
Guilt, Responsibility, and the Limits of Identity

DIANE ENNS

In the aftermath of World War II, two German philosophers, Karl Jaspers and Hannah Arendt, addressed the question of guilt and responsibility for Nazi atrocities. Though their analyses differ in some respects, they both insist on the distinction between these concepts and their applications: Guilt is a pronouncement of wrongdoing and refers only to an individual act, whereas responsibility is a collective accountability for deeds that occur in a shared world. I am interested in the implications of this distinction for dealing with the legacies of other historical tragedies such as colonialism and slavery. The question of who is guilty and who is responsible is never simple when past violations continue to haunt the present – materially and psychologically – and when those guilty of the original violation are long dead. When the institutions they built to systematize and legitimize oppression remain very much alive and managed by members of succeeding generations, someone must be held accountable for the past and its present effects. And when many live on the advantaged side of a society divided by injustice and inequality, it is tempting to assign widespread, collective guilt, and ignore responsibility altogether.

In what follows, I will explore the implications of Jaspers' and Arendt's complex understanding of responsibility for contemporary emancipatory movements. Reading their work in the context of our current attempts to deal with past atrocities and their ongoing legacies exposes a monumental shift in scholarly and public discourses concerning guilt and responsibility. This is due, in large part, to the pronounced increase in value bestowed on identity and victimhood in recent decades – essentially, victimhood *as* identity – in the social, political, and even ethical dimensions of our lives. Identity has come to determine who is innocent and who is guilty, who can speak and who must stay silent. Though my particular interest is to examine the effects of this shift on Indigenous struggles in Canada, I will draw from recent discussions of anti-black racism, since many of the dominant voices representing, or supporting,

both of these struggles place identity at the core of political engagement. I argue that the powerful role identity now plays in social justice movements leads to moralism rather than political transformation, which means expressions, or judgments, of guilt come at the expense of a robust sense of collective responsibility.

Public discussions of the Indigenous fight for recognition, rights, and improved living conditions in Canada – officially subsumed under a paradigm of reconciliation – have changed dramatically in recent decades. This is in large part due to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2008–2015), which brought to light the suffering caused by the residential school system.¹ Other factors include an increased awareness of violence against Indigenous women, an intensification of Indigenous activism (especially against environmental degradation), and the recent flourishing of Indigenous writing, art, and scholarship, all of which have helped to reverse the effects of hundreds of years of cultural denigration and ignorance about Indigenous experience. But increased awareness is only a beginning. We must take seriously the need to deal with the past and present in ways that will alter the future. I maintain that the current focus on identity in the call for reconciliation and decolonization poses troubling obstacles to this objective.

1.1 Guilt and Responsibility: Distinctions

In a series of public lectures given in Germany at the end of Nazi rule in 1945, Jaspers bravely broached the subject of German guilt. He began with a passionate defense of reconciliation for a nation in ruins, urging his audience to listen to one another. We must “hear what the other thinks,” he advises, not simply cling to our own opinions. Moreover, we must seek out opposing views, for disagreement is more important than agreement when it comes to finding the truth. There must be trust, not rage, and thinking, not comforting platitudes. These comments are made in full view of the extreme differences in what Germans had “experienced, felt, wished, cherished and done” during the Nazi period.

1 The residential school system was a Canadian government-sponsored, church-managed program of aggressive assimilation that removed Indigenous children from their families and communities and forced them into schools in which they were prohibited from speaking their own languages and practicing their cultural traditions. Neglect, mistreatment, and sexual and physical abuse occurred. The program was fully established by the 1880s and the last residential school closed in 1996. Approximately 150,000 First Nation, Inuit, and Métis children were removed from their communities to attend these schools.

“We belong together,” Jaspers insists, “we must feel our common cause when we talk with each other” (Jaspers 2000, 5–7, 11).

The lectures are Jaspers’ response to the world’s indictment of the German people as a whole for Nazi atrocities. Guilt is not as simple as this broad accusation implies. In Jaspers’ account there are four types: Criminal, moral, political, and metaphysical. Criminal guilt is the only type legally punishable, because it applies strictly to the person whose actions have violated unequivocal laws, and whose crime is objectively proven. Moral guilt is personal, a matter for each individual conscience, and, Jaspers believes, judged by God alone. Political guilt means that every citizen is liable for the deeds done in their name by the state, and, for this reason, it is collective. Jaspers cautions his listeners: Liability does not equal criminal guilt; the politically guilty must answer for the acts of their leaders – they pay the price of being co-responsible for what happens in their national home – but only individuals can be charged with crimes. This type of guilt may give us pause; we might object that we do not always sanction the decisions of our leaders, let alone vote for them, and are powerless to prevent their actions. But Jaspers is unequivocal: The German people must accept the “fearful consequences” of their liability, and this includes poverty and “political impotence” for some time to come (Jaspers 2000, 56). He asks,

Are we Germans to be held liable for outrages which Germans inflicted on us, or from which we were saved as by a miracle? Yes – inasmuch as we let such a régime rise among us. No – insofar as many of us in our deepest hearts opposed all this evil and have no morally guilty acts or inner motivations to admit. To hold liable does not mean to hold morally guilty. (Jaspers 2000, 55)

We might conclude from this point that political guilt in Jaspers’ discussion is better understood as responsibility.

The most intriguing type of guilt under Jaspers’ consideration is “metaphysical” guilt. He describes it as the inescapable “guilt of human existence” that arises from the fact that all individuals live “enmeshed in the power relations” of their times (Jaspers 2000, 28). He is obviously alluding to his own indelible feelings of guilt as one among those who survived when many others did not. As he explains: “We preferred to stay alive, on the feeble, if logical, ground that our death could not have helped anyone. We are guilty of being alive” (Jaspers 2000, 66).² Metaphysical guilt is a concept relevant for any historical period; it evokes the solidarity unique to

2 It is worth noting that Karl Jaspers was married to Gertrud Mayer, a German Jew, and as a result was forced to leave his academic post in 1937, though he was able to remain in

human life, that makes each of us “co-responsible” for all the injustices in the world, according to Jaspers, especially when we know they are happening, and when they are happening in our presence (Jaspers 2000, 26). This type of guilt alludes to a responsibility that always exceeds our capacity to respond, and thus evokes an overwhelming sense of powerlessness in the face of injustices we do not personally suffer but are forced to witness. When we experience this powerlessness, we may feel a sense of guilt though we have not personally committed a wrong.

Jaspers’ classifications attest to a slippage between responsibility and guilt. On the one hand, guilt is unambiguous, based on whether we have engaged in wrongful action or not, and punishable if we have. On the other hand, we may feel guilty for actions others have done even if we have not participated, simply by virtue of the fact that we are part of a human world. That we *feel* guilt in this case, though we are not guilty or deserving of punishment, speaks to a profound sense of responsibility for our fellow human beings, generated by an empathic identification with our own species. Thus, one understanding of guilt has to do with actions, the other with emotional responses to others’ actions, others to whom we are necessarily connected. It is worth emphasizing the root of the term responsibility. Human beings are responsive: The solidarity implied in Jaspers’ understandings of guilt and responsibility is evidently necessary for the reconciliatory sentiments he urges his audience to consider.

Some fifteen years later, Jaspers’ onetime student and lifelong friend, Hannah Arendt, made further observations on guilt and responsibility, inspired by the same historical events. She was struck by the fact that those Germans who were active participants in wrongdoing did not express guilt or remorse, while those who did no wrong confessed to feelings of guilt. The unintended result, she notes, was “a very effective whitewash” of those who had participated in evil. Arendt elaborates:

The cry “We are all guilty” that at first hearing sounded so very noble and tempting has actually only served to exculpate to a considerable degree those who actually were guilty. Where all are guilty, nobody is. Guilt, unlike responsibility, always singles out; it is strictly personal. It refers to an act, not to intentions or potentialities. It is only in a metaphorical sense that we can say we *feel* guilty for the sins of our fathers or our people or mankind, in short, for deeds we have not done, although the course of events may well make us pay for them. (Arendt 2003: 147)

Germany with his wife throughout the war. See *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/jaspers/>, last accessed March 1, 2022.

There are a number of insights in this passage worth drawing out. First, like Jaspers, Arendt is assuming that guilt must be assigned for wrongful actions *actually* carried out, not for acts that could have been carried out, or that someone intended to carry out but did not. This means that blame cannot be assigned to a collective, since every individual is solely responsible for what he or she has done. Those who did not carry out Nazi crimes themselves were not guilty, whether they knew of these crimes or not, and despite any guilt they may have *felt* – guilt that Jaspers might call metaphysical, but Arendt calls “metaphorical.” Those who experienced this metaphorical guilt were, for the most part, powerless witnesses to a historical tragedy.

Most importantly in this passage, Arendt argues that to blame the witnesses would absolve those who did commit atrocities. A declaration of collective guilt is therefore “devoid of risk” because it renders judgment superfluous, but it is also harmful in itself (Arendt 1977, 297, as quoted in Schaap [2001, 752]). To admit guilt on the basis of group membership demands little of us; the individual in this case is not judged and punished accordingly. But if the actual culprit is let off the hook, judgment ceases to be meaningful.

Finally, Arendt points out that the expression of guilt on the part of those who did no wrong attests to a baffling moral confusion: Those who did no wrong identify with the guilty. This response might tempt us because the expression of guilt makes us feel noble or virtuous. Arendt refutes this temptation in the strongest of terms: “It is as wrong to feel guilty without having done anything specific as it is to feel free of all guilt if one actually is guilty of something” (Arendt 2003: 28). No doubt this stunning equivalence has to do with the adverse effects of a disingenuous guilt that Arendt describes as “phony sentimentality” (Arendt 2003: 148) – namely, political impotence and the abdication of moral judgment. Identifying as a perpetrator when one is not guilty, she maintains, is no reliable indicator of right or wrong, but an indication of “conformity or nonconformity” that obscures the real moral and political issues at stake (Arendt 2003: 107).

To clarify the distinction Jaspers and Arendt make between guilt and responsibility: Guilt is purely individual, a judgment based on one’s wrongful actions, whereas responsibility is both individual and collective, related to obligations and the effects of our own and others’ actions. We are responsible for our own actions, meaning that we are liable or accountable for what we have done of our own volition (which would entail guilt if we committed a wrong), but we are also responsible *with*

others for the world we build together through our collective actions. An individual is guilty of past wrongdoings, but we are all together responsible for the future. What complicates this responsibility is that we inherit a world not of our own making; each generation is burdened or blessed by the deeds of its ancestors (Arendt 2003: 27). We suffer or we benefit from what was decided and done before us. One dimension of collective responsibility, then, is to “set the time aright,” as Hamlet feels destined to do (Arendt 2003: 28), in the never-ending process of renewing the world. This necessarily includes redressing past wrongs, for though we can never undo evil deeds, we can mitigate their harmful effects. Collective responsibility is therefore a “vicarious responsibility,” Arendt argues, it is “the price we pay for the fact that we live our lives not by ourselves but among our fellow [human beings]” (Arendt 2003: 157–158). She warns, however, that the past cannot be mastered; “the best that can be achieved is to know precisely what it was, and to endure this knowledge, and then to wait and see what comes of knowing and enduring” (Arendt 1968, 20).

It is important to note that, in Arendt’s view, responsibility may be the price we pay for human togetherness, but the price we pay for being without responsibility is worse. The only persons bereft of this burden would be those stripped of a place to which they belong: outcasts or pariahs who are deprived of the public voice and political agency that give rise to responsibility (Arendt 2003, 150). We have no choice in this accountability, though we can deny it or hide from it; responsibility simply accompanies the social nature of human existence.

1.2 Hard-won Identities and the Moral Power of Victimhood: Limits

Kwame Anthony Appiah argues that a century ago our national, ethnic, racial, sexual, or religious identities were not given much thought, yet now they determine the narratives of our lives (Appiah 2018, 3). This means that *what we are*, rather than *what we do*, becomes the criterion for blame or exoneration. When the always provisional nature of *what we are* is denied, identity is pinned to a particular essence. We come to identify fully with this essence until we are one with it, forgetting all other possible identifications. This fulfills a very human desire to belong and justifies a demand for recognition, but the satisfaction of this demand entails an erroneous *misrecognition*. Appiah puts it bluntly: Identities are “the lies that bind” us – they do not resolve conflict but arise from it (Appiah 2018, xvi). We could argue, in fact, that a politics founded on identity is

profoundly *anti*-political, if we concur with Arendt's view that political life is founded on pluralism. It is difference that preserves the capacity to speak and act together on the public affairs that concern us all. If the source of solidarity is a fixed identity, rather than a need for transformative action, then the substance of political life is bound to the twin practices of allegiance and exclusion, which lead – perhaps inevitably – to sectarianism and orthodoxy. Politics quickly turns into its antithesis: policing.

At present, we are witnessing in emancipatory struggles everywhere an aggressive emphasis on identity, particularly as it pertains to the racial, ethnic, or national groups to which we belong, and which we perceive to be under threat. Gender and socioeconomic status have taken a backseat for a number of reasons, but perhaps first and foremost because they are not so easily homogenized, or, in the case of class, visible. We need only consider the fact that there have never been protests against the murder of women by men as global or outraged in scale as occurred against the murder of Black men by police officers in the spring of 2020.

The attachment to a politicized ethnic or racial identity has intensified in tandem with the moral power of victimhood. To identify as a victim is to lay claim to the virtuous innocence associated with suffering and, in this respect, victimhood – as a permanent identity rather than an experience one survives and hopefully overcomes with time – infuses a victimized life with meaning. Claiming victimhood may even instill a “perverse pride” as Thomas Chatterton Williams puts it, writing of his own comfort in an essentialized, rebellious black identity while growing up in New York City. To reject this comfort is not easy. For an oppressed person to relinquish a “hard-won identity,” he writes, entails the “terrifying” prospect of becoming “responsible for creating [oneself] anew” for “finding new ways of belonging to each other, new values, new ways of construction” (Williams 2019).

Identities are indeed hard-won, and we must keep this in mind when we examine the effects of their politicization on emancipatory movements. If oppression operates on the basis of identity, we can reasonably assume it must be fought on that basis. But then we tend to maintain the lines initially drawn between oppressor and oppressed, the distinctions and definitions, the stereotypes and qualities fabricated in order to justify domination. Since the feminist and gay movements, and the anti-colonial and anti-racist struggles of the latter half of the twentieth century, this quandary has dogged us. But now we are witnessing the anti-political, and, I would add, anti-social, effects of having exaggerated the role of identity in the fight for rights and justice.

One of these effects Williams already hints at in his reference to personal responsibility, which parallels Arendt's collective responsibility for the renewal of the world. His point flies in the face of current discussions regarding the victims and perpetrators of injustice, in which responsibility is not defined in terms of a collective liability for the effects of past or present wrongs, or concern for the future and of the individual's place within it, but as synonymous with guilt. The blaming of a perpetrator *group* is justified by the claim that a select population benefits from systemic injustice; whether or not they helped to carry out the original harms (slavery, or colonization, for example), or actively participate in any ongoing wrongdoing is immaterial. From this point of view, benefit is equal to committing a wrong; to be a member of the privileged group is to be guilty. In this moral universe, no distinctions are made between, let's say, a president who aggressively promotes racism and misogyny through word and deed, and a white person who has never given racism much thought, or has become too confident in her progressive worldview. One of the more popular representations of this approach is Robin DiAngelo's (2018) best seller, *White Fragility*, an attempt to re-educate white people who are unaware of, or refuse to admit, their inherent racism. Describing the author's relentless "self-mortification" and "agonizing soul-searching" as entailing an "elaborate and pitilessly dehumanizing condescension toward Black people," John McWhorter complains that *White Fragility* manages to teach white readers "how to be racist in a whole new way." To what end, he wonders, for DiAngelo fails to say anything about how to achieve constructive change on "issues of import to the Black community" (McWhorter 2020).

A trail of pernicious effects is in evidence here: The political use of identity leads to the assumption of collective guilt, which demands a broad base on which to allocate blame. Individual actions cannot implicate an entire group but benefit and privilege can if we do not examine the criteria too closely. It is all too easy from here to induce ideological conformity, for all those on the side of the privileged – members of the oppressor group – who either do not support the unjust treatment of others or want to appear as though they do not, are anxious to be exonerated. The political use of identity leads conversely to collective innocence, granting blanket immunity to the victimized group for expressing the very hostility or hatred that we would agree constitute racism when turned against them.

We see this dynamic at play in what is officially promoted as a reconciliation process between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples

in Canada. First, we are forced to resort to fixed terms of identity – settler and colonized – that correspond to assignments of guilt or innocence. The question of who exactly constitutes these groups is not simple, given that neither designation represents a unified voice or one historical set of circumstances. Once again, we face the identity quandary for, *as a group*, however loosely defined, Indigenous peoples in Canada share at least some commonalities that non-Indigenous Canadians do not; identity seems a critical point of departure. But in the fight for recognition and redress, settler and colonized are reduced to monolithic entities, which erases a multitude of distinctions between cultures, languages, and histories *within* both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations. With this watering down of pluralism, the “we” disappears and, with it, an interest in anything we might call “reconciliation.” This is another effect of a fierce attachment to identity, a point to which I will return.

The work of securing a hard-won identity is challenging and demands a high degree of conformity among both settler and colonized groups. Homogeneity must be fabricated, continually reinforced, and performed. The inescapable guilt Jaspers evokes, of living “enmeshed in the power relations” of our times, comes into play here; the privileged feel guilty for enjoying what others cannot, or for sharing membership in an identity category with those who abuse their power over others. These are fertile conditions for conformity, especially for those who care about matters of justice and equality and given that we live in a time of easy recourse to public shaming.

In forums, classrooms, and scholarly writings on Indigenous issues, we find non-Indigenous individuals accepting, even embracing, the designation of settler, or, more often, “white settler,” and confessing personal guilt as individual beneficiaries of colonial relations. In a recent journal article that addresses how to “unsettle” settler colonialism, for example, Corey Snelgrove writes that like his European immigrant ancestors, he is also “a white settler, a colonizer,” an admission he insists does not “signal any innocence” as “there are no good settlers; there are no good colonizers.” He adds: “For myself, as a white, class-privileged, temporarily able-bodied, heterosexual, university-educated cis-male, the social world really is crafted in my image” (Corntassel et al. 2014, 6).

Such self-positioning is now a required exercise in the world of social justice politics, but it seems more appropriate to classify it as a moral exercise, one that Arendt might describe as morally *confused*, an echo of the sentimentalism she observed among post-war Germans. Despite Snelgrove’s protest to the contrary, his statement seems an apt example

of virtue-signaling, since it identifies him as one willing to face his own complicity and guilt in the power structures of colonialism. He is thus claiming the status of an “ally”, a third term that offers some relief from the stark oppositions of oppressed versus oppressor, or victim versus perpetrator. But we might well ask, as McWhorter does when he questions DiAngelo’s call for the self-mortification of white people: To what end do we declare our positions? A statement of guilt is devoid of risk, it asks nothing of the confessor beyond an admission of guilt, admittedly at a time when the stakes of such confessions are high. As Ibram X. Kendi makes clear, there are only racists and anti-racists; the claim “I’m not racist” has no validity and must be eliminated from our daily parlance. The implication is, to be anti-racist one must be an active participant in the struggle and never deny that one is racist. If, as he puts it, “the heartbeat of racism has always been denial,” the largely symbolic gesture of confessing our racism is suddenly invested with significant moral import (Kendi 2020). But symbolic gestures do not, on their own, accomplish political change. If the heartbeat of racism is, rather, the material and psychological subjugation of a group of people selected according to superficial characteristics that mark them as distinct from their oppressors, then transformation requires more than symbolic gestures.

Perhaps the best example of this claim in the context of Indigenous reconciliation is the land acknowledgement attached to an email signature or recited at the beginning of a public event. To expose the token nature of this gesture, one might reasonably ask: Why merely acknowledge we live on aboriginal land, why not give it back to them? The practice engenders noble feelings for the person who carries it out, and mitigates the feeling of metaphorical or metaphysical guilt, but it is politically impotent. Lamentably, we have arrived at a point at which public statements are judged before actions, and the beliefs that inform them, are even considered. We might notice how much easier it is to do so, despite the fact that a statement taken out of context is more readily misjudged than an action whose context is generally apparent. Once again, responsibility is neglected in favor of blame.

One of Snelgrove’s co-authors, Rita Kaur Dhamoon, inadvertently exposes the absurdity of assigning guilt based on the facts of one’s birth – facts about which we have no choice – rather than on our actions. She stipulates that her birth in India to a family of anti-colonialists means that her “structural location” as a settler in Canada is different from that of Snelgrove’s. “Being anti-colonial is in me,” she states, in a move that

seeks exemption from membership in the perpetrator group on the basis of individual moral and political positions (Corntassel et al. 2014). The term “white settler” evidently fails to capture the multi-ethnic composition of Canada, a nation of immigrants. But on this basis, others could also claim exemption, including Snelgrove himself, given his obvious commitment to decolonizing practice; it is his European ancestry that makes exemption difficult. Despite his intentions, he has no recourse other than to admit his guilt and, in doing so, hope for some vindication. These are convoluted steps we must take – theoretical fancy footwork – in the service of deference to identity and the power of victimhood.

If the guilty are judged so on the basis of skin color rather than actions and beliefs, they are trapped under their skins, while those deemed innocent are trapped under the burden of a victim’s resentment and the task of policing. Blame risks as little as symbolic confessions of guilt, for it neglects the work of assessing who is guilty of an abuse of power, exploitation, violence, the implementation of discriminatory policies, and so forth, and who is living as a witness to the injustices of the world with limited capacity to change them. If actions do not matter in this judgment, one only needs to decide which group has benefited and which has suffered. In terms of moral power, collective innocence may triumph, but it proves to be an unsatisfying compensation for the lack of all other forms of power. This lack often means that the headiness of empowerment turns into the bitterness of resentment; they are two sides of the same coin.

I call resentment a “burden” despite its recent appropriation as a positive and vital feature of the fight for social justice. In the name of outrage against the forces of injustice – an entirely reasonable and justified response – the expression of anger and resentment is given free rein, even if it targets a group on the basis of superficial characteristics. To raise one example, in a widely-read recent iteration of “Dear White People” letters, Sandra Inuitiq paints an unflattering portrait of white residents and their “whitesplaining” habits in her city of Iqaluit in Nunavut, where Inuit people – once the majority – now comprise approximately 50 percent of the population and are struggling to maintain the city as a center of Inuit culture and governance under exceptionally harsh conditions (Inuitiq 2019). With a view to making “a better white person,” Inuitiq reprimands white residents for their arrogance, apathy, and insensitivity, and their loud, incessant talk. Her recommended corrections to white behavior include listening to those who experience racism on a daily basis, refraining from making judgments

about what is racist or culturally insensitive, suppressing a defensive reaction in the face of criticisms, and recognizing in this defensiveness a desire to maintain power. As if to head off an anticipated objection, Inutiq insists that “racism against white people does not exist.” She does not provide reasons to support this claim; perhaps she feels that given its popular acceptance, none are needed.

It isn’t difficult for a reader to imagine the arrogance and sense of superiority she describes among a transient workforce arriving from the southern provinces, but what troubles me is Inutiq’s condescending tone, and her mockery of “white fragility,” ignorance, and ineptitude. She inspires precisely the kind of self-recriminations we find in Snelgrove’s confession and DiAngelo’s re-education plan (Inutiq 2019). A white reader may feel a sense of shame and embarrassment for simply sharing the same skin color as the residents Inutiq criticizes. We might ask whether the shame rightfully belongs to arrogant people, not to everyone with white skin.

Inutiq’s letter attests to the imperviousness of the victim to critique. Despite her stated hope that the letter will inspire discussion, I question what response is left to the white person. There is no possibility of defense from the charge of guilt without at once reinforcing that guilt. Any critical analysis of the letter, such as my own, would be perceived as a manifestation of power and privilege and the attempt to maintain it, an outcome of my white skin rather than my thought process, since, as Inutiq states, whites are “socialized to be unconsciously invested in racism.” She adds that being a “good” person does not redeem the white person, because “all white people are racist to some degree” having been “born and raised in a system made by white people, for white people” (Inutiq 2019). This is precisely Snelgrove’s argument when he insists that the social world “really is crafted in [his] image.” But if the world is crafted in the image of white (racist) people, what room is there for any of us to craft other images? And, to reiterate William’s point, how do we take up the responsibility to create ourselves anew?

No one more effectively describes the complicated interaction of empowerment and resentment than Frantz Fanon, perhaps our most astute and eloquent twentieth-century thinker of decolonization. In his account of the colonized man’s struggle to reclaim subjectivity (he has a more problematic account of the colonized woman), he describes an encounter between a black man and a white woman and her child, who is evidently frightened of his black body, charged as it is with racial stereotypes. They have “sealed” him into a “crushing objecthood,” until

he frees himself by defiantly telling the woman: “Kiss the handsome Negro’s ass” (Fanon 1986, 114–115). It is a moment of shame for her and euphoria for him that demonstrates the allure of empowerment for the victimized. Fanon’s own desire for it is palpable. But he later warns of the regressive effects of an impulse to celebrate such a fleeting joy, for any identification with an essentialized identity will imprison them all in “a bitter brotherhood” (Fanon 1986, 124) that can explode into resentment and violence. The colonized, Fanon famously said, simply wants to take the settler’s place (Fanon 2004, 16).

When identity is the basis on which we make judgments of guilt or innocence, perpetrator and victim are settled into immovable positions that render both incapable of responding to the needs of the times. Whether frozen into innocence or guilt, the status quo remains unchanged. In other words, our overvaluation of identity allows *all of us* to avoid responsibility, if by that we mean *collective* political responsibility that both redresses the historical crimes committed by “our people” or our nation’s leaders, and fulfills our obligation to create a future world with a better inheritance.

1.3 Responsibility and Reconciliation

Arendt’s observations are all relevant here. In the rush to proclaim one’s innocence or guilt there is ideological conformity in evidence, but no moral criteria for judgment. In those who identify with the perpetrator group there is sentimentality, and a sense of guilt for tragedies they did not cause, but it is a self-indulgent guilt that offers consolation for the one who expresses it, absolving those who are actually guilty. From this point of view, we cannot be guilty for events that preceded our births (like colonialism) or in which we were not personally involved (like the residential school system), though we must bear the consequences of those deeds and the burden of liability. The consequences are not equally shared – the victim’s and the bystander’s experiences of historical tragedies are incomparable – but the burden *and the privilege* of responsibility rests with everyone because of our common humanity. If the victimized were stripped of their responsibility, they would be reduced to the condition of those without agency, without a place to belong, where their voices and opinions matter; they would be doubly dehumanized.

What does it mean to take up this burden of liability, to be co-responsible for setting the time aright? I don’t think there is a

satisfying answer, given our responses to injustice, past or present, are context dependent. There is no plan to follow. We respond as we are able, as personal and social resources allow, always frustratingly cognizant of the infinite need for response and the impossibility of meeting it. Some of us have the economic means to accomplish change, others have the political or legal power to do so, and still others have passion, determination and necessary skills. Privilege has multiple uses and should not be wasted.

We are all “guilty of being alive,” as Jaspers put it in the context of a very different time, and this means we must be worthy of those who have lived before us and who left the work of building a future to us. The “we” I employ is intentional. When discussion across the borders of enclosed identities is silenced, thought and critical judgment are suspended, destroying the very political habits needed for reconciliation, if by reconciliation we mean learning how to live together, collectively responsible for renewing the world. Recall Jaspers’ words: We must listen to one another, we must trust, not indulge in rage; we must think rather than hide in platitudes, we must listen to those who disagree with us. These are what I am calling the political habits that inspire solidarity and action. The spirit of reconciliation in Jaspers’ account is thus profoundly political, bound to a collective responsibility for discovering the truth of a tragic past without homogenizing experience or demanding the conformity of opinion. For Arendt, responsibility is inherently political because it is both the price we pay for living in a human community and a gift for the privilege of this togetherness.

Jaspers’ call to “feel our common cause” and “hear what the other thinks” may sound quaint to our contemporary ears. Reconciliation as a concept and practice is out of fashion, evidence that emancipatory struggles founded on identity and solidarity, fostered through blame and resentment, are divisive strategies. This does not mean we should remain uncritical of reconciliation paradigms such as the one currently promoted in Canada. As an official national policy, reconciliation is merely programmatic and superficial; it demands little of us. It raises awareness of Indigenous issues, but it fails to take into account the vast geographical and social diversity of Canada, which is ironic given the increasing demand to acknowledge one’s “place-based” political position.

The institutionalization of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous is also criticized by Taiaiake Alfred, who argues that reconciliation is politically impotent. He alludes to its “emasculating” effects, not an insignificant comment given his recent public apologies for

harboring an attitude of “toxic masculinity.” This perception hints at the gendered nature of an aggressive identity politics that feminizes reconciliation. Alfred favors an approach known as Indigenous “resurgence,” characterized by a rejection of what he calls “the assimilative reformism of the liberal recognition approach.” Resurgence is focused instead on revitalizing traditional Indigenous political values and practices; respect for these values, according to Alfred “is the only lasting solution to the political, economic, and social problems” of Indigenous peoples (Alfred 2014, quoted in Coulthard [2014], 154–155).

No one could intelligently argue against the necessity of respect in the work of redressing past wrongs and addressing present injustices, but to conflate reconciliation with assimilation reinforces, once again, deference to a fixed identity and the victimhood that gave rise to it. Does the past – even a traumatic past – determine the future? Joseph P. Gone questions the association between psychological trauma and historical oppression when he argues that those who promote historical trauma as an “explanatory frame” for the social problems that plague Indigenous communities in the United States – substance abuse, violence, and suicide, for example – “inadvertently” misrepresent the extraordinary range of Indigenous responses to colonization, and to a complicated, multi-century history. It is a paradigm that “pathologizes Indigenous identities as essentially wounded or damaged by history,” and this pathologizing lends itself well to “oversimplified” resentment and blame (Gone 2014, 274, 286).

Gone seems to echo Fanon here, who, despite his sympathetic understanding for the refuge and euphoria an essentialized identity provides, and for the desire to embrace the history and culture that nurtures this identity, ultimately refuses this path. He concludes his analysis of the colonized subject’s fight for recognition with a different kind of resurgence:

My life should not be devoted to drawing up the balance sheet of Negro values.

There is no white world, there is no white ethic, any more than there is a white intelligence.

There are in every part of the world men who search.

I am not a prisoner of history. I should not seek there for the meaning of my destiny.

I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. (Fanon 1986, 229)

What surges – or resurges – in this passage, is a longing for a future that is not imprisoned by the past, or maimed by what Fanon (1986, 140) calls the “amputation” of victimhood.

Gone’s alternative is faithful to this mandate; he insists on the value of rigorously undermining all attempts to simplify histories of oppression and the identities rooted in them, in order to foster the “intergroup exchanges” necessary for the future of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations (Gone 2014, 275). Given the effects of the politicization of identity that I have briefly described, his description of a “renewed politics of relationality” is a breath of fresh air, even if it is a return to a reconciliation paradigm familiar to anyone working in the field of political conflict and atrocity and their aftermath. A politics of relationality, according to Gone, is reliant on “ethical generosity” that permits the space needed for solidarity with others. Most importantly, for my purposes, this generosity and solidarity, he adds, is an “obvious responsibility of *non*-Indigenous citizens of the United States and Canada, but Indigenous peoples (for our part) would likewise appear to fall under and to benefit from this sweeping ethical mandate as well” (Gone 2014, 287).

A robust understanding of responsibility thus extricates us from the dilemma posed by fixed identities when grappling with the vexed legacies of oppression. The collective, relational, and generous foundation of responsibility allow us to escape the traps of moralism and policing. Most importantly, they highlight the agency of the victimized. This is poignantly illustrated by Ronald Niezen, in his analysis of a tragic series of cluster suicides that occurred at Cross Lake First Nations Reserve in Manitoba, from 1999 to 2000. Corroborating Gone’s argument about the limits of a historical trauma paradigm, Niezen suggests there is more to the high rates of suicide in Indigenous communities than the experience of trauma. Given that every Indigenous community experiences the legacy of a colonial history, yet reports widely uneven suicide rates, present sufferings cannot be attributed exclusively to colonial trauma (Niezen 2009, 134). He urges us to consider, rather, the presence or absence of political agency (Niezen 2009, 147); to ask whether these youth and other members of their communities “are included in the processes of shaping and making use of new institutions” (Niezen 2009, 138). The most important features of collective life are “political accountability, accessibility, and responsibility” – these are what Niezen argues “promote resilience among youth and act as a hedge against self-destruction” (Niezen 2009, 138). Cluster suicides occur when political life is

stymied, leaving a vulnerable population feeling powerless “in nearly every aspect of their lives,” and without prospects or futures.

In other words, when robbed of responsibility, victims of injustice and oppression become like outcasts, and therefore pay a worse price than the burden the rest of us must accept for belonging to a human community. We must all be burdened – and gifted – with responsibility for a shared future.

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