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A world without innocence

ABSTRACT

What exactly *is* innocence—why are we morally compelled by it? Classic figures of innocence—the child, the refugee, the trafficked victim, and the animal—have come to occupy our political imagination, often aided by the important role of humanitarianism in political life. My goal is to see how innocence, a key ethico-moral concept, has come to structure what we think of as politics in the contemporary Euro-American context—how it maps political possibilities as well as impossibilities. The centrality of innocence to the political imagination is shaped by a search for a space of purity, one that constantly displaces politics to the limit of innocence and thereby renders invisible the structural and historical causes of inequality. We need, then, to open up political, moral, and affective grammars beyond innocence. [*moral*ity, *humanitarianism*, *purity*, *suffering*, *political imagination*, *secular liberalism*, *contamination*]

The now-famous image of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy whose body washed up onto a Turkish beach in September 2015, grabbed the world's attention, eliciting sympathy rather than the usual mix of fear and indifference toward those who have left their homes to land on European shores. The photo gave the "refugee crisis" a new face: innocence.

There is perhaps no more essential image of innocence than that of a child. Humanitarian organizations regularly figure children on their home pages and in fundraising materials, to elicit support for those considered most vulnerable. And even in this increasingly illiberal era, images of children are powerful: in April 2017, when Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad attacked his own people with chemical weapons, US president Donald Trump said in response, "It crossed a lot of lines for me. When you kill innocent children, innocent babies, babies, little babies, with a chemical gas that is so lethal—people were shocked to hear what gas it was" (Borger, Smith, and Rankin 2017).

But some images of children are considered more heartrending than others. Why did Alan catch the world's attention? Since then, many children's bodies have washed up on the shores of Europe, with little response. Why did the images of Syrian children touch Trump, while those of injured Mexican children do not? The point, of course, is that only some people and some plights get noticed when innocence is what draws our attention to them. Furthermore, while innocence can compel responses to important events such as the refugee crisis or the war in Syria, it can also create a distinction between worthy and unworthy victims in these same events. While many say the photo of Alan Kurdi is what finally shamed Europe into action, ideas and images of innocence—and the moral imperative they engender—have a long history of actually hurting those they intend to help.

We need to understand the concept of innocence: its historical and philosophical groundings, and how it functions as a political, not simply a moral, concept. What exactly *is* innocence—why are we morally compelled by it? What gives it its power? My goal is to see how such moral and ethical terms come to structure what we think of as politics, and what we can do, think, and feel—how they map political possibilities as well as impossibilities.

Far from being understood as an engagement with the regular stuff of politics, like power or the organization of collective life, innocence is defined as freedom from both the worldly and unworldly.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *innocence* means “freedom from sin, guilt or moral wrong in general”; “freedom from specific guilt”; “freedom from cunning or artifice.”¹ This space of “freedom *from*”—this negative freedom—is so free indeed that it is seemingly free of content; it purports to be a state of *moral and epistemic purity*. Innocence is defined as a state of guilelessness, artlessness, want of knowledge or sense—in the terms of the *OED*, it is a state of ignorance, even a state of “silliness.” In this sense, innocence is perhaps as far from politics as we could possibly imagine. But innocence is a concept that—either because of or despite its very emptiness—has been deployed politically in more or less vigorous ways over time; indeed, it has moved into the center of political life today.

In the contemporary era, we are embroiled in a search for a space of purity, a space outside corruption and contamination, a space emptied of the power that can ground both tolerance and action; innocence provides us with such a conceptual space. Yet, because innocence is both mythical and ephemeral, we are constantly displacing politics to the limit of innocence in a never-ending quest, and in the process the structural and historical causes of inequality get rendered invisible. In the search for purity, a very particular politics gets produced, and another, disabled. To this end, we need to open up political, moral, and affective grammars beyond innocence. Ultimately, I do this to clear the way for alternative ontological starting points. What would a world look like without innocence?

While innocence is a concept with a vast range and history, I focus on its ethico-moral dimensions in the Euro-American context after the 1960s. This means, first, that I locate innocence in a particular secular, liberal world that is concerned with individual autonomy, freedom, and rationality, as well as with the limits of humanity, of which equality and dignity are key principles. Innocence helps define these principles, sometimes as their constituent outside, sometimes as their precursor, and often as their hope for the future. Innocence, however, has persisting Judeo-Christian contours that give it power even in worlds that may border on illiberal or authoritarian. Even in the more illiberal political regimes that hold sway from the United States to Turkey, where principles of democracy, individual freedom, universal equality, and religious toleration may no longer hold a central place, moral principles such as humanity and innocence still play an important role, albeit with differing interpretations and responses. For instance, Trump denounced the chemical attacks in Syria as “an affront to humanity” and subsequently launched direct strikes against the Syrian people. Similarly, the unborn fetus plays an enormously important role in right-wing political agendas globally as the ultimate example of purity and innocence. Of course, liberalism and authoritarianism need not be mutually exclusive (Mahmood 2015); seeing innocence across these realms may actually provide insight into the nature of

liberalism. In this sense, while some say this is not the time to critique liberal values, I find it as important as ever to trace how innocence gets deployed politically and to open up space for alternative ways of thinking.

Second, I will not deal centrally with innocence in its arguably most recognizable guise—that is, as a legal or juridical concept. Of course, early appearances of the concept define innocence as free not only from knowledge but also from specific wrong or guilt.² In contemporary legal terms, innocence is about acquittal—a decision to acquit means that the judge or jury had a reasonable doubt as to the defendant’s guilt. It may be based on exculpatory evidence or a lack of evidence to prove guilt. It does not mean that there is absolute certainty, only reasonable doubt. To find someone innocent is not necessarily to make a judgment on who they are but on whether they committed a particular act. In other words, the legal concept has developed to judge acts, not identities (although, as Janet Halley [1993] has demonstrated, acts and identities may not be as easily distinguished as we might think). The legal concept leaves room for uncertainty; it does not presume absolute truth. This is not the case with innocence as an ethico-moral concept, which is much less flexible, much less compromising, and which helps to constitute identities or kinds in relation to purity. While these different registers certainly work together to determine its meaning, it is the ethico-moral register that has been activated in more politically salient ways, and so I limit my discussion to that.

Histories of innocence, configurations of purity

Innocence promises a space of purity. This promise is also innocence’s political potential—in other words, its potential to engage with the power relations of the dominant order and the shape of collective life by defining their outer limits. Innocence comes into being in relation to its various binary others, such as guilt, knowledge, and sexuality. While the concept does different work in relation to these binaries, in each case innocence works to regulate a space of purity: sometimes this means to be without knowledge, sometimes to be without intention, sometimes to be free from desire, and sometimes free from guilt. It works as a boundary concept, and in the process it helps produce and regulate human kinds and their constituent outsides—it helps to imagine “humanity.” The counterintuitive aspects of the concept are important in this regard. For instance, while the Latin etymology of *innocence* focuses on harm (*in-* + *nocens*, “not harmful,” which is clearly a central feature of the concept), the etymology of *in-* + *noscere*, “not to know,” is perhaps even more significant. What does it mean not simply to be empty of knowledge, but specifically to *not know*?

Innocence comes into view early in relation to its theological interpretations. These locate innocence in the story of Adam and Eve, wherein innocence means not

knowing the difference between good and evil; it means lacking worldly knowledge. Innocence is represented as a state of calm and repose, particularly in the Garden of Eden, before the fall of humanity, when Eve eats from the tree of knowledge. The Fall helps to define humanity afterward; the loss of innocence is *how* we become human. In this sense, as philosopher Joanne Faulkner (2008) points out, innocence is inherently unsustainable, overdetermined by its conceptual history within Christian discourse: it is a mythical state, destined to be toppled by humanity. Innocence also implies a lack of responsibility, insofar as innocent life is bound by a divine authority, and the Fall brings to human life a will and responsibility of its own.

This Judeo-Christian history continues to resonate and shape our ideas of innocence, even as it gets used to different ends. Recalling the Garden of Eden, Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1987a, 1987b) also imagined a time of innocence that preceded the social contract and the political life of citizens; for Rousseau, innocence is exemplified in the state of nature and conceived of as “oneness with nature.” Again, it is understood as a state of unsullied simplicity, where human and animal are not clearly distinguishable. As with the Garden of Eden, the departure from the state of nature is the beginning of our social existence, our start as political animals.

Central to this philosophical history is epistemic or experiential purity: the absence of knowledge or experience, or sometimes even the active repelling of it. Such purity structures moral categories, filling out binary notions of deserving and undeserving, the innocent and the guilty, ultimately giving shape to different human kinds. Of interest is how innocence is constantly deployed to *produce* this economy of knowledge, action, and purity—how it regulates what counts as knowledge and what is understood as purity, and for whom. Innocence has worked to produce the idea of a deserving humanity, one that can escape the compromised and often-corrupt nature of political life. In marking off a period of epistemic and moral purity, the concept of innocence has produced worthiness, but only insofar as it is also a space of freedom from desire, will, or agency. While literary theorist James Kincaid (1998, 16) suggests that the empty figure of the innocent allows the admirer to read just about anything into its vacancy, my goal here is to qualify this negative state—that which is lacking. Sometimes the missing element is attached to desire—it leaves the subject as asexual; sometimes it means lack of will or intention. Almost always, however, the lack leaves one incapable of being a thinking, engaged, active, or informed subject. In valorizing purity, innocence has also produced humanity as a population of unknowing dupes. While it is not my goal to recuperate a normative liberal idea of humanity as composed of rational, autonomous, agentive beings, I do want to mark this as the opposite of such a normative humanity, one that leaves no space for other ways of being in the

world. That is, innocence acts as the boundary for liberal ideas of personhood, where this constituent outside is simultaneously idealized and denigrated.

Take the archetypal figure of innocence: the child. Capturing innocence in the figure of the child reflects this search for purity in the secular world, this deep yearning for a time before corruption, a space beyond social norms. The child represents a mode of experience that is protected, controlled—it performs the part of *tabula rasa*, and as such it offers proof that as humans we can be anything, that we are not condemned by our sinful past. Of course, childhood was not always considered the epitome of innocence; this is a modern invention, dating to the 18th century (Ariès 1962). Following theories of original sin, which held that all humans carry the guilt of Adam’s disobedience, children were understood as inherently sinful; they were small, faulty adults in need of discipline, correction, or worse, since they had no idea how to control their various impulses (Bernstein 2011).

Notions of childhood as soiled by original sin shifted to the now more well-known ideas of romantic childhood, thanks in part to John Locke (1975), who situated the child as simply a subject without experience and memory. For Locke, the child was an instance of natural humanity, revealing humanity’s *capacity* for knowledge and reason, without being tainted by the prejudices of actual knowledge in society. The child was pure and uncorrupt potential. Images of romantic childhood stress this idea of the child as barely part of the physical world, as belonging to a time out of history. This is achieved by making their bodies seem unreal or as distinct as possible from adults: dimpled and round, with unblemished skin (Higonnet 1998). In this sense, Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers used the child to imagine a secular humanity; as its exemplar, the figure of the child enabled humanity to reimagine itself as also essentially innocent, that is, as having the potential to act and shape its own future (Faulkner 2011). On the one hand, Enlightenment thinkers turned Judeo-Christian notions of innocence on their heads, not simply placing innocence in the past but identifying it as the key to the future; on the other hand, despite its shifting temporal location, innocence remains central to how we imagine nature and the limits of humanity.

Innocence demarcates human kinds according to their relationship to knowledge and action. For instance, locating innocence in the figure of the child leaves little space for actual childhood experiences. What happens when these experiences do not fit the parameters of innocence? Innocence carves out a conceptual space and time of unsullied hope, one that is linked to a freedom from knowledge. Yet the borders of this space are profoundly contested; rather than a given, this space is a political battleground. Understanding the work of innocence requires tracing which types of knowledge are named or counted as pure (which

experiences slip into a space of epistemic purity, unnoticed) and, by contrast, which ones somehow tip the balance and result in an expulsion from innocence.

Child soldiers, for instance, trouble the image of the child as innocent. And as Liisa Malkki (2010) has argued, child soldiers are seen as an abomination, a category mistake that leads to their being labeled “youth” or “teens” as opposed to “children” whenever possible, to set aside and protect a time of innocence, when they are still unworldly and untainted. Similarly, the undocumented minors crossing into the United States from Central America in great numbers in the summer of 2014 were not categorized or treated as children; they were called “minors,” no matter their age, and imprisoned in detention centers. While child soldiers are sullied by their involvement in war, the undocumented children were tainted by their association with gangs, drugs, and violence; they were rendered complicit in these crimes by virtue of coming from the same place—racially, geographically, and socioeconomically.

As these examples demonstrate, the concept of innocence does not describe a clear-cut state of epistemic or other purity. Rather, it helps distinguish morally acceptable forms of knowledge, action, and experience, and these are inevitably tied to one’s being in the world. That is, innocence is defined not simply by a period of life called “childhood” or by outside standards such as age but by, as we just saw, class, gender, and racial background, among other positionalities, histories, and experiences. Certain conditions enable the space for an unsullied childhood; clearly class formation is important here, in configuring a space and time understood as pure, as empty or free of knowledge. But so is race: as feminist theorist bell hooks has noted, black children in the United States, particularly black boys, are never allowed to be children.³ This is also true for black girls, who, starting as early as five years old, are treated as more adult than their white counterparts, with presumed knowledge of topics like sex (Meyerson 2017). Racial regimes mean that they are never allowed this period of untroubled and ignorant life; they are immediately interpellated into the structures and hierarchies of society, which render their knowledge suspect. Historian Robin Bernstein (2011, 30–35) argues, in fact, that childhood innocence was from the very beginning racialized as *white* in the United States; it came into being in the second half of the 19th century in relation to its Other, the black child, who was constructed as a “pickaninny”—a nonfeeling, noninnocent, juvenile *worker*. In this sense, childhood was forged in the context of capitalism and slave labor—and innocence worked to mark the boundary of allowable, exploitative, racialized labor. Innocence thus produces and regulates ontologies of human kinds. When one is a noninnocent child, one is no longer a child—one is simply expelled from the category.

Even as it produces human kinds, innocence marks humanity’s limits. Perhaps unsurprisingly, those associated

with innocence tend to be at humanity’s edges; they mark its border, in the sense that they are not corrupt (as is a normative humanity), yet nor are they fully human in the Enlightenment sense of having reason, will, or autonomy. Women have been figured as innocent, for instance, particularly in the form of mother and child. This may be because white children’s innocence was often transferable to surrounding people and things (Bernstein 2011). Yet for women by themselves, chastity or sexual integrity has been the most important thing about them, and in this sense, innocence is still inextricably tied to sexual innocence (Miller 2004; Rubin 1993). As we know, sex is a particularly dense site of struggle between knowledge and ignorance; the term *carnal knowledge* illustrates the battle over how to categorize different forms of action and experience.⁴ Kincaid describes innocence as simply “virginity coupled with ignorance” (1998, 55). For women, then, sex is considered the primary corrupting form of knowledge. To be innocent is to be chaste. Purity here—to be a “good woman”—is to actively embody performances of passionlessness (Bernstein 2011, 41). This is echoed over and over again in the history of rape cases—women who have been victims of sexual violence are figured immediately as guilty; the burden of proof is reversed, requiring that they prove *their innocence* rather than the guilt of their attackers. Indeed, in this way, innocence has helped produce new gendered and sexual ontologies: the requirement of passionlessness to claim innocence has carried over to homosexuality. In the struggle against HIV/AIDS, access to life-saving treatment required that queer bodies be rendered innocent, which entailed taking homosexuality out of the realm of choice and desire, placing it in the sphere of genetically determined nature or essence.

Humanitarian innocence, political consequences

Innocence does important work to produce human kinds by regulating distinctions between purity and impurity. Yet how has innocence come to occupy such an important place in the Euro-American political landscape? The following provides an example of how it has become central to contemporary politics, insofar as it creates a space for seemingly apolitical (or morally pure) action.

Let’s turn to France in 1968 and the subsequent formation of Médecins sans frontières (MSF; Doctors without Borders), since it was here that a shift in a form of political engagement rendered innocence central to politics. This was not the only moment or place that the shift occurred, but it was certainly a critical one, particularly in the European and, later, global context. This is also the beginning of what Didier Fassin calls “humanitarian government” (2011, 1), or how moral sentiments have become an essential force in contemporary politics, directed from the more powerful to the weaker. The year 1968 marked the largest strike in the history of the French workers’ movement, and the largest

mass movement in French history (Ross 2002, 3–4). The key players in the formation of MSF were all *soixante-huitards* ('68ers): at the time they were doctors or medical students, and Maoists or members of the Communist Party. These revolutionary doctors, who came together with a group of equally radical journalists, founded MSF in 1971.

While initially guided by the belief in a universal humanity grounded in equality and solidarity, MSF and the “new humanitarianism” soon blossomed into and helped to shape an era of moralist antipolitics. After the failure of '68 to transform the social and political order and after the disappointment of anticolonial revolutionary Marxist movements, Bernard Kouchner, one of MSF's founders, and many of his comrades from '68 radically changed their views. They turned away from engagement with what they thought of as politics—engaging with power relations in the struggle for a collective future—and instead embraced the belief that one can ultimately address only individual suffering; in this sense, they attended to what they conceived of as a universal humanity composed of suffering victims (Redfield 2013; Ross 2002; Vallaeys 2004). As former executive director of MSF-USA Nicolas de Torrenté wrote, “Humanitarian action's single-minded purpose [is] alleviating suffering, unconditionally and without any ulterior motive” (2004, 5). That is, politics in terms of the anticapitalist, anti-imperialist revolution dreamed of by the *soixante-huitards* was replaced by a defense of the principles of human rights, and by a view that separated victims from perpetrators, heroes from villains, in order to side with and defend the powerless (Ross 2002). Kouchner and MSF brought a form of action that appealed in its purported ability to *avoid* Machiavellian politics (Caldwell 2009). It was an ideology grounded in individualism, one that no longer allowed for the possibility of larger political change.⁵

Innocence was central both to the politics of this “antipolitics” and, ultimately, to defining morally legitimate suffering. This “new humanitarianism” was shaped by a frustration with and refusal of politics; consequently, it was driven by the search for an uncorrupted space of action. Innocence offers such a space of imagination, even as it calls forth and protects different versions of epistemic and moral purity. In this sense, the suffering victim driving humanitarian action quickly inhabited the conceptual space opened by the notion of innocence, even if it was not always identical to it—of course, humanitarianism is not *simply* a politics of innocence, and innocence clearly travels beyond its humanitarian deployments. While MSF maintains impartiality as a key principle, meaning that it offers assistance to people irrespective of their race, gender, religion, or political affiliation, in many humanitarian contexts—on the ground—innocence becomes the necessary accompaniment to suffering, required to designate the sufferer as worthy. That is, the suffering victim is best and most easily recognized by humanitarians when considered innocent—pure,

outside politics, outside history, indeed, outside time and place altogether (Ticktin 2011a). This figure is distinctly counterposed to the previous political protagonists of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the worker and the colonial militant, in that these are both highly situated, geographically, historically, racially, and of course politically.

On a practical level, humanitarians are guided by the principle of impartiality, but in practice, finite resources limit their action.⁶ While the goal is to treat everyone equally, whether they are perpetrators or victims, they themselves admit that they must triage, prioritizing those considered in the most serious and immediate danger. The concept of innocence helps in this process, as a way to grasp and measure vulnerability. Indeed, former MSF president Rony Brauman has criticized how moralist positions have marked humanitarianism, noting that the symbolic status of victim can in effect “only be granted in cases of unjustified or innocent suffering. . . . The point is that he [*sic*] must be 100% victim, a non-participant” (Brauman 1993, 154).

This process of triage is evident in the case of sexual violence. Before the early 2000s, survivors of sexual violence were not included in standard models of humanitarian aid delivery. In the collection of essays by MSF about humanitarian practices in the Congo Republic in the late 1990s, *Civilians under Fire* (Le Pape and Salignon 2003), former MSF-USA executive director Nicolas de Torrenté and former MSF president Jean-Hervé Bradol admit that this is because relief organizations search for the “ideal victims.” On the one hand, they acknowledge that this is strategic, insofar as it is a way to get donors interested; de Torrenté writes, “Deeply rooted images put a premium on the innocence of victims, making children, who are by definition blameless, the ideal recipients of care” (2003, x). On the other hand, they suggest that this focus, instrumental or not, pushes other categories of victims into the background. Survivors of sexual violence were not seen as innocent—as Bradol writes, “The raped woman rarely represents the ideal victim” (Bradol 2003, 11). This is because such survivors raised a number of unsettling issues for practitioners around violence and gender roles, which they felt were too political to engage. As a result, de Torrenté states that MSF reproduced forms of prejudice against women in general and survivors of sexual violence in particular. These discussions are haunted by the histories and treatment of women victims of rape, who were (and still are) seen as responsible for and consenting to their own rapes because of how they dressed or behaved, or where they had chosen to be. They are seen as too knowing and too agentive to be innocent.

In many ways, MSF's collection of essays marks the shift, since the early 2000s, in the humanitarian mandate; sexual violence now merits an immediate response from aid workers. This was not because humanitarianism stopped looking for innocent subjects; rather, there was a shift to seeing these women as innocent enough to be

compelling humanitarian subjects. This happened, in large part, through the medicalization of gender-based violence, which is a longer story related to its changing treatment by regimes of human rights and global health (Ticktin 2011b). Attention was transferred to health consequences such as infection with HIV, physical injury and trauma, unwanted pregnancies, reproductive health, and STDs. This medicalization of rape and sexual violence ended up shifting the blame and rendering the victims innocent of the harm they endured. More specifically, a focus on the vulnerable body in biomedical terms brackets off social and political identities and realities. The medicalization was helpful insofar as it allowed women to be abstracted from their political contexts, rendered blameless, and treated; it has been less helpful, however, insofar as it has worked to depoliticize the larger gendered inequalities that lead to such harm.

The conceptual space of innocence has been shaped and disseminated through the process of medicalization at the heart of medical humanitarianism; biomedicine, in its focus on the physical body, also generally disregards the role of intentionality, desire, or will. While MSF has primarily attended to health care in times of crisis, engaging innocence both honestly and strategically, humanitarianism as a field brings medicine into intersection with the law, and here once again, innocence has played an important role.

In my earlier research in France on the role of humanitarian exceptions in the politics of immigration (Ticktin 2011a), I found that those who were understood to be the most passive or guileless were the most likely to gain access to legal documents through humanitarian exceptions to the law. For instance, undocumented immigrants could be legalized (temporarily) in exceptional circumstances, such as severe illness, or as a result of gender-based or sexual violence, drawing on the process of medicalization to enhance their palatability as blameless. Again, the more “innocent” one appeared, the more likely it was that one would be issued documents. For example, the successful cases I observed included a child with cancer; a Malian woman infected with HIV by her husband, who brought home the infection after sleeping with other women; and an Algerian woman who had been raped and disfigured by her uncle. These are people who did nothing to cause their situation. As Fassin notes, humanitarian government tends to work by setting up a “scale of innocence and vulnerability” that works to privilege some, like HIV-positive children who are the ultimate innocents, but in the process, it also works to penalize others, like their mothers (2011, 167).

The humanitarian exceptions I tracked also increasingly included victims of human trafficking. Of course, the movement against trafficking has its other histories and precursors, such as the movement against white slavery, which, interestingly, also focused on purity. While current antitrafficking laws are concerned with trafficking for forced labor as well as for forced sex, trafficking for the purposes

of sex still receives the most publicity and emphasis transnationally, and one reason for this is the focus on and appeal of innocence. As anthropologist Carole Vance (2012) has long argued, the central characters in stories of sex trafficking are teenage girls and young women, putatively devoid of sexuality or knowledge, and sold into brothels.

In fact, human-trafficking cases—a subset of which are called “modern slavery”—perhaps best illustrate the need to appeal to innocence in the humanitarian logic. And they in turn reveal the contours of innocence as a political concept. Here, victims lack not only (sexual) knowledge but also intention, which enhances their identities as innocent. In my research, nearly all the “modern slaves” who were recognized and granted documents through humanitarian exceptions were young girls who had supposedly come to France naively, sexually innocent, and often without a choice. There was no room for their complicity in wanting a better life or to provide for their kin, or in taking opportunities to leave their homes, often with the help of their families; no room for sexual knowledge or experience. The girls were described as vulnerable, defenseless, lost, and excluded. They were portrayed as unable to comprehend their situations. In the process, sex work as work was either rendered invisible or criminalized.

As we can see from these examples, certain subjects are better positioned to fit into the conceptual framework of innocence. Gender configurations suggest that women are more easily understood as victims and as apolitical, and hence more easily interpellated into the role of moral purity. But the “Third World Woman”—as transnational feminist theorist Chandra Mohanty (1988, 333) has called the stereotypical suffering victim of oppressive patriarchal cultures—is perhaps *best* qualified to pass the test of innocence, insofar as women from the third world or Global South are often equated with passivity and apolitical corporeal existence. They are seen as without agency, docile, and in need of rescue (Abu-Lughod 2002; Mohanty 1988). Indeed, Ratna Kapur has called this “the victim subject” (2002). The point is that such gendered, racial hierarchies actually serve to qualify these women as innocent. Similarly, men can rarely qualify as such. In this sense, we see that innocence is part of a conceptual apparatus that demarcates human kinds, purporting to value the most naive, the most inactive, the most childlike, while simultaneously setting up another class of people on whom these innocents must depend. While innocence is valued, it shares its conceptual space with pitifulness. And a politics of pity, as Luc Boltanski (1999) suggests, is not about equality or justice; while justice is concerned with fairness and requires recourse to standards or conventions of equivalence, pity sets up two classes of people, the fortunate and the unfortunate, where the unfortunate are often regarded as victims.

Differently stated, even as innocence creates a pure space for humanity, it creates what Fassin has described,

referring to humanitarianism, as “hierarchies of humanity” (2010, 239). While the concept of innocence shifts according to the constellation of experiences and histories in which it is located, it nevertheless always carries with it the desire to protect and the impetus to take responsibility for those whom—in their want of knowledge—cannot take care of themselves. Guilelessness evokes the need for care; innocents cannot take responsibility for themselves. But this means that it props up a feeling of control in those who care for the innocent; it assures them not only of their power but also of their knowledge, insofar as the innocent person is oblivious. *It creates a class of saviors.* Gayatri Spivak (1988) called out one instance of this type of action, provoked by the idea of innocence and fed by the comfort of superiority in knowledge and power: she called it “white men saving brown women from brown men.” This is a script that continues to have enormous appeal, as we saw in US interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan in the name of saving their women and in the huge political following and money garnered by Somaly Mam and her foundation, which works to rescue girls from sex trafficking in places like Cambodia—until her own story of sexual slavery, recounted in her autobiography, *The Road of Lost Innocence*, was shown to be a lie (Marks 2014). As a space of purity, innocence itself appears outside history, and as such, it allows those who work as saviors to ignore the political and historical circumstances that created these victims. “White men who save brown women from brown men” are allowed to ignore their complicity in creating a category of people who need saving, and they need never ask whether these brown women actually want saving, since as innocents they are understood to lack desire or agency.⁷

This not only allows saviors to feel powerful or knowledgeable but also enables them to simultaneously capture innocence—to purify or absolve themselves. In other words, innocence also creates a savior class or subject, and they too make claims to innocence. If the people one is saving are understood as innocent, outside time and place, and one is intervening only to stop the suffering, how can this not be considered innocent too? This refers back to the meaning of explicit not-knowing in the concept of innocence: *in-noscere*, “not to know.” In the context of US history, James Baldwin (1998) understood such interventions to be a form of racial innocence, meaning that they were based on ignorance; he described this impermissible innocence as Americans’ refusal to deal with deeply entrenched forms of racial injustice, by holding on to ideologies of equality that undergird the American dream rather than facing the actual historical evidence (see also Balfour 1999). Baldwin was describing the way Americans prefer clinging to fantasies that suggest they can move into a race-blind future. Their ignorance allows the posture of innocence. Indeed, racial innocence is a form of deflection (Pierce 2012)—a not-knowing or obliviousness

that can be politically useful for those in power and that can prompt and justify further such pursuits of innocence.

In a similar vein, those inspired by humanitarian sentiments may try to bypass politics, claiming to act only as witnesses to injustice or in response to the immediacy of suffering, but the political innocence they proclaim ignores the privilege that allows them to act—it is a refusal to acknowledge the structural inequalities that allow them to be humanitarians, witnesses, or saviors. It also ignores the desire to feel morally upstanding and to absolve oneself of the guilt that accompanies such interventions; moreover, such moral claims can be pleasurable. As Sherene Razack (2007) writes in relation to the witnessing of pain, particularly in relation to racialized others, identifying with the suffering of the Other can too quickly slip into feeling that one has *become* that sufferer, both erasing the actual suffering subject and displacing any sense of responsibility toward them. Transnational feminist scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod (2013) and Leti Volpp (2015) have critiqued the yearning for innocence among certain feminists whose politics are grounded in their desire to save others—such as Muslim women—and *to not know* about their own complicities in the disenfranchisement of those they are saving.

Expansions of innocence, the innocence of expansion

As a space of epistemic, experiential, or moral purity, innocence is always a work in progress. Insofar as there is no pure state of innocence—the concept derives from an imaginary or mythical past, and it enables us to imagine that we can be the authors of our future—a politics based on innocence requires not only the search for but also the production of innocent victims, since the “pure” victim is a placeholder, always just out of reach. For example, the recent focus on victims of human trafficking imagines young girls or women who have been kidnapped from their homes and locked away in brothels; yet this picture of innocence is complicated when we realize that many girls or women who engage in sex work actually chose to leave home, often encouraged by relatives, and generally knew what they would be doing, even if they did not know the exact conditions of their employment. Here, the victim is implicated in her own situation of exploitation, and her status quickly shifts from endangered to dangerous, innocent to delinquent. We lose her as an exemplar of innocence and must look for someone new.

Forms of politics based on innocence are increasingly prevalent globally—not only through humanitarianism or discourses and practices of human rights. Jackie Wang argues that the politics of innocence has infiltrated contemporary antiracist politics in the United States, now grounded on an empathetic structure of feeling that centers appeals to innocence. Thus it is OK to rally around

17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin, murdered in his own neighborhood in 2012 by the volunteer neighborhood watchman George Zimmerman, since he was innocent, but this is based on a whole class of people who, by this move, are categorized as guilty—a black man carrying a gun in his situation becomes killable. In other words, he is differentiated from other black men—the “bad” ones, the threatening ones (Wang 2012). The point here is not that people should be allowed to carry guns but that because innocence insists on purity and is coupled with guilt, and because our world is structured by these moral grammars, those who are not innocent are immediately deemed guilty: there is no space in between.

We can think of migrants in Europe similarly; for instance, since April 2015, innocence has been used to create a distinction in European public discourse between “refugees” and “illegal economic migrants” (Hage 2016; Holmes and Castañeda 2016; Kallius, Monterescu, and Rajaram 2016). Here asylum is primarily a moral, not a legal, distinction that purports to separate the deserving from the undeserving. “Real” refugees are seen as innocent—fleeing *real*, well-founded fears of persecution. They are understood as passive, vulnerable, and in need of saving. Economic migrants, in contrast, are portrayed as wily, trying to lie their way into enjoying the welfare and other benefits of Europe, and undermining not only European security but also European values. They are criminalized, and in the process, global inequality is shut out of the frame. Not only does this enable a form of politics that erases larger structural inequalities, but it also creates a greater need for prisons and detention centers for those designated guilty, literally feeding the prison industry.

Insofar as this type of (moralistic) politics depends on the figure of the innocent victim as the highest moral good—in an attempt to steer clear of explicit political solutions or goals—the politics of innocence works through a logic of *expansion*, in which new territories of innocence must be constantly discovered and incorporated. The innocent sufferer can never be isolated for long enough to keep it uncorrupted by history or context. In this sense, we are constantly *displacing politics to the limit of innocence*, a border that must be drawn and redrawn.

An example will help illustrate this idea of expansion. Days after the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, humanitarian aid flooded in. But it was not just for people; a number of NGOs came together to form the Animal Relief Coalition for Haiti (ARCH) to provide medical assistance to animal survivors. Since its inception, ARCH has claimed that its mobile veterinary clinic treated nearly 68,000 animals, including dogs, cats, horses, cattle, pigs, goats, and sheep.⁸ Similarly, in Japan in 2011, the American Humane Association conducted a large-scale animal rescue operation with its Japanese counterparts in response to the tsunami and earthquake. This was part of the American Humane

Association's special animal emergency services program, called Red Star Rescue, which goes to disaster scenes with experts, volunteers, and mobile resources, such as an 82-foot mobile truck and veterinary clinic, carrying rescue boats, emergency equipment, generators, food, and medicine. Interestingly, the American Humane Association's mission is to protect both animals and children; its mission is driven by the figures of innocence and vulnerability, whether human or not.

These acts of humanitarian rescue reflect larger cultural narratives: for instance, in a 2013 “global giving” contest, the top four positions went to animal causes, which were represented by photos of innocent, suffering animals; these included giving money to build a roof for 150 animals in Cartagena, Colombia, and rescuing abandoned companion birds. The next few slots went to causes for women and children.⁹ There are many such examples, including practices like “Chihuahua airlifts,” to rescue “homeless” Chihuahuas and bring them to new homes for adoption (Bustamente 2011).

The story line is familiar. The victims being rescued here recall poor women, innocent children. And like them, these animals are liminal figures, at the border of humanity. While animals are selectively incorporated into this politics of humanity in new ways, they do not represent a novel terrain of innocence; they have been variously included in and excluded from this category of universal solidarity over time. Historian Joanna Bourke (2011) writes about a woman known as the Earnest Englishwoman, who in 1872 asked to let women “become animal” in order to reap the benefits they were denied because they were not part of “mankind.” Animal cruelty organizations have a long history, having aided in the project of creating a compassionate sensibility in humans, and as such, in producing the very category of humanity (Esmeir 2012). Some felt that being kind to animals would help protect humans, with the idea that reform for animals would help humans who were in an “animal-like” condition, including immigrants and racial Others. Others argued against cruelty to animals as a moral wrong in and of itself. Arguments to this end were made as early as 1776. The first movements against animal cruelty in the United States and Europe were founded in the 19th century. To be sure, this was very much a middle-class movement, used to civilize the lower orders (Sznaider 2001). The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, for instance, was founded in 1864 in New York. But animals have not always been considered innocent; in medieval Europe and colonial America, animals were invested with legal personalities and tried in court; they testified and were executed for legal transgressions. This shift to seeing animals as innocent was part of the growth of secular liberalism and the move away from religious understandings of original sin, which held both animals and children responsible for their conditions.

Similarly, environmentalism has its own history of engaging with innocence by way of nonhumans, though it is by no means identical to the movements against animal cruelty and is often even in tension with them. Environmentalists generally focus on the “nature” side of the modernist divide between humans and nature, and they are more attentive to populations than individuals. In recent years, however, environmental and conservation movements have used many similar strategies to draw attention to the plight of endangered species and, now, to climate change. In particular, the attention to “flagship species” overlaps with humanitarian sentiments for nonhumans: this is the focus on popular, charismatic species likely to trigger sympathy, raise awareness, and gain resources. Most famously, perhaps, is the giant panda, whose image has been adopted as the logo of the World Wide Fund for Nature (Lorimer 2007). In fact, some of these same affective strategies are engaged by the recent move to depict mother earth as a legal person at risk from climate change.

Despite the historical continuities with humanitarian and environmentalist logics, there are new economies, technologies, and infrastructures that build on these logics, instituting a particular incarnation of innocence and giving it a new shape and valence. Animals are seen as innocent subjects that need protection in many new ways: not only through humanitarian rescue but also the protection of their right to mobility. The Israeli West Bank Separation Barrier—or Wall—offers an example. Initiated in 2002 by Israel at the height of the second intifada, the barrier comprises electric fencing, iron, barbed wire, and a lot of concrete snaking in multiple directions; it is imposing and mostly impassable. And yet the barrier includes small holes for animals such as hedgehogs, ibex, and gazelles, thanks to the efforts of Israeli ecologists, who insisted that animal families—in contrast to human families—should not be separated. I saw the same at the US-Mexico border wall. They too have created small holes for animals such as the ocelot (a type of wild cat) in the border fence (see Figure 1). Debates about who or what can pass through the wall have landed in both Israeli and US courts, which have adjudicated how border enforcement affects the mobility of wildlife, revealing not only how much the lives of animals are seen to matter but also how they are framed as innocent bystanders to immigration and security wars. Indeed, I have been finding that across the Global North there is increasing concern for innocent animals hurt by the proliferation of border walls. For instance, newspapers report protests at the new border wall between Croatia and Slovenia—Croatians are upset that animals are getting caught in the barbed wire. In one newspaper, graphic images of maimed owls and deer caught in the fence were accompanied by text stating, “These are the horrific images of suffering animals” (Rosc 2015) (see Figure 2).

Not only does the larger politics of border walls and global migration fall out of the frame here, but so too does the larger context of institutions and practices, like factory farming and animal experimentation, which affect billions of animals, leaving just a tiny few to be saved. The larger circulation of capital and labor is rendered invisible, whether it has to do with humans or nonhumans, including any way to address its workings or effects. The concept of innocence works by making people feel as if they are already doing good in the world, that they are already fighting the good fight, in ways that make them feel not only virtuous but also pure.

While there are surely several overlapping reasons for incorporating animals into these industries—including changing perceptions of animals as part of larger kinship structures and as rights-bearing subjects—there is nevertheless something particular about this set of developments.¹⁰ This set of industries does not include all animals, so we cannot say it is simply the result of rethinking either the moral or the ontological categories of human, animal, and nature; instead, it focuses on animals that can fit into the conceptual framework of innocence, from companion animals to animals like chimps, dolphins, and pandas. This includes docility, often meekness, and an ability to obey. As one example of this, biologists working with the US Fish and Wildlife Service at the US-Mexico border explain that images of ocelots are critical in protecting the area’s wildlife. That is, as part of a larger conservationist agenda, they have a mandate to protect the innocent, endangered ocelots, but they also use this knowing that ocelots are the gateway to possibilities for protection for other, less innocent-looking creatures.

What makes these seem innocent? Part of it involves not just the conceptual space of innocence but its aesthetics. This includes what Jamie Lorimer (2007) has called “non-human charisma” and aesthetics like cuddliness and cuteness, which trigger strong emotional responses. Sianne Ngai (2005) describes the aesthetics of cuteness, and suggests it accentuates helplessness and vulnerability. Innocence shares many of its formal properties with cuteness, organized around small, helpless, abject, or deformed objects: for instance, large eyes that evoke distress. These induce both the desire for mastery as well as the desire to help and to cuddle. As ethologists have long noted, cuteness is associated with juvenile features in humans as well as animals, and it is accompanied by a desire to protect (Konrad 1971). Innocence, like cuteness, is a minor aesthetic concept (unlike the more prestigious ones like the beautiful, sublime, and ugly), and its very diminutiveness is critical to its appeal. Indeed, innocence, like cuteness, seems to name an aesthetic encounter based on an exaggerated difference in power; it works in relation to a socially disempowered Other—the lack of animal “speech” only adds to this effect.



Figure 1. The US-Mexico border wall, Brownsville, Texas, February 15, 2015. At bottom, there is an 8" x 11" opening for animals to pass through. (Miriam Ticktin) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]



Figure 2. A great horned owl caught in a fence. This image appeared on the Slovenian online news site *Svet* in an article about the new border wall with Croatia. The article condemned the suffering of animals caused by fences. (Courtesy of Blanford Nature Center) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]

It is in this sense that innocence, as a political concept that has become central to a politics of help, pity, and rescue, actually encourages a form of expansion, colonizing new landscapes to produce innocent victims, reproducing a certain sentimental political project of “protection” in the process—one might call it a predatory compassion.

The ends of innocence

Many concepts are used to name and manage the border of politics and of humanity. For instance, Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) *Homo Sacer* describes a space at the heart of politics that is included by its very exclusion, a

conceptual space that stands at once inside and outside politics. Innocence is part of tangled convergences with such concepts that seek to manage and regulate distributions of knowledge and power, deservingness and blame, life and qualified life, potentiality and hopelessness. It is also part of a cluster of moral concepts, along with suffering, victimhood, and vulnerability. I conclude by briefly parsing the differences in this cluster, to think through the overall structure of the political argument that innocence participates in and, ultimately, to pry open a space to imagine a world without innocence.

Suffering, for instance, is not limited to those who are innocent. Rather, today, it is associated with the concept of a universal humanity. This notion of common suffering as the basis of humanity developed in the 18th century, with Enlightenment thinkers like Rousseau (Sznajder 2001); one might say it accompanied the democratic project and the shift away from a religious belief in the blessedness of suffering. “Humanity” began to refer to a shared sentiment of sympathy or benevolence—not shared species or biological fact. In this sense, the construction of a humane, secular society required the elimination of suffering; meaningless pain and suffering were eschewed. Humanitarianism in its current form developed to respond to a global humanity, understood as the capacity to suffer. Yet, while the concept of suffering pretends to universality, and while the humanitarian argument is that all suffering should be alleviated, there is a tension at suffering’s conceptual core: in the liberal secular project, some kinds of suffering have been seen as gratuitous—as more inhuman—than others. As both Talal Asad (2003) and Samera Esmeir (2012) note, suffering and pain have been used as both tools for and measures of the progress toward a modern, liberal, “civilized” humanity. Asad suggests that some kinds of suffering are justified as helping one to become human—those that are seen to be carefully calibrated and used to rational ends, such as modern warfare or prisons; meanwhile, others are considered barbaric, such as torture, which people see as excessive, irrational. Innocence plays on this tension, qualifying expressions of suffering, rendering some more warranted than others; it creates a moral distinction between unnecessary (innocent) and unavoidable (necessary) suffering. At stake here is what counts as suffering and how we can recognize it. Innocence parses different kinds of suffering, qualifying them; it provides a moral and cultural frame by which to judge them. Differently stated, innocence inserts hierarchy into the concept of suffering. Suffering could be understood in other ways—perhaps as more wide ranging—without innocence.

Victimhood is also part of a moral constellation with the concept of innocence; the phrase *innocent victim* occurs so often that it can be difficult to think of *innocent* and *victim* apart. Victims of natural disasters such as earthquakes or tsunamis are the incarnation of this. But this

understanding was made possible in part by the victims’ rights movements of the 1980s in the United States and France, which gave victimhood a new public and social presence, associated with trauma, which in turn eliminated the suspicion of victims—they were henceforth considered innocent in their claims and deserving of either compensation or treatment (Fassin and Rechtman 2009; Herman 1992). Innocents need not be victims—children are one such example. And victims need not be innocent. One can be a victim of a crime without being innocent, as we know in the cases of women who kill their abusers. Another example from the 1970s shows some of the complexity within the concept of victimhood: I refer here to debates in the United Nations about whether everyday people (i.e., civilians) who were part of occupying or colonial regimes, and who were killed as part of liberation struggles, should be considered “innocent victims” under the laws of war. This debate took place in the context of struggles for decolonization all over Africa, especially in South Africa under apartheid, and was part of negotiations at the United Nations over the definition of terrorism (Blumenau 2014). Could (violent) acts of liberation be labeled terrorist, and if so, should the victims be considered innocent? Ultimately, it was accepted that victims could be “guilty” but still victims—that is, they were guilty by virtue of being part of an occupying regime (i.e., South African apartheid) and therefore somehow complicit in its violence and oppression. When decoupled from innocence, victimhood becomes a more complicated subject position, which can be tied to an act of harm and not necessarily to a fixed identity as someone pure or undeserving of harm. In other words, victimhood need not be a moral identity; it can also be a medical condition or a legal category, which, as discussed, allows for more flexibility and contestation, and a whole new set of debates, for better or worse.¹¹

Finally, innocence is perhaps most often thought about together with vulnerability. Both vulnerable and innocent subjects are seen as needing protection; both cannot fully care for themselves. There is an element of frailty in each; a susceptibility to harm. And in both cases, the subjects verge on being pitiful, even undignified, insofar as a normative, liberal idea of humanity is grounded not simply on ideas of rationality, autonomy, and determination but on physical wholeness (Dean 2015). Feminist theorists like Judith Butler (2016) have attempted to shift understandings of vulnerability, understanding it not in opposition to political agency but precisely as inherent to political action: we mobilize vulnerability as a practice of political resistance to demand the material infrastructures and social conditions necessary for everyone to live. While I am not entirely convinced that vulnerability is a fundamental ontological condition, these theories nevertheless make clear that vulnerability allows for relationality; one is vulnerable in relation to something or someone. Innocence, however, is a

concept that stands on its own, even when contrasted with its binary others, such as guilt, knowledge, or sexuality; one is innocent or one is not. Because it is about purity, it does not allow for gradations—for being *partly* innocent. Innocence patrols the borders of power and powerlessness, rendering them incommensurable, while vulnerability leaves room for negotiation—it allows room for degrees of powerlessness while allowing some measure of action in the world.

In this sense, a world without innocence would not be a world without morality or care; it would not need to refuse the recognition of vulnerability, suffering, or victimhood. It would also not need to be a world of total guilt or unbridled, unchecked desire. To think beyond innocence is precisely to challenge the binaries that structure our moral vocabularies. It would, however, be a world without purity and without absolutism. Feminist scholars like Donna Haraway (1991) have long argued against this search for purity, suggesting that there is no innocent standpoint, no place of moral transcendence. The opposite of innocence in this sense is not guilt but *impurity*. A world without innocence, then, would embrace this contaminated reality and let it be the site of new political emergence.

As a general concept, innocence works particularly well to regulate the meanings of epistemic and moral purity, and as such to manage deservingness. As a *political* concept, however, innocence must be recognized as broad reaching, searching to include whatever it can in *an always incomplete capture of purity*. Innocence at once sets aside a space of life unsullied by knowledge or politics, yet it institutes a pathetic, docile figure at the heart of this space. If we did not fetishize purity and simplicity—if innocence did not constitute power and powerlessness as incommensurable—could we avoid a politics of rescue, one that cannot help but produce hierarchies of humanity? Without innocence, might we have a chance at an entirely different ethico-political life?

Notes

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1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “innocence, n.,” accessed August 18, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/96292?redirectedFrom=Innocence>.

2. According to the *OED*, Thomas Hobbes invoked this meaning in *Leviathan* (1651) in speaking of a sovereign prince who put to death an innocent subject.

3. Public lecture at the New School for Social Research, New York, November 5, 2013.

4. For Joanna Faulkner (2011, 333), carnal knowledge assumes a kind of ignorance that in turn makes way for pleasure.

5. MSF, however, grew out of a revolutionary context in which populations in danger, not simply individuals, were also part of its mandate (Redfield 2013).

6. I am primarily speaking of the type of medical humanitarianism that was shaped by MSF and that includes, for example, Médecins du monde (Doctors of the World).

7. Leti Volpp (2006) gives an example of this with journalist Nicholas Kristof.

8. International Fund for Animal Welfare, “Animal Rescue Coalition Meets Objectives and Concludes Earthquake Relief in Haiti,” press release, May 3, 2011, accessed August 3, 2017, <http://www.ifaw.org/united-states/news/animal-rescue-coalition-meets-objectives-and-concludes-earthquake-relief-haiti>.

9. GlobalGiving, “GlobalGiving 2013 Photo Contest,” accessed August 22, 2013, <https://www.globalgiving.org/dy/v2/poll/photo-contest-2013/>.

10. Dolphins were accorded legal personhood in a vote by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and great apes actually have *human* rights in Spain.

11. Playing with the idea of innocence and victimhood can have many consequences, as we have seen in Israeli-occupied Palestine, where a tactic of the Israeli army has been to fire warning shots onto the roofs of Palestinian civilians, in buildings suspected to contain weapons, supposedly to tell them to evacuate (“roof knocking”). If they do not leave within a few minutes, they are no longer considered innocent civilians but as complicit in Palestinian terrorism, and hence killable.

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