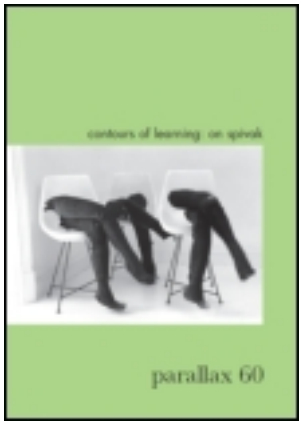

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Sara Ahmed
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The Contingency of Pain

Sara Ahmed

The body is an affective object, whereas external things are from my point of view merely represented [...] For if I say my foot hurts, I do not simply mean that it is a cause of pain in the same way as the nail which is cutting into it, differing only in being nearer to me; I do not mean that it is the last of the objects in the external world, after which a more intimate kind of pain should begin, an unlocalized awareness of pain in itself, related to the foot only by some causal connection and within the closed system of experience. I mean that pain reveals itself as localized, that it is constitutive of a 'pain infested space'. 'My foot hurts' means not: 'I think that the foot is the cause of this pain', but: 'the pain comes from the foot' or again 'my foot has a pain' [...] my body does not present itself as the object of external impressions do and that perhaps even these latter objects do no more than stand out against the affective background which in the first place throws consciousness outside of itself.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

The philosopher's foot

There could be a lot to say about philosophers and their feet. Merleau-Ponty's foot, out of which he builds his phenomenology of the body (the foot that hurts becomes the basis of a theory that bodies are different to objects in the external world that are presented to consciousness, that appear before consciousness), joins other feet that trample through the history of philosophy. Descartes, for example, wrote about his foot in his meditations.[1] But it is not just that feet seem to 'stand apart' in such a history of thought. The foot does not simply appear as such. Rather, the foot comes to have a place in philosophy precisely insofar as it is constituted as a site of pain, that is, insofar as pain becomes a means by which philosophy asks the question of what it means to be in the world, or perhaps to stand in the world, to stand out. Descartes' foot also achieves its philosophical existence insofar as it is described as hurting.[2] One could speculate as to why 'the foot' allows pain to enter the philosophical imaginary as an object to be thought. Feet do 'stand on' the ground. Perhaps it is Merleau-Ponty's foot that is hurting precisely because the foot is what

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allows him to stand his ground; to clear his ground, to be grounded. The story of the hurting foot allows Merleau-Ponty to ground his philosophy of embodiment.

And yet I do not really believe in this story. I am not asked to believe in it, admittedly – he begins, 'if I say'. So I might doubt that he is writing about an incident, a happening, that he had an event – either past or present at the moment of writing – in mind. I can't know one way or the other, of course. But the hurting foot is a means by which philosophy addresses something else; it is absent in its presence. At this moment I look down at my foot (did I or didn't I? you can't know either way): it is bent against my desk and contained within some warm blue and white socks. I smile at my foot. At this moment, it has no such role within the making of philosophy. But when I move my foot, when I move, I feel the corner of the table imprinted onto the surface of my foot. I can feel the table in its absent presence. It is a prickly sensation. Has my foot entered this history of philosophy? I cannot enter this drama without a wince, a grimace. This is not my history. 'Or yours', I say to my foot which, without me knowing, has moved back to its usual resting place, nestled against the corner of the table.

And yet. The tingle spreads. It intensifies. I keep it there, waiting. Before long, I can say it. I can join in. My foot hurts. It hurts. I hurt. Does it? Do I? What does it mean to be hurt? What does it mean to be *in* pain? It is difficult to talk about the experience of pain. As Elaine Scarry suggests in her powerful book, *The Body in Pain*, pain is not only a bodily trauma, it also resists or even 'shatters' language and communication.[3] So that which seems most self-evident – most there, throbbing in its thereness – also slips away, refuses to be simply present in speech, philosophy or forms of testimonial address. It is this relationship between what is *felt* as being present and what is absent in the very intensity of this presence that I will seek to address in this paper, through analysing the contingency of pain.

But does such an attempt to complicate the self-evident nature of pain serve to undermine its diagnostic status as symptom within medical discourse? As we know from psychoanalysis, the story of the symptom is not a linear one that moves us neatly from cause to effect. Pain is not always an effect of something; it is not simply the result of collisions, such as the one that did (or did not) take place between Merleau-Ponty's foot and the nail. In medical discourse, it is taken for granted that there isn't a simple relationship or correspondence between an external stimuli and the sensation of pain (leading to the development, for example, of the gateway theory of pain). Pain is not only treated as symptomatic of disease or injury: for instance, chronic pain is treated as a medical condition with its own history.[4] There are many instances when the relationship between the intensity of pain and the severity of injury is not proportional.[5] In the classic medical textbook on pain, *The Challenge of Pain*, Melzack and Wall suggest that pain 'is not simply a function of the amount of bodily damage alone. Rather, the amount and quality of pain we feel is also determined by our previous experiences and how well we remember them, by our ability to understand the cause of the pain and to grasp its consequences'.[6] Although Melzack and Wall exercise the concept of causality in their posing of the complexity of pain as a bodily response, their emphasis on the psychic life of memory and experience suggests that pain is not simply an effect of bodily damage. This gap

between the pain and injury throws into doubt the whole concept of pain as always an effect of either internal or external damage to bodily tissues. More radically, it might call into question the causal model itself: the model which understands pain as always a sensation that corresponds to something (the nail that intrudes into Merleau-Ponty's foot; the corner of the table intruding into my foot) that comes before it. If pain is not simply an effect of damage to the body, then how can we understand pain?

In this paper, I will suggest that the bodily life of pain is bound up with the fragility and vulnerability of the surfaces of the world we inhabit. If pain makes and unmakes figures (bodies, subjects, worlds etc.), then pain shows how the (un)making of figures involves processes of intensification, whereby surfaces become established through different intensities of feeling.

Pain surfaces

One way of re-thinking the 'happening' of pain is to consider pain as an affect, rather than an effect. The affectivity of pain is crucial to the forming of the body as both a material and lived entity. In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud suggests that the ego is 'first and foremost a bodily ego'.[7] Crucially, the formation of the bodily ego is bound up with the surface: 'it is not merely a surface entity, but itself is the projection of a surface'.[8] Freud suggests that the process of establishing the surface depends on the experience of bodily sensations such as pain. Pain is described as a '*thing intermediate between internal and external perceptions* even when its source is in the external world' [emphasis added].[9] It is through experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as bodily surface, as something that keeps us apart from others, but as something that also 'mediates' the relationship between internal or external, or inside and outside.

We need to be cautious readers here. It is not that pain *causes* the forming of the surface. Such a reading would ontologize pain as that which 'drives' being itself. Rather, it is through the flow of sensations that *become* conscious as pain and pleasure that different surfaces are projected. In other words, the identification of sensations and feelings as painful or pleasurable enable bodily surfaces to be established in relationship to each other. It is through such painful encounters between this body and other bodies (including objects) that 'surfaces' are felt as 'being there' in the first place (for example, when I felt the imprint of the table on the surface of my foot). To be more precise *the impression of a surface is an effect of such intensification*. I become aware of my foot as a body part with a surface only in the event of feeling discomfort (prickly sensations, cramps) that become transformed into pain through an act of reading and recognition ('it hurts!') which is also a judgement ('it is bad!').[10] This transformation of sensation into judgement might also lead me to moving my foot away from its intimacy with the corner of the table. That is, the transformation of pain (it hurts, it is bad, move away) also involves *the re-constitution of bodily space*.

Such an argument suggests an intimate relationship between what Judith Butler has called materialization – 'the effect of surface, boundary and fixity'[11] – and what I

would call *intensification*. It is through the intensification of pain sensations that bodies and worlds materialize and take shape, or that the effect of surface, boundary and fixity is produced. Clearly, to say that feelings are crucial to the forming of surfaces and borders, is also to suggest that what 'makes' those borders also unmakes them. In other words, what separates us from others also connects us to others. This paradox is clear if we think of the skin surface itself, as that which appears to contain us, but as where others *impress* upon us. This contradictory function of skin begins to make sense if we unlearn the assumption that the skin is simply already there, but begin to think of the skin as a surface that is felt only in the event of being 'impressed upon' in the encounters we have with others.

The affecting of borders and surfaces hence involves the over-determination of sense perception, emotion and judgement. Such an argument suggests that sensations are mediated, *however immediately they seem to impress upon us*. Not only do we read such feelings, but also the way in which feelings feel in the first place may be tied to a past history of readings, in the sense that the process of *recognition* (of this feeling, or that feeling) is bound up with what we *already know*. Furthermore, to be touched a certain way, or to be moved a certain way by an encounter with an other, may involve a reading, not only of the encounter, *but of the other that is encountered as having certain characteristics*. If we feel another hurts us, then we may project that reading onto the other, such that *it* becomes hurtful, or is read as *the impression of the negative*. In other words, 'it hurts' becomes, 'you hurt me', which might become, 'you are hurtful'. These affective responses are readings that not only create the borders between selves and others, but also 'give' others meaning and value in this very apparent separation, a giving which temporarily fixes an other, through the movement engendered by the sensation itself. Such responses are clearly mediated: materialization takes place through the 'mediation' or reading of affect, which may function in this way as readings of the bodies of others.

However, it may seem counter-intuitive to say that the differentiation of sensations as painful and pleasurable (which then become collapsed into a differentiation between bad and good: judgements are implicated in sensations and feelings, as I have suggested) is central to the formation of the body as a perceiving surface. Don't I already have a sense of where my foot is *before* I feel it hurt? Isn't that knowledge necessary to the very ability to feel that pain *as* a pain in my foot? How else would it be possible for me to say, 'I have pain in my foot'? Of course, in some ways I do already have a sense of my body surface. After all, life experience involves multiple collisions with objects and others. It is through such collisions that I form a sense of myself as (more or less) apart from others, as well as a sense of the surfaces of my body. Such a sense of apartness may be crucial for bodily survival (for those who lack the ability to feel pain-like sensations, the world is very dangerous[12]), though it may be felt differently by different bodies. So I do have a sense of myself as body, before I might encounter this table, this nail etc. But what is crucial is that although I have a sense of my body before each new encounter, my body seems to *disappear from view*; it is often forgotten as I concentrate on this or on that (in this case, on the computer keyboard).

This is described beautifully by Drew Leder in *The Absent Body*. He suggests that 'the body is "absent" only because it is perpetually outside itself, caught up in a multitude

of involvements with other people'.[13] And so, experiences of dysfunction (such as pain) become lived as a return to the body, or as a rendering present to consciousness of what tends to become absent: 'Insofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning unproblematically, it often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction'.[14] The intensity of feelings like pain recalls us to our body surfaces: pain seizes me back to my body. Leder also suggests that pain can often lead to a body that *turns in on itself*, while pleasure tends to open up bodies to other bodies.[15] Indeed, bodies in pain might come to our attention in this very process of turning in; they take form by being reformed. Bodily surfaces become reformed not only in instances when we might move away from objects that cause injury, but also in the process of *moving towards the body and seeking to move away from the pain*. In my experiences of period pain,[16] for example, I feel a dull throbbing that makes me curl up. I try and become as small as possible. I hug myself. I turn this way and that. The pain presses against me. My body takes a different shape as it tries to move away from the pain, even though what is being moved away from is felt within my body.

However, I would not use the terms 'absent' and 'present' to describe embodiment as Leder does, as it presumes the possibility that bodies *can* simply appear or disappear. Rather, I would point to the *economic* nature of intensification, and suggest that one is *more* and *less* aware of bodily surfaces depending on the range of intensities of bodily experiences.[17] But Leder's argument does show us the way in which the intensity of pain sensations make us aware of our bodily surfaces, without assuming that 'the surfaces' pre-exist such awareness, and with an attention to the *dynamic nature of surfacing itself* (turning in, turning away, moving towards, moving away). But we still need to ask *how* that intensity impresses upon the surfaces of bodies. I want to suggest here a link between impression and negation. As Elaine Scarry suggests, the experience of pain can be felt as *negation*: something from outside presses upon me, even gets inside me.[18] When there is no external object, we construct imaginary objects or weapons to take up their empty place: hence the use of expressions like, 'I feel like I have been stabbed by a knife'.[19] It is this perceived intrusion of something other within the body that creates the desire to re-establish the border, to push out the pain, or the (imagined, material) object we feel is the 'cause' of the pain. Pain involves the violation or transgression of the border between inside and outside, *and it is through this transgression that I feel the border in the first place*. In the example of period pain discussed above, I also create an imagined object. The pain is so familiar – I have felt it so many times before. I remember each time, anew. So I know it is my period, and the knowledge affects how it feels: it affects the affect of pain. In this instance, the blood becomes the 'object' that pushes against me, which presses against me, and that I imagine myself to be pushing out, as if it was an alien within. I want the pain to leave me; it is not a part of me, even though it is in my body that I feel it. So pain can be felt as something 'not me' within 'me': *it is the impression of the 'not' that is at stake*. It is hence not incidental that the sensation of pain is often represented – both visually and in narrativization – through 'the wound' (a bruised or cut skin surface). The wound functions as a trace of where the surface of another entity (however imaginary) has impressed upon us, an impression that is felt and seen as the violence of negation.

It is these moments of intensification that define the contours of the ordinary surfaces of bodily dwelling, surfaces that are marked by differences in the very experience of

intensities.[20] As pain sensations demand that I *attend* to my embodied existence, then I come to inhabit the surfaces of the world in particular ways. For example, normally when I am typing I have forgotten my foot, or any other part of my body for that matter. Pain returns me to my foot; it gives me a sense of my foot as part of my body or as a body part. The tingles, pricks and then cramps return me to my body by giving me a sense of the edge or border, a 'sense' that is precisely an experience of intensification and a departure from what is lived as ordinary (the ordinary is linked in this way to the absence of perception, rather than the absence of the body). As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, in the case of pain, 'the effected zones of the body become enlarged and magnified in the body image'.[21] Such enlarged sensations of the limits of our bodies may also involve an impression of the *particularity* of how they occupy time and space. In other words, I become aware of bodily limits *as* my bodily dwelling or dwelling place: after moving my foot, I am now aware of my posture, my legs, the touch of finger tips against the cold surface of the keyboard. Pain is hence bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship to the surfaces, bodies and objects that make up our dwelling places. Our question becomes not so much what *is* pain, but what it *does*, what affects does it have on how bodies inhabit the world made up of other bodies.

Notably, Jean-Paul Sartre describes pain as 'a contingent attachment to the world'.[22] For Sartre, the lived experience of pain as 'being there' is dependent on what bodies are doing (reading, writing, sleeping, walking), on *how they might be arranged*. Or, in my terms, pain sensations might rearrange bodies, which might huddle or shudder into different shapes, shapes that take shape here or there, in this place or that. So the experience of pain does not cut the body off in the present, but attaches this body to the world of other bodies, an attachment that is contingent on elements that are absent in the lived experience of pain.

We could ask, for example, how did Merleau-Ponty's foot arrive at the nail, how did the nail arrive at the foot? What were the conditions of possibility for this collision? And having arrived, what else could happen? Here we are, back to the foot. Back to the nail which 'happens' by colliding with the foot. It is not an incidental return. The word 'contingency' has the same root in Latin as the word 'contact' (Latin: *contingere*: com-, *tangere*, to touch). It happened that my body got close enough to touch your body, although it only happened because of this and that. From that happening, so much followed. Contingency is linked in this way to the sociality of being 'with' others, of getting close enough to touch. But we must remember that not all attachments are loving. We are touched differently by different others[23] and those differences involve, not just marks on the body, but different intensities of pleasure and pain. So what attaches us, what *connects us* to this place or that place, to this other or that other, is also what we find most touching; it is that which makes us feel. The differentiation between attachments allows us to align ourselves with some others and against other others in the very processes of turning and being turned, or moving towards and away from those we feel have caused our pleasure and pain.

The sociality of pain

Such a model of pain as contingent, as that which attaches us to others through the very affect of intensification, might seem counter-intuitive given that pain is often

represented within Western culture as a lonely thing.[24] For example, Kotarba describes how pain experience is 'inherently private and remains unnoticed by others unless actively disclosed by the sufferer'.[25] But even when the experience of pain is described as private, that privacy is linked to the experience of being with others. In other words, it is the apparent loneliness of pain that requires it to be disclosed to a witness. Melzack and Wall suggest that, 'Because pain is a private, personal experience, it is impossible for us to know precisely what someone else's pain feels like'.[26] We can see that the impossibility of inhabiting the other's body creates a desire to know 'what it feels like'. To turn this around, it is because no one can know what it feels like to have my pain that I want loved others to acknowledge how I feel. The solitariness of pain is intimately tied up with its implication in relationship to others.

So while the experience of pain may be solitary, it is never private. A truly private pain would be one ended by a suicide without a note. But even then one seeks a witness, but a witness who arrives after the anticipated event of one's own death. Perhaps the over-investment in the loneliness of pain comes from the presumption that it is always 'my' pain that we are talking about – a presumption that is clear, for example, in the phenomenological and existential writings on pain.[27] But what about the pain of others? Because we can't inhabit her body, does that mean that her pain has nothing to do with us? My main experiences of pain relate to living with my mother's pain. My mother was diagnosed with *multiple sclerosis* just after I was born. I was sent away to Pakistan and they thought she was dying. I lived in Pakistan for over a year (there are pictures of me with grandparents I now struggle to recall), while my mother pulled through. She lived, she lives on. In fact, decades later they realized they got it wrong and they changed her diagnosis to *transverse myelitis*. It meant that her illness isn't degenerative. It means she won't degenerate. But it doesn't mean an end to her pain. And the change in diagnosis gave her a different kind of pain.

You might note that I said 'living with' my mother's pain. You might question this. It is my mother who has pain. She has to live with it. Yet, the experience of living with my mother was an experience of living with her pain, as pain was such a significant part of her life. I would look at her and see her pain. I was the witness towards whom her pleas would be addressed, although her pleas would not simply be a call for action (sometimes there would be nothing for me to do). Her pleas would sometimes just be for me to bear witness, to recognize her pain. Through such witnessing, I would grant her pain the status of an event, a happening in the world, rather than just the 'something' she felt, the 'something' that would come and go with her coming and going. Through witnessing, I would give her pain a life outside the fragile borders of her vulnerable and much loved body. But her pain, despite being the event that drew us together (the quiet nights in watching classical movies, it was a life together that hummed with sentimentality), was still shrouded in mystery. I lived with what was, for me, the unliveable. Through being with her, through being so attached to her, I felt the unfeelable.

Pain, which as I have said is often experienced as 'already there', is difficult to grasp and to speak, whether in the event of talking about pain in the past or pain in the

present. When we talk of the experience of pain we assume it is 'my pain' because I cannot feel the other's pain. I may experience my pain as too present and the other's as too absent. And yet, others are in pain; I *read* her body as a sign of pain. I see you grimace, or your face, white and drawn. I watch sadly as your body curls up, curls away. I want to reach you, to touch you. Love is often conveyed by wanting to feel the loved one's pain, to feel the pain on her behalf. I want to have her pain so she can be released from it, so she doesn't have to feel it. But I want that only insofar as I don't already have it. Could one have this other's pain and still want to have it for her? I want to suggest here, cautiously, tentatively, that an ethics of responding to pain involves being open to being affected by that which one cannot know or feel. Such an ethics is, in this sense, bound up with the sociality or the 'contingent attachment' of pain itself.

Much of the thinking on pain, however, contrasts the ungraspability of the other's pain with the graspability of my own pain. Elaine Scarry makes this contrast in her analysis of pain and torture.[28] Such an opposition is problematic. Certainly, there is something ungraspable about the other's pain, and this is not just because I do not feel it. But my pain, even when I feel it, is not always so graspable. It is precisely the resistance of pain to language, which Scarry herself describes, that makes one's own pain not only hard to bear, but also hard 'to know'. Try concentrating on a pain, really hard. Try turning it into an 'it' that you could feel, like an object. Try having a relationship with it. When you move towards pain, rather than moving away from it, it recedes. It even recedes in the very experience of its intensity. This does not mean it goes away; it just means one can't 'get at it'. It is so hard to locate pain, even when one 'knows' its location. As I have argued already, the feelings and sensations that we come to identify as pain are 'read' in that moment of identification; they are interpreted as pain, as something against me, as something to be pushed out, moved away from. This does not mean that these experiences are not real. The intensity of pain and pleasure can burn through us. But it means that my pain cannot be simply grasped in its 'thereness'. Pain is more than there even when it is so there that it feels that it is all that there is.

So in some sense, as I respond to this other's pain, as I touch her cheek, I come to feel that which I cannot know. It is the ungraspability of her pain, in the face of the thereness of my own, that throws me into disbelief. But it is not her pain that I disbelieve. I believe in it, more and more. I am captured by the intensity of this belief. Rather it is my pain that becomes uncertain. I realize that my pain – it seems so there – is unliveable to others, thrown as they are into a different bodily world. The ungraspability of her pain calls me back to my body, even when it is not in pain, to feel it, to explore its surfaces, to inhabit it. In other words, the ungraspability of my own pain is brought to the surface by the ungraspability of the pain of others. A response to her pain is not simply a return to the self (how do I feel given that I don't know how she feels?): this is not a radical egoism. Rather, in the face of the otherness of my own pain, I am undone, before her, and for her.

The sociality of pain – the 'contingent attachment' of being with others – requires an ethics, an ethics that begins with your pain, and moves towards you, getting close enough to touch you, perhaps even close enough to feel the sweat that may be the

trace of your pain on the surface of your body. Insofar as an ethics of pain begins here, with your surface and not mine, then the ethical demand is that I must act about that which I cannot know, rather than act insofar as I know. I am moved by what does not belong to me. If I act on her behalf only insofar as I knew how she felt, then I would act only insofar as I would appropriate her pain as my pain, that is, appropriate that which I cannot feel. Such an approach – in both senses of the word 'approach' – would amount to violence.

The politics of pain

Pain involves the sociality of bodily surfaces (including the surfaces of objects) that 'surface' in relationship to each other. Some of these encounters involve moments of collision: here, the surface comes to be felt as an intense 'impression' of objects and others. Not all pain involves injuries of this sort. But even in instances of pain that is lived without an external injury (such as psychic pain, pain as an effect of disease), pain 'surfaces' in relationship to others, who bear witness to pain, and authenticate its existence. I have suggested then that pain encounters, or encounters with pain, are crucial to how we inhabit the world in relationship to others; pain encounters involve the animation of the surfaces that both separate us from others, and connect us to others.

But to talk about the lived experiences of pain in such general terms may seem problematic. Isn't this in danger of 'flattening' out the differences in pain experience, or turning the sociality of pain into a new form of universalism? In this section, I want to talk about the politics of pain: how pain is involved in the production of *uneven* effects, in the sense that pain does not produce a homogenous group of bodies who are together in their pain. A political model of pain cannot gather together all the different pain experiences (this is partly my point). In the first instance, I want to restrict my model of pain to its association with 'injury' and thereby link what you might consider rather banal experiences of injury from an external object, with experiences of feeling injured by others, as well as 'society' or 'the big Other'. You might say with alarm that my experience of encountering the corner of the table has nothing to do with politics: it has nothing to do, for example, with relationships of power between my body and the table. I would agree with this, whilst pointing cheekily to how the negation of the place of the object has political effects. But I would agree with this, and laugh with you. But while not all pain encounters are straightforwardly political, many political negotiations (of territory, spaces, borders etc.) involve affects that we can describe, however inadequately, as pain. In making this suggestion, I want to consider the links between power, harm, hurt and pain.

Certainly, in some recent feminist political theory, pain has been considered to function as a very problematic politics. Using Nietzsche's model of *resentiment*, for example, Wendy Brown argues that there has been a 'fetishisation of the wound' in subaltern politics.[29] Here, subaltern subjects become invested in the wound, such that the wound comes to stand for identity itself. The political claims become claims of injury against something or somebody (society, the state, the middle-classes, men, white people etc.) as a reaction or negation.[30] Brown argues that reactions to injury

are inadequate as a basis of politics as such reactions make *action* impossible. That is, the over-investment in the wound, 'comes into conflict with the need to give up these investments'.[31] Following Nietzsche, Brown suggests that *resentiment:*

> produces an affect (rage, righteousness) that overwhelms the hurt; and it produces a site of revenge to displace the hurt (a place to inflict hurt on the sufferer who has been hurt). Together these operations both ameliorate [...] and externalize what is otherwise unendurable.[32]

I agree that the transformation of the wound into an identity is problematic. One of the reasons that it is problematic is precisely because of its fetishism: the transformation of the wound into an identity cuts the wound off from a history of 'being hurt' or injured. It turns the wound into something that simply 'is' rather than something that has happened in time and space. In other words, it negates the encounter between the ones who are injured and the ones who injure, an encounter that is itself productive of those identity claims, even as it is concealed by them. But our response to this ought not to be to 'forget' the wound: *this would simply repeat the forgetting that is already implicated in the fetishization of the wound*. Rather, our task would be to 'remember' how the skin, the surface of this body or that body (including the bodies of communities, as I suggest later) came to be wounded in the first place. Following from bell hooks, we could see our task as being 'not to forget the past but break its hold'.[33] In order to break the seal of the past, in order to move away from the attachments that are hurtful, we must first bring them into the realm of political action.

Brown sets up an opposition between reaction and negation as responses to injury, and an action that she suggests might wish to 'forget' the injury, or indeed the history of that injury in the pursuit of a different kind of future.[34] She hence assumes that all forms of reaction (perhaps associated with the negation of pain experience: against-ness, or the impression of the 'not') necessarily lead to the fetishization of the wound. In some sense, the implication of my reading of Brown would be to say that there is no 'pure action', which is outside such a history of 'reaction', whereby bodies come to be 'impressed upon' by the surfaces of others. We need to think of the political process in terms of encounters between bodies that involve injury, hurt and pain sensations without then fetishizing the wound. If we were to forget these encounters, we would also forget that politics 'happens', as it were, at the level of bodies who feel. We would be unable to theorize the role played by bodily sensation and feeling in the forming of political 'attachments'. In some sense, it is the production of affects that we are talking about when we consider border disputes.[35] So to forget the wound altogether, would be to forget that *somebody* is at stake in the political process.

We can turn to Lauren Berlant's more nuanced analysis of the 'logic of pain' in subaltern politics. Like Brown, Berlant is critical of the fetishization of the wound as a sign of both identity and the 'proof' of injury. In contrast to this model of pain as being that which resides in the individual and confirms the individual as victim, Berlant suggests that we need to read pain as ideology.[36] She argues, following Brown, that social transformation can only be energized if it moves 'beyond the field of its

sensual experience'.[37] I have also argued that pain *has to be read*, and it is contingent on elements that are not 'revealed' in the pain sensation itself. Berlant also argues that we cannot reduce justice and injustice to questions of feeling good and bad.[38] I would agree that feeling bad and feeling good cannot be the basis of, or even evidence for, what is considered good and bad, or just and unjust, or could become the means by which we would re-imagine the kind of body that we might want to inhabit. But this for me leaves open the question of whether good and bad feelings, that is, feelings that are readable or already read as good and bad, have a place in 'deciding' what constitutes our notions of better and worse. As I have suggested, sensations, feelings, memories, fantasies and thoughts are already over-determined in our everyday negotiation of bodily space and dwelling places. I would suggest that political action does work, and needs to work, with how our bodies have already been formed, with *the kinds of attachments and feelings that surface in our everyday lives*. The relationship between the readability of pain and the intensity of feeling is what might make pain also, in some sense, unreadable, and resistant to our desire for knowledge or morality.

I would hence agree with both Brown and Berlant that a politics that assumes access to subaltern pain is possible, and that her pain constitutes her identity, is problematic. Indeed, this model of pain is problematic. But we need to contest this model of pain, not in order to liberate politics from pain, as Brown would seem to suggest, but in order to interrogate how pain *already* enters the sphere of 'politics', how pain is already lived and felt differently by those subjects whose bodily survival may be at stake. Pain matters for a collective politics; it matters insofar as the experience of pain is precisely about the bodily life of the process of harm and being harmed (violence involves a relationship of both force and harm). Harm does not simply happen; it is over-determined as well as contingent. In other words, harm has a history, even though that history is made up of a combination of often surprising elements that are unavailable in the form of a totality. Pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the *bodily life of that history*. So while injustice cannot be reduced to feeling bad (although feeling bad is, as we have already seen, a rather complicated matter), we can say that injustice is unjust precisely insofar as it is affects the bodies of individuals and communities. Some-body is always at stake. I must repeat this. Some-body is always at stake.

In order to think through the politics of pain in a specific context I want to consider the document, *Bringing Them Home*, which is a Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Straight Islander Children from Their Families (1997). *Bringing Them Home* reports on the Stolen Generation in Australia, a generation of Aboriginals who were taken away from their families as part of a brutal and shocking policy of assimilation. Generations of Aboriginal children grew up with little or no contact with the mothers and families, and hence little contact with their community and culture. They were often taken from the families and communities in violent ways.

When considering the damage that was performed on the bodies of Indigenous Australians, we can think about not just the individual's skin surface, but the skin of the community. The violence was not simply inflicted upon the body of the individual who was taken away, but also on the body of the Indigenous community, which was

'torn apart'. Here, the community is damaged insofar as 'attachments' with loved ones are severed. As Kai Erikson suggests, collective trauma involves, 'a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together'.[39] The skin of the community is damaged, but a damage that is felt on the skin of the individuals who make up that community. *Bringing them Home* is made up of individual testimonies of this pain of separation, this hurt, this bereavement, this loss from which recovery is so difficult. In the document, individual and collective hurt are aligned (though not, as we shall see, collapsed). The testimonies were gathered together, and together form the document.

Such stories of pain must be heard. But what are the conditions of possibility for hearing them? Within the context of Australian politics, the gathering together of this document does not necessarily mean that the stories of pain are being heard. Or, if they are being heard, it does not mean that they are being heard justly. *Bringing Them Home* is very much concerned with a process of healing, in which the 'wound' caused by both the invasion of the Australia and tragedies of the Stolen Generation is healed: 'the devastation cannot be addressed unless the whole community listens with an open heart and mind to the stories of what has happened in the past and, having listened and understood, commits itself to reconciliation'. The document is committed to the importance of recovering rather than forgetting the traumas of the past, traumas that are defined as both 'personal' and 'national'.

Importantly, the personal traumas that are shared by Indigenous men and women in their testimonies of what happened become associated with national shame rather than personal guilt:

> This is not to say that individual Australians who had no part in what was done in the past should feel or acknowledge personal guilt. It is simply to assert our identity as a nation and the basic fact that national shame, as well as national pride, can and should exist in relation to past acts and omissions.

The question of who is doing the healing and who is being healed is a troubling one. For what is clear in the address of the document is that the response to the pain of individual Indigenous Australians is the shame of a white nation that is, paradoxically, not made up of white individuals. Reconciliation becomes in this narrative, the reconciliation of Indigenous individuals into the White nation, which is now 'cleansed' through its expression of shame. As Fiona Nicoll[40] has argued, reconciliation has a double meaning. It can suggest coming to terms with, but it can also refer to passivity, in which one seeks to make the other passive (to reconcile her to her fate). In Australian politics, the narrative of reconciliation – and with it, of hearing the other's pain – is too often bound up with making Indigenous others fit into the white nation or community.

In the expression of emotional responses to the stories, the white hearing of Indigenous testimonies, can involve a violent form of appropriation. That is, the acknowledgement of 'their pain' slides easily into the experience of the pain of the nation. Indeed, the recognition of the 'wound' of theft becomes, in the terms of the

document, 'our identity as a nation'. In this way, the healing of their wounds is represented as the healing of the nation, the covering over of the wound caused by the theft of the bodies of Indigenous Australians to allow 'the nation' to become one body, sealed by its skin. In such forms of responding to pain, the national body takes the place of the individual Indigenous bodies; it claims their pain as its own. As I have already argued, to hear the other's pain as my pain, and to empathize with the other in order to heal the body (in this case, the body of the nation) involves violence. But if the other's pain is appropriated as the nation's pain, and the 'wound' is fetishized as the broken skin of the nation, is the answer to forget the other's pain, to admit to the impossibility of hearing that pain by refusing to hear? No. That's all I can say. No. Our task instead is *to learn how to hear what is impossible*, to allow ourselves to be moved by a pain that we cannot feel, and to get closer to others only so that we can move away. This is about taking responsibility for forming a different kind of national body, where the healing is not the bringing of the other's pain into the body, and the use of their pain to seal the skin of the nation. Such a responsible response, one that moves and is moving, is only responsible when it moves us beyond guilt or shame *and into a different way of inhabiting or dwelling in the world with indigenous others.*

So I read through the document. Admittedly, it hurts. How could it not hurt? The stories, so many of them, and stories of grief, of worlds being torn apart. So cruel, this world. It is a world that I lived in. I remind myself of that. Yet I lived in a very different world. Each story brings me into its world. I am jolted into it. I try and turn away, but you hold my attention. My world recedes as I stand before you, as I encounter you, as you enter the space in which I move. The encounter surfaces as pain. Everywhere I turn, I am moved. I am moved by the broken bodies, the 'I's' that speak only by showing how they cannot speak, how they cannot command agency in the ruins of this world. These are stories of separation and loss. These are stories of pain. My response is emotional: it is one of discomfort, rage and disbelief. I fidget in my chair. I have a dull ache inside me, as the stories hit me, hurtle towards me: unbelievable, too believable, unliveable and yet lived. Knowing that I am part of this history makes me feel a certain way;[41] it impresses upon me the intensity of that wrong. But what I feel is not your pain. I cannot know how it feels, however much I seek to understand.

One story reaches out to me; it finds me. It is Fiona's story. That is all I have to start with, your first name. I say it out loud, quietly, softly. Fiona. I say it again, even more gently, Fiona. You start with a date, *'1936 it was. I would have been five*'. You draw me into a past, into a time and space I have not inhabited before. You say *would have been* not *was*. This wording makes your past seem open. Would have been. *What would you have been if you hadn't been taken away*? The question shocks me. The past is no longer past, but the theft of a different kind of future. What would you have been? What would we have been? I move uneasily. I cannot help but read on:

> We had been playing all together, just a happy community and the air was filled with screams because the police came and the mothers

> tried to hide their children and blacken their children's faces and tried to hide them in the caves.

The event unfolds before me. I close my eyes. Imagine. It becomes a scene. But the desperation of the mothers who are about to lose their children cuts through the scene and obscures it. I blink. I cannot see this before me. As I close my eyes, I come to hear. Sounds, screams. My ears tremble with the force of hearing those screams. Hearing this makes me shudder. The sounds of Fiona being taken away. The cries of Fiona's mother. She is addressed as such by the poetics of this testimony:

> My mother had to come with us [...] I remember that she came in the truck with us curling in the foetal position. We can't understand the trauma of knowing that you're going to lose all your children. We talk about it from the point of view of our trauma but our mother to understand what she went through, I don't think anyone can really understand that.

Already, in the story of her mother, the 'I' names the impossibility of understanding the pain. Even the daughter cannot be with her. There is a chasm and a gulf that cannot be overcome by empathy, even by some-body in the story, even by the daughter whose pain is also part of the story, whose pain already throbs the story into its difficult life. The impossibility of communicating this loss is echoed in the life of these bodies, curled as they are into their different bodily worlds, shuddering with the intensity of a pain that surfaces as loss: '*curling in the foetal position*'. Bodies, kept apart, moving away from each other, from the reader: '*We got there in the dark and we didn't see our mothers again. She just kind of disappeared into the darkness*'. The pain of this mother's disappearance. It is a darkness that overwhelms. This is not a pain that we can see. The darkness overcomes me, presses against me.

The daughter's story, Fiona's story, is one of a body being reformed, being made into another body. She surfaces differently, made white as another form of violence: '*there we had to learn to eat new food, have our heads shaved*'. It is a story of violence, in which the body is turned into an instrument, and words can only tell the story in a way that confirms the violence, '*you forbad us to speak our own language*'. But it is not an embittered story. Indeed, the others who committed this violence – the missionaries, the State – on both the body of Fiona's community and on her body are treated with a sympathy that is a torturous to read: '*You hear lots and lots of the criticisms of the missionaries but we only learnt from being brought up by missionaries. They took some of that grief away in teaching us another way to overcome the grief and the hurt and the suffering.*' Faced with this, my anger unfolds and refolds before you. I want to hear your rage; I want you to allow me to be angry with them. But no 'them' appears to allow me the safety of such projection. They did this. They did this. I want you to say it. But no. You refuse to blame those whom I feel caused your injury. And yet, in that refusal, you do not express the language of forgiveness. Rather, you just say that those who were responsible, and they are evoked in such terms, were responsible for more than the experience of pain, but also for your ability to move away from it, to allow it to be taken from you, in the way you were taken from them.

So to those who were responsible for your pain, you can express only a certain kind of attachment. This does not replace your grief, nor does it resolve it. You don't forget the hurt. But they do not become the other against which you define yourself. They become part of the body you now inhabit – the different body, the different community made up of bodies that are with other bodies, and with them in a certain way. Even though this body confirms the loss of 'what would have been', it is a body which speaks your survival. But your mother is not with you in this body. Your survival is afforded in the pain and violence of this loss. The injury surfaces in the forming of a different kind of body. The scars on your skin both attach you to a past of loss and a future of survival. This is not a healing. But you've moved on.

And so, throughout, it is your mother's loss that you address; it is her loss that keeps open the wound of being taken away: '*I guess the government didn't mean it as something bad but our mothers weren't treated as people having feelings. Naturally a mothers got a heart for her children and for them to be taken away, no-one can know their heartache. She was still grieving when I met her in 1968*'. The mother's feelings. They are announced from the perspective of the daughter who is now a mother herself. They are the feelings that were negated by those who committed the injustice; they were the feelings that made the injustice so unjust. The mother's pain. And yet still, before her mother, Fiona recognizes the limits of her own empathy: '*no-one can know their heartache*'. Their ache. The mother's pain is both here evoked and shown to be unfeelable for those who are with her, and for those who read the story. We can't feel her pain, her ache. And yet, we are moved by the story. It is a hurt that refuses to keep us apart. But it is not her hurt that I feel. In bearing witness to the hurt that is already lived as a feeling that we cannot feel, I am moved into uncertainty, overwhelmed as I am by having got close enough. I know enough of this pain to know the limits of what I can know, reading as I am in this time and this place, with this body, arranged as it is, in the here and the now. And then:

> All the years that you wanted to ask this and that, there was no way we could ever regain that. It was like somebody came and stabbed me with a knife.

Here, the experience of pain – the feeling of being stabbed by a foreign object that pierces the skin, which cuts you into pieces – is bound up with what cannot be recovered, with something being taken away that cannot be returned. The loss is, in some sense, the loss of a 'we', the loss of a community based on everyday conversations, on the comings and goings of bodies, in time and in space: '*every morning as the sun came up the whole family would wail*'. What a sentence. The collective cry rebounds. Out of the cutting of this body and this community, surfaces a different body, formed as it is by the intensity of the pain. A community that cries together, which *comes together in this gesture of loss*, which comes together in the painful feeling that togetherness is lost. The language of pain aligns these bodies with other bodies; the surface of the community comes to be inhabited differently in the event of being touched by such loss.

This response, my response, does not stop here, with the hope made possible by the opening up of a different form of community. For the call of your pain, as a pain

that cannot be met by the rigour of empathy, is a call not just for an attentive listening, but for a different kind of inhabitance. It is a call for action, and a demand for politics, a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with its impossibility, on learning that we live with each other, and yet we are not as one. But what we do with what we hear, and how we act on what we feel, is always another question.

Permission to quote from *Bringing Them Home* was granted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Australia.

Notes

[1] R. Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (vol. 2), trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.61.
[2] Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (vol. 2), p.61.
[3] E. Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.5.
[4] J. A. Kotarba, *Chronic Pain: Its Social Dimensions* (Beverley Hills: Sage, 1983).
[5] R. Melzack, and P. D. Wall, *The Challenge of Pain* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996), p.1.
[6] Melzack and Wall, *The Challenge of Pain*, p.15.
[7] Freud, S., *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (vol. 19), trans. J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p.26.
[8] Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (vol. 19), p.26.
[9] Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (vol. 19), p.23.
[10] You might question the argument that pain needs to be read on the grounds that we know when we are in pain (or not). But there are many moments in the negotiation of pain where uncertainty creeps in. Sometimes an intense sensation can present itself to consciousness as both pleasurable and painful. We seek to keep pain and pleasure separate (sadomasochism can only be a perversion in such an economy), but that separation is produced through knowledge (knowledge is also bodily knowledge: sensations are here an important part of the production of knowledge). The inevitability of tautologies when it comes to discussing what it means to be in pain is instructive here. What is pain? Something that hurts. What is it to be hurt? To feel pain. It seems we can only discuss pain and hurt as feelings that are bad (even when we imagine good outcomes can follow from them). The impossibility of getting out of the circularity (this economy of substitution and deferral: pain, hurt, bad, pain, hurt, bad...) means that we often assume that pain – which is so 'there' – is self-evident, and that it is because of this that it cannot be described. But the difficulty of describing pain should not be taken as grounds for the judgement that it is self-evident. As soon as we have conversations in which we seek to describe pain – rather than simply state we have it – descriptions, however inadequate, are rehearsed (sharp, dull, throbbing etc.). Such rehearsals are essential for medical diagnosis (see Melzack and Wall, *The Challenge of Pain*, p.39) and the production of sympathetic witnessing. Such rehearsals also suggest that the identification of sensation and feeling as pain *is not necessarily the identification of the same sensation or feeling* and that this is part of the structure of pain experience (hence the difficulty of both diagnosis and sympathetic witnessing). Pain suggests in this way the limitation of knowledge rather than the existence of absolute knowledge, even when it comes to knowledge that the self has of it-self. To put this more simply, we do not always know how we feel.
[11] J. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (New York: Routledge, 1993), p.9.
[12] People who do not experience the sensation of pain – who suffer from *congenital analgesia* – are prone to injuries which can be serious, and indeed are often fatal (Melzack and Wall, *The Challenge of Pain*). This reminds us that some pain sensations can function as warnings as well as reactions that help bodies to navigate their way safely through the world. Not all pain has this function, of course. One of their implications of the (contingent) relationship between bodily survival and bodily apartness is that we cannot assume that all transgressions of borders are to be welcomed (the privileging of transgression is an obvious tendency in the critical literature on corporeality). Borders, which are the effect of concealed labour (the work that has to be done to allow them to be felt in the first place), have different affects in the organization of bodily and social space. Some of these affects

might be: the protection of vulnerable matter; the generation of new forms and bodies; the enabling of forms of contact, approach and touch (contingency) that do not simply involve the taking of the place of the other. After all, violence is a means by which borders are re-established through transgression: violence can involve the generalizing of the skin of a dominant body to incorporate the broken and bruised skin of vulnerable bodies. Given this, our political task might be to develop normative (which means also provisional) criteria for differentiating between different forms of border transgression and formation.

[13] D. Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), p.4.

[14] Leder, *The Absent Body*, p.4.

[15] Leder, *The Absent Body*, pp.74–75.

[16] Period pain is not a pain that has been written about within the context of existentialism or phenomenology (even by feminists working in these traditions). Yet many women suffer from period pain in a way which affects what they can do with their lives. It is importance to write the lived experience of period pain into our theorizing of embodiment. The discomfort we might feel in writing it into a philosophical existence is like many discomforts: it is caused by not quite fitting the body (in this case, the philosophical body) we inhabit.

[17] Thanks to Claudia Castañeda and Imogen Tyler for encouraging me to make this distinction.

[18] Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.15.

[19] Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.52.

[20] Of course, with chronic pain, the intense sensation becomes, not a departure from the ordinary (which defines the ordinary in the event of the departure), but the ordinary itself. As such, attending to the body surface becomes part of the structure of ordinary experience (see Kotarba, *Chronic Pain*).

[21] E. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1996), p.76.

[22] J.-P. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. H. E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 1996), p.333.

[23] S. Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp.44–50.

[24] A. Kleinman, V. Das, and M. Lock, *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.xiii.

[25] Kotarba, *Chronic Pain*, p.15.

[26] Melzack and Wall, *The Challenge of Pain*, p.41.

[27] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* and Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.

[28] Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p.4.

[29] Brown, W., *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p.55.

[30] Brown, *States of Injury*, p.73.

[31] Brown, *States of Injury*, p.73.

[32] Brown, *States of Injury*, p.68.

[33] hooks, b., *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist – Thinking Black* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1989), p.155.

[34] Brown, *States of Injury*, p.56.

[35] We only dispute a border when we *feel* like it has been transgressed: that is, when we love what is potentially being taken away, or when what we hate gets too close. Or, more precisely, feelings of 'too far' and 'too close', which allow for the construction and enforcement of borders, involve the production of love and hate as 'emotions' that we assume to be 'caused' by particular bodies.

[36] Berlant, L., 'The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy and Politics', in S. Ahmed, J. Kilby, C. Lury, M. McNeil, and B. Skeggs, (eds) *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.43.

[37] Berlant, *The Subject of True Feeling*, p.42.

[38] Berlant, *The Subject of True Feeling*, p.35.

[39] K. Erikson, 'Notes on Trauma and Community', in C. Caruth, (ed), *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.187.

[40] F. Nicoll, 'B(l)acklash: reconciliation after Wik', *Meanjin*, 57, 1 (1998), pp.167–183.

[41] This is not an easy or obvious knowledge. As a mixed-race Asian Australian migrant (who has since left Australia for the UK), I am historically implicated in the dispossession of Indigenous Australians. But one cannot learn this history – which means unlearning the forgetting of this history – and remain the same. Knowing one's implication in this history is about accepting the violence as a form of 'un housing': the house in which I grew up, and to which I am attached through memory, was on Indigenous land. We need a form of hospitality premised not on giving up one's home, but on recognizing that where we lived and live is not one's home to give or to give up in the first place (see Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*, p.190). At the same time, as a non-white Australian (recognizing the violence and negation of the non), I have also been affected by forms of racism, especially throughout the early years of my life, and these experiences have affected my embodied relationship to both the imagined nations of Australia and England. These forms of racism are not the same as those that are directed towards Indigenous Australians (and non-Indigenous Black Australians have been implicated in racism towards Indigenous Australians). But a politics of collective solidarity amongst and between those others who have been 'hurt' or damaged by whiteness and racism might take place through 'putting together'

our different histories of pain, not as the same histories, but as histories that can only be read and heard together *insofar as they are not read as one*. This sharing of histories has already begun (at both local, national and trans-national levels), and it can be painful as well as joyful work.

Sara Ahmed is Senior Lecturer in Women's Studies and is currently Co-Director of the Institute for Women's Studies at Lancaster University. Her publications include: *Differences that Matter: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (1998); *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000); (co-edited) *Transformations: Thinking Through Feminism* (2000); (co-edited) *Thinking Through the Skin* (2001). She is working on a new book provisionally entitled, *Feel Your Way: Bodies, Politics, Emotion*.