In “Reconciliation as Non-Alienation: The Politics of Being at Home in the World,” Catherine Lu develops her novel account of the political project of reconciliation. Lu distinguishes between justice and reconciliation, claiming that while justice is concerned with rectifying agential or structural injustice, reconciliation addresses forms of alienation that socially subordinated people are apt to experience in virtue of such injustice.

Drawing on critical theorist Rahel Jaeggi, Lu claims that alienation is a kind of disruption of “the capacity to make the life one leads, or what one wills and does, one’s own” – it is a disruption, in other words, of “the ability to realize oneself in what one does” (4). For Lu, political reconciliation is a matter of overcoming the kind of alienation that I just described. This involves developing narratives about one’s society – including its past, its present, and its possible future trajectory – and developing images, or representations, of one’s society. Furthermore, it involves being able to draw on these narratives and images in order to construct an understanding of oneself, and to formulate and pursue one’s aspirations. In other words, reconciliation involves developing a conception of one’s own society as a kind of home – a setting that organizes the “meaning, coherence, and stability” of one’s social life, and it supplies part of the background against which one may be regarded as flourishing or languishing.

In these brief comments, I will discuss one, largely clarificatory or exploratory question about Lu’s account. My hope is that thinking through it and thinking through related issues will help us better
understand how some key ideas – namely, justice, reconciliation, and alienation – fit together on Lu’s account, and that it will help us better understand the extent to which Lu’s account of reconciliation is responsive to certain factors that have traditionally motivated calls for reconciliation.

I want to consider whether oppressed people can overcome the sort of alienation that Lu describes – that is, whether they can come to be at home in their social world – without engaging in a process of reconciliation, where reconciliation is supposed to be distinct from the project of rectifying or redressing agential or structural injustice. In cases in which being at home, without engaging in such a process, is a possibility, does reconciliation retain its importance, and if so, why does it retain this importance?

Put roughly – and drawing on a characterization of reconciliation by Linda Radzik and Colleen Murphy – calls for reconciliation are traditionally grounded in the view that, in light of some past or ongoing injustice, altering the relationship between social groups that were once at odds with one another other – and doing so in the right way – is important for enabling one’s society to flourish in some respect, or to be made whole. Lu rejects conceptions of reconciliation that, she claims, focus too narrowly on individuals’ psychological healing from traumatic experiences; aspire to achieve excessively demanding forms of social unity among different social groups; or focus too narrowly on agential injustice, neglecting sources of structural injustice. And she argues instead that we should understand reconciliation as a process that addresses forms of alienation that oppressed people might experience in virtue of their social condition. On Lu’s account, it seems, oppressed people’s engaging in a process of reconciliation involves their participating – together with their more privileged compatriots, and in some cases, together with their oppressors – in a shared pro-
cess of coming to understand their society as a kind of home.¹ My question is whether oppressed people must, in order to be at home in their social world, engage in any such shared process. And in cases in which they can be at home in the world without participating in such a shared process, I ask whether reconciliation retains its significance, and what accounts for this significance.

In order to explore this possibility that the process of reconciliation and the status of being at home in the world may come apart, and to consider the significance of this possibility for Lu’s project, I will briefly discuss two historical examples. Lu notes that she does not wish to address some abstract philosophical question about how rational individuals may feel at home in the modern world (5). My hope is that focusing on these examples will keep the discussion sufficiently close to the ground. First, consider Ralph Ellison’s account, in the Introduction to Shadow and Act, of his experience growing up in the early 20th Century as a Black boy in Oklahoma City – the capital of a state whose Black citizens, Ellison informs us, were often “charged by exasperated White Texans with ‘not knowing their place’”.² Ellison describes the years

¹ Here it will be helpful to quote a selection from the paper. Lu writes:

> The politics of reconciliation ultimately is a struggle about the shape of the social world that organizes and mediates agents’ social positions, identities, agency, and well-being. Such politics involve contestations over narratives of that order in historic terms, as well as over representations of the current social/political order, and reveal conflicting images of home, including who can be at home in the world, and what kinds of identities, positions and roles are possible, and that are available to different agents to enact, practice, as well as imagine, in this home. In struggling to be at home in the world, agents in different social positions reveal different images of that home from their standpoints, presenting others with sometimes discordant, jarring, and unsettling images of the social/political order.

during which he and his childhood friends – in a manner characteristic of residents of his community at that time – immersed themselves in narratives and images drawn from literature, from folklore, and from music and – taking their cue from the jazz musicians that they so admired – improvised their various identities and aspirations. He writes,

“we were Americans born into the forty-sixth state, and thus ... ‘frontiersmen.’ And isn’t one of the implicit functions of the America frontier to encourage the individual into a ... state in which he makes – in all ignorance of the accepted limitations of the possible – rash efforts, quixotic gestures, hopeful testings of the known and the given?”

Second, consider the community programs that the Black Panther Party developed and administered throughout the United States during the 1960s. Founded in Oakland, California – a city in which Black citizens endured relentless police harassment and violence – the Black Panthers sought both to protect Black people from harm and to promote their liberation. Through the development of community programs, which included distributing meals to students and families and creating a nationwide newspaper that presented their program for Black liberation, the Black Panthers crafted narratives and images from which Black citizens could draw in order to craft their identities, cultivate their self-respect, and broaden their aspirations. For example, the newspaper depicted the police as pigs, who were to be ridiculed rather than feared; and it presented images of Black people asserting their humanity and standing up to unjust authority. And Elaine Brown, who chaired the Party in the 1970s, explained in an interview that the meal distribution programs served not only to meet the material needs of the people they fed, but also

“to influence the minds of people, to understand ... that if they could get food, that maybe they would want clothing,

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3 Ibid., pg. 52.
and maybe they’d want housing, and maybe they’d want land, and maybe they would ultimately want some abstract thing called freedom”.4

So, how do these examples bear on Lu’s project? It seems – if I understand Lu’s claims correctly – that the Black citizens in the Oklahoma City of Ralph Ellison’s youth and the Black Panthers of the 1960s (and we could offer other examples in a similar vein) employ the kinds of interpretive resources that Lu describes in order to shape, or reshape, aspects of their social world. But such resources are fully available to these people quite apart from their engaging, say, with the White citizens of Oklahoma or with the members of the Oakland Police Department in any sort of contest over narratives and images of home. So, these examples may help us understand, at least in outline, what it would mean for people who are oppressed to come to be at home in their social world, without engaging with their more privileged compatriots in some contest over what it means to be at home. Of course, in order to enjoy, say, the security and the range of opportunities that would enable them to realize and successfully act in accord with the identities that they construct, the people in these examples may need more than just a fund of narratives and images. For example, they may require the rectification or redress of certain grave agential and structural injustices that they endure; that is, they may need justice to be done. But the project of doing justice is, on Lu’s account, distinct from the project of reconciliation. And the question is whether, in these cases in which conflict across groups over the meaning of being at home has faded from the scene, the process of reconciliation, or the importance of that process, has faded as well.

[Concluding remarks]

The American Society for Political and Legal Philosophy is distributing this draft to its members and registrants for our Zoom conference on “Reconciliation and Repair,” September 25, 2020, https://www.political-theory.org/event-3736560. Please do not distribute the draft further or quote or cite it without the permission of the author: preston.roedder@gmail.com