

## “There Is a Corpse in the Room”: On Political Guilt and Reparation of the Past

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**Abstract:** Political theory scholarship tends to resist guilt, and especially collective guilt, as a framework for thinking about wrongs committed in the past or still enduring. The voices and experiences of those wronged, however, often imply that they are attributing guilt, and they are attributing it to a collectivity. I follow their lead and think through the potential of political guilt in motivating reparation and redress. Drawing on insights that Karl Jaspers fails to fully develop, I appropriate his notion of political guilt as situation, and read it as something that is contested among victims, perpetrators, and bystanders. Through contestation political guilt creates political spaces for reckoning with the past, and can be instrumental in making space for marginalized voices. I apply my framework to race relations in the contemporary United States, but guilt could be a catalyst to rethink postcolonial relations as well.

No curtain under heaven is heavier than that curtain of guilt and lies behind which white Americans hide.

—James Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt”

If I know that any one of you, you know, has murdered your brother, or your mother, and the corpse is in this room, under the table and I know it and you know it and you know I know it and we cannot talk about it, it takes no time at all before we cannot talk about anything, before absolute silence descends, and that kind of silence has descended on this country.

—James Baldwin, Sept. 5, 1963

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I thank Ruth Abbey, Jonathan Havercroft, Alisa Kessel, Michael Illuzzi, Amit Ron, and two anonymous reviewers for invaluable feedback on this version, and Mary Dietz, Kathryn Sikkink, Bill Scheuerman, and Eric Weitz for probing questions on a much earlier incarnation. This article is dedicated to Eric Weitz in memoriam.

## Introduction

Can one be guilty for crimes that one's society commits, if one does not participate directly in those crimes? If the answer is no, where does that leave the descendants of the original victims, who still suffer? The theorist who has most discredited guilt as an appropriate political category is Hannah Arendt, who associated it with the “cheap sentimentality” with which young Germans, or liberal whites in the United States, seek to ennoble themselves by taking on the guilt for the deeds of their fellow citizens from the past and the present.<sup>1</sup> Arendt has proposed that responsibility, rather than guilt, can be a path to mending past conflicts and enduring patterns of oppression, for how can we fairly put blame on individuals who were not there to commit the crimes, or even distanced themselves from them?<sup>2</sup> Yet scholars and activists whose work indicts broad categories of people (“the white man,” Germans) do point to debts to be repaid after the devastation brought about by one specific side, and even if they do not always deploy the category of guilt, they do not spare blame. Consider, beside the words of James Baldwin quoted above, those of Primo Levi,<sup>3</sup> Jean Améry,<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King,<sup>5</sup> or, more recently, Ta-Nehisi Coates.<sup>6</sup>

Drawing on the work of Karl Jaspers,<sup>7</sup> I suggest that guilt has its uses in political discourse in the aftermath of grave injustice. Pushing his insights beyond him, I note that political actors, especially those historically disempowered, draw on the weight that the language of guilt carries to further their political goals. Guilt brings forth deep, uncomfortable questions that, when articulated, can make space for the pain and voices of those who have been wronged, and may unsettle the lives of those who live by configurations of power that systematically favor them. In that situated space of newfound respite/discomfort, common political initiatives may rise to address the injustice.

My focus is on guilt not as an inner feeling within the perpetrator(s), but as a situation comprising perpetrators, victims, structural beneficiaries, and bystanders, and on the role of those injured in defining and politicizing the

<sup>1</sup>Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 251.

<sup>2</sup>Hannah Arendt, “Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility,” in *Essays in Understanding, 1930–1954*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994), 121–32.

<sup>3</sup>*The Complete Works of Primo Levi*, ed. Ann Goldstein (New York: Norton, 2015).

<sup>4</sup>Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2009).

<sup>5</sup>Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (Boston: Beacon, 2018), 72.

<sup>6</sup>Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *Atlantic*, June 2014.

<sup>7</sup>Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969); Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000); Karl Jaspers, *Psychologie der Weltanschauungen* (Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1971).

situation. I bring to the fore an understanding of political guilt that, like Jaspers's, is distinct from criminal guilt, but still entails blame and the need for reparation. In order to be political, guilt must be also "outside," situated,<sup>8</sup> with different relevant characters respectively bearing witness and uncovering the "corpses in the room." This process facilitates an opening of the range of voices, issues, and claims occupying public debate, and undermines hierarchies of power so entrenched that they become invisible.

At the core of my inquiry is not the question of how many within the collectivity of alleged perpetrators may be innocent, but how those who have been wronged, still are. That guilt is often theorized from the perspective of what the privileged will accept is somewhat ironic, reinforcing the problem of structural injustice and privileging what the privileged will accept over what the unprivileged allege. Exculpating those who are mindlessly enjoying the fruits of past exploitation takes off the table of politics a powerful catalyst for change—guilt—both as an individual underpinning of broader processes of addressing past injustice that structurally remain in the present, and as a political device to be wielded by those who have endured that injustice.

In the first section I present political guilt as a situation by drawing on, but also stretching, the work of Jaspers and his typology. Section 2 moves beyond Jaspers to propose an adjusted understanding of political guilt, working through an analysis of the murder of George Floyd. Section 3 shows how this different understanding of guilt meets some of the concerns of those who eschew this category—and especially collective guilt—while retaining the centrality of the voices of the marginalized. Section 4 centers those voices while section 5 brings to the fore the connections between this understanding of political guilt and citizenship.

## 1. Guilt as a Situation, and a Typology of Guilt

Jaspers discusses guilt primarily as a situation. Our existence is embedded in a specific time and space, so that experiences such as suffering, guilt, and death cannot be understood apart from specific human existences, with all their entanglements. I take from this notion that guilt cannot be understood or exhausted as simply an inner experience: it has a context and encompasses a definite stage, and characters beyond one specific actor. As an inner response, guilt entails an emotional dynamic that remains inscrutable from the outside, and ultimately from political analysis. Yet as situation it involves an exhibition of suffering, the pondering of spectacles of suffering by those not enduring it, the structures of oppression that may be entangled with that suffering, and most importantly the testimonies, pleas, and arguments expressed by those wronged. In emphasizing structures of oppression and

<sup>8</sup>Following Améry, I take resentment to be a more strictly subjective phenomenon (*At the Mind's Limits*, 62).

the plea of those wronged, I depart from Jaspers’s own understanding of guilt as situation and appropriate this notion to further my own argument. One certainly can call oneself out, pretend one does not see, as in Baldwin’s room in one of the epigraphs to this article, or exculpate oneself by recourse to dynamics that Jade Larissa Schiff has described so well (thoughtlessness, misrecognition, bad faith).<sup>9</sup> But political guilt lives through the denial, as voiced by those who have been wronged, who work to build a political case against structures of oppression, and possibly sway bystanders within the situation to garner support for their case achieving results that take advantage of the undermining of power that guilt makes possible. If we take from Jaspers this characterization of guilt as both an inner and a social experience, then political guilt is not centered exclusively on the perpetrator or structural beneficiary: it also has to do with a dynamic of recognition between those injured and the perpetrators/beneficiaries, set in motion by historical reflections and debates embedded in a given polity. This is what is missing in Baldwin’s room, and what a centering of the discussion of guilt as situation can bring about.

Situations both limit and enable: actors within them cannot control them completely, but they can redraw the boundaries of what and who is included.<sup>10</sup> For Jaspers, guilt is a boundary situation, a defining and inescapable experience which, like death (the prospect of one’s death or the death of someone close), struggle, and suffering, brings an opportunity to reveal one’s character as an individual or society. While most individuals most of the time deny or evade them, these situations, when they are embraced as existential opportunities and hence become boundary situations, open new horizons. This qualification—that they be embraced as existential opportunities—is important because an accusation of guilt in itself does not suffice to set the process in motion. It must be received rather than denied or evaded.

Through boundary situations our certainties and existential shells crumble, creating opportunities to reshuffle the coordinates that orient us through the world. They also draw us to a place where we look at what happens to someone else as a possibility that “hits my own being.”<sup>11</sup> Boundary situations open new horizons for political action and solidarity.<sup>12</sup> If we look at the cascade of police brutality in 2020 in the United States, it did bring more generalized attention to questions of privilege, entrenched racism, and white fragility among “white moderates.”<sup>13</sup> Guilt as Jaspers defines it plays

<sup>9</sup>Jade Larissa Schiff, *Burdens of Political Responsibility: Narrative and the Cultivation of Responsiveness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

<sup>10</sup>Jaspers, *Philosophy*, 2:177–92.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>12</sup>Giunia Gatta, “Suffering and the Making of Politics: Perspectives from Jaspers and Camus,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 14, no. 4 (2015): 335–54.

<sup>13</sup>Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* (Birmingham: African Studies Center—University of Pennsylvania, 1963).

a part in this process, bringing some individuals who previously saw themselves as obviously innocent in all ways to start noticing themselves as privileged by virtue of their race, and to be ready to be held accountable for what they have and others do not.

The typology of guilt that Jaspers devised in the wake of the Holocaust had the goal of parsing the different ways in which most Germans were guilty in some way, but some more than others. He distinguished among criminal, political, moral, and metaphysical guilt, and his characterization of political guilt reveals its standing “in between” guilt that is attributed—in a court of law—and guilt (like moral and metaphysical guilt) that is taken on, in the privacy of one’s own conscience. Criminal guilt pertains to the perpetration of crimes that can be objectively proved, and which “violate unequivocal laws.”<sup>14</sup> Jaspers supported the Nuremberg trials and believed that what had occurred in concentration camps and during the Nazi regime violated laws that were unequivocal, if not codified. Jurisdiction over criminal guilt rests with formal courts. Political guilt, on the other hand, is attributed by victors in a conflict.<sup>15</sup> This is a realist understanding of the concept, which transfers the stage of the legal attribution of guilt on the basis of the law to the stage of political attribution of guilt on the basis of power.

But beyond this attribution “from the outside,” Jaspers believed that the German people ought to reflect on their role as a collectivity: “a people answers for its polity.”<sup>16</sup> While the primary targets of political guilt are the deeds of statesmen, the citizenry will also have to bear the consequences of those deeds, because those deeds define the order of the state by which they live. All Germans for Jaspers are collectively liable in a political sense because “we let such a regime rise among us.”<sup>17</sup> Within the constraints of a political attribution of guilt “from the outside” are the political reflections and debates sparked by the attribution, and the attempt to move the polity collectively to reckon with injustice.

There are two other kinds of guilt that, for Jaspers, arise autonomously and are for this reason best kept out of the public realm. Moral guilt is one, and some people Jaspers notes are beyond its pale. The Nazi hierarchy on trial in Nuremberg “are beyond moral guilt for as long as they do not feel it.”<sup>18</sup> For them the category of moral guilt is meaningless, so efforts to communicate with them on this are futile: “Force alone can deal with such men who live by force alone.”<sup>19</sup> But for those who do have a conscience, who pledged allegiance to Nazism out of fear, or went along unthinkingly out of misguided patriotism, the question of moral guilt arises. Jaspers saw the

<sup>14</sup>Jaspers, *Question of German Guilt*, 25.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

lectures he gave in 1945 and 1946, which became *The Question of German Guilt*, as an effort to solicit the issue with those among his fellow countrymen ready to hear it. Although it presents a typology of guilt, the book blurs the boundary between moral and political guilt, showing the politically productive ways in which the two kinds of guilt interact: how the first could enable political actions of redress, and the second could set the first in motion. In this sense, the book constitutes a political intervention: while moral guilt remains inscrutable, it can be elicited from the outside, and produce political effects. Jaspers offers a standard to determine moral guilt: insofar as German citizens could have made things better without significant danger for their lives, they should have. If they did not, they are morally guilty. While this guilt can only be adjudicated by one's own conscience, the dynamic is relevant politically, both in the sense that it can be elicited through political debate and because its consequences could shift what the community itself perceives its political guilt to be, and the kind of redress it is willing to undertake.

“Metaphysical guilt is the lack of absolute solidarity with the human being as such—an indelible claim beyond morally meaningful duty.”<sup>20</sup> My presence at a crime scene, or wherever a wrong is perpetrated, implicates me in this kind of guilt: “if it happens, and if I was there, and if I survive where the other is killed, I know from a voice within myself: I am guilty of being still alive.”<sup>21</sup> That we did not lose our life to protect the life of another does not make us morally guilty, but it makes us metaphysically guilty, and the source of our guilt is our “being there,” with other human beings we have failed for lack of “absolute solidarity.” This kind of guilt cannot, for Jaspers, be currency for legal, political, or even moral interaction. No one can accuse another of it for we are all enmeshed in it. It draws a normative horizon that remains constitutively unfulfillable.

Jaspers's typology modulates the amount and nature of guilt among German citizens, to assuage the concern that “where all are guilty, no one is.”<sup>22</sup> He draws expanding circles of guilt with criminal guilt at the core, and moral guilt surrounding and enabling it insofar as bystanders and beneficiaries were reluctant to risk their lives or lose their benefits by acting or speaking out against injustices committed. Political guilt is a broader circle of liability that involves all citizens as the beneficiaries of order within the state, while metaphysical guilt is the condition of all humans living in a world where grave injustices are committed while they survive. This image of circles encompasses everyone in the scope of metaphysical guilt while also marking a significant distinction among the different layers, especially in the innermost circles of criminal and moral guilt.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Hannah Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” in *Amor Mundi*, ed. James W. Bernauer (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 43.

The extent to which anyone falls within the different circles is not, I believe, a matter for the theorist to decide in absolute terms. The specific situation of injustice matters enormously. So, for example, in the US context we can—at the limit—comprehend Baldwin when he says he feels responsible for the death of the girls in the Birmingham bombings,<sup>23</sup> but certainly he feels far less responsible than structural beneficiaries of the situation, let alone those who put the bombs and those who supported them. Judges, as we have seen, will decide about criminal justice. But, even beyond what Jaspers himself concedes, all other layers constitute opportunities for political reflection and even contestation within the relevant polities prompted by the voices of the marginalized. Of course, who is marginalized is itself an object of political contestation.

## 2. Nuances of Political Guilt, and the Murder of George Floyd

Jaspers does not fully exploit his understanding of guilt as a situation, where the different circles are cocentered but also interrelated. He also does not appreciate the relations of power that mark most situations. I argue that if we follow the voices of the marginalized, we uncover a political dimension for all typologies of guilt, where guilt is attributed, contested, and responded to. When mobilized, claims of guilt exploit both the emotional and relatively private journey of a conscience, and the more public attribution that takes place in courts of law, or in less formal ways in the streets. In the political re-elaboration of the concept as situation, however, I highlight the primacy and distinctiveness of politics with respect to morality, psychology, and the law. This is less about the moralization and juridicization of political discourse than about drawing out the political dimension that always already underlies the moral and legal domain.

I illustrate how each type of guilt in Jaspers's typology acquires political relevance, and why moral and metaphysical guilt—as also political—can become claims that are fruitfully brought to the public realm. What Jaspers understands as political guilt, in its dimension of attribution “from the outside,” can be meaningfully attributed not just by the victors, but also by the marginalized. It becomes not just a way to confirm and consolidate power from an outside above, as he posited, but also to undermine it from below. I start with, and throughout the article return to, the murder of George Floyd. Something about this murder made it stand out from hundreds of examples of police brutality over the last few years, when African American children, men, and women have been brutalized or killed without justification. The vividness of the violence conveyed by the images certainly had a role in bringing up the question of guilt both among exasperated African Americans and among white moderates.

<sup>23</sup>Margaret Mead and James Baldwin, *A Rap on Race* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1971), 223.

If we take Floyd’s murder as a situation comprising Floyd himself, the policeman who killed him, the by-standing police officers, the American citizens witnessing the murder as it happened and those witnessing it through the videos circulated afterwards, including people all over the world, we can parse the different positionalities of each with respect to Jaspers’s typology of guilt, to see how all types of guilt emerging from the analysis are political in some way. Derek Chauvin has been convicted of murder, and the other officers at the scene of depriving Floyd of his civil rights. That criminal guilt is also political in these situations is shown by the contentious process of determining one charge or another, as by the frequency with which police brutality has gone unpunished, as by the disproportionate prosecution and incarceration of African Americans. The disproportionate criminal guilt of one group is the political guilt of another, those who stand to gain from white supremacy and its systems of punishment and reward.

Political guilt here refers to a system, deliberately created and nourished since the failure of Reconstruction, to keep too many African Americans from resources to accede to the ‘middle class’ (education, housing and mortgages, health care, public transportation), or even from the polls. Political guilt attaches to all American citizens who “let such a regime rise among us,”<sup>24</sup> those who have been silent in the face of Baldwin’s corpse in the room, and those who have been privileged by this system. Putting this injustice in terms of political guilt signals that action to redress it is a matter of justice, something due rather than something undertaken to assuage the conscience of those who embrace it. Unlike Jaspers’s understanding of political guilt, here it is not the victors adjudicating it. Rather, it is those formerly victimized demanding change and building coalitions to secure a hold on power that previously escaped them. Moral guilt as Jaspers defines it has a role in this, and its indicting of the white moderates staying silent in the face of injustice, choosing not to see it, refraining from acting against it, points to significant political faults. We can presume this moral/political guilt to attach particularly to American citizens, but also to others around the world with less agency in the American situation, but still a voice to denounce white supremacy in the United States and beyond.

There are several ways in which we can see metaphysical guilt at play in this situation. As we have seen, metaphysical guilt implicates the citizens who were there when the crime was committed. Jaspers calls this type of guilt “an indelible claim beyond morally meaningful duty.”<sup>25</sup> At its worst, it takes the shape of survivor’s guilt among those who were present at the scene and did what they could, like Darnella Frazier, the seventeen-year-old who filmed the slow torture of Floyd and has lived with the trauma since. At its best (and significantly prompted by the images Frazier filmed), it calls on the conscience of anyone watching—whatever their political

<sup>24</sup>Jaspers, *Question of German Guilt*, 55.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 65.

embroilments with the situation. Here, we take “if I was there” less literally to include knowing about the fact, or witnessing it from afar. In this more constructive sense, metaphysical guilt points to an ever-expanding normative horizon that motivates one to action even in the apparent absence of their own criminal, moral, or political guilt, even beyond the boundaries of states and specific political commitments. In this sense its political potential is significant.

Guilt that arises from political traumas ought to be, and often already is, an object of contention within political communities, especially those more marked by legacies of racism and colonialism. Using the concept of guilt allows one to keep in view both the accusatory element attributed “from the outside,” without forgetting the importance of the internal dimension. Insofar as guilt is understood as a situation and can fulfill its emancipatory promise, it needs both. Not in the sense that the primary goal and function of the accusation is to cater to the feelings of the guilty, or that the structurally disadvantaged group ought to articulate their claims with a concern for the effect they will have on the sense of guilt of the powerful. This would mean, once again, centering the privileged experience and yielding to white fragility. Rather, the discomfort that the stories of those previously oppressed may create within the privileged ought to be embraced by the latter, the hurt recognized, and the narrative of a country built on equality and human dignity rewritten to acknowledge not only the oppression, but also the gas-lighting effect of that rhetoric on a significant proportion of the population.<sup>26</sup>

It is crucial for this process to be shared, situated, and contentious. This contesting and situating of guilt is centered on that corpse in the room that Baldwin discusses, or more concretely the one on the streets of Minneapolis, a corpse that embodies all the policies enacted by white supremacy, and structures the space for the contention. One ought not underestimate the importance of seeing this body, and linking it to an account of the racist policies that turned it into a corpse, in holding a community accountable. All parties are called into question: those injured, perpetrators, structural beneficiaries, and bystanders, though the injured take on a primary role in articulating what the remedies might be. The language of guilt bears the advantage of bringing those accused to participate but yielding the floor and the initiative to those from whom they have taken space and words in the first place.

Guilt thus understood is a wound to the polity that pierces a narrative of civilization (and US history) as a reality centered on white experience to the exclusion and detriment of others. As Baldwin reminds us, it pierces the

<sup>26</sup>Sonali Chakravarti notes a similar contribution to the rewriting of histories of oppression in victims’ testimony in the context of truth and reconciliation commissions. “Agonism and the Power of Victim’s Testimony,” in *Theorizing Post-conflict Reconciliation: Agonism, Restitution and Repair*, ed. Alexander Hirsch (London: Routledge, 2013), 11–25.

“fantastic,” “pathological” rationalizations that the white man had to devise to maintain at the same time the narrative of a glorious and progressive civilization, and the reality of the exclusions and dehumanization that civilization entailed.<sup>27</sup> Yielding to the wound, then, by way of “the past we step into and how we repair it”<sup>28</sup> opens vistas to a more complete account of the past and horizon for the future for the country as a whole. Political guilt as is being articulated among those wronged does not demand literal “punishment” for those who “inherit” structures of oppression and still benefit from them,<sup>29</sup> but rather the opening of a space for confronting, acknowledging, repairing, and undermining relations of power. The precise nature of the repairing is for a political process that centers those it previously marginalized to determine. A sustained discussion of reparations both in formal political institutions and in the public sphere would be an excellent starting point.

This notion of political guilt works particularly in the context of race relations in the United States and in postcolonial settings where the lines of oppression are not equivocal. But even in contexts where these lines are more ambiguous, the typology of guilt is a useful tool to parse the standing of each individual or group with respect to their role as both victims and perpetrators.

### 3. Guilt, Shame, and Responsibility

My appropriation of Jaspers’s typology responds to a tendency to avoid the language of guilt among many contemporary thinkers. Some prefer the notion of shame, or responsibility, some resist guilt being tied to sentiments and emotions, many take issue with its application to a collectivity, and the indiscriminate blame it entails. In this section, I illustrate how my understanding of guilt responds to some of these concerns and show that in frowning upon guilt, many focus on those who would be or feel guilty, rather than on those injured. For example, when Bernard Williams writes that “shame can understand guilt, but guilt cannot understand itself,” he means that shame allows one to understand their relations to the deeds that caused guilt and to rebuild “the self that has done those things.”<sup>30</sup> He is focusing on the self of the guilty. If our concern is for the moral emotions experienced by the guilty and ashamed self, and its reconstruction, he may be right about

<sup>27</sup>James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son—Stranger in the Village,” in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 127.

<sup>28</sup>Amanda Gorman, “The Hill We Climb,” inaugural poem, January 21, 2021, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wz4YuEvJ3y4>.

<sup>29</sup>Farid Abdel-Nour, “National Responsibility,” *Political Theory* 31, no. 5 (October 2003): 705.

<sup>30</sup>Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 93–94.

shame being the better, overlooked emotion, and guilt the overemphasized one. But if we are concerned with political injustice, when reparation is more urgent than the moral self-understanding of the perpetrators or structural beneficiaries, then guilt might be useful.

As current research in psychology points out,<sup>31</sup> shame has more to do with the specific being of the agent, and guilt more with what has been done to someone who has suffered the deed. Shame keeps the focus on oneself, rather than on the hurt one may have caused, and hence in psychology guilt is being rehabilitated as adaptive, constructive, and helpful to mend relationships because it transcends the focus on oneself to look at the harm done and how to repair it.<sup>32</sup> Shame also makes it easier to deflect blame. Lilian Alweiss suggests that shame is best equipped to capture the appropriate reaction of Germans who did not actively take part in the persecution of Jews: “shame, unlike guilt, expresses an *indirect* or *impersonal* responsibility based on identification with a particular people.”<sup>33</sup> I may feel shame as a German for the Holocaust or as an Israeli for the oppression of Palestinians, even as I can prove I am not guilty. But by emphasizing the indirectness and impersonality of one’s implication, one effectively excepts oneself from the guilty community via shame, and recasts oneself in a position that deserves less blame or no blame at all, in an attempt to place oneself outside the “situation” of guilt but also outside the possibility to respond to it politically.

Some theorists object to the notion of collective guilt and prefer the notion of responsibility: since guilt by definition singles out, any notion of collective guilt is for them nonsensical at best and dangerous at worst.<sup>34</sup> It would be absurd to put all Germans on trial. The result would be failure to discriminate among Hitler, his inner circle, an SS agent, and someone who put their life in danger to save Jews or any persecuted category. But, as we have seen, Jaspers’s typology is aimed precisely at discriminating among these cases. And attributions of guilt—especially in the context of racial injustice in the United States—occur in a political space where the goal is acknowledgment,

<sup>31</sup>June Price Tangney, “Shame and Guilt in Interpersonal Relationships,” in *Self-Conscious Emotions: The Psychology of Shame, Guilt, Embarrassment, and Pride*, ed. J. P. Tangney and K. W. Fischer (New York: Guilford, 1995), 114–39; Maria Miceli and Cristiano Castelfranchi, “Reconsidering the Differences between Shame and Guilt,” *Europe’s Journal of Psychology* 14, no. 3 (August 2018): 710–13.

<sup>32</sup>For an insightful blurring of the lines between shame and guilt, see N. Gausel and R. Brown, “Shame and Guilt—Do They Really Differ in Their Focus of Evaluation? Wanting to Change the Self and Behavior in Response to Ingroup Immorality,” *Journal of Social Psychology* 152, no. 5 (2012): 547–67.

<sup>33</sup>Lilian Alweiss, “Collective Guilt and Responsibility,” *European Journal of Political Theory* 2, no. 3 (July 2003): 314, emphasis original.

<sup>34</sup>Arendt, “Personal Responsibility under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2003), 17–48; Abdel-Nour, “National Responsibility.”

debate, and possible reparation of structural injustice, rather than punishment of individuals. It is a matter of the political implications of moral and maybe metaphysical guilt, not of criminal proceedings.<sup>35</sup> The target is not a whole culture, nor the random punishment of members of a certain class or nation. These attributions will not fall with the same weight on those who committed crimes, devised the structures of oppression, or passively benefited from those structures respectively. But they do entail a measure of blame for all, roughly commensurate with the benefits and power enjoyed as the injustice was occurring, especially if the pleas for redress are met with the denial that one has indeed benefited.

Arendt was concerned that the guilty feelings of those who were relatively innocent (in Germany during the 1930s and 40s, or among white liberals in the United States in the 1960s), when taken literally and not metaphorically, would “only lead into a phony sentimentality in which all real issues are obscured.”<sup>36</sup> Her concern was that this self-flagellation would be unproductive and possibly preclude a genuine assumption of responsibility. This valid concern has parallels with the Floyd murder: Did many whites sentimentalize the murder and reduce it to an unfortunate single occurrence? But the problem is not sentimentalization, as centering feeling or emotion, but rather idleness. Arendt was reluctant to allow emotions and their language into the political realm. Part of my argument is that the language of emotions and feelings might make a dent in structural injustice and move individuals to action and public discourse in the direction of redress, allowing us to look into the political potential of the “metaphor” of guilt, listening to the language with which marginalized groups may articulate their plea without dismissing it or policing its tone. Of course, even as it centers the claims of the wronged, accusations of guilt span out to hit those who have wronged or benefited from structures of oppression, but the goal remains addressing past injustice and doing so in terms set by those wronged, not by the perpetrators or structural beneficiaries. We could see the Fifteen Percent Pledge initiative, and the revival of HR 40 (a bill aimed at discussing reparations for slavery and discrimination),<sup>37</sup> as opportunities for redress set in motion by a convergence of demands and willingness to respond to them in the wake of Floyd’s murder.

Arendt’s qualms with guilt were not just about its leading to idleness, but also about the particular kind of action it may result in: direct reparations.

<sup>35</sup>Except, obviously, where criminal guilt is involved.

<sup>36</sup>Arendt, “Collective Responsibility,” 43.

<sup>37</sup>For decades it failed to be discussed in committee but was reintroduced by Representative Sheila Jackson Lee with more than two hundred cosponsors. In April of 2021 the Judiciary Committee voted to move the bill to the House floor. See <https://15percentpledge.org>, accessed March 1, 2023 and Human Rights Watch, “Historic Progress on US Slavery Reparations Bill,” April 15, 2021, available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/04/15/historic-progress-us-slavery-reparations-bill>.

She and her husband, Heinrich Blücher, thought that Germany's response in the aftermath of World War II had to entail empowerment of Jews anywhere by way of a constitutionally granted right to citizenship and, in general, support for displaced persons.<sup>38</sup> Such empowerment was to be aimed not at German Jews in particular, or the victims of the Holocaust and their families, but at Jews in general. Arendt and Blücher deliberately avoided the language of reparations. Indeed, when they applied for the pensions that the German government was awarding to German Jews as "restitution," both strikingly referred to the money they received as "gifts."<sup>39</sup> Resisting any broadening of the concept of guilt to the political realm, and narrowing it down to its criminal dimension, Arendt believed that the work of justice in this juridical sense had to be focused on the doers, not the victims.<sup>40</sup> I believe the ease with which Arendt lets go of the notion of victimhood, without getting into the psychological complexities of her personal history, is tied to her resistance to traditional understandings of power, and her portrayal of politics as the realm where the asymmetries that social and economic power drives among citizens recede into the background. In politics properly understood, there are/ought not to be, for her, victims and perpetrators. But as long as there are oppression and structural injustice, the language of guilt may have its uses.

A number of theorists have followed Arendt in exploring responsibility as an alternative to guilt, such as Iris Marion Young,<sup>41</sup> Andrew Schaap,<sup>42</sup> Schiff,<sup>43</sup> Antonio Vazquez-Arroyo,<sup>44</sup> and Farid Abdel-Nour.<sup>45</sup> Young sees responsibility as better equipped to address questions of structural injustice, which are hard to pin on specific guilty individuals. Being politically responsible means for Young monitoring the work of institutions in our society that, often in our name, perpetrate injustice, and ensuring they are not "grossly harmful," keeping public spaces open where citizens can confront one another.<sup>46</sup> This is a fundamental component of any sound political community, and especially any democracy. But I find it problematic that Young believes that if we fail in taking up our responsibility, we are not

<sup>38</sup>Hannah Arendt and Karl Jaspers, *Correspondence, 1926–1969* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1993), 52.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 470.

<sup>40</sup>Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 6–9.

<sup>41</sup>Iris Marion Young and Martha Nussbaum, *Responsibility for Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>42</sup>Andrew Schaap, "Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility: Arendt, Jaspers and the Resonance of the 'German Question' in Politics of Reconciliation," *Political Studies* 49, no. 4 (September 2001): 749–66.

<sup>43</sup>Jade Larissa Schiff, *Burdens of Political Responsibility*.

<sup>44</sup>Antonio Y. Vazquez-Arroyo, *Political Responsibility: Responding to Predicaments of Power* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

<sup>45</sup>Farid Abdel-Nour, "National Responsibility."

<sup>46</sup>Young and Nussbaum, *Responsibility for Justice*, 88.

blameworthy. Political responsibility as she characterizes it is an important feature of a forward-looking understanding of citizenship. But often citizenship is as much about looking backward as it is about looking forward, especially for those who have suffered oppression and exclusion from citizenship. Looking backward may very well bring about accusations, recriminations, resentments, and the demand for reparations. It means talking about the corpse(s).

Alweiss suggests that it is unlikely that responsibility, without blame attached, can sustain the burden of reparation: “If we hold fast to the idea of reparations, then we have to argue that the Federal Republic of Germany—which was established in 1949—is guilty,”<sup>47</sup> for it is they who would have to pay reparations. If we “exempt collective responsibility from the notion of blame, as Arendt seeks to do, then it can no longer necessarily do the work of reconciliation.”<sup>48</sup> While Arendt and Young share my concern for opening spaces for political discussion, overdrawn the difference between guilt and responsibility, neglecting the distinctions that Jaspers’s typology allows us to draw, is bound to hide the ways in which they reinforce one another. The language of responsibility also displaces the claims of those wronged in Schiff’s otherwise very insightful *Burdens of Political Responsibility*. She analyzes the processes by which we come to care (or not) about the suffering of others, identifying thoughtlessness, bad faith, and misrecognition as the main impediments to such care. These can be overcome (or reinforced) through the stories we tell ourselves and others about suffering. For Schiff, responsiveness is a prerequisite both for assuming responsibility for suffering and for being conscious of guilt. Yet Schiff’s focus on those responding can feel claustrophobic, as if responsiveness happens solipsistically within the responders themselves. These are the burdens mentioned in her title, and they appear to be largely self-imposed. There is no adversarial, agonistic dynamic through which the victims of injustice articulate their grievances.<sup>49</sup>

My approach is more political than Schiff’s in two ways. First, I am more interested in the implication of one’s own community, and particularly the deployment of the power structures of one’s state, in the creation of the injustice and the suffering. Second, I consider guilt and responsibility as matters to be probed not in the silence of one’s own conscience, nor from the point of view of an impartial observer, but in the back and forth of reasons, pleas, and claims that characterizes political spaces.<sup>50</sup> Schiff’s running example is sweatshops, and one’s indirect support of a system that exploits workers. But racial injustice in the United States and postcolonial injustice around

<sup>47</sup> Alweiss, “Collective Guilt and Responsibility,” 311–12.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>49</sup> Schiff, *Burdens of Political Responsibility*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> Sentiments, or sentimentality as critics call it, are a fundamental part of the exchange: they provide a motive for engagement and often a way for the participants to find some common ground on bases other than intellectual agreement.

the world implicate the citizens of those states in a more direct way than the structures of contemporary global capitalism. They are tied to existing *demoi*, within which citizens can deliberate in order to try to rectify these injustices as a matter of politics, not individual moral scruples, vengeance, or criminal proceedings. This guilt is not a solipsistic feeling, but a complex situation comprising shifting dynamics between those who are beginning to question their exclusive hold over power and those who do not yet have it but are demanding some of it. Importantly, letting go of the power with which one has been privileged entails not only a rational assessment, but a denting of identity, not exactly a punishment, but a wound, if we will.<sup>51</sup>

The absence of blame also figures in Schaap's reading of collective responsibility in Arendt and Jaspers. He suggests that both conceive of collective responsibility as "a liability predicated on political association that does not impute blame."<sup>52</sup> In line with Young and Arendt, Schaap notes that the attribution of political guilt is likely to result in either denial or sentimentality in those to whom guilt is attributed and thereby complicate a genuine reflection on collective responsibility. In appropriating and modulating Jaspers's notion of political guilt I note that when the victims of injustice speak, they often speak the language of guilt, and the claims they bring forth are not just invitations to consider,<sup>53</sup> but demands posed to be answered without deflection. The oppressed attribute guilt, and the accusation ought to be pondered thoroughly. In my reading, guilt is compatible with, and indeed instrumental to, responsiveness. It can be one of those crises that Schiff discusses as spurring responsiveness, and Jaspers calls boundary situations. But it is not (only) a crisis within the conscience of perpetrators or structural beneficiaries, but also within a polis brought about by the accusations of parts of it previously unheard. Guilt also acts, perhaps more than responsibility and shame, as a prompt not only to take something on, but also to give something up (voice, space, privilege), in order to rectify a situation that has advantaged oneself and victimized others. This rectification is then regarded as the repayment of a debt rather than something supererogatory which, if neglected, carries no blame.

Looking at guilt as political situation shifts the focus from what a privileged person internalizes, to what kind of political claim is made against them by a

<sup>51</sup>Wendy Brown appropriates Nietzsche's indictment of guilt and resentment in "Wounded Attachments," *Political Theory* 21, no. 3 (1993): 390–410. While I find her diagnostics about the danger that attachment to identity reinscribes subjection insightful, her wish for a politics freed from resentment and guilt leads to too quick a dismissal of the injury, and the demand to overcome resentment falls disproportionately on the powerless and marginalized. I ask whether there can be a path to emancipation that passes through guilt rather than bypassing it.

<sup>52</sup>Schaap, "Guilty Subjects," 749.

<sup>53</sup>Schiff, *Burdens of Political Responsibility*, 26.

nonprivileged person. When we focus on those claims, new political questions and ways of looking at citizenship and national narratives open up.<sup>54</sup>

#### 4. “And Yet It Moves”: What Remains of Guilt Evaded

Neglecting the language of guilt used by those wronged, and rejecting their call to look backwards—even when it is done for philosophically and politically sound reasons—takes the ground out from under their claims, ground that could instead become ground for solidarity. It cuts out the possibility of creating a shared situation out of their accusations. In the legitimate concern not to consider any oblivious citizen a criminal, something remains unaccounted for: the legitimate sense of injustice and betrayal felt by those who systematically lost friends, family, opportunity, and, in the broadest and deepest sense, a home. It is often those who have suffered injustice who extend the purview of guilt beyond strict criminal responsibility, and it is to their claims that I turn.

Améry embraces the notion of the collective guilt of Germans from the perspective of the victim, in his essay “Resentments.”<sup>55</sup> As a Jewish member of the Belgian resistance, during the twelve years in which Nazism reigned in Germany he had to assume the collective guilt of Germans, guarding himself from all of them, to ensure his survival. What he calls the inverted pyramid of political guilt, at whose vertex stands the SS man who beat him on the head with a shovel handle when he did not work fast enough in the camp, is still driving him “with its point into the ground”<sup>56</sup> with the weight of an entire people behind the SS man. Améry lays claim to his resentment as the moral truth of the situation, certainly over those closer to the vertex of the pyramid, but also over German society’s demand for reconciliation and its own survival. He is aware of his positionality within the situation, as he is of the innocence and heroism of some brave German resisters, but his resentment does not breed a demand for revenge. Rather, he demands from those who were not immediately guilty an acknowledgment that the Nazi years were as constitutive of German identity as the rest of its cultural ancestors.

Liliana Segre, a Holocaust survivor and tireless activist on behalf of historical memory and those marginalized, does not spare from guilt those who looked on as she was taken from her home as a girl with her father in Milan, first to prison and then to Auschwitz. Those who looked on failed as citizens to speak up against that injustice. They are guilty. Speaking out against the deportation of neighbors, friends, or colleagues would have

<sup>54</sup>In Hirsch’s edited volume *Theorizing Post-conflict Reconciliation*, most of the authors draw attention to these processes.

<sup>55</sup>Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits*, 62–81.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 71.

likely earned nothing but a futile death sentence, but—beside mattering to those on behalf of whom those words would have been spoken—if some did, that implicates in some way those who did not.<sup>57</sup>

In the poem at the beginning of *If This Is a Man*, Levi admonishes his readers, whom he presumes safe in their homes, to consider those imprisoned and dehumanized in concentration camps. He commands them to remember that “this has been,” to teach it to their children and keep the words with them always, or else

May your house fall down,  
May illness make you helpless,  
And your children turn their eyes from you.<sup>58</sup>

Levi broadens the circle of culpability to those who would deny that the Holocaust happened, as well as those who prefer not to think about it. Should they endure in their obliviousness, they would indeed be guilty, and deserving not only of blame, but of such punishment as he lists.

In their 1963 exchange, Malcolm X and Baldwin disagree on several things, but agree on the fact that the “white man” is guilty. The corpse in the room in one of this article’s epigraphs is the past the nation refuses to address. Baldwin’s words perfectly embody the understanding of guilt as a situation comprising differently positioned individuals. To draw out his analogy, there are hundreds of thousands of black corpses that lie on American soil. There is someone who is guilty of having turned those bodies into corpses. Someone literally murdered them and most likely did not incur criminal guilt in 1750, in 1850, in 1950, and in 2020. But the suggestion here is that even those who have not physically killed the bodies, but now refuse to talk about them in the “room” that is US politics, acquire political guilt, cherishing a democratic space deceptively lively with white voices but ignoring Black calls to address racial injustice. Baldwin’s analogy gives space and situation to guilt, which is both inside the perpetrator and outside, in the room, leveraged by those who have been wronged, and defining everyone in it.

Baldwin appears to be more interested in guilt “outside” than “inside,” as apparent in his essay “The White Man’s Guilt,” where white (inner) guilt is mostly an obstacle to action and acknowledgment, whereas the attribution of guilt by Baldwin to “the white man” unfolds throughout. He notes that in the dialogue that is to come the contribution of the Black man “fatally

<sup>57</sup>Metaphysically, in Jaspers’s language. For a testimony in English, see Segre’s speech at the American School of Milan on January 8, 2018, at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FN0tejjL4tc>; for a reference on her thoughts on guilt and indifference, see <https://eurojewcong.org/news/communities-news/italy/liliana-segre-champion-against-hatred-and-indifference-turns-90/>

<sup>58</sup>Levi, *Complete Works*, 7.

contains an accusation.<sup>59</sup> In “Words of a Native Son,” Baldwin again refers to a “corpse in the room” around which his play *Blues for Mister Charlie* pivots. Here, Baldwin suggests, no one is innocent, Black or white. But while he takes on his own responsibility, he deplores the apathy of whites with respect to the matter. While “not interested in anybody’s guilt”<sup>60</sup> in the sense of that idle guilt that also concerned Arendt, he is interested in overcoming apathy and the lies upon which it is built. In a conversation with Margaret Mead, Mead rejects the notion of guilt in favor of responsibility, along lines we have seen in Young’s work. Baldwin is recalcitrant, at times identifying responsibility as “useful guilt.”<sup>61</sup> But he does not conceive of responsibility as only present or future looking: in the face of Mead’s objections he declares himself responsible for the Birmingham bombings, for not having done enough to prevent them, in a way that echoes Jaspers’s notion of metaphysical guilt. Yet while we may all be responsible for suffering in this way, there is a specific way in which he accuses whites of being “impaled” by the historical lies they tell themselves, and of still regarding the danger in which Blacks live their lives as a condition for their safety.<sup>62</sup>

Though Coates at times seems to avoid the language of guilt,<sup>63</sup> his narrative of white supremacy identifies it as a moral and material debt to be reckoned with, for which contemporary Americans ought to pay.<sup>64</sup> He chronicles the dispossession of Blacks at the hands of the white power structure after the Civil War, from dispossession of the vote, to dispossession of the land, to the predatory lending practices that brought many African Americans to work multiple jobs only to be left with no home or one severely depreciated by racist zoning laws.<sup>65</sup> Coates refers to the unwillingness of contemporary America to come to terms with its past as if, having run up a credit card bill and pledging to charge no more, it would be surprised that the balance would not disappear. He points out that “a nation outlives its generations,” and “if Thomas Jefferson’s genius still matters, so does his taking of Sally Heming’s body.”<sup>66</sup>

<sup>59</sup>James Baldwin, “The White Man’s Guilt,” in *Collected Essays*, 722–27.

<sup>60</sup>James Baldwin, “Words of a Native Son,” in *Collected Essays*, 713.

<sup>61</sup>Mead and Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*, 67.

<sup>62</sup>“1984 James Baldwin Interview Hampshire College” (United States: Find Center Beta, 2015); Mead and Baldwin, *A Rap on Race*.

<sup>63</sup>Meerah Powell, “Ta-Nehisi Coates: A Discussion on Power, Race, and Getting Past White Guilt,” *Daily Emerald*, February 7, 2017.

<sup>64</sup>Coates, “The Case for Reparations.” On this see also Joel Olson, *The Abolition of White Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>65</sup>Clarissa Hayward has documented how the Federal Housing Administration and zoning laws kept most African Americans from home ownership in the second half of the twentieth century, depriving them not only of a fundamental component of the “American dream,” but also of the most important investment in most households. Clarissa Hayward, *How Americans Make Race: Stories, Institutions, Spaces* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>66</sup>Coates, “The Case for Reparations.”

Nor is the “balance” — the debt (the guilt?) — of which Coates speaks merely a moral or political one: in the seven “cotton” states, one third of white income was derived from slavery and all over America, slavery constituted the economic foundation of “its great experiment in democracy.”<sup>67</sup> The plunder continued after Reconstruction and with the New Deal, which excluded the vast majority of African Americans by way of the exclusion of farm and domestic workers from social security, and with the G. I. Bill, whose administration by the states actually helped to increase the gap between the wealth of whites and Blacks. As Coates put it, the United States has a “long tradition of . . . actively punishing Black success,” and in the mid-twentieth century it elevated that tradition to federal policy: the Black/white wealth gap is not a problem of unregulated capitalism, but was engineered as such.<sup>68</sup> Coates suggests as reparations at least a “full acceptance of our collective biography and its consequences.”<sup>69</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones puts forth concrete strategies to repair the damage done over the centuries by white supremacy, beginning with heavy investments in those areas where that system created more damage: inner cities and other predominantly Black areas.<sup>70</sup>

The focus on forward-looking responsibility is inadequate to understand white privilege and neglects what Young calls “background conditions,”<sup>71</sup> those structural phenomena that place each of us in hierarchies of power. It fails to see that those hierarchies make shared ideas of justice problematic, contingent, and laboriously achieved—if at all—after much contestation.<sup>72</sup> It focuses initiatives for redress with the powerful (those in a position to take responsibility) rather than calling for their silence and possible retreat from center stage, so that the less powerful can speak and act in a space where the privileged are present, but their privilege is in abeyance. Young’s and Schiff’s notion of responsibility, if my reading is correct, spares the powerful from fault or blame, while also asking them to be the main agents for redress. They are the ones who seem to decide that an injustice is taking place and what should be done about it.

## 5. Guilt and Citizenship

Jaspers’s work on guilt in the aftermath of World War II, despite his long-standing distrust of politics, could be read as an ode to an active, engaged,

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid.

<sup>70</sup>Nikole Hannah-Jones, “What Is Owed,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 2020.

<sup>71</sup>Young and Nussbaum, *Responsibility for Justice*, chaps. 1 and 4.

<sup>72</sup>On the difficulty of establishing shared understandings of reconciliation, let alone justice, see Adrian Little, “Rhetorics of Reconciliation: Shifting Conflict Paradigms in Northern Ireland,” in Hirsch, *Theorizing Post-conflict Reconciliation*.

inquiring understanding of citizenship. It is crucial for citizens in the modern state to think and be critical of any regime.<sup>73</sup> He emphasizes the need to talk with each other with openness and readiness for a genuine exchange of insights, and the need to try and see things from one another’s perspective.<sup>74</sup> Jaspers shows us the kind of reflective attitude towards oneself and others without which neither responsibility nor guilt could arise. My contribution highlights the role of the attribution of guilt, whether implicit or explicit, as not just a form of confirmation of power, as Jaspers suggests happens in the case of victors’ justice, but also as a way to undermine it. For both Jaspers and Baldwin, insofar as it delineates a bond, connecting citizens of a state (especially in political guilt) or humanity as a whole (in metaphysical guilt), guilt identifies debts to be fulfilled and responsibilities to be met at a variety of levels. It is a situation generating political contestation rather than just a sense of inadequacy within the perpetrators and resentment within the victims.

A white male in the United States today benefits from configurations of power that made it much easier for his parents or grandparents to build wealth and consolidate their socioeconomic position than it was for Black families.<sup>75</sup> This is primarily the guilt of those who set up the system to disadvantage a part of the population, but it also becomes the political guilt of those who still benefit from that system, unless they do what they can to make it more just. On one side are those who are oblivious to their privilege and do not see themselves as the victorious party in a bloody, century-old struggle. On the other are those who have been on the losing side, and still bear the wounds. Guilt, a problematic, loaded, and in many ways “unsightly” emotion might contribute to undermining the power of one side and strengthening that of the other. Its equalizing potential is particularly relevant when the parties to the discussion are peers only in the most formal and abstract of ways. Guilt, Jaspers reminds us, is enmeshed in relations of power that many theorists prefer to bracket out of the public realm, but which exist nonetheless.<sup>76</sup>

The expression of outrage in the face of past cruelty and injustice is useful to a process of reconstitution of the public space, and impossible, unjust, and unwise to ignore and exclude from public debate as Schaap and Arendt

<sup>73</sup>Jaspers, *Question of German Guilt*, 2.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 5–6.

<sup>75</sup>Hayward, *How Americans Make Race*; Coates, “The Case for Reparations”; Hannah-Jones, “What Is Owed”; Christopher J. Lebron, *The Color of Our Shame: Race and Justice in Our Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Christopher Lebron, *The Making of Black Lives Matter: A Brief History of an Idea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

<sup>76</sup>Jaspers, *Question of German Guilt*, 28. See also Charles W. Mills, “White Ignorance,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13–38; Charles W. Mills, *Black Rights/White Wrongs* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

suggest that we do.<sup>77</sup> To demand that the accusations and moral indictments moved by the victims be filtered through an ethic that embraces a concern for the world rather than specific victims<sup>78</sup> is politically crippling, besides assuming a common world that many victims (and even perpetrators) do not consider as such.<sup>79</sup> There is certainly a danger in using guilt politically, piercing that veil that Arendt would have covered feelings and emotions unfit for public display. Certainly if guilt remains within the perpetrators, unrelated to the voice of those they may have hurt, it runs the risk of acting in the same extreme and ultimately unpolitical way in which suffering acted for Arendt in the French Revolution.<sup>80</sup> But if guilt is understood as a political situation, and probed, ascertained, questioned, and even “compromised” in the *agon*, it can be a force for recognition, equalization, and reconciliation.

The goal is the creation of an environment where one will speak of the corpse. There will not be a single narrative about who killed the individual lying in the room, but there will be talking. Guilt as reconstructed in this article is not a way to conclude the discussion, but to start it. For criminal guilt, there is a stage when appeals are exhausted, and the verdict is final. Such finality escapes the other dimensions of guilt, and especially that of political guilt. But the contestation of guilt in forums other than criminal tribunals can be extremely productive. Truth and reconciliation commissions have fulfilled an important role in many countries’ transition to more just political regimes, but even in less formal ways, political reflections about guilt can point the path to reparation and reconciliation. The process that led to Germany paying reparations to the state of Israel, for example, was contested in both countries. Concerns in Israel were that reparations would entail the laundering of German conscience through German money. But the billions helped to triple Israel’s GDP over the twelve years of the process, and “launched Germany’s reckoning with itself.”<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup>Schaap, “Guilty Subjects and Political Responsibility.”

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 750, 753.

<sup>79</sup>Every morning, upon waking up, Améry sees his Auschwitz number on his forearm and is thrown back to the camp, losing his faith in the world. Meanwhile, his neighbor greets him in friendly way: “*Bonjour, Monsieur*; I doff my hat, *Bonjour, Madame*. But Madame and Monsieur are separated by interstellar distances; for yesterday a Madam looked away when they led off a Monsieur, and through the barred windows of the departing car a Monsieur viewed a Madam as if she were a stone angel from a bright and stern heaven, which is forever closed for the Jew.” *At the Mind’s Limits*, 95.

<sup>80</sup>Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Penguin Books, 1963), chap. 2.

<sup>81</sup>Coates, “The Case for Reparations”; Tom Segev, *The Seventh Million* (New York: Macmillan, 2000). Segev’s account shows the centrality of the previously persecuted in setting the terms of discourses of reparation: Israeli figures had an important role in drafting multiple speeches by German chancellor Adenauer to the Bundestag and the German public.

## Conclusion

I have applied Jaspers’s framework to a relatively easy case, where structural injustice has consolidated over centuries with clear lines. But his typology could still be helpful in cases where victimization follows more complex paths, such as wars fought along ethnic lines or other situations in which victims have also been perpetrators, and where the vectors of violence and harm are more difficult to parse out. In the aftermath of civil war, criminal guilt can be problematic to ascertain, as shown by the choice of truth and reconciliation commissions to take a more political and less legalistic approach. One could posit that moral and political guilt are fundamentally already at play in such commissions, in which individuals as part of the groups in conflict may at different times reflect on their role as victims and perpetrators. An acknowledgment of one’s role in the strife as perpetrator or even bystander, as well as seeking recognition for one’s victimization, are crucial steps in the process of conflict transformation. We could imagine this situation as a room with multiple corpses, in which the accusatory glances intersect but in which the goal is still that of reopening up a public space for contestation and possibly reconciliation.

In my amendment to Jaspers’s framework, all guilt becomes political in some way, and arguments about responsibilities, and what can be done to ameliorate a given situation, become arguments to be wielded in a political setting. The effectiveness of these claims and kinds of argument will depend on the context, and because politics is ultimately an environment in which motives and sincerity remain inscrutable, it is impossible to assess definitively the impact of guilt on actions taken or not taken. There are mechanisms that effectively insulate some from the burden (and potentially emancipatory effects) of guilt: the dehumanization of the people one has victimized, or regarding oneself as the victim. In many German households after World War II, guilt was displaced by the suffering the German people endured in those years, and white guilt is also often rejected by claiming one’s own victimization. One “does not feel that he shares a responsibility; he looks on, is politically inactive, works and acts in blind obedience. He has an easy conscience in obeying and an easy conscience about his nonparticipation in the decisions and acts of those in power. He tolerates the political reality as an alien fact.”<sup>82</sup> But this ground of complacent privilege is, Jaspers writes, where democracy perishes and dictatorship flourishes. While citizens as individuals do not have a say in which one will prevail, they bear responsibility for the consequences of their disengagement. In Baldwin’s words:

(white people) can scarcely dare to open a dialogue which must, if it is honest, become a personal confession—a cry for help and healing, which is, really, I think, the basis of all dialogues—and, on the other

<sup>82</sup>Jaspers, *Question of German Guilt*, 29.

hand, the black man can scarcely dare to open a dialogue which must, if it is honest, become a personal confession which, fatally, contains an accusation. And yet, if neither of us cannot do this, each of us will perish in those traps in which we have struggled for so long.<sup>83</sup>

Neglecting the entanglement of moral and political guilt, and rejecting the language of guilt, impoverishes our political landscape, undermines the claims of those wronged, and deprives beneficiaries of structural injustice of a powerful motivator to reengage with fellow citizens, fellow humans, and the past we share.

<sup>83</sup>Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," 724–25.