



Unsettling Jaspers Historicizing Metaphysical Guilt

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Abstract: My aim is to historicize metaphysical guilt in order to fight back against the rise of the far right and fascism in North America. Departing from Karl Jaspers' book *The Question of German Guilt* I draw on anti-colonial and Indigenous philosophy such as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang's essay "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor." They debunk what they call "settler moves to innocence," which allow settlers to absolve themselves from guilt and responsibility and to establish and sustain structural racism and colonialism. I also borrow insights from W. E. B. Du Bois' and Aimé Césaire's work. Settler-colonial societies in North America and elsewhere breed fascism. This enabling of the spread of white supremacy is a further reason why epistemic, ontological, and cosmological violence perpetrated by settler invasion needs to be addressed and remedied.

Keywords: Jaspers, Karl; Indigenous philosophy; settlers; colonialism; guilt, political; decolonization; fascism; race philosophy; whiteness; cultural origin.

In my recent work, I have been looking at the post-war writings of European antifascist philosophers.¹ I have analyzed Jean Paul Sartre's *Antisemite and Jew* and Simone Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity* to assess how we might fight back against the rise of the far right and fascism in North America. At the same time, I have found it necessary to consider these figures of Continental philosophy within the context of the socio-political situations of settler-colonial societies in North America. I believe, drawing on a long line of antifascist and anti-colonial authors, that antifascism entails decolonization. As J. Sakai once noted, "white settler-colonialism and fascism occupy the same

ecological niche."²

It is within this framework that I would like to approach Karl Jaspers' book *The Question of German Guilt*.³ There, Jaspers distinguishes between four concepts of guilt: criminal guilt, political guilt, moral guilt, and metaphysical guilt. At the outset, I assumed that I could read Jaspers in parallel with a well-known

¹ Devin Zane Shaw, *Philosophy of Antifascism: Punching Nazis and Fighting White Supremacy*, London, UK: Rowman and Littlefield International, 2020.

² J. Sakai, "The Shock Of Recognition: Looking at Hamerquist's Fascism & Anti-Fascism," in *Confronting Fascism: Discussion Documents for a Militant Movement*, eds. Don Hamerquist, J. Sakai, Anti-Racist Action Chicago, Mark Salotte, Montreal, CN: Kersplebedeb Publishing 2002, pp. 95-197, here p. 103.

³ Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, transl. E. B. Ashton, New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2000. [Henceforth cited as QGG]

essay in the field of Indigenous political thought and settler-colonialism studies by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor."⁴ There, the authors analyze a number of what they call settler moves to innocence:

Settler moves to innocence are those strategies or positionings that attempt to relieve the settler of feelings of guilt or responsibility without giving up land or power or privilege, without having to change much at all. [DNM 10]

Settlers, for example, might claim a real or imagined Indigenous ancestor to mitigate feeling responsible for the ongoing settler-colonial oppression and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. This would be an example of what Tuck and Yang call "settler nativism" or what Vine Deloria Jr. calls the "Indian-grandmother complex,"⁵ the latter of which reveals in part how settler-colonialism entails gendered violence.

In a similar way, Jaspers notes that an analysis of guilt does not necessarily entail that one takes responsibility for their actions. He examines how the distinction between the four concepts of guilt can be "speciously used to get rid of the whole guilt question" (QGG 68). For example, when evaluating moral guilt, a German who lived through the Third Reich could use Jaspers' appeal to conscience as an encouragement to absolve oneself of guilt by reasoning,

I hear that my conscience alone has jurisdiction, others have no right to accuse me. Well, my conscience is not going to be too hard on me. It wasn't really so bad; let's forget about it, and make a fresh start. [QGG 68]

Here the recognition of guilt takes the place of responsibility. They place their actions (for which they might bear guilt) in a closed past. In settler-colonial societies, settlers commonly appeal to the idea that colonialism is in the past, having no bearing on present social inequalities. There is a clear parallel between Jaspers' analyses of guilt, Tuck and Yang's descriptions of moves to innocence, and, I should note, Jean-Paul Sartre's or Simone de Beauvoir's analyses of bad faith.

I have also considered how one might understand the concept of metaphysical guilt in light of settler-

colonialism. Jaspers defines metaphysical guilt by saying:

There exists a solidarity among men as human beings that makes each co-responsible for every wrong and every injustice in the world, especially for crimes committed in his presence or with his knowledge. If I fail to do whatever I can do to prevent them, I too am guilty. [QGG 26]

In the North American context, Jaspers is here calling settlers to recognize their responsibility in societies of on-going settler-colonialism. This involves, at a philosophical level, dismantling myths and presuppositions that suffuse the discipline of philosophy. In Continental philosophy, which I study, so I am also implicated, French and German philosophy are often practiced as if one could do European philosophy, only accidentally in North America. The discipline rarely asks: what conditions have to obtain such that European philosophy could present itself as endogenous to American and Canadian academia?

Let us then consider two passages from Tuck and Yang. First, they write:

Settlers are not immigrants. Immigrants are beholden to the Indigenous laws and epistemologies of the lands they migrate to. Settlers become the law, supplanting Indigenous laws and epistemologies. Therefore, settler nations are not immigrant nations. [DNM 6-7]

Tuck and Yang seek to unsettle the myth, central to American ideology, that "we" are a nation of immigrants. Colonization is not a process whereby Europeans immigrated to Indigenous lands, respecting the laws and epistemologies of the nations already present; instead, European settler-colonialism involved genocide and replacement.

Furthermore, settler-colonialism involves the "disruption of Indigenous relationships to land [which] represents a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence" (DNM 5). Here Tuck and Yang describe a kind of existential violence that attacks the core relationships and norms that make an Indigenous world possible, for example the world of the Unangax nation to which Tuck belongs. The Michi Saagiig Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson points that since the idea of kinship is understood not only with other human beings, treaties could also be established with any non-human member of a

⁴ Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is Not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1/1 (2012), 1-40. [Henceforth cited as DNMM]

⁵ Vine Deloria Jr., *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press 1988, p. 3.

community.⁶ I consider this variation of perspectives to be very important with regard to the problem of epistemic, ontological, or cosmological violence. Initially I wondered whether Jaspers' concept of metaphysical guilt could contribute to our sense of responsibility, as settlers, for the kinds of existential violence, the genocide, and the forced assimilation, that the European invasion committed against Indigenous peoples.

In my understanding, Jaspers' concept of metaphysical guilt does not apply in this instance. When Jaspers discusses the liability of the collective form of guilt, he explains that this liability includes necessary reparations and possibly the loss or restriction of political power and political rights. By contrast, metaphysical guilt calls an individual before the "jurisdiction [that] rests with God alone" (QGG 26). But as Frantz Fanon writes,

God has nothing to do with the matter, unless one wants to clarify this obligation for mankind to feel co-responsible, 'responsible' meaning that the least of my acts involves mankind.⁷

Neither the concept of metaphysical guilt nor the one of political guilt captures how settlers are responsible for the ongoing accumulation of debt for the existential violence of settler-colonialism—the condition that Tuck and Yang describe as epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence.⁸ Settler colonialism cannot be reckoned as being merely political debt that can be paid via reparations. While the payment of reparations and the return of land to Indigenous nations are necessary to reckoning political debt, these acts do not necessarily speak to the epistemic, ontological, or cosmological violence perpetrated by settler invasion. And metaphysical debt does not seem to capture the problem either. Indigenous philosophers discuss the possibilities of Indigenous resurgence that revitalize these epistemic, ontological, and cosmological relations to kin and land; however, categorizing resurgence merely in terms

of metaphysical or ontological qualities poses two problems. First, it has the potential to reify Indigenous social relationships as if they were metaphysical essences. And second, I think that Jaspers presumes a degree of spiritual—that is philosophical and theological—homogeneity among those who have wronged others and those who were wronged, which cannot be assumed when assessing the debts and violence of settler-colonialism. Jaspers' assumptions guide his explanation of the causes of World War II. Jaspers gives undue weight to the idea that the West was gripped by a spiritual crisis exacerbated by technological transformations (QGG 83).

Whiteness, Imperialism, Settler-Colonialism

The idea of a spiritual crisis is idealistic. In addition, the idea of the West in crisis delimits the scope of the analysis of guilt and precludes examination from a perspective informed by voices beyond the Western metropolises. I will propose an alternative approach to this history of 'Western spiritual crisis' grounded in theorists outside of the Western world or at its peripheries, in the worlds of the colonized.

Perhaps the best-known counter-narrative is found in Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire contends that fascism (or as he calls it: Hitlerism) took the techniques of colonial oppression, settlerism, and genocide, and turned them against Europe itself. He writes about the toleration of Nazism, that the

very distinguished, very humanistic, very Christian bourgeois of the twentieth century [tolerated Nazism] before it was inflicted on them, that they absolved it, shut their eyes to it, legitimized it, because, until then, it had been applied only to non-European peoples.⁹

Césaire is not minimizing the horrors of Nazism. He seeks to isolate the conditions that made fascism possible so that these conditions can be extirpated. It is important to note that Césaire's view is not merely retrospective—instead it is the culmination of criticisms levelled at European imperialism by the black radical tradition. In 1940 W. E. B. Du Bois contends that fascism arises out of the valorization of whiteness in American and European imperialism: "Hitler is the late crude but logical exponent of white world race philosophy

⁶ Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 2017, pp. 55-70.

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, transl. Richrd Philcox, New York, NY: Grove Press 2008, p. 70 n9.

⁸ The German word for "guilt" is *Schuld*, which also means "debt."

⁹ Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, transl. Joan Pinkham, New York, NY: Monthly Review Press 2000, p. 36.

since the Conference of Berlin in 1884."¹⁰ Du Bois refers here to the conference that partitioned Africa into European colonial holdings. In fact, already in 1920 Du Bois criticizes this "white world race philosophy" in *Darkwater*.¹¹

In *Darkwater*, Du Bois gives a sociogenetic explanation for the emergence this "white world philosophy," which he discusses in terms of "personal whiteness." He dates the invention of personal whiteness to the late nineteenth century. The personal aspect of whiteness is at first somewhat unclear. Du Bois is both a rigorous and allusive thinker—so referring to "personal whiteness" evokes the Protestant idea of a personal god and the rugged frontiersman of the American myth of manifest destiny. But I will also argue that "personal whiteness" is a form of interpellation that draws individuals into the status marker of whiteness. It is also important to examine Du Bois' dating of personal whiteness as a late nineteenth-century invention. In the United States, for example, whiteness had been legally codified long before the late nineteenth century; so personal whiteness has to be something other than merely the legal codification, although this codification is nonetheless important. One can conclude, in brief, that Du Bois links this invention to the expansion of European imperialism and capitalism, the formation of the proto-fascist Ku Klux Klan, the closure of the frontier in the United States in 1890, and the implementation of Jim Crow in the United States. An additional factor in the United States is the massive immigration by people who were not Anglo Saxon and their entrance into what David Roediger has called the "white working class."¹² All these transformations happened at the end of the nineteenth century.

This is what Du Bois is pointing toward when he inquires about what all these events had in common. In *Darkwater*, Du Bois characterizes whiteness as both a claim to possession, ownership, and sovereignty, and as entitlement. The latter aspect, as entitlement, is

summarized in a well-known passage from his *Black Reconstruction in America* about what he calls "a sort of public and psychological wage of whiteness."¹³ These wages took the form of public forms of deference and access and entitlements to prestige institutions in order to align the white bourgeoisie and white working classes along racial lines, breaking solidarity between white and black working classes. In *Darkwater*, he quickly summarizes it as "the white man's title to certain alleged bequests of the Fathers in wage and position, authority and training" (*DW* 16).

Here I want to focus on a claim that is developed in *Darkwater* but left underdeveloped in *Black Reconstruction*. In the former Du Bois defines whiteness, in part, as possession:

I am quite straight-faced as I ask soberly: "But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?" Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen! [*DW* 16]

He argues that whiteness is understood as a title to ownership, possession, and sovereignty. This underlying assumption of whiteness can be discerned in the very idea that European countries could hold a conference among themselves about which European country has the rights to which parts of Africa. It can be seen in the process of so-called Reconciliation in Canada, in which the Crown (the Canadian government) claims to desire to deal with Indigenous peoples in nation-to-nation talks, but sets the terms of entering talks: Indigenous peoples must agree to extinguish their claims to Indigenous title. For obvious reasons, many communities have sought to fight their claims through Canadian courts, but the courts favor the Crown, by requesting proof of claim from Indigenous Peoples rather than requesting this proof to be submitted by the subsequent title claimant, which is the Crown. This underlying assumption of whiteness as possession can be seen also in settler myths of the rugged individual who moved west and worked the land—though behind the myth is a history of civilian settlers acting as "citizen-deputies" of colonial expansion.

¹⁰ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An essay Toward an Autobiography of a Race Concept*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2007, p. 86.

¹¹ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007. [Henceforth cited as *DW*]

¹² David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*, New York, NY: Verso, 1999.

¹³ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., New York, NY: Oxford University Press 2007, pp. 573–4.

I started, at the outset, by discussing antifascism, the far-right political scene, and what Karl Jaspers might have to offer with regard to these topics. I referred to my recent book, *Philosophy of Antifascism*, where I provide a detailed analysis of some of the problems I have identified here. To return to Jaspers, I have quickly sketched the argument that *The Question of German Guilt* could provide an interesting path into understanding the ongoing refusal of settlers to assume responsibility for the structural advantages they possess in a settler-colonial society. As a negative critique, Jaspers can help one to understand the manipulation of guilt as a move to innocence. After outlining this possibility, I offered an approach to understanding some of the material and ideological underpinnings of fascism that does not slip into what I identified as Jaspers' idealism

(the so-called "spiritual crisis" of the West). If Sakai is correct that white settlerism and fascism occupy the same ecological niche, then as antifascists we must fight back against the underlying conditions that make fascism possible. As philosophers, this includes considering the ways that philosophy as a discipline enables settler moves to innocence, in a manner such that philosophers themselves are not immune. To this purpose the present essay contributes to casting a critical perspective on the settler-colonial assumptions in the discipline of philosophy.¹⁴

¹⁴ In the era of digital reproduction, I managed to lose my notes for my presentation to the Karl Jaspers Society. I would like to thank the editors who assembled a working draft of this paper, which formed the basis of the present essay.