


RESEARCH ARTICLE/ÉTUDE ORIGINALE

# Dispelling the Fantasy of Innocence: Complicity and the Cultivation of Transgression in Settler Colonial Contexts

Yann Allard-Tremblay 

Department of Political Science, McGill University, Leacock Building, 4th Floor, 855 Sherbrooke Street West, Montreal, QC H3A 2T7, Canada

Email: [yann.allard-tremblay@mcgill.ca](mailto:yann.allard-tremblay@mcgill.ca)

## Abstract

This article critically engages with the Canadian framing of settler colonial/decolonial politics in terms of guilt and innocence. I argue that centring innocence, even as something to be snatched away from settlers, as with the theorization of settler moves to innocence, can corrupt the practice of moral responsibility. Furthermore, I argue that the desire for and expectation of innocence, in the face of structural injustices such as settler colonialism, are illusory and that complicity is widespread. In contrast, I follow Iris Marion Young's focus on political responsibility, but I argue that public collective actions need not be as centred as she suggests. Given the nature of settler colonialism and of coloniality, I argue for the acknowledgment of the political significance of daily individual acts and for the cultivation of dispositions that disrupt unjust structures, such as a disposition to transgress.

## Résumé

Cet article jette un regard critique sur le cadrage canadien de la politique coloniale d'établissement/décoloniale en termes de culpabilité et d'innocence. Je soutiens que le fait de mettre l'accent sur l'innocence, même comme une chose à arracher aux colons, comme c'est le cas dans la théorisation des mouvements des colons vers l'innocence (*settler moves to innocence*), peut corrompre l'exercice de la responsabilité morale. De plus, je soutiens que le désir et l'attente d'innocence face aux injustices structurelles comme le colonialisme d'établissement sont illusoire, et que la complicité est largement répandue. En revanche, je m'inspire des travaux d'Iris Marion Young sur la responsabilité politique, en mettant toutefois moins l'accent que cette dernière sur les actions collectives publiques. Compte tenu de la nature du colonialisme d'établissement et de la colonialité, je plaide pour la reconnaissance de la signification politique des actes individuels quotidiens et pour le développement de dispositions qui perturbent les structures injustes, comme une disposition à la transgression.

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**Mots-clés:** injustices structurelles; responsabilité politique; décolonisation; colonialisme d'établissement; responsabilité morale

Settler colonialism should not be understood as a historical event, now superseded, but as an organizational feature of various contemporary societies. Settler societies are characterized by a logic of elimination in that their social, political, legal, economic and ideological organizations are geared toward perfecting the settlers' claim to sovereignty and possession through the dispossession and extinguishment of Indigenous claims to land and to political difference (Wolfe, 2006; Veracini, 2010). As an organizing structural logic, elimination, regardless of its different contextual manifestations, is oppressive, harmful and unjust. Beyond their structural eliminatory nature, settler societies suffer from additional moral and political defects. According to the work of Iris Marion Young (2011), settler societies can be said to produce diverse structural injustices because they constitute social positions—the settler and the native, among others<sup>1</sup>—characterized by unfairly differentiated opportunities, capabilities, vulnerabilities and power.<sup>2</sup>

Canada, historically and in the present, is structured by this settler colonial logic and produces such structural injustices. Genocidal and assimilationist violence directed against Indigenous nations and individuals, such as policies that led to starvation and disease, the residential schools, the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls, and the forced sterilization of Indigenous women, are clear illustrations (Daschuk, 2013; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015; National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls [Canada], 2019; The Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2021; Starblanket, 2018; MacDonald, 2019). Literary constructions and public narratives that dehumanize Indigenous peoples and frame Indigenous-settler relations accordingly are other illustrations (LaRocque, 2010; Starblanket and Hunt, 2020; Anderson and Robertson, 2011). So are ongoing structural processes of recognition, extinguishment and domestication that seek to facilitate dispossession and access to Indigenous lands and resources (Tully, 2000; Coulthard, 2014; Pasternak, 2017; Nichols, 2020; Thomas and Coburn, 2022).

These issues have increasingly gained public attention, but they do not translate into a personal call to action for most Canadians. Indeed, on July 1, 2023, Adrian Humphreys, in the *National Post*, discussed “a national opinion survey by Leger conducted for the Association for Canadian Studies.” Humphreys summarizes the findings: “A solid majority of Canadians accept that injustice to Indigenous people in Canada amounts to genocide, but few think they have personal responsibility, even for injustices continuing today; few even blame the government.” More specifically: “Almost 80 per cent of respondents across the country said they strongly disagree with the notion they bear personal responsibility for past injustice.” The results are not much different regarding contemporary injustices toward Indigenous peoples: “A majority still strongly rejected the idea they had personal responsibility. . . . Only 18 per cent expressed some agreement” (Humphreys, 2023; Association for Canadian Studies, 2023). This survey discloses the clear

disconnection, for the Canadian public, between the recognition of structural injustices and how one understands one's position, role and responsibilities within those structures. This denial of personal responsibility is associated with a lack of action to remedy those injustices, even when one may be benefiting from these structures. This is further reflected in the survey, since it reports that many among those saying land acknowledgments "don't often believe it applies to them" or to their homes (Humphreys, 2023).

Such denials of personal responsibility, and the need to counter them, is the focus of what Eve Tuck and Wayne Yang (2012: 9) have discussed as "settler moves to innocence"—that is discursive and ideological constructions through which settlers deny their responsibilities and assuage their guilt, without giving up on their privileges or the structures producing such privileges.<sup>3</sup> In theorizing, and disqualifying, these moves to innocence, Tuck and Yang attribute a double blame to settlers: through a reassertion of the complicity initially denied by moves to innocence and through a further blame for engaging in such deceptive moves. They also thereby reinscribe personal moral responsibility, guilt and innocence in the theorization of (de)colonial politics.

This theoretical framing can be said to occupy an important, although not hegemonic, position in Canadian public and academic discourses. This is notable in the numerous references to settler moves to innocence in both public and academic interventions.<sup>4</sup> This article critically examines this framing, given its surveyed limitations in leading to uptake of responsibility. There are various contributions that have already theorized (de)colonial politics to lead settlers to take responsibility to transcend settler colonialism (Regan, 2010; Mackey, 2016; Veracini, 2017; Leblanc, 2021). In this article, I contribute to this project through an engagement with Iris Marion Young's posthumous, incomplete, and yet influential, *Responsibility for Justice*.<sup>5</sup>

Young has already argued that guilt is often unproductive to address structural injustices, since those addressed by it tend to reject blame and that we are all to some extent producing and reproducing the structures that lead to injustice. Similarly, I argue that it is unclear that innocence, even as something to be snatched away from settlers through blame and guilt, is appropriate to trigger responsible conduct. Like Young, I hold that we should instead focus on the political responsibility to transform unjust structures, but where Young emphasizes the importance of collective, public actions, I recentre the role of individual, daily acts and of nurturing dispositions that can disrupt structures of injustice.

I make three central claims toward this conclusion. I first consider the search for innocence within the practice of moral responsibility. Responding to blame and accounting for one's actions are central to this practice, but I argue that moves to innocence can be interpreted as a corruption of this practice. While they often take the form of proper responsiveness to blame and complicity, they substantively insulate agents from those calling them to account. They thus denature the practice and prevent proper responsiveness to moral and political considerations. This raises concerns about the risks of focusing on innocence and guilt to produce responsible political conduct.

Second, I argue that even if the desire for and expectation of innocence were not susceptible to corrupting moral responsibility, they remain illusory in contexts of

structural injustices such as settler colonialism. This is because of how embedded our agency is within these structures and how almost impossible it is not to contribute to these structures, regardless of whether we seek to undermine them, and of how the benefits and advantages associated with these unjust structures are visited upon us in far-reaching multilayered ways. The search for innocence is the wrong consideration because we are all caught up in these structures in ways that spread complicity widely, though not equally. Focusing on innocence and guilt impedes the underlying pursuit of justice by distracting us from this fact. I suggest that we need to consider other ways of producing greater responsiveness to moral and political considerations in contexts of structural injustice.<sup>6</sup>

Third, I turn to Young's distinction between moral and political responsibility (2011: 89, 93, 153). The first is discharged through individual acts and the second through collective and organized public actions. In contrast, I bring attention to the political significance of individual actions and of nurturing dispositions. Drawing on the work of Erich Steinman (2020), Corwin Aragon and Alison Jaggar (2018) and various authors' concerns with daily acts of Indigenous resurgence (Corntassel et al., 2018), I argue that given the nature of settler colonialism and of coloniality, one may take responsibility politically<sup>7</sup> and complement the more collective form of actions considered by Young by working on the self and by cultivating, notably, a disposition to transgress.

In sum, my intervention argues for redirecting the framing of politics in settler colonial contexts away from guilt and innocence and toward political responsibility, but it is also meant to recover the political significance of individual conduct, against the frequent institutional and macro focus of political science and against Young's own focus on public, collective actions. In this, I participate in Indigenous affirmations that, as Dallas Hunt (2023: 67) writes, "the intimate spaces we inhabit are worthy sites of analysis and action in Indigenous communities" and, more broadly, in political science.

### **Corrupting Moral Responsibility by Searching for Innocence**

To understand the potential role of innocence and of blame in taking responsibility for structural injustices, and thus in settler colonial politics, I begin with a general consideration of the practice of moral responsibility and of its associated function, notably that it may produce greater responsiveness to moral and political considerations. Yet, looking at the motivations identified as driving responsiveness to blame and guilt, I argue that such a practice can easily be corrupted, and I discuss how settler moves to innocence may be interpreted precisely as corrupting moral responsibility. Focusing on denying the innocence of settlers in the pursuit of a decolonized future may thus be unproductive; it may undermine the very objective we are pursuing, namely producing responsible conduct.

### ***Moral responsibility and increasing responsiveness***

I suggest that moral responsibility should primarily be interpreted as a practice of accountability in which we engage socially and politically. We hold one another responsible for our actions, inactions and negligence by praising and blaming

one another. We hold one another as liable for our agency by asking for explanations and excuses for perceived misconduct and by asking for reparations for harm caused, and compensation for, unfair benefits accrued. This practice of accountability is fundamental to how we relate to others, since being in good relationships with others and being in good social standing depend on our adequate engagement in this practice. There is no durable relationship of trust, care and friendship with someone held to be morally responsible but who remains unaccountable and unresponsive to blame and demands for explanations, excuses or reparation.<sup>8</sup>

While I recognize the relevance and significance of pursuing a decolonized and unsettled future through a consideration of moral responsibility,<sup>9</sup> I want to caution against the role played by innocence in this project. To see why this is an issue, we need to consider that when we engage in the practice of demanding accounts by holding morally responsible, we strive for an underlying objective that may be thwarted by centring guilt and innocence.

Following Manuel Vargas's (2013) "agency cultivation model," I hold that through the practice of political responsibility, we pursue the objective of "fostering a certain sort of agency, namely, agency that is sensitive to moral considerations" (Holroyd, 2018: 140). Through praise and blame and by requiring that we give account for our actions, we bring one another to be more sensitive and responsive to moral and political considerations. The practice of moral responsibility is thus justified by its role in the pursuit of a world in which we become "better beings" (Vargas, 2013).

Similarly, Cheshire Calhoun (1989) developed an account of blame as appropriate when someone is indeed blameworthy but also when blaming someone, even if they are not strictly blameworthy, can effect beneficial "social change" (McKenna, 2018: 43). On this view, while a settler, for instance, may not be blameworthy given their socialization, it could still be appropriate to blame them in order to produce transformation of their agency and to move them toward greater responsibility, thus contributing to the pursuit of a decolonized and unsettled future. Similarly, engaging in discourses of blame, guilt and innocence would make sense in settler colonial contexts because it would allow us to become better agents. This is reflected, for instance, in Matt James's (2021: 381–82) argument that the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, and its structural focus, needs to be complemented by a retributive attribution of sanctions against blameworthy wrongdoers; this is because it "warns successors that they might some day face similar judgment" and can increase accountability and thus make us better agents and help to realize a more just world.

### ***Innocence and the corruption of responsiveness***

I am concerned, however, that the driving force of innocence in this model makes the practice susceptible to corruption. To appreciate this, we need to consider how blame and guilt are said to produce the desirable objective of making us better agents. Indeed, it is common among moral philosophers to present blame as an important tool in the joint pursuit of improved moral conduct.<sup>10</sup> If blame can play this role, it is because of a deep-seated desire to avoid blame and guilt—that is, a desire for innocence. As Jules Holroyd explains Victoria McGeer and Philip

Pettit's (2015) views, while not agreeing with them: "The sanctioning component of the blame serves to fulfil the promised threat that accompanies the exhortation 'attend to reasons or else'" (Holroyd, 2018: 160). Since blame functions as a form of accusation and condemnation of an agent's conduct, it is expected that agents will seek to avoid the conduct that led to blame. We can say that there is moral comfort in innocence.

There is debate on whether blaming will produce "backlash" or distract from acting responsibly (Holroyd, 2018: 150; Young, 2011: chap. 6), but Holroyd (2018: 150) notes that some empirical studies show that "holding each other responsible [through blame and other moral confrontations] may well increase sensitivity to moral reasons." We can make sense of this by considering that agents desire to be proper moral agents, whether this is because they genuinely desire to be moral agents or simply because they covet the "social standing" that comes with being someone who can "be called to account" (Vargas, 2018: 121). In either case, the result should be the same, and agents should be seeking to avoid blame and guilt through greater responsiveness and attentiveness to moral considerations.

Yet when we consider how practices can be corrupted, we can appreciate how this very same motivation—avoiding blame—may short-circuit the fostering of moral agency. A corrupted practice is a parasitic practice that relies on an uncorrupted practice to remain in effect. It takes the form of, and remains broadly recognizable as, the uncorrupted practice, but it deviates from its substance by pursuing a different objective than the constitutive aim of the original practice. For instance, lying can be said to be a corruption of communicative actions: a lie is expected to be taken as a true statement and relies on the continuation of true statements to function as a lie, but it does not contribute to the sharing of propositions held to be true (Allard-Tremblay, 2014). I contend that moral responsibility can be corrupted when accountability is driven by the moral comfort of innocence in ways that thwart actual responsiveness to moral considerations and demands for answers.

To see this, we need to appreciate how the comfort of innocence can be achieved by retaining the form of responsiveness to blame but by actively exculpating the agent and shielding them from blame. Moral responsibility is corrupted when responsiveness to blame no longer aims for a discursive engagement in accountability but for the pre-emption of guilt. There are various ways in which agents can improperly engage in practices of moral responsibility. Young (2011: 114) writes, for instance, that "the language of blame in political debates . . . often impedes discussion that will end in collective action, because it expresses a spirit of resentment, produces defensiveness, or focuses people more on themselves than on the social relations they should be trying to change." She adds that "rhetorics of blame in public discussion of social problems . . . usually produce . . . unproductive blame-switching." In her view, this is "a natural and appropriate reaction" (2011: 117). Even if the examples provided by Young do not all constitute corrupted practices of moral responsibility—defensiveness is still within the bounds of the practice, unlike systematic and disingenuous blame-switching—they all make clear that if what motivates us is achieving the comfort of innocence, then we should not expect agents to adopt only actions consistent with proper responsible moral agency. Indeed, for Paulo Ravecca and Elizabeth Dauphinee (2022: 42), this is a fundamental problem with innocence; the comfort it provides perversely motivates "an

epistemological and political blockage to a genuine examination of our individual and collective circumstances” and thus blocks moral responsiveness.

While the discussion of settler moves to innocence takes the form of a discussion about moral responsibility and of unwarranted exculpation of guilt, I suggest that they can in fact be interpreted as corrupting the practice. Tuck and Yang (2012: 9) discuss six settler moves to innocence that all point to the fact that “directly and indirectly benefiting from the erasure and assimilation of Indigenous peoples is a difficult reality for settlers to accept. The weight of this reality is uncomfortable; the misery of guilt makes one hurry toward any reprieve.” They point to the moral comfort of innocence and its motivating power.

In the case of the first move to innocence they discuss, “settler nativism,” this comfort is achieved through a pre-emptive denial of needing to answer for one’s conduct and position. As Tuck and Yang (2012: 10) explain: “Settlers locate or invent a long-lost ancestor who is rumored to have had ‘Indian blood,’ and they use this claim to mark themselves as blameless in the attempted eradications of Indigenous peoples.” In doing so, settlers reposition themselves in ways that shield them from having to engage in accountability practices by providing reasons for why they are not to be blamed. Ultimately, however, the practice of moral accountability is corrupted because there is no dialogue of moral responsibility—only an unresponsive justification of innocence through the denial that the settler should even be called to account in the first place.

A focus on innocence thus not only risks sustaining defensive refusals of guilt and blame-switching but may also lead to disingenuous engagement in the practice of moral responsibility through pre-emptive assertions of innocence. It shows that there are further limitations, beyond the practical hurdles identified by Young, to relying on the appeal of innocence in the search for a decolonized and unsettled future. It also shows, beyond Tuck and Yang, that what is needed is not only an empirical critique of claims to innocence but a rethinking of the very frame of innocence, given that people will not only sometimes provide the wrong response to blame, as shown by Young, but may also corruptingly centre their innocence rather than pursue responsible moral agency. Focusing on denying the innocence of settlers may thus remain unproductive.

### The Fantasy of Innocence and Ignoring the Embeddedness of Agency

The appeal of innocence is not only potentially counterproductive; it also prevents us from recognizing the extent to which our agency is embedded in unjust structures by making us search for something that cannot be achieved.<sup>11</sup> I begin by discussing how hoping for the achievement of innocence makes sense within a calculating approach to responsibility. I then argue that structural injustices and the ways in which benefits from unjust structures are visited upon members of a society make it impossible to calculate guilt and blame, such that innocence appears to be an unachievable fantasy. I discuss a concrete example arising from my teaching of Indigenous Studies to illustrate this point and to give additional material, specific to settler colonial contexts, to recognize the soundness of Young’s view that universal political responsibility better captures relevant aspects of our responsibility in contexts of structural injustice than moral responsibility.

### *The illusion of computable responsibility*

Pursuing the moral comfort of innocence makes sense when it is assumed that it can be achieved. This requires guilt to be something that can be exculpated or, at least, released through forgiveness. It also requires an account of how to act responsibly to avoid blame and guilt. This often takes the form of required actions or conduct and of a specification of what one ought to do. On this view, responsibility is understood as specifiable, distributable and measurable. More importantly, once specified, responsibility can be discharged, and one can thus move to innocence—one can do one's share and no longer categorically be called to action. If one decides to do more, this is no longer one's responsibility but one's supererogatory contribution.

This dischargeable view of responsibility can be associated with what Shalini Satkunanandan (2015: 2) refers to as a calculating approach to responsibility, one that "takes human responsibility as something amenable to calculation—as a series of debts that can be identified in advance, reckoned up, negotiated, balanced out, and discharged." This calculating view of responsibility underlies what Young (2011: 98) calls the liability model of responsibility, which "include[s] all such practices of assigning responsibility under the law and in moral judgement that seek to identify liable parties for the purposes of sanctioning, punishing, or exacting compensation or redress." Liability is easier to negotiate when responsibilities, blame and guilt can be distributed and when compensation and punishment can be calculated. Indeed, as Young (2011: 11) notes, the "absolving function" of discourses that make it possible to fully discharge one's personal responsibility, and thus to achieve the moral comfort of innocence, helps to explain the centrality of such approaches to moral responsibility.

Problematically, however, such calculating approaches can function, counterintuitively, as barriers to accountability and to increased sensitivity to moral and political considerations. While Satkunanandan argues that the calculating view of responsibility is "part of our ordinary way of articulating and discussing our responsibility," she is also clear that it often prevents us from being attentive to the complexity and deep ways in which our relationships to others entail more than debt-like measurable calculations (Satkunanandan, 2015: 2). Indeed, the fact that our responsibility is seen as something that can be calculated and discharged is precisely what makes it also possible to deny responsibility by claiming to already have done our fair share or paid our just due. Further, problematically, for such calculating approaches to responsibility is the possibility that one may not have a computable share of guilt or blame that can be discharged toward innocence. While there is, arguably, moral anxiety associated with unabsolvable guilt, undischARGEABLE responsibility and unspecifiable compensation, I suggest that this may precisely be the case in contexts of structural injustice and that acting responsibly requires an appreciation of this fact.

Simply in virtue of one's position in an unjust structure, one contributes to sustaining that unjust structure in a multiplicity of indiscriminable ways, including through daily actions. As Young explains, "social-structural processes" (2011: 53) are "background conditions of action" (107), and the opportunities and constraints they constitute for individuals appear "objective" (53, 55); yet they exist "only in



actions” and generally result from “the unintended consequences of the combination of the actions of many people” (53). My concern here is not how social structures produce injustice—I take this for granted. It is rather the idea that such structures, and the corresponding social positions they constitute, are produced and consolidated through the actions and interactions of individuals, often going about their daily affairs without intending to produce unjust outcomes. As Young notes, structures are sustained notably by people following formal and informal rules (55) and by their “routine or habitual” conduct (61). The production of structural injustices is thus not necessarily by design or intentional but merely “a consequence of many individuals and institutions acting to pursue their particular goals and interests, for the most part within the limits of accepted rules and norms” (52, 62).

Since structures are enacted and sustained in such broad, diffuse and generally unintentional ways, it becomes impossible to allocate blame in any computable sense. As Young (2011: 107) writes, “most of us contribute to a greater or lesser degree to the production and reproduction of structural injustice precisely because we follow the accepted and expected rules and conventions of the communities and institutions in which we act.” While it is true that some individuals and groups benefit from these background unjust structures and others suffer oppression, it would be wrong to say that only those who benefit are responsible. There are social structures where that can be the case—that is, where those who are oppressed are also so utterly dominated that it would be meaningless to affirm that they also participate in the social structure. Generally, however, social structures are complex, and individuals occupy diverse social positions, benefit in some ways while being oppressed in others, and exercise some power and participate in the enactment of social structures. Accordingly, I agree with Aragon and Jaggar (2018: 451), who “find it philosophically mistaken, often pointless, and even diversionary to dissect people’s contributions and intentions in efforts to parse out different degrees of individual culpability for wrongdoing.” Arguably, then, seeking to analytically completely untangle class, Indigeneity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and other social positions to arrive at a dischargeable specification of responsibility appears fanciful.

Ultimately, the point is not that an individual cannot act in morally responsible manners by accepting responsibility for contributing to unjust structures or that there is no role for the discourse and practice of moral responsibility; as Ruth Koleszar-Green (2019) illustrates by differentiating between settlers, guests, hostile, and ignorant individuals, there are different ways of occupying the settler social position that are not morally equivalent.<sup>12</sup> The fundamental point I am making is that even if the language and practice of moral responsibility is retained, claiming innocence eclipses the depth at which our agency is embedded in complex social structures and distracts from the importance of changing these structures.

### **Structural complicity and non-innocence**

In contexts of structural injustice, our concern should not be mainly moral but political: our focus should not be on whether one is innocent or not but rather on how the positions we occupy require political actions to make social structures less unjust. Again, this does not mean that there can be no moral assessment of how

individuals respond to their social positions. It means that regardless of this moral assessment, there would be a political remainder that would not be accounted for. One way of understanding this is to see complicity as structural and incalculable. Aragon and Jaggard (2018: 449) provide support for this view when they write that “people are structurally complicit when they exercise their agency in ways that reinforce the unjust social structures in which they participate, regardless of their conscious intentions.” I contend that being aware of such structural complicity and recognizing that it cannot be discharged through calculation is essential for political change.

There is a further complication for calculating discourses of responsibility and the associated view of achievable innocence. This complication relates to the consequences of one’s actions as part of unjust structures and when we consider how the benefits associated with such structures are visited on agents. Both issues frame agents as complicit and liable but also make it impossible to compute one’s share of blame or guilt and to achieve innocence.

Even when agents challenge unjust social structures and struggle to transform them, their agency generally remains embedded within those social structures. As such, their actions risk contributing to the production of unjust consequences through these very same structures. Consider, for instance, how in a globalized capitalist economy, the consequences of one’s actions extend far beyond our intentions in ways that often render ethical consumption impossible, thus making us all complicit and not-innocent: while one may opt for almond milk instead of cow’s milk because one wants to reduce animal suffering and fight climate change through reduction of cow-digestion-related-gases, one ends up contributing to increased bee suffering and water-intensive monocrop agriculture (McGivney, 2020). Similarly, by opting for an electric car to reduce one’s carbon footprint, one may end up contributing to extractive industries on Indigenous land and irresponsible water use in the Atacama Desert (Horvath and Medina, 2019). In these circumstances, one’s attempt at responsible conduct is precisely what makes one complicit, and there is no clear way to avoid this complicity. Once again, the idea of innocence appears fanciful.

Furthermore, while the positions constituted by social structures can be comparatively considered and while some individuals may clearly benefit and others clearly be disadvantaged by the position they occupy, there is hardly any sense in which one can escape all the benefits produced by unjust structures, except in the most extreme cases of structural injustice. For instance, Alissa Macoun (2016: 86) explains how, in settler colonial contexts, “policies presented as neutral or benevolent are almost axiomatically doing some kind of colonising work”; to see this, we need to consider how “the state has been and continues to be a party to racialized colonial conflict.” This means that one who benefits from apparently beneficial or neutral state policies is also visited by the benefits arising from the colonial enterprise on which the settler state constitutively depends. One is made complicit by being on the receiving end, whether one intends it or not. Similarly, even those who are in a position of disadvantage may also benefit from some (public) goods produced by unjust structures.

Olúfẹmi Táíwò (2022) notes a further sense in which it becomes impossible to apply moral responsibility and innocence and to compute reparations, when we

consider structural injustices as historical processes in which different advantages and disadvantages develop, accumulate and consolidate over time. As he writes: “The very same racialized system that constituted a person as a chattel slave (or potentially so) also constituted other people as slave owners (or potentially so), and the same colonial social system that constitutes persons as members of the colonized group constitutes other persons as members of the colonizing group” (131). According to Táíwò, focusing on measurable and attributable guilt and blame for these historical and structural injustices is mistaken: “To build a view of reparations on these notions of binary group identity and collective responsibility is to build a house on a sand foundation. . . . To say that the ancestors of some contemporary whites were causally responsible for slavery and colonialism, whether as individuals or as organized groups, is not yet to identify a difference between white people and Black people” (118). This is in part because our relationship to historical and structural injustices is one where the details of benefits and advantages, while following discernable patterns, cannot be avoided nor fully reckoned up. Nevertheless, the calculating approach to moral responsibility makes us look for clear attributions of guilt and innocence:

Many of our arguments for reparations come from this place as well—we insist that reparation must separate the guilty from the innocent, and adopt a view of history on which this distinction in moral responsibility will map cleanly onto racial categories. But the truth is that we are all morally “in the red” as Dr. Martin Luther King put it; for better or worse, we owe to history the possibilities for our choices and the resources we have to follow through on them. (Táíwò, 2022: 122)

This is why, similarly to Young, Táíwò puts forward a constructive view of reparations that is informed by the social positions we occupy but that focuses on our political responsibility to realize a more just world, not on the moral or collective responsibility we would have inherited in virtue of what our ancestors did.

Students in an introductory course to Indigenous Studies that I teach experience these hurdles in measuring responsibility and in thinking about how our agency is embedded in structures of injustice in ways that may unwittingly contribute to the colonial enterprise. In the course, I cover Indigenous resistance to settler colonialism, and I show the movie *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* by Alanis Obomsawin (1993), which documents events that took place in Kanehsatake and near Montreal, Canada, in 1990. During that summer, members of the Kanehsatake Mohawk community resisted the construction of a golf course on their territory and erected barricades. The events eventually led to the deployment of the Canadian Armed Forces. I also show the movie *Invasion* about the Unist’ot’en Camp in Wet’suwet’en Territory and the resistance of members of that Indigenous community to the construction of a pipeline on their land (Unist’ot’en Camp, 2019). After watching both movies, students are rarely left indifferent. They often question the validity of the position of the state and the force with which it intervened in Kanehsatake. They also often condemn the continuation of colonial policies up to this day in Wet’suwet’en territory, notably through the denial of the necessity of free, prior and informed consent.

Yet in showing these movies, one of my ulterior motives is also to make the students think about the complex ways in which we are embedded within settler colonial and capitalist structures associated with the injustices they identified in these movies. For instance, I discuss how the pipeline at issue in *Invasion* is a project of the TC Energy Corporation, and I mention how various institutions that we sustain by our actions or in which we participate—such as banks and retirement funds—often invest funds in such corporations. I mention how despite our best efforts and calls to divest from fossil fuel energies, most of our daily actions still depend in important ways on petrol and sustain the structural demand that drives the construction of such pipelines: for example, petrol for the production and transport of the food we eat and for the clothes we wear and for the powering of most buses and cars we use to transport ourselves, or mazut to heat some public spaces we visit. This seems to leave the students (and me) with a sense of (structural) complicity that cannot be easily alleviated. It shows, in concrete ways, that structural injustices make it difficult, if not impossible, for agents to measure, distribute and discharge their responsibility in ways that enable them to claim innocence. It also shows that seeking or claiming innocence would prevent a deep appreciation of the complex ways in which our agency is tied to unjust social structures, even when we struggle against these structures.

In contexts of structural injustices, such as settler colonialism, we should not primarily focus on moral responsibility, guilt, blame and innocence. These are unproductive to develop an awareness of the depth at which our agency is embedded in unjust structures and of the fact that we need to act otherwise to transform these structures. A decolonized and unsettled future is not achieved by discharging one's moral responsibility and claiming innocence while leaving structures unchanged; it is better pursued by recognizing one's position and ongoing responsibility to act even if that means postponing (indefinitely) the achievement of the comfort of innocence. When moral responsibility and innocence are centred, we either ignore these required transformations or end up pursuing a fanciful objective of innocence. A decolonized and unsettled future is thus better achieved by taking responsibility to change unjust structures. I agree with Young—and Táíwò (2022), among others—that this requires “a special kind of responsibility, rather than a variation on responsibility understood as guilt, blame, fault, or liability,” which is called political responsibility (Young, 2011: 97).

### Taking Political Responsibility by Cultivating Transgression

Young (2011: 89, 93), referencing the work of Hannah Arendt, differentiates between moral and political responsibility. She presents moral responsibility as something that can be discharged through individual, private acts but as inappropriate to address structural injustices. This is because structural injustices “spread” complicity around, such that we all share responsibility in transforming those unjust structures (179). Indeed, Young claims that our responsibility “is essentially shared” and that “it can therefore be discharged only through collective action”—that is, through public, joint and organized actions (105). This is why it is a political responsibility, “because it involves enjoining one another to reorganize collective relationships, debating with one another how to accomplish such reorganization,

and holding one another to account for what we are doing and not doing to undermine structural injustice” (153). Through such mobilization, we can monitor the effects of social practices and institutions and “make sure that they are not grossly harmful,” and we can “speak publicly and support one another in [. . . our] efforts to prevent suffering” (88). All this makes clear that, according to Young, our individual actions would be of the wrong kind to take responsibility. She indeed explicitly states it: “Political responsibility is not about doing something by myself. . . but about exhorting others to join me in collective action” (93). While I recognize the significance of focusing on public collective actions for undermining structural injustices, I suggest in this final section that Young dismisses too much the political significance of daily individual actions that may disrupt structural injustices such as settler colonialism.

### ***Transforming ways of being, knowing and doing***

To appreciate the significance of individual actions in challenging unjust structures, it is worth emphasizing that settler colonialism, like other structural injustices, is more than a set of formal institutions producing injustices. As a social structure, it also manifests in individual ways of being, knowing and doing. For instance, individuals may internalize settler colonial ideologies, discount and ignore Indigenous knowledges and cultures, and adopt life goals that sustain Indigenous dispossession. As Steinman (2020: 561) argues: “Settler colonialism is not just expressed in pipelines threatening Native access to clean water; members of American society routinely reproduce settler colonialism when they cooperate to conceal its existence; reproduce its beliefs, justifications and practices; deny alternatives; and through additional ‘non-actions’ in a variety of settings.” This points to the recursive relationship between social structures and individual conduct: individual conduct sustains social structures, and these structures in return frame and consolidate individual conduct that sustain these structures. Aragon and Jaggar (2018: 450) further explain this:

People internalize this architecture by habituating the cognitive, affective, and active practices that it normalizes. Shared conceptual schemas encourage us to develop cognitive habits that reflect the broader patterns of thinking that shape the structures in which we are situated. Shared systems of meaning and value encourage us to develop affective habits that reflect the broader patterns of feeling characteristic of our structural context. And shared systems of social roles and expectations encourage us to develop habits of conduct that reflect the broader patterns of behavior constitutive of existing social practice. When social structures are unjust, they orient individuals to re-enact injustice and when people act on habituated dispositions to think, feel, and act in conformity with unjust structures, they are complicit in the injustice of those structures.

Ultimately, the embeddedness of our agency within these structures means that we should avoid imagining resistance to these structures as something that can be neatly separated from who we are, what and how we know and believe, and how we act and feel.

I thus suggest, following Steinman, and Aragon and Jaggar, that to the extent that social structures are sustained and consolidated by ways of being, doing and knowing, their production and reproduction can be disrupted and undermined by transforming these ways of being, doing and knowing.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, apart from engaging in collective actions to change unjust structures, we can also seek to transform ourselves by “changing those of our own cognitive, affective, and active habits that sustain unjust social processes” (Aragon and Jaggar, 2018: 455). This idea is shared by decolonial projects in that they emphasize the ways in which coloniality structures not only formal institutions but also how we know, sense and experience the world. As Walter Mignolo (2021: 17) writes: “The world cannot be changed if the people who inhabit and make it do not change,” such that to pursue decoloniality, we need “to engage in epistemic (knowing) and aesthetic (sensing, being) reconstitutions.” We need to work on ourselves to experience and adopt other ways of being, knowing and doing; we need to engage in practices that will transform us and make us become otherwise. Similarly, it is through individual transformative engagement in practices of Indigenous resurgence that, according to Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel (2005: 612), we can work to transcend settler colonialism; individual resurgence will be “a strength that soon reverberates outward from the self to family, clan, community and into all of the broader relationships that form an Indigenous existence. In this way, Indigeness is reconstructed, reshaped and actively lived.”

This points to the significance of cultivating and nurturing dispositions to act, think and feel in ways that can disrupt unjust structures. The practice of cultivating dispositions can be clarified when we consider that we can set ourselves up to facilitate certain responses or conduct. Vargas (2018: 117) explains, for instance, that “environments can foster particular patterns of cares and commitments that shape what agents perceive as reasons. We can also restructure our environments to better exploit our cognitive and affective dispositions, and to better express and realize our cares and commitments.” To cultivate a disposition, we thus need to explore what will contribute to fostering that disposition. How this can be achieved for each and every one cannot be answered in advance. Nevertheless, such transformative work on the self is useful, if not essential, to disrupt and undermine unjust social structures.

### ***Cultivating a disposition to transgress***

Interestingly, given the pervasive nature of settler colonialism and of the coloniality of power, our daily existence and actions are shot through by them, such that, as Steinman (2020: 561) puts it: “We do not have to go looking for settler colonialism so that we can oppose it. We are in it, all the time, and we can act to undermine it where we are.” We are thus awarded “countless opportunities for disruption,” which means that unsettling can take the form of a “disruptive, bounded and modest . . . agency” that can be “essentially quotidian in nature” (Steinman, 2020: 567). To challenge settler colonialism, we can work on refusing the ways in which our agency is framed and influenced by it, in our daily lives. Engaging in decolonial praxis, epistemic and aesthetic reconstitutions, and transforming our ways of being, knowing and doing, notably by cultivating dispositions, can be done in, and about, our everyday individual conduct.

Considering the extent to which coloniality models the economy, authority, intimate relationships, and cultures through imposed terms, and thus constitutes what counts as right conduct within those areas (Mignolo, 2021), I suggest that one significant disposition we can nurture so as to disrupt settler colonialism is precisely to transgress those imposed terms. A disposition to transgress is a disposition to cross imposed boundaries and to question, refuse and challenge the varied ways in which power and social structures frame, influence and limit conduct. Transgressive conduct, by departing from standards of expected conduct, has the potential to disrupt the otherwise uninterrupted reproduction of social structures such as settler colonialism.

Without transgressing norms of civility by calling out the chairperson that once again mispronounces the name of the Indigenous nation they are acknowledging, without transgressing imposed gender norms and queering the family, without taking a knee during the national anthem, without transgressing the boundaries of respectful conduct toward the flag, power and settler colonialism go uninterrupted, unchallenged and disappear as features of the social world. Transgressing the limits that power creates and imposes discloses these limits precisely as contingent impositions. A disposition to transgress is thus a disposition that serves to demystify the limits imposed by power and to disclose ways of acting otherwise that depart from conduct that reproduces current unjust social structures.<sup>14</sup>

The illustrations of transgressive conduct just provided are context dependent. Cultivating transgression is not about any specific act that must be carried out—what counts as a transgression depends on the specific shapes taken by power in one's context and on existing social norms. Since settler colonialism is “shape-shifting” (Alfred and Corntassel, 2005: 601), so will be its transgressions and what it means to dispose oneself to transgress it. Cultivating transgression is about becoming more aware of the significance of challenging power and of taking steps to dispose ourselves to do so in our daily individual actions. It is nevertheless useful to consider concrete examples of how this may be pursued. This is even if, as pointed out by a reviewer, the second example I discuss may not be applicable to contexts where, for instance, walking the land is a practice of settlement. This is because these examples relate to specific expressions of settler colonialism and cannot be universalized, albeit they may be instructive for those who are similarly positioned.

First, in “Everyday Decolonization: Living a Decolonizing Queer Politics,” Sarah Hunt and Cindy Holmes (2015: 156) look at “decolonization at the level of interpersonal relationships, families and homes” in ways that “highlight the intimate and everyday practices of allyship and decolonization that are often made invisible when we focus solely on social action strategies taking place in more ‘public’ spaces.” One example they discuss is the parenting practice of allyship adopted by Holmes as a White parent:

At the core of their parenting philosophy is a commitment to promoting critical literacy for social justice within their family, including conversations that raise questions to help their daughter develop critical thinking skills about the world around her with a focus on issues of equity and justice. An analysis about White supremacy and the history of colonialism in Canada is central to these conversations, which take place around the kitchen table, on their way home from school, or while reading stories together. (164)

This is the cultivation of a disposition to transgress through the calling into question of the givenness of (racial and colonial) social structures. It thus fosters conduct that undermines settler colonialism.

Second, Senka Eriksen (2018: 75) writes in “Fearless Regeneration: Walking with Decolonial Intention on Indigenous Land” about walking as a decolonial everyday practice that allows one to “see and feel” one’s relationship to the land and to thus engage in the reconstitution of ways of being and sensing. It also allows one to challenge and transgress settler colonial norms and expectations. When one walks, one can no longer rush from one place to another, as when one is driving or taking public transit. One is led to question the imperative to produce ever more and to be as busy as possible by reducing the time between tasks and meetings. By choosing to walk, one “can begin to see that settler colonial reality is a permeable manifestation that primarily exists because it is enacted upon by many bodies willing to accept this reality as status quo. Its entire existence is wholly based on the imaginations of people immersed within capitalistic imperialism and shape shifting colonial confabulations” (76). By walking with decolonial intentions, one can cultivate a capacity to perceive the shallowness of the reality and expectations created and sustained by unjust structures such as settler colonialism and capitalism and thus a disposition to transgress them.

## Conclusion

The initial motivation of this article was to critically engage with the framing of (de) colonial politics in terms of guilt and innocence. I argued that given the risks associated with the moral comfort of innocence and given the embeddedness of our agency in social structures, a theoretical framing that avoids guilt and innocence and a calculating approach to responsibility can better reflect how we are implicated in unjust structures. Accordingly, and following Young, I argued for framing this politics in terms of political responsibility. I believe this framing is less likely to lead to the denial of one’s responsibility to act to remedy structural injustices. It should inform public and theoretical framing of (de)colonial politics in Canada and beyond.

Furthermore, in contrast to Young, and to the typical institutional and collective focus of political science, I have sought to recover the significance of individual conduct to political responsibility. While the examples I discussed in the last section do not refer to public, joint and organized conduct, it would be wrong to frame them as unpolitical private uptake of responsibility. On the contrary, everyday practices and the nurturing of relevant dispositions, such as a disposition to transgress, are clear and effective ways in which one can act in responsible ways to disrupt unjust structures. Individual, daily actions that contribute to undermining colonial ways of being, knowing, doing, and to transform conduct are thus part of how we can assume our political responsibility to challenge settler colonialism.

In recovering the significance of daily actions to disrupt the reproduction of unjust structures, I am not offering a complete theory of change. While such actions can contribute to transform the social world—as with practices of resurgence, they can reverberate widely—they are insufficient to entirely break unjust social structures. As such, my argument does not mean to recentre an individual moral



responsibility to act differently as *the* solution to transform unjust structures. It seeks to ensure that we do not discount how we can take political responsibility to bring about a decolonized and unsettled future through individual, daily acts such as by working to transform our lifeways and by nurturing dispositions that disrupt the production and reproduction of unjust structures, such as a disposition to transgress.<sup>15</sup> This is meant to complement, not replace, other aspects of political responsibility, such as the responsibility to collectively mobilize and struggle to change unjust structures.

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## Notes

1 This binary does not exhaust the social positions associated with settler colonialism; see Byrd (2011), Tuck and Yang (2012) and Wolfe (2016).

2 Following Aragon and Jaggar (2018: 442), settler colonial societies are both institutionally and structurally unjust. They are institutionally unjust when their formal institutions are designed in ways that “violate principles of justice,” namely by being eliminatory. They are structurally unjust when they produce unfairly situated social positions, making some vulnerable to domination, deprivation and oppression.

3 See Veracini (2010) for related, broader strategies that consolidate the settler order.

4 According to a Google search, *Decolonization is not a metaphor* has over 7,700 citations. Not all those citing this article agree with or discuss moves to innocence, but this nevertheless reveals the influence of this contribution. I offer a brief list of public interventions and academic contributions that uptake the notion of settler moves to innocence, but it is easy to find more (Smith and Midzain-Gobin, 2021; Kanji, 2023; Davis et al., 2017: 410; Barker, 2021).

5 On structural injustices in relation to colonialism, see also Lu (2017).

6 My argument about innocence, its corrupting effects, and our implication in unjust structures shares much with Ravecca and Dauphinee’s (2022) arguments, although we draw on different literature.

7 This may also be a way of taking moral responsibility, but to avoid the connection with guilt and innocence, and to complement Young’s work, my concern is to emphasize the political nature of such conduct.

8 I take inspiration from Oshana’s (2018: 85) general account of responsibility as “a dialogical practice, involving the request for, the giving of, and the receiving of reasons” that “is almost always judgmental.”

9 See, notably, James (2021).

10 See Westlund (2018: 253), who lists a few examples.

11 For a related assessment of how we are implicated in unjust structures, see Rothberg (2019).

12 Leblanc (2021) also offers a related significant proposal for how settlers could learn to relate differently to Indigenous peoples, by adopting a “denizen ethos,” and contribute to decolonization.

13 Recall that according to Young (2011: 61, 107), unjust social structures are produced and sustained through “routine and habitual” conduct that often follows “the accepted and expected rules and conventions of the communities and institutions in which we act.” If we accept this account of unjust structures, then it makes sense to hold that departures from the conduct on which such structures depend undermine them.

14 My view of transgression is inspired by Pickett’s (1996) reading of Michel Foucault.

15 A reviewer suggests that a relevant disposition to nurture would be one to participate in the collective struggle to undermine unjust structures. This is consistent with my argument.

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