In Justice and Reconciliation in World Politics (Lu 2017), Catherine Lu argues that those of us who have been thinking about problems of justice in the aftermath of cataclysmic international events have been aiming too narrowly and too low. We have been aiming too narrowly in the sense that we have focused too much attention on states and individuals as responsible parties and not enough on international structures. In other words, there are multiple sites of justice and all the action is not to be found at the level of interpersonal or interstate interactions. Much of Lu’s discussion of structure is drawn directly from Iris Marion Young’s work (or, at least, one version of Young). In addition, we have aimed too low by not devoting attention to the widespread forms of alienation that are the result of events and persistent unjust international structures (the case that she returns to throughout the text is that of colonialism). She calls for a more historical and sociological turn in the literature on transitional justice. This essay raises a few questions regarding the ideas of culpability and motivation in Lu’s account of structural justice. In particular, if focuses on Lu’s use of Young and then concludes with a brief consideration of her notion of alienation.
In addition, we have aimed too low by not devoting attention to the widespread forms of alienation that are the result of events and persistent unjust international structures (the case that she returns to throughout the text is that of colonialism). She calls for a more historical and sociological turn in the literature on transitional justice. Conventional understandings of reconciliation tend to focus on the relationships between individuals. They seek what she calls interactional reconciliation. What is missing in these accounts are wider and, perhaps, higher forms of reconciliation that include the relationship between individuals and the social structures under which they live or what Lu calls structural reconciliation as well as a kind of existential reconciliation in which a form of self-alienation is overcome and individuals are rejoined to themselves.

Lu presents a compelling case for going beyond state interactions and raising the structural question in matters of reconciliation. In addition, Lu raises and addresses quite a number of difficult issues surrounding responsibility, reparations, the consequences of colonialism and the ways to address structural injustice. In particular, Lu does a brilliant job in addressing the pathologies of victimhood. She shows how the idealization of (and sometimes by) the victim is deployed as a means to absolve victims of responsibility. Her point here is not to shift blame from perpetrators to victims, but to argue that the division between perpetrator and victim in the case of widespread injurious structures (such as colonialism) is not clear or bright. The pathology of victimhood is that when people don’t measure up to our virtuous standard of victimhood, we are reluctant to see them at ‘real’ victims. There is an impulse to associate victimhood with a kind of purity. From this perspective, it is no accident that we prefer our victims to be innocent – the very young and the very old. In order to make good on the claim that one is a victim of structural injustice, there is an incentive to deny that one has anything to do with sustaining or replicating those structures.

The comments that follow raise a few questions regarding the ideas of culpability and motivation in Lu’s account of structural justice. They conclude with a brief consideration of her notion of alienation. First, in order to talk about culpability and motivation it is important to note that Lu relies heavily on what Young calls a social connection model as opposed to a liability model of responsibility. The latter is a more familiar way of understanding responsibility insofar as it focuses on finding a particular individual or group of individuals causally connected to what has happened. The idea here is that the events or outcomes in question would not have happened but for the intervention of individuals. Moreover, those actors who caused the events did so voluntarily and are therefore blameworthy. The impulse of the liability model is to look backward in time in order to reconstruct the causal lines of connection and establish culpability.

In contrast, in the social connection model of responsibility ‘individuals bear responsibility for structural injustice because they contribute by their actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes’ (Young 2011, 105). There is a causal connection between individual actions and outcomes, but the individual actions that sustained the unjust structures are not driven by an intention or motive to sustain the structures. The individuals concerned may have been minding their own business even though the unintended result of their actions has deeply unfortunate consequences for large numbers of people. In contrast to the liability model, the social connection model appeals to a notion of shared responsibility that individuals bear: ‘Each is personally
responsible for the outcome in a partial way’ (Young 2011, 110). Moreover, that ‘each’ can include people who are both advantaged and disadvantaged by the structure. Anyone who contributes to the processes shares responsibility for it.

One of the striking elements of Young’s account of structural injustice, particularly as it appeared in her posthumously published Responsibility for Justice (Young 2011), is that it is forward-looking. While the liability model looks backward to figure out who did what to whom, the orientation of the social connection model is towards motivating changes in our practices, norms and political institutions. This forward-looking orientation disconnects political responsibility from moral culpability in cases of structural injustice. Individuals are responsible for the structures that they, by-in-large, unintentionally create and maintain through their ordinary day-to-day actions. Although they are responsible for those structures, they should not be blamed for them. For Young, the goal is to bring individuals together in order have them do the difficult work of transforming the deeply embedded institutional arrangements that lead to forms of oppression and domination. The motivational element is that if people are blamed for structures that they did not intentionally fabricate, but may have been advantaged by, then they will bristle at the charge of being held culpable and are unlikely to act in solidarity with those wishing to change the structural arrangements.

In a number of respects Lu subscribes to this version of Young’s social connection model. She is willing to entertain the idea that culpability need not accompany responsibility for structural injustices. Things, however, are different once the participants understand the character of the social structures and how their actions may unintentionally maintain them. Lu’s position appears to be that post-realization of one’s responsibility, actors become culpable for sustaining those institutions. Those actors are now liable. Moreover, if they are favourably positioned, they may be obligated to repair the harms done to those who have suffered under the unjust structures. Lu writes,

My argument does make the concept of political responsibility more controversial, because such responsibility can include reparative obligations to victims of wrong-doing. This is because the causal implication of structural injustice in contemporary wrongful conduct makes those who perpetuate such structural injustice partially liable for the harms or injuries that result from wrongful conduct. (Lu 2017, 259)

In other words, perpetuating structural injustice by knowingly participating in those structures creates a liability for reparations or other restorative measures.

A version of this kind of argument is mentioned by Martha Nussbaum in her introduction to Young’s Responsibility for Justice. One can call it the ‘time marches on’ argument (Nussbaum 2011, xxi). According to Nussbaum, it is one thing to relieve individuals of culpability when they don’t realize they are implicated or imbricated in structural injustice. It’s quite another thing once they understand the situation and their role in it. That knowledge moves them from a social connection model without culpability to something that looks more like the liability model. Hence Lu can now talk about a duty of redress, whereas I think that Young’s impulse would be to call it a responsibility to address continuing unjust structures.

In contrast, Young (once again, at least in Responsibility for Justice) argues that there is little if anything that is ‘owed’ to victims insofar as many victims, bystanders and
beneficiaries play some role in maintaining these structures. The absence of culpability should hold she argues even in the extreme case of understanding the American response to racialized slavery.

Affirming the existence of white privilege does not amount to claiming that white people either as a group or as individuals owe some kind of payment to black people as a group or as individuals. Those who are beneficiaries of racialized structures with unjust outcomes, however, can properly be called to a special moral and political responsibility to recognize our privilege, to acknowledge its continuities with historical injustice, and to act on an obligation to work on transforming the institutions that offer this privilege, even if this means worsening one’s own conditions and opportunities to what they would have been. (Young 2011, 187)

One’s positionality leads to a situation in which some are advantaged and others are disadvantaged, but very few, if anyone, chooses her position and everyone (advantaged and disadvantaged) participates in replicating structures through their actions. The obligation here is one of transforming institutions and structures.

I would imagine that from this perspective (which is not the only perspective that Young adopted), not acting on the knowledge of the existence of structural injustice still does not generate culpability. And this is what is so striking about Young’s view of structural injustice in that book: She really wants to forgo the blame game and lift our politics above such concerns. She does not believe that blaming individuals motivates political action and she believes that the kind of view that includes culpability (say, as suggested by Nussbaum or Lu) potentially generates or breeds resentment. Out of that resentment comes a resistance to change and political action. Young endorses Nietzsche’s view that responsibility creates a deeper sense of self – which is good – but she also endorses Nietzsche’s view that resentment ‘allows those who lay blame to wallow in the past: “they tear open their oldest wounds, they bleed from long-healed scars”’ (Young 2011, 115). Why not adopt Young’s more radical perspective and retain the language of responsibility but forgo culpability when talking about the failure to address structural injustices? To be clear, this question does not claim that Young fully worked out the position before her death. Rather, the question is whether Lu’s attention to obligations of redress do not insert a notion of culpability that generates resentment and make less likely the possibility of structural change. Is there evidence that the language of redress and blame necessarily changes behaviour and improves the lot of those who have suffered under unjust structures?

Throughout this particular discussion and presumed by Lu’s work is the problem of motivation. That problem has an additional component to it: What would motivate powerful states to engage in the kinds of structural changes that Lu’s idea of reconciliation requires? As she notes, ‘Powerful states… can still largely escape accountability and duties of reparation to their victims, due to the lack of robust international institutions that can enforce judgments of wrongdoing’ (Lu 2017, 237). It could be argued that the problem of motivating state action goes beyond the focus of Lu’s project. After all, there is a difference between a project that helps identify an injustice and a project that shows how that injustice can be overcome. On the other hand, if ‘ought’ implies ‘can,’ there must be an assumption on Lu’s part that change is possible. If we pick up that thread, it is clear that robust international institutions will not appear unless there is widespread cooperation from powerful states. Now, one way that Lu could respond to this
challenge is to argue that knowledge leads to virtue: Once state actors read Lu’s book and see the right course of action, they will be motivated to act. If, however, as social scientists argue, that evidence and reason are not particularly powerful motivators in getting people to change their beliefs, then writing books and articles on structural injustice won’t make much of a difference. Moreover, recent work by Clarissa Hayward (2017) suggests that in considering all of the steps that may be part of motivating action in the case of structural injustice (and there are quite a number), the most difficult may be getting people to see that our present social rules and institutional arrangements are, in fact, harmful. At a domestic level, she argues that getting people see what they don’t want to see requires a ‘disruptive politics’; e.g. boycotts, sit-ins, protests, die-ins. Hayward writes,

... when structural change is enacted, it is not only, and it is not principally because privileged people are made to understand their responsibilities in ways that align with the ethical principles they endorse. Instead, in significant part, it is because those whom injustice harms engage in political disruption, one important product of which is the interruption of motivated ignorance. (Hayward 2017, 407)

In Hayward’s view, the political disruption, for example, associated with the Black Live Matters movement engenders an awareness amongst the general public that there is a structural problem associated with policing.

At a global level, the question of motivation becomes even more complicated. As I understand it, Lu argues that the horrors suffered by women caught up in the Japanese comfort women system during the Second World War are not merely the responsibility of the Japanese but also the responsibility of every nation that participated in maintaining the norms associated with colonialism. One could imagine how Hayward’s disruptive politics could function in getting Americans to becoming aware of structural injustices associated with policing in America or how that might work in getting Canadians to understand the structural injustices that supported such institutions as the Indian Schools, but it is not clear how the demand for reparations from the Japanese could result in a politics that made the American government aware of its complicity in the international structure of colonialism.

The problem of how to motivate changes in the international structure also points to an interesting question regarding the depth and nature of a structure. If, as Young suggests, a situation of injustice is one in which an actor is vulnerable to domination, then one could make a pretty good case that the state system is itself fundamentally unjust. Within the state system, arbitrary boundaries based on historical contingencies and violence are the basis for distributing resources and opportunities in a fundamentally unfair manner. The rights of self-determination are jealously protected and defended in a manner in which states continue to believe that self-help and the use of force can be deployed for political reasons under a thin veneer of international approval. In addition, one need only consider all of the historical wrongs (such as colonialism) that have been legitimated by such a system. There are moments in which Lu talks about problematizing the international state system, but if one takes a structural approach to its logical conclusion, it would seem that all of the actions – major and minor – that intentionally and unintentionally continue to support that system yield a political responsibility to change the Westphalian state system. Once Lu has
pointed us to a concern with international structures, is not the state system itself and not colonialism the biggest elephant in the room? Is Lu’s focus on colonialism and reparative obligations of states paradoxically reinforcing more pervasive structural injustices? And, to bring the point back to motivations, how could states be motivated to change the very conditions that give them life?

Once that last question is raised and assuming that the motivational problem is overcome, the issue becomes whether there is not some other system that would do a better job diminishing the vulnerability of individuals to domination. Some may argue that a global state would do the trick. Others, and I would include myself in this camp, are sceptical that such a system would necessarily diminish the potential for domination – not that the state system is something to write home about. What, then, is the goal if structural global justice is unlikely in the near term?

Finally, one of the contributions of Lu’s book is not only its focus on structural injustice, but also its raising of the question of alienation in the process of international reconciliation. Following Frantz Fanon, Lu argues that colonialism has a number of costs – the deepest are forms of self-alienation in which the colonized are meant to feel inferior, disoriented, disconnected from each other and from themselves. In contrast, nonalienation is a state in which genuine communication is possible. According to Lu, the goal of this form of reconciliation is ‘to create a mutually affirmable and affirmed social/political order that can support the flourishing of nonalienated agents’ (Lu 2017, 25). It is a goal that is meant to serve as a regulative ideal – a standard that both provides both a direction and a way to judge how far current practices fall short.

As noted at the beginning of this essay, Lu seeks to keep our focus on three levels of reconciliation: existential, interactional and structural that correspond to the three forms of alienation. Existential reconciliation concerns the relationship of oneself to oneself. Interactional reconciliation is all about the relationship between individuals and structural reconciliation is a matter of whether one is alienated from the basic rules, norms and practices that govern one’s life. These levels of reconciliation and the forms of alienation can be interrelated. For example, colonial structures that created and maintained imperial relationships (structural alienation) established certain hierarchical roles and norms that prevented individuals from interacting as equals or in an open and frank manner (interactional alienation), which, in turn alienated individuals from themselves (existential alienation). Alienation at one level may reinforce alienation at another level: a kind of intersectionality of alienation. Similarly, it is possible that forms of reconciliation at one level enable or reinforce reconciliation at another level. On this account, what is needed for structural reconciliation is not inconsistent with and may indeed support what is needed for interactional reconciliation or existential reconciliation. Like Aristotle’s unity of the virtues, the three forms of reconciliation work in tandem in responding to the three forms of alienation.

Alternatively, it is possible that Lu’s three forms of alienation and reconciliation do not work in tandem. The kind of actions needed to reconcile structural alienation may exacerbate existential or interactional alienation. An example here may help. One could argue that the sort of self-alienation discussed by Lu is similar, at least in form, to the self-alienation experienced by one third of Americans who are Trump supporters or the significant percentage of French voters who are Le Pen supporters or the percentage of British diehard Brexit supporters. Each of these groups may believe that they have
suffered historic wounds associated with the loss of a way of life and that the larger liberal order is incompatible with their views of tradition, religion, ethnicity, and so on. It is not implausible to think that there is a significant percentage of Americans, Germans, French, Russians and Poles who are alienated from their domestic institutions and global or cosmopolitan norms because they see their national affiliation as utterly central to their identity. From their perspective, the cosmopolitan point of view implied by a concern over the effects of international structures is something to be fervently resisted. Their identities appear to require violating the regulative ideal that lies at the heart of Lu’s conceptions of reconciliation and global justice. In their eyes, the problem is not too much state, but not enough state.

Even with the idea of multiple forms of alienation, questions of motivation arise. Unless Lu believes that Brexit, Trump and Le Pen supporters can reconceive who they are and what they value, it seems that international reconciliation could rest on nativists and hyper-nationalists remaining in a state of existential alienation. If the different levels of reconciliation can move in different directions then reconciliation in world politics acquires a tragic cast. Perhaps for some, not being true to oneself is the price of interactional reconciliation. Perhaps on occasion the cost of securing some modicum of interactional reconciliation involves abandoning structural reconciliation. Lu’s work on justice and reconciliation provides important tools for thinking about structures and international wrongs. If, however, the trade-offs discussed above are possible (and perhaps they are merely hypothetical), then how much reconciliation should we expect in a tragic world?

**Disclosure statement**

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