

On the limits of cosmopolitanism and a ‘curriculum of refuge’ – A response to Molly Quinn

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If Molly Quinn wanted to introduce her readers to a poetic exploration of cosmopolitanism and curriculum change she succeeded in doing so quite insightfully. She begins and inconclusively ends her essay with poetic language and affirmation of cosmopolitan justice through convincing arguments in defence of a curriculum of refuge. She derives her notion of a curriculum of refuge from Derrida’s (2002) idea of a ‘city of refuge’ which builds on both an ‘acceptance of human vulnerability’ and a capacity for ‘imagining community anew’. For Quinn, in academia a curriculum of refuge ‘is multicultural in terms of inclusive curriculum – anti-racist, anti-oppressive, et al. – a sanctuary for the unsanctioned – different epistemologies, subaltern discourses, other discourses – initiated in audacity for interrogating the apparatuses of welcoming’ (Derrida, 2002) as well as in terms of practices of legitimation. This includes the rights and responsibilities curriculum takes up (or doesn’t), and has (or hasn’t) historically. So conceived, this call may for instance also involve offering protection to children, from a culture of consumerism; a culture that has been called our ‘audit society’ (Quinn, 2010, p. 94). Thus conceived, for Quinn a curriculum of refuge should in fact be a haven for hospitality and multicultural, intercultural, transcultural and postcultural community, thus making room for imaginative transformation of a ‘not-yet’, ‘yet-to-come’ child/children-centred curriculum (Quinn, 2010, p. 95). It is hoped that this curriculum would entertain encounters with otherness, difference and forgiveness – the latter being by far the most pronounced piece of poetic justice that a curriculum of refuge, in my mind, has to offer.

As a South African who has encountered racial oppression, marginalisation and exclusion in much of my life, I can relate experientially to Quinn’s poetic call for forgiveness as a corollary of a curriculum of refuge. I agree with Quinn that practising forgiveness would enable teachers, students and others to enhance educative relationships constituted by moments such as ‘walking city sidewalks into a new way’, ‘wondering anew’, ‘wondering into unexpected moments’, and ‘being open to otherness’ – all those encounters with others, strangers or otherness in our midst. Why? Like Quinn I contend that forgiveness is a redemptive encounter with the other which would enable us to move towards reconciliation and peace. This is what post-apartheid South Africans – and I am sure Quinn’s community too – are expected to do. Only then curriculum change will hopefully be justly poetic. But this is also where I wish to depart from Quinn. In as much as a curriculum of refuge (intertwined with hospitality, the granting of temporary asylum to others, and forgiveness) might be of value, such a curriculum also has the potential to reify encounters with otherness as some romanticised dream. My argument is premised on an understanding that Quinn seems to be silent about the nature of cosmopolitan encounters with others and otherness. I am not suggesting that Quinn has abandoned the democratic education project but her obvious silence on deliberative iterations as a cosmopolitan imaginary suggests that she might be ignoring an epistemological and psychological endeavour (that is, iterations) to talk



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back or to learn to talk back as the shaping of a curriculum of refuge unfolds. The very notion of a curriculum of refuge will not be possible without the cosmopolitan ethic of deliberative iterations.

Moreover, forgiveness and peace are set up by Quinn as an elitist agenda of a curriculum of refuge. But should forgiveness be limited to pardoning what is forgivable? This seems to be an issue Quinn appears to be muted on and which I intend to explore in order to make her case for a curriculum of refuge more plausible. Derrida (1997, p. 33) argues for a view of forgiveness which builds on the premise ‘that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself ... (and that) it can only be possible in doing the impossible’. ‘Doing the impossible’ for Derrida (1997, p. 33) implies forgiving the ‘unforgivable’. In his words, ‘forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable’ – that is, atrocious and monstrous crimes against humanity which might not be conceived as possible to forgive (Derrida, 1997, p. 32). Derrida (1997, p. 44) explicates forgiveness as ‘a gracious gift without exchange and without condition’. Amongst crimes against humanity Derrida (1997, p. 52) includes genocide (say of Hutus against Tutsis), torture and terrorism. This notion of forgiving the ‘unforgivable’ is spawned by the view that forgiveness is an act without finality – that is, the fault and the guilty (the one who perpetrates the evil) is considered as being capable of repeating the crime without repentance or promise that he or she will be transformed. And, forgiving the ‘unforgivable’ takes into consideration that the crime might be repeated, which makes forgiveness an act (of madness) of the impossible (Derrida, 1997, p. 45). Now a cosmopolitan account of forgiveness that makes possible the act of forgiving the ‘unforgivable’ makes sense, because if Tutsis are not going to venture into forgiving the ‘unforgivable’ genocidal acts of Hutus, these two different tribal communities on the African continent might not begin to connect with one another and a process of inducing transformation within a Congolese or Rwandan society might not begin to take place. Such a Derridian view of forgiveness is grounded in an understanding that ‘nothing is impardonable’ (Derrida, 1997, p. 47) and, that ‘grand beginnings’ are often celebrated and redirected through amnesia of the most atrocious happenings – a point in case is South Africa’s democracy which grew out of forgiving those ‘unforgivable’ racial bigots who committed heinous crimes against those who opposed the racist state.

Then also, Quinn seems to be adamant about the prospects for a curriculum of refuge *through* peace – that is, ‘imagining and creating spaces where forgiveness, healing, communion, and fellowship might actually be made possible’ (Quinn, 2010, p. 95). I think Quinn is ignoring the potential that violence has to offer to a curriculum of refuge. I shall elucidate this claim in reference to the thoughts of Arendt. Following Arendt’s (1969) analysis, violence can be considered to be a phenomenon whereby people impose themselves on others, thus making others the ‘instruments’ of their will (Arendt, 1969, p. 56). In other words, violence is an instrumental means of coercion (Arendt, 1969, p. 44). So, Hutu militia murder, torture, rape and maim Tutsi women and children because they use such instrumental acts in order to terrorise Tutsis. Off course, non-violence can counteract violence because unlike violence, non-violence is capable of speech acts – that is, ‘violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence’ (Arendt, 1963, p. 19). Unlike violence, which is determined by silence (Arendt, 1969, p. 77) such as the silence of both victims and perpetrators of torture in Nazi concentration camps, non-violence draws on the authoritative voice of speech. It is here that non-violence can begin to tackle the genocide of Hutus by Tutsis. Like Arendt, I contend that there is no legitimate justification for violence and that the use of violence will only result in more violence. Yet, following Cavell (1979) and Arendt we sometimes require a disruption of existing practices of violence through violence. Is it conceivable that non-violent resistance will always be met

with non-terrorisation and peace? I do not imagine so. If Hutu militia were to be resisted non-violently, massacre and submission of Tutsis would be the order of the day. Thus, in a Cavellian sense, we require a momentary breakage from non-violence in order to ensure lasting change in the Congo – that is, a condition ought to be set up whereby speech could become dominant in an attempt to resolve conflict. What this argument amounts to, is that non-violence with its insistence on speech acts can temporarily create conditions for violence to counteract the destructive force of more violence.

Thus, if a curriculum of refuge could be extended to forgiving the unforgivable and to the temporary use of violence, ‘new openings for curriculum ... (and) new encounters with otherness’ (Quinn, 2010, p. 98) might be a distinct possibility.

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