that bypasses deliberation of important social issues in its aim to assert a definitive apology, Hatch urges readers to instead consider the prescription set forth by the Benin participants and Tony Hall who saw reconciliation as a move to open up previous conversations in hopes of more extended, honest, and nuanced dialogue into the future. In fact, Hall introduced a second resolution to the U.S. legislature in 2000 inspired by his Benin experience, but once again the measure failed. However, by 2007 after Hall had retired from public service, apologies for slavery were gaining rapid support in the U.S. states, a condition that Hatch suggests actually took root before, during, and after the Benin conference at the same time other community-initiated actions were gaining visibility.

Hatch's research spanned nearly a decade and thankfully included the years 2007-2008, when as he says, "like dominoes ... state legislatures in Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina passed resolutions expressing 'profound regret,' 'contrition' and/or 'apology' for slavery ... As the year progressed, other states introduced similar resolutions" so that within short order 14 states had done the same (p. 311). That is, each act of apology toward racial reconciliation became the impetus and sometimes the model for other states to consider. Why the flurry of activity in the absence of anything like it in years previous?

Readers will find in this book a number of reasons why the rhetoric of reconciliation is a political discourse whose time has finally come: the observance of commemorations that make fresh past historical wrongs; new revelations about the lasting legacy of slavery; celebrity instances of racial insults showcasing the haunting prevalence of racism; America's concern post-9/11 to "set its own house in order" (p. 312); and most importantly, the growing discourse of reconciliation around the world and in local initiatives that provided the groundwork and groundswell of support for reconciliation. Importantly, Hatch points to the currency of discourse to compel public response. He also points to the significance of the U.S. Senate's belated action in 2005 to address another racial stain in our national history. That year, the Senate apologized for not earlier taking action to ban lynching when it might have made a difference in the lives of so many African Americans in the country.

Hatch recognizes as well that local efforts can have influence far beyond the scope of their regional boundaries, as was the case with the United State's first Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Greensboro, North Carolina that prompted intense public scrutiny surrounding the events of November 3, 1979. On that day, the Ku Klux Klan and the American Nazi Party disturbed a legally-sanctioned march and protest, and in the absence of any police presence,

killed five people and wounded ten others in broad daylight as captured on television footage. The miscarriage of justice--no one was convicted in two criminal trials--led to a third civil trial where the hate groups and law enforcement were held jointly liable for one of the deaths. The Greensboro TRC issued a Final Report in 2006 in the hopes of revealing truths not previously considered, and inspiring community-wide action for reconciliation among the citizens of Greensboro and its local law enforcement and government agencies. Hatch concludes that because of actions like Greensboro's many states were "... able to break through the slavery apology barrier, in large part, because prior public reconciliation discourse had created a web of meanings with which such historic apologies could meaningfully cohere" (p. 319).

The sum accrual of these instances of reconciliation rhetoric Hatch says in *Race and Reconciliation*, has "... created a discursive space within the political sphere for a more dialogic and coherent approach to reconciliation" (p. 343). He is correct to emphasize that as we assess the contribution of reconciliation discourse, "... no single initiative could possibly achieve racial reconciliation in the fullest sense (and thus it should not be judged by that standard)" (p. 352). That a rhetoric of reconciliation might open a door previously closed tight, however, is testimony to the power of communication to draw from its ethical foundation and discourse alternatives to change the frame and understanding of history so that we may consider the present anew with a greater care for social justice to those for whom it has long been denied.