

Phenomenology and Forgiveness

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Chapter 8

Collective Forgiveness in the Context of Ongoing Harms¹

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During the Dakota Access Pipeline protests in North Dakota, Great Turtle Island, a group of military veterans knelt in front of Oceti Sakowin Elders. The organizer of this group, Wes Clark, Jr., asked for forgiveness on behalf of the military for centuries of settler colonial military ventures in Oceti Sakowin Territory. Leonard Crow Dog (Sicangu Lakota) forgave but immediately demanded respect for Native nations throughout the United States. Lacking such respect, he said, Native people will cease paying taxes (wcmctv 2016). Crow Dog's post-forgiveness remarks speak to the political context of the military veterans' request: They seek collective forgiveness amid ongoing occupation and harms committed by the collective they represent.

In this chapter, I examine this case study and argue that ongoing harm undermines requests for forgiveness. I look to Glen Coulthard's (Yellowknives Dine) critique of recent settler discourse on reconciliation and forgiveness: He describes a temporal obfuscation in these discourses, which focus their gaze narrowly on past injustice and thus deny the ongoing structural violence of settler colonialism. Settlers' responsibility is thus framed as an attempt to make past injustices right. The deeper, more pressing questions of responsibility—the settler's right to the land they live on and their nation's right to govern Indigenous people—go unaddressed. Even though forgiveness was granted, Clark's petition fails because it does not tell the truth about injustice, which is an essential component of seeking forgiveness responsibly.

The philosophical literature about forgiveness suggests that requests for forgiveness are a means to create new or renewed moral relationships. Ongoing harm, especially when it is unacknowledged by those seeking forgiveness, is antithetical to those relationships. Whether or not Clark intended it, a request for forgiveness in the midst of ongoing wrong can easily be

interpreted as a request for license to continue harms unobstructed by the resentment or counterclaims of those who suffer. Phenomenologically, any renewed moral relationship has as its condition the acknowledgment of the weight of collective injustice on the shoulders of the member of the collective requesting forgiveness. Instead of petitioning for forgiveness, Clark should have spoken the truth regarding ongoing harms and pledged to work toward collective action to end the harms of settler colonialism. This would have been a responsible form of collective responsibility-taking.

Further, this chapter is engaged with the question of what it means to constitute a collective capable of taking collective responsibility. I look to Leanne Simpson's (Nishnaabeg) writing on the ways in which a history of injustice can make gestures of decency by settlers seem more promising than they truly are. A history of broken promises and the hermeneutical context Simpson identifies calls on settlers to hold ourselves to a higher standard when making promises of collective service and solidarity. Such a higher standard requires that we advocate for collective responsibility among members of our collective. Although Clark spoke as a representative of the military, he did not do enough to create an ethic of responsibility within his collective. Advocacy for acknowledgment of the phenomenological weight of ongoing collective wrongdoing and the responsibility-taking that follows could have created a stronger foundation for collective action at Standing Rock. Once collective responsibility for a history of injustice—of which Standing Rock is an instance—is acknowledged, the stage is set for deeper commitments to resistance to settler colonialism. Thus, there is a deeper commitment to the work that would end the harms Native people suffer from settler colonialism.

The shortcomings of Clark's petition for forgiveness points to a principle for settlers seeking to take responsibility for injustices: Members of responsible collectives should resist the urge to prematurely petition for forgiveness. Seeking forgiveness first demands the reflexive work of making one's collective capable of taking the action that would make them worthy of it.

TEMPORALITY AND FORGIVENESS

The call for a mass movement of veterans to Standing Rock was initiated by a Navajo U.S. Navy veteran, Remy. In response to this call, Wes Clark, Jr., one of two central organizers of veterans traveling to Standing Rock, wrote to Phyllis Young (Ogala Lakota) a few weeks before their arrival, suggesting a ceremony to prepare the veterans for nonviolent action.² Young accepted and described it as an opportunity to make allies from former enemies for the benefit of world peace (Tolan 2016). The previous night and for two hours

before the ceremony, Oceti Sakowin elders spoke of the history of injustice, land expropriation, battles, and massacres to the gathered veterans (Gelder 2016). During the ceremony, Clark stood in front of the elders and asked for forgiveness on behalf of the military units to which the veterans belonged:

Many of us, me particularly, are from the units that have hurt you over the many years. We came. We fought you. We took your land. We signed treaties that we broke. We stole minerals from your sacred hills. We blasted the faces of our presidents onto your sacred mountain. When we took still more land and then we took your children and then we tried to take your language and we tried to eliminate your language that God gave you, and the Creator gave you. We didn't respect you, we polluted your Earth, we've hurt you in so many ways, but we've come to say that we are sorry. We are at your service and we beg for your forgiveness. (May 2016)

This petition for forgiveness has many remarkable elements. Unlike apologies offered by politicians and bureaucrats in the United States, the words spoken have action behind them (Lee 2015). Clark organized thousands of veterans to sacrifice their time, comfort, and money to support Native water and treaty rights. These words are grounded in collective action: Veterans for Standing Rock camped in the Dakota winter and arrived with a willingness to sacrifice their lives for an issue critical to Native people. By responding to a call for support by Native people, they are demonstrating respect for Native people as authorities. Clark speaks important historical truths. Yet, we—as settlers—are wrong if we speak of settler colonial history without speaking of the colonial present. By speaking of the harms committed by his collective (the U.S. military and the U.S. Army's Seventh Cavalry) in the past tense, Clark does just this. Without first addressing and overturning the ways the U.S. military produces the colonial present, it is no time for Clark—or any settler—to be asking forgiveness.

The circumstances of the Standing Rock water protectors demand more of Clark. The U.S. military has a hand in many of the obstacles facing the water protectors. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued the permits for the pipeline and the National Guard provided guardsmen, surveillance, and weapons in support of police forces hostile to the water protectors (Axe 2017). A veteran-operated paramilitary group, TigerSwan, conducted counterinsurgency measures against protestors in the interest of the oil pipeline company (Brown 2017). Given that Clark specifically invokes the taking of land through military ventures, the question of who presently occupies this taken land follows. Although the cavalry may no longer massacre Indigenous people as a matter of course, the military remains an occupying force. Further, the events involving Clark, the veterans, and the Oceti Sakowin elders point to the ways that the military has equipped police forces for war against

those who oppose sanctioned projects of the U.S. government—like those who protest endeavors of the oil and gas industry.

The issue of speaking of the harms of the settler colonial states as if they are past is not merely a factual error (which Clark should have avoided). There is a political context where the obfuscation of truth around the ongoing injustices of the settler states plays a political role of undermining claims to Native sovereignty and self-governance. Whether Clark is aware of this political context or not, his petition for forgiveness inherits this language. This context serves to undermine the relationship-building that is the intention of the ceremony.

In *Red Skin, White Masks*, Glen Coulthard critiques the “conceptual obfuscation” around the temporality of settler colonialism in Canadian political discourses of apology and reconciliation (Coulthard 2014, 108).³ He writes:

In settler-colonial contexts—where there is no period marking a clear or formal transition from an authoritarian past to a democratic present—state-sanctioned approaches to reconciliation must ideologically manufacture such a transition by allocating the abuses of settler colonization to the dustbins of history, and/or purposely disentangle processes of reconciliation from questions of settler-coloniality as such. (Coulthard 2014, 108)

The discourses of transitional justice theorize alternatives to *vae victus* “justice” imposed in postwar and post-genocide contexts. Where catastrophic damage is done to the structure of civil society by violent upheaval, transitional justice scholars and practitioners ask what is necessary to establish/renew moral and political norms of trust, especially among victims and perpetrators who must live together. As the name “transitional justice” implies, there is an assumption that its practices are temporally located *after* conflict has ceased, but *before* a new post-conflict order has been established. Coulthard helpfully points to the ways in which settler states such as Canada—which have a political and legal interest in erasing the ongoing wrongs necessary to maintain themselves—use such discourses to ill effect.

By seeking “reconciliation” and “forgiveness” for past wrongs without mention of ongoing wrongs, Coulthard identifies a justification for misguided federal policy: it addresses the harms of past settler colonial policy at the expense of acknowledging that Canada is presently responsible for policy that perpetuates those harms and creates new harms. Rather than address both past and present colonial relationships that harm Indigenous Nations and peoples, government programs focus their energy on reparation for individuals who suffered in the past. When taking up the issues so narrowly, “reconciliation efforts focus on repairing the psychologically injured or damaged status of Indigenous people themselves” (Coulthard 2014, 121). The settler state arrives on the scene as a penitent seeking to be cleansed of its sins through

belated support to those it wronged in obsolete institutions. The ongoing obstacles from extant institutions (like the Canadian and U.S. military) to Indigenous sovereignty, land claims, and autonomous government are erased.

As a non-politician seeking to defend the water of Oceti Sakowin peoples and their allies, it would be demanding to require Clark be aware of the issues surrounding the abuse of discourses of transitional justice. Further, it is clear from interviews that Clark’s petition for forgiveness was extemporaneous and spoken after hours of standing at attention and listening (Gelder 2016). Yet, if the forgiveness petitioning aspect of ceremony was planned in advance—as is suggested by Clark in interviews—understanding the ways in which forgiveness has been used, abused, and critiqued by Native people should be an expectation. Clark’s missed opportunities point in the direction of what collective responsibility should look like. If those—like myself—have the urge to apologize and seek forgiveness for the wrongs of our settler colonial collectives, we must acknowledge the ongoing harms of colonialism and seek to resist the ways in which requests for forgiveness have been used for cynical ends. Without this, we are failing to speak truthfully about the injustices of our collective and we are failing to redress the harms of denying such wrongs. As Waziyatawin (Wahpetunwah Dakota) writes: “No one will be committed to righting the wrongs if they cannot recognize and name those wrongs” (Waziyatawin 2009, 176). Without truth, collective action is undermined.

Further, a petition for forgiveness should not be considered unless the harms in question have ended. To use an interpersonal analogy: It would be extremely strange to ask a friend for forgiveness for physically harming them, while I am in the act of hitting them. Forgiveness in the midst of such an act requires that I lack control over my body or that my action falls under another excusing condition, like duress: “I hate that I’m hitting you, but if I stop, I will be murdered. Please forgive me.” Without such excuses, one who requests forgiveness for a harm, while committing that harm, seems to misunderstand the meaning of forgiveness. Further, asking forgiveness in the midst of harm exacerbates harms. If I admit my unfaithfulness to my partner with whom I promised a monogamous relationship, apologize, petition for their forgiveness, but take no steps to end my affair, I could easily be described as deceitful. My petition for forgiveness would be revealed as cruel manipulation under the cover of moral address.

Whether we follow Bishop Butler’s notion of forgiveness as the forswearing of revenge⁴ or Thomas Hobbes’s conception of forgiveness as the release from obligations to another (Hobbes 1994, 86),⁵ petitioning for forgiveness in the midst of ongoing harms undermines responsibility.⁶ In both of these accounts, forgiveness creates a new moral relationship between victim and perpetrator. To forswear revenge is to make a commitment to working internally (or among a collective) to give up the desire for retributivist response to a harm. But, under

such a definition, requesting forgiveness is only responsible if the harm is firmly in the past. If the harm is ongoing, the request for forgiveness can be glossed like this: Please promise not to respond with vengeance to any future wrong act that I may do. This is a request for license for the petitioner and further restriction for the one who is harmed, which is antithetical to responsibility.

On the Hobbesian account, to request to be released from obligation is to seek a clean slate for a renewed relationship. It offers, according to Hobbes, a "restitution of liberty" for the one who has an obligation (Hobbes 1994, 86). Hannah Arendt's conception of forgiveness inherits the Hobbesian thought: Forgiveness is "the possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility" (Arendt 1998, 237). Once a promise is made, it is supposed to be held to—come what may. Trespass of the obligations inherent in promises can bring on vicious cycles of vengeance. When we forgive, we acknowledge that circumstance and human fallibility can conspire to frustrate fulfillment of promises. Forgiveness "acts anew and unexpectedly . . . freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven" (241).

Under this Hobbesian/Arendtian interpretation, to ask for forgiveness in the midst of failing to meet an obligation to request release from the very obligations that could be called upon to motivate resistance to further wrongdoing. To offer a relevant example, obligations were imposed upon the U.S. government in their treaty negotiations with Oceti Sakowin peoples. The U.S. government failed to meet those obligations. To request forgiveness from Native people as a representative of the U.S. government—in the midst of ongoing failures to honor treaty obligations—is a request not to be held to the obligations that would impede continuous expropriation of land and resources. It is thus a request for removal of an obstacle to the right of the perpetrator to continue their harms that is, once again, antithetical to responsibility.

Clark uses language in reference to the forgiveness ceremony that suggests a desire for a clean slate. In his operations letter, he describes plans for "a cleansing ceremony to wash away our sins and steel us for the days ahead" (Veterans for Standing Rock 2016). The intention behind the request for forgiveness was not sinister. As mentioned in endnote 2, Clark connects "washing away sins" to the capacity to remain firmly nonviolent in resistance to provocations from police and related "security" forces. Forgiveness is framed as therapeutic preparation for effective collective action. However, any gains in activism won from such forgiveness are outweighed by the aforementioned outlined historical, political, and moral problems with petitions for forgiveness in the midst of ongoing harms. Good intentions and even ignorance of ongoing harms cannot justify Clark's request for forgiveness.

Clark's epistemic responsibility for the actions of the collective to which he belongs is not expected to be as strong as those he holds to his individual

actions. Ignorance of what our collective has done or is doing is expected. Yet, when Clark takes up representation of the collective's responsibility-taking for harms against the Oceti Sakowin people, the burden of responsibility for knowledge becomes heavier. José Medina refers to a situation of "heightened epistemic responsibility" for those "who are in a position to educate and are charged with the task of being vigilant about epistemic lacunas, distortions, and cognitive deficiencies." (2012, 147–48) Despite the fact that the military and larger settler society seeks to whitewash its history, as a representative, Clark should have been aware of ongoing harms of his collective. He is culpable for this ignorance. As a representative of a collective, this is Clark's position.

Even if a request for forgiveness was expected by the Native elders he spoke to, Clark should have acknowledged ongoing wrongs and pledged his collective's energy and action to the creation of a situation where those harms are past. Clark should have recognized that forgiveness—no matter the understanding of the term by the Native people who granted it—is thoroughly identified by non-Native people in the United States as absolution from responsibility as opposed to commitment to responsibility. Truth-telling with a pledge to become worthy of forgiveness through action would be the appropriate act for Clark and any settler seeking to take responsibility for their collective history of injustice.

REPRESENTING A COLLECTIVE'S RESPONSIBILITY-TAKING

In this section, I will focus on the invocation of the collective "we" in Clark's petition for forgiveness. I suggest that Clark does not succeed in the work of representing the collective due to insufficient advocacy for the need to take responsibility among non-Native veterans. His failure is instructive as it brings into view the responsibilities of organizing a collective in the interest of collective responsibility-taking: To take responsibility on behalf of a collective requires prioritizing advocacy among one's group before seeking relationship with the collective that has been harmed.

Despite my critiques of the temporal issues of the petition for forgiveness and Clark's work of representing a collective of non-Native veterans, the ceremony remains a brilliant educative maneuver. In the context of a settler colonial education system, military justifications of massacres of Native people, and problematic military language (e.g., Osama Bin Laden's code name was "Geronimo" and enemy territory was referred to as "Indian Country" until at least the early 2000s), it is likely that the vast majority of non-Native veterans lack any understanding of how the injustices of the past are present among members of the Oceti Sakowin. The education provided by elders

on the Oceti Sakowin people's experience of colonialism was not simply spoken. The forgiveness ceremony required that a non-Native veteran situate himself and the military in that history. The ceremony created the conditions for remorse and statements of responsibility-taking. Given that the media followed the veterans at Standing Rock closely, Clark's petition for forgiveness was broadcast widely. The dynamics of public speech in the U.S. settler state give a greater degree of authority to non-Native veterans than Native elders. To hear a man in military uniform detail a list of injustices has the power to persuade non-Native observers that the threat to clean water at Standing Rock is connected to a history of continuing colonial violence (even if Clark did not directly say this).

Despite my contention that a petition for forgiveness was an inappropriate form of collective responsibility-taking for settler colonialism, I admit to being moved by Clark's invocation of the atrocities of the U.S. military in his petition for forgiveness. A man in the uniform of the U.S. cavalry telling the truth about settler colonialism, while kneeling before a Oceti Sakowin elder is not only rare. As someone who seeks decolonization, it sets off my imagination: What if veterans reprise their role during the Vietnam War and could turn the tide of U.S. public opinion against settler colonialism? What if those who are enlisted to fight the battles of settler colonialism refuse to fight? What if the National Guard said no to going to Standing Rock? What if the military personnel and veterans everywhere refused the orders to protect drilling sites or dams? A broken alliance between forces of state violence and extractive industry would land a serious blow to the settler colonial project.

These are undisciplined thoughts and I will not hold my breath for their realization. Part of this temptation to imagine comes from the politics of juxtaposition. I take my inspiration from Leanne Simpson's (Nishnaabeg) critique of Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau's gestural politics:

It can appear or feel as if the state is operating differently because it is offering a slightly different process to Indigenous people. Goodness knows, we'd all like to feel hopeful. We'd like to see a prime minister smudging or acknowledging he is on Indigenous territory and have that signal a significant dismantling of settler colonialism. (Simpson 2017, 45)

Neither smudging (the ceremonial burning of sacred herbs), Native drumming at political events, making land acknowledgments, nor supporting truth and reconciliation proceedings means that there is a commitment to taking responsibility for and ending extractive/acquisitive settler colonialism, in which the elimination of Native people and their claims to sovereignty is foundational and constitutive (Simpson 2017, 47; Wolfe 2016). In a blog post, Simpson points to the ways that Trudeau's promise derives less from the substantive good of his proposals than the juxtaposition of his politics

to those of his predecessor: "Harper lowered the bar to such a level that the tiniest bit of humanity impressed us, and Trudeau was providing us with the mother load" (Simpson 2016).

In a similar way, I believe the power of Clark's gesture comes from juxtaposition. His kneeling before elders gains its power in juxtaposition to the military's well-known history of massacres and murders of Oceti Sakowin people at Wounded Knee, Whitestone Hill, Mankato, among others (Allard 2016). Members of Clark's unit—the Seventh Cavalry, which is responsible for the Wounded Knee massacre—were likely responsible for the murder of the ancestors of the elders he spoke to. Acknowledgment of historical atrocities and respect for Native people and traditions is an act of decency on behalf of settlers. The rarity of such decency does not make it worthy of moral or political esteem. It does, however, make it a convenient vehicle for projection. Although we can imagine alliance between the Canadian government or the U.S. military and Native people against settler colonialism, Simpson teaches that it is critical to separate imagined justice from continuing injustice. Inclusion of Native ceremony in politics and Clark's petition for forgiveness is meaningless (and irresponsible) if it does not come with a concomitant responsibility to Native people and their demands for sovereignty, land, and self-government.

Many Native people are rightfully sensitive to non-Native gestures of respect and promising given such a history. A history of military disrespect can make an act of respect from veterans powerful. A history of broken promises can magnify the significance of a promise. This historical vulnerability requires that care be given before a promise is made. As one seeking to take responsibility for that history of injustice, it is critical that Clark speak and act carefully. I locate the failure to promise responsibly in the distinction between Clark asking forgiveness as someone carrying the message of a collective versus Clark asking forgiveness as an individual member of a collective. Lacking sufficient advocacy for collective responsibility among his group, he lacks sufficient backing for the responsibility-taking and service he promises in his statement. Through the work of advocacy within the collective, Clark could have gone beyond a gestural politics of juxtaposition to a place where his words are invested with the power of the collective.

To carry the message of a collective requires that there be deliberation on questions of history and responsibility among members of the collective. It requires that there be an authorization of Clark as a carrier of the message. This does not require complete agreement among members of the collective; rather, it calls for a concerted effort on the part of the representative to address diverse groups among the group. From the work of advocacy, there should be knowledge of the concerns, disagreements, and challenges to the petition among the group. There should be authorization in the form of a collective

speech or action, which signals support for the petition among members of the group.⁷ This is the work of backing up the language of service to harmed groups with meaningful solidarity.

From reporting and primary sources, Clark embodied a petition for forgiveness on behalf of an individual member of a group. His deliberations on the question of asking forgiveness did not extend far beyond himself, if at all. The operations order—whose preparation inspired Clark to contact Phyllis Young about the ceremony—tells veterans: “The tribal elders will then perform a cleansing ceremony to wash away our sins and steel us for the days ahead” (Veterans for Standing Rock 2016). Despite Clark’s claims that this language notified veterans of the forgiveness ceremony, there is no specification of what sins would be cleansed (Linehan 2016). Our mainstream understanding of “sin” tends to understand it as an individual rather than collective historical failing. We can thus sympathize with Michael A. Wood, Jr., who co-led Veterans for Standing Rock, who said that he “hadn’t been briefed beforehand by Clark or anyone about the ceremony” (Linehan 2016). Adam Linehan’s “Why They Went: The Inside Story of Standing Rock Veterans” quotes Navy veteran Luke Eastman as typical of numerous complaints from veterans in the protest camp: “I’m here to support the Native Americans, but I don’t have anything to apologize for” (Linehan 2016). At the time of the ceremony, the veterans were more concerned with the absence of Clark from the protest camp. To many, the forgiveness ceremony was a publicity stunt at the expense of veterans who were looking for leadership and support from organizers in blizzard conditions.

Inseparable practical and moral issues arise from the lack of work advocating among the collective for the petition for forgiveness. Advocacy for collective responsibility can change the dynamics of how non-Native veterans and Native people coalesce around protecting the waters on Oceti Sakowin lands. Consider the circumstances: There are thousands of non-Native veterans joining in collective action at Standing Rock. Given the aforementioned deficiencies of the U.S. settler education system, it is likely that the vast majority of non-Native veterans walk around without knowledge of the complicated meanings of their presence among Native people.

Frantz Fanon points to the ways that the colonial legacy is revealed in encounters between white people and the colonized. Non-Native veterans’ embodiment itself carries the weight of settler colonialism and the military’s actions on Native land. Fanon’s chapter “The Lived Experience of the Black,” from *Black Skin, White Masks* offers a phenomenology of the encounter with this weight: “And then the occasion arose when I had to meet the white man’s eyes. An unfamiliar weight burdened me. The real world challenged my claims” (Fanon 2008, 83). The experience of encountering a white person himself undermines his claims to racial equality. This white man “had woven

me out of thousand details, anecdotes, stories” (84). No words are necessary. The presence of a white man alone carries a white supremacist projection powerful enough to interrupt Fanon’s relationship to his body and his conceptions of equality. The burden is not only seeing himself through the distortions through which the colonizer sees a colonized person. Fanon points to the “historicity” inherent in those “details, anecdotes, stories” (84). This encounter recalls the gratuitous violence of colonial expropriation.

Fanon’s phenomenology of the encounter between colonized and colonizer speaks to the weight that I—as a settler—carry with me. No matter my personal or familial history, as a “beneficiary” of the injustices my collective committed against Indigenous people, I inherit the legacy of those injustices. I may choose to ignore them or say that I have nothing to do with them, but Fanon teaches colonizers that the deeds of our collectives are held within our embodied presence. James Baldwin echoes this phenomenology of collective wrongdoing: “People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them” (Baldwin 2012, 167). Clark’s advocacy among the collective of non-Native veterans could have offered the opportunity to grapple with the history that weighs on settlers more generally and members of the U.S. military more specifically. This advocacy could challenge Eastman’s conception that support for the water protectors could be separated from taking responsibility for the injustices of settler colonialism.

The solidarity between non-Native veterans and Native water protectors becomes helpfully complicated when non-Native veterans feel the historical weight they carry. Despite good intentions, there is a way in which they are responsible for the harm they are resisting at Standing Rock. The military has been an important means of undermining treaty rights and Native sovereignty since the establishment of the United States. The Army Corps of Engineers approval of the pipeline is a new chapter of an old story.

For non-Native veterans to see themselves as both resistant to and responsible for a harm calls forth a shift in authority: Rather than presuming that non-Native veterans’ expertise and training is what is required—as the operation orders suggest with their focus on tactical maneuvers through police lines—authority would shift to those who have been harmed. In address to veterans coming to Standing Rock, Remy (who extended the invitation to non-Native veterans) suggests: “We are asking them to help us heal together. We’re asking them to change their lives and their mindset, because this is a place for healing” (Acronym TV 2016). Prayer and healing are in concert with conventional forms of civil disobedience.⁸ Although Remy does not use the language of decolonization, the shift that is required to give authority to Native people’s conception of resistance above that of non-Native veterans is a critical part of supporting Native sovereignty and leadership in environmental activism.⁹ The transformation of lives, mind, and spirit that Remy seeks is

one where “these tactics and techniques that we’re teaching people, they can take back home and they can fight this fight back there: How to hold space, how to peacefully assemble, how to take out these pillars of support that allow these corporations to continue securing these resources in this way” (Acronym TV 2016).

Remy denies the paternalistic savior-complexes where non-Native people rescue besieged and victimized Native people. He instead offers a vision of resistance as a virtuous circle where respect for Native teachings becomes a capacity to address one’s own wounds while taking responsibility to resist local iterations of extractive colonialism. Collective responsibility-taking on the part of settlers is critical not only because it creates the conditions for respect for Native political demands and a sensitivity to Native people’s historical and present relationship to the U.S. settler state. It is critical if we—as settlers—are to do the reflexive work that Remy calls us to. Only once we are able to see ourselves as beneficiaries of an ongoing history of harms, can we connect collective responsibility to the collective action necessary to end those harms. For instance, instead of grounding the call for veteran support on environmentalism, and the defense of the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights (causes motivating Wood and Clark) (Wood 2016), collective action would be oriented toward the cessation of the harms of settler colonialism.

The limitations of Clark’s advocacy for collective responsibility among non-Native veterans points to its importance. Given a history of mistreatment and broken promises, reckoning with U.S. military responsibility for settler-colonialism could have been the foundation for more meaningful service and support to Oceti Sakowin people—backed by a collective rather than a single individual. Further, engagement with these questions of collective responsibility could helpfully shift dynamics of authority in collective action. If non-Native military veterans complicate notions of themselves as “helpers” and see themselves as collectively implicated in the wrongs they are seeking to resist, collective action at Standing Rock becomes part of the work of collective responsibility. The harm being resisted becomes settler colonialism, of which the attack on the waters of the Oceti Sakowin is one manifestation. The priority of ending ongoing harms becomes tied to collective responsibility, as it should be.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have argued that petitions for collective forgiveness are responsible only if the wrongs they address are firmly in the past. I have argued that one should do the work of advocacy for collective responsibility within one’s own group before addressing those who have been harmed with promises and pledges on behalf of one’s collective. Given that Clark missed

opportunities to do this work, he missed opportunities to create meaningful collective responsibility-taking and for a more durable basis for collective action between non-Native veterans and Native people. These missed opportunities point toward the importance of avoiding premature declarations of collective responsibility and petitions for collective forgiveness for settlers—like myself—who seek to do the work of collective responsibility for the ongoing harms of colonialism. They point us toward two elements of the work that is most critical in the present: (1) Working to resist the ongoing assault on Native people, lands, and sovereignty and advocating and (2) Developing a notion of collective responsibility among settlers.¹⁰

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NOTES

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- 2 In some sources, it is suggested that a forgiveness ceremony was planned all along, but according to Wes Clark, Jr., he suggested a "Wiping Away the Tears" grief ceremony that would steel the veterans for nonviolent resistance. The thought was that veterans' post-traumatic stress disorder might create triggers that would cause the veterans to respond violently to provocations from pipeline security forces. When asked about veterans' objections to the forgiveness ceremony, Clark responded that the planned "cleansing ceremony" should have alerted them to the forgiveness ceremony. Tolan (2016), Veterans for Standing Rock (2016), Gelder (2016), and Linehan (2016).
- 3 See also Irlbacher-Fox (2010) and Jung (2009).
- 4 Griswold offers an excellent interpretation of the notions of resentment, revenge, and forgiveness from Butler's eighth and ninth sermons (2007, 31–37).
- 5 Thanks to Sandy Skene for pointing me to this reference.
- 6 I do not include Derrida's notion of forgiveness as an unconditional gift given that the actions of the perpetrator of harms (or the representative of that collective) is immaterial to the question of forgiveness (Derrida 2001, 27–58).
- 7 There are important analogies with the literature on authorizations of political representatives, but given that group authorization lacks the coercive, rights-giving aspects of a political order, an artifact of consent (in the form of speech, document, or action) is sufficient to authorize one as a representative. See Tuomela (2016, 160–63).
- 8 María José Méndez describes a shift in her understanding of resistance when Indigenous Lenca activists fighting a proposed dam on the Río Blanco in Honduras speak of "swimming in the river" as their central form of protest despite effectively organizing road blocks, occupations, and sit-ins at government buildings, international alliances, and public protests. Relations and ceremony with the river they are protecting take precedence over the humanist focus on civil disobedience and protest. Thanks to Sarah Tyson for this reference. Méndez (2018).
- 9 See La Paperson's distinction between settler environmentalists seeking to protect the environmental and decolonial land pedagogy (2014).
- 10 Of course, not all settlers are positioned alike. Addressing complexity among the collective called "settlers" is part of this collective responsibility work. Jared Sexton (2016) makes important contributions to thinking about the ways that calling black people in the United States "settlers" is to misunderstand anti-blackness.