Abstract (149 words)
What does collective responsibility for historical injustices look like where systematic harms are committed by people who are themselves oppressed by the same system? Many who participated in colonialism were moved to migrate to the “New World” following their own experience of deprivation and violence at the hands of colonial powers. I focus on Jewish people displaced by the Inquisition. To capture the moral position of this “between” group, I argue for a relational and intergenerational approach to collective responsibility. I focus on how present-day Jewish people can take responsibility for diachronic dynamics of identification with groups at the top of hierarchy and disidentification with groups below. My question is not why groups are obligated to take responsibility, but why they might want to undertake such responsibility. If we who have both benefited from and suffered from white supremacy wish to undo white supremacy, this relational transformation is critical.

Presentation (2,797 words)
Recent scholarship in the field of settler colonialist studies has highlighted a commonly known, but understudied phenomena (at least from the point of view of academic and popular ethical reckoning). For colonialism to be successful, colonial powers had to conscript a vast number of non-Black and non-“American” Indigenous people whose subjection to colonial oppression and/or economic exploitation could move them to migrate to places where they would be useful to the colonial projects.1 These migrants were conscripted to displace Native people from their lands and mitigate the threat of slave rebellions. Jonathan Israel, a historian of European colonialism, describes Jewish refugees of the Inquisition in the Americas as “both agents and victims of empire.2 Extending the language Primo Levi used to describe concentration camp prisoners who operated the gas chambers in exchange for the promise of food (daily rations were not sufficient for life),3 I will describe members of these social groups as operating in a colonial “gray zone.”4 Their

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1For instance, Japanese farmworkers in Hawai‘i, Northern Indian indentured servants in Trinidad and Tobago, and Jewish refugees of the Inquisition (As a Jew of European descent in the U.S., I count myself as an inheritor of their experience).
subjection to the duress of colonialism and economic exploitation lead them to places where—they
by
their very presence (as well as their actions)—they contributed to the harms of the colonial
enterprise. In this positioning, they could exercise power over others in ways that would have been
impossible in the places from which they came.

The scholarship that motivates my writing—from Lisa Lowe,6 Lorenzo Veracini,7 and
Patrick Wolfe8—does the descriptive and interpretive work to understand those who occupy the
“between” in the global colonial order. In this presentation, I ask a normative question: How does
inheritance of the colonial “between” complicate intergenerational collective responsibility-taking?
These groups are complicit in colonial oppression, but they are not its architects. This underlines the
complexity of their collective agency: The group agency embodied in the will to survive was
manipulated by European powers to the ends of colonial domination. At the same time as they were
oppressed by unjust arrangements, members of these groups participated in unjust arrangements for
the purposes of safety and accumulation. Although these benefits were often modest (and did not
create freedom from colonial oppression), members of these gray zone groups made gains through
participation in the oppression of those positioned as lower on the racial hierarchy. The harms to be
redressed are both gains accumulated from injustice and the hierarchical position that has been
secured and handed down generation to generation.

The complex responsibility of gray zone groups

When looking at questions of responsibility for historical injustice, philosophers and other
scholars have offered clearer pictures of guilt and responsibility: The broken treaties between settler
colonial governments and Indigenous peoples and the U.S. government’s role in enslavement. In
each case, the focus is on the wrongdoings of a nation, which Janna Thompson describes as capable

5 In the legal conception of duress as a legal excuse, there is a situation of necessity. The paradigm case is “My kidnapper
says, ‘If I don’t rob this bank, I will be shot.’ To save my life, I rob the bank.” In this case, one cannot be held
responsible for bank robbery due to their reasonable fear for their life. The colonial duress of gray zone groups that I
identify in this presentation does not require strict necessity. It is a structural condition that operates on a continuum
from forced migration to situations where migration is incentivized (but not strictly required) as an opportunity to
escape hostile conditions. My conception is temporally stretched beyond a moment of fear of life and into a structural
situation of unsafety and lack of value. It is conceptually expanded to include situations where other options were
potentially possible, but where the desirable moral deliberation is blocked by hostile circumstances.

of acting as “morally reliable intergenerational institutions.”

Political institutions have a juridical standing that allow for promises to be held to account intergenerationally and in some cases, in perpetuity. Further, their standards of treatment and protection are formally articulated by those who have some representative capacity—which can be understood as a wellspring of collective agency. In these cases, nations intentionally undermined treaties and denied rights and protections.

By contrast, in the cases that interest me, there was no central organizational structure with the capacity to make group-wide promises about treatment, alliance, or respect. For these groups, collective responsibility for the past is not about broken intergenerational promises to other groups. Nor can it be about the harm of formal and deliberated decision-making that made certain groups of persons into subpersons.

Without the political anchors of collective agency, intergenerational collective responsibility does not track formal articulations of unjust group intentionality. Further, the complex responsibility of gray zone groups challenges a conception of collective responsibility that looks solely to ill-gotten gains accumulated via injustices by group members. Does the fact that Jewish refugees of the Inquisition in Dutch colonies owned slaves, does that mean that Jewish people today (like myself) should reckon with our role in slavery? Absolutely, and it should be considered when deciding the content of collective responsibility-taking—how much is owed and what needs to be acknowledged. Yet, specific unjust actions are not sufficient to motivate a meaningful notion collective responsibility for those who identify in the present as descendants of these refugee and migrant groups. Focus on the acts of injustice themselves—participation in enslavement and the refinement and trade of colonial commodities—mystifies the harms of groups like Jewish refugees in the “New World.” Without a concomitant examination of the conditions that gave them the power to do injustice (as well as the broader strategic reason for these powers), the gray zone groups’ complicity falls out of the picture.

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10 I admire the clarity of the approaches to collective responsibility that track broken treaties and the civil and social death allowed in the structure and law of the U.S. government, but I also worry that even the best formulated versions would end up taking treaty-making and the presence of Africans in the U.S. a conceptual given rather than as themselves a result of extraordinary injustice.

11 The Nation of Islam’s infamous *Secret Relationship Between Blacks and Jews* takes this tack, though does so viciously, with the aim of pinning historical responsibility for colonialism entirely on Jewish people of European descent.


With the focus on complicity, we can offer suitably complex notions that place responsibility on members of the group and the systematic contexts that made their injustices possible. Complicity offers a multidimensional notion of mens rea. They are guilty of the harmful intentional oppression of others and their mens rea is complicated by their fulfillment of a role incentivized (or in some cases forced upon them) by a colonial government for purposes of its own power. Complicity also offers a richer notion of collective responsibility-taking in the present. The closer the linkages between past injustices and the present, the deeper the possibilities of transformation. If we are focused on the particular acts of injustice contributing to the colonial socio-economic system, they can seem distinct from the present. A focus on complicity takes a larger view and reveals a racial hierarchy whose relevant contours remain in place today. For instance, the restrictions on Jewish political and economic power have dissolved in important ways, but the persistence of white anti-Semitic supremacist violence—embodied in synagogue shootings, increasing hate crimes, and the influence of the alt-right at the highest levels of U.S. politics reminds us that we do not occupy the highest level of the racial hierarchy in the U.S. We may be closer to the highest rung, but we remain in the liminal space between.

To be adequate to these complicities and harms, a relational approach to collective responsibility is called for. A relational approach to collective responsibility prioritizes moral evaluation of group solidarities. In colonial gray zones, groups hold collective responsibility for making the wrong choice in bedfellows—for identifying with representatives of white supremacist hegemony and denying relationship with groups situated below them. Although I can understand the reasoning of those who joined in alliance with colonizers, I also believe that those refugee Jews should have known and acted on the knowledge that their alliance with the colonizers against these lower groups was harmful. Their own experience of homelessness and diaspora should have taught them the harms of contribution to a system that removed people from their lands and forced them to labor. It should have taught them to listen to the demands of the oppressed. Their experience should have taught them to invest in the solidarities with those suffering harms rather than those inflicting harms.

Given that the historical record reveals that Jewish people mostly maintained ties with the oppressors at the expense of the oppressed, a distributed notion of collective responsibility comes to the fore: Responsibility lands in two places: First, on the colonial nations that created situations of duress that drove people from their homes to the “New World” and created and extracted the most benefit from the system of colonial oppression. Second, on those migrants and refugees who
accepted the terms of the agreement with colonial nations and acted as their agents for the sake of their own freedom. The work of collective responsibility for the descendants of these groups is threefold: (1) Calling for redress from the colonial nations for the duress that pushed them and other groups in the colonial gray zone to migrate (2) Making redress for the gains accumulated at the expense of Indigenous and African people and (3) Joining with Black and Indigenous people in solidarity against present conditions of injustice as well as calling for redress from colonial nations.

**Why should we want to take collective responsibility?**

In the conception of socio-collective responsibility I am arguing for, the experiences of deprivation and injustice does not excuse harms committed, even when those injustices are life threatening. This is a claim influenced by Hannah Arendt's reading of Socrates' *Gorgias*. She translates Socrates in dialogue with Callicles: “It is better to be wronged than to do wrong.”14 Translated into the context of this presentation, it is better to suffer—and even die, following Socrates’ in 28d-29a of the *Apology*15—in solidarity with the oppressed than to benefit from their oppression. Arendt follows Socrates in offering a psychological justification for this claim. She elaborates, if you do harm—even if this harm is applauded by all around you—you lose your thinking relationship with yourself. She offers the example of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, where Richard’s inner-dialogue is one of fleeing from the self because the self he encounters in solitude is his guilty conscience reminding him of his crimes.16 Even if one lacks such a conscientious inner-dialogue, to commit crimes and seek to go on without taking responsibility requires silencing the part of oneself that remembers the harm. To silence an aspect of oneself is a loss of the essentially human capacity to engage in a free dialogue with oneself.

More relevant for my analysis of relational collective responsibility is how attempting to move through the world without taking responsibility for harms entails the silencing of the voices and demands of the harmed. In the same way that Richard must flee from the inner-voice reminding him of his crimes to maintain his justifications, those who commit harms against others must flee from the voices of the harmed. Édouard Glissant describes the communicative dynamics under enslavement: “Since speech was forbidden, slaves camouflaged the word under the provocative intensity of the scream. No one could translate the meaning of what seemed to be nothing but a

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16 Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 442–44.
shout. It was taken to be nothing but the call of a wild animal.” In context, Glissant is theorizing the resistant origins of slaves’ appropriation of Creole and the development of the language from those roots. For my purposes, I am interested in the dynamics of the enslavers’ prohibition of speech and their rendering of the screams and shouts of the enslaved “as the call of a wild animal.” Slavery punished the self-expression of the enslaved for many reasons, but a critical aspect is that enslavers didn’t want to hear it. The smooth functioning of their oppressive apparatus calls for a silencing of critique. Their power allowed them to enforce such silence. In rendering the shouts as that of wild animals, there is a sense that there is no shared community among oppressed and oppressor. Without shared community, it is easier to rationalize the notion that the shouts and screams make no claim or demand on the enslavers—that this noise justifies the practice of enslavement by confirming the animal nature of the enslaved.

The denial of the voice of the oppressed in the midst of slavery is a condition of systematic oppression, though the formal prohibitions may vary. Many are comfortable with the rationalizations that support the denial of relationship involved in discounting the speech of those who suffer harms at their hands. There are many apparent benefits to this—perhaps foremost among them, a life devoid of troubling obstacles to enjoying the fruits of one’s “success.” However, Glissant, Socrates, and Arendt point to the price paid for such comfort. When we render mute the voices of those who claim that we have harmed them, we sacrifice the consciousness of our effect upon others. We condemn ourselves to move through the world like a wrecking ball without a sense that we are wrecking anything. We silenced the Socratic and Arendtian inner-voice by numbing ourselves to the voices of others. The capacity to be affected by the voices of others is the condition that makes the inner-voice possible. This lack of conscientiousness among oppressors motivates Ralph Ellison to write: “There are few things in the world as dangerous as sleepwalkers.” When one believes that they are innocent while inflicting serious harms, they are a fool capable of nearly anything.

Following the ethical and psychological basis of Arendt and Socrates’ claims, I see the work in the presentation as motivating a notion of collective responsibility based on choice rather than intergeneration liability and the obligation that follows. Collective responsibility is work that we should want to take on as members of a collective that has done harm. It is the work that must be done to wake up to our effect on those we live among. The primary work is around moral

motivation: There must be a felt need to transform oppressive complicity into solidarity for shared projects of liberation.

This choice-based conception of collective responsibility follows writers like Jean Améry and Ta-Nehisi Coates who see collective responsibility as a choice to take on a group purification. This would not be a means of overcoming the past, but of recognizing the inseparability of the past from the present and future. For Coates, collective responsibility for slavery in the U.S. is a “revolution of the American consciousness, a reconciling of our self-image as a great democratizer with the facts of our history.” On a similar note, for Améry, collective responsibility for the Holocaust requires that Germans first recognize victims’ perspectives as authoritative and take on responsibility without caveats. Of the German collective, he writes:

It would then…learn to comprehend its past acquiescence in the Third Reich as the total negation not only of the world that it plagued with war and death but also of its own better origins; it would no longer repress or hush up the twelve years that for us others really were a thousand, but claim them as its realized negation of the world and its self, as its own negative possession. On the field of history there would occur…two groups of people, the overpowered and those who overpowered them, would be joined in the desire that time be turned back and, with it, that history become moral.

The group relationships that responsibility make possible are based on a shared need for history to be different. In the case of gray zone groups, this would be an honest accounting of not only the harms committed against others during colonialism, but the harms committed against themselves through their alliance with oppression. The duress would not be a means of rationalizing oppression, but part of the “negative possession” called for by Améry. For Jewish people, this is the recognition that we have a tradition and experiences that could have led to resistance to colonialism—and that we undermined that tradition. It is the truth that although we could have been allies in a struggle against oppression, instead, our actions contributed to oppression. Despite our own oppression, we were a part of systematic death, destruction, and land expropriation that remains in effect today.

The language of “learn to comprehend” and “revolution of consciousness” in Coates and Améry point to the sense that collective responsibility has epistemic and social ontological dimensions that are difficult to mandate. For gray zone groups, the political work of organizing a collective for the sake of taking responsibility calls for those with a commitment to the idea that white supremacy is unlivable despite its apparent benefits. These are people with a sense that the

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distorted hierarchical relationships that develop under oppression undermines our attempt to create lives worth living.21 I see my work among my fellow Jewish people to be along these lines: Agitating for the idea that our collective lives and identity are poisoned by white supremacy rather than nurtured by it. This work begins with facing the history of our involvement in the colonial enterprise.

**Conclusion**

In this presentation, I have sought to define colonial gray zone groups and outline their complex responsibility for colonial harms. I have argued that the situations of these groups call forth a relational notion of collective responsibility—where responsibility is taken for harmful group complicities and the actions that maintained those complicities. I contended that complicity entails a denial of victims' authority and maintained that such denial creates serious, reflexive problems for the oppressor. I have concluded with reflections on why and how those who inherit the complex responsibility in the gray zone might choose to take on the responsibility to dismantle identifications with colonial, white supremacist hierarchies and create the conditions for solidarities with those struggling against those hierarchies. This conception highlights the relational opportunities inherent in the work of collective responsibility-taking.

**Works Cited**


