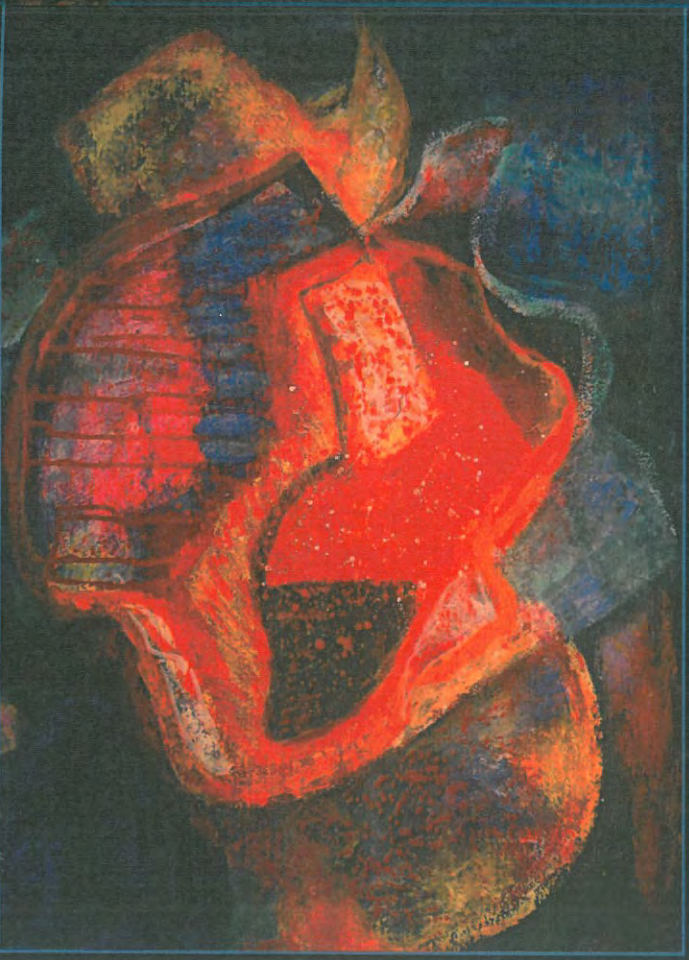


Second Edition

The Cultural Politics of Emotion



Sara Ahmed

The Contingency of Pain

Landmines. What does this word mean to you? Darkened by the horrific injuries and countless fatalities associated with it, it probably makes you feel angry or saddened. *I'm sure you will be interested in the success stories that your regular support has helped to bring about . . .*

Landmines. Landmines are causing pain and suffering all around the world, and that is why Christian Aid is working with partners across the globe to remove them . . . *Landmines.* What does this word mean to you now? *I hope you feel a sense of empowerment.* (Christian Aid Letter 9 June 2003)¹

How does pain enter politics? How are lived experiences of pain shaped by contact with others? Pain has often been described as a private, even lonely experience, as a feeling that I have that others cannot have, or as a feeling that others have that I myself cannot feel (Kotarba 1983: 15). And yet the pain of others is continually evoked in public discourse, as that which demands a collective as well as individual response. In the quote above from a Christian Aid letter, the pain of others is first presented through the use of the word 'landmines'. The word is not accompanied by a description or history; it is assumed that the word itself is enough to evoke images of pain and suffering for the reader.² Indeed, the word is repeated in the letter, and is transformed from 'sign' to the 'agent' behind the injuries: 'Landmines are causing pain and suffering all around the world.' Of course, this utterance speaks a certain truth. And yet, to make landmines the 'cause' of pain and suffering is to stop too soon in a chain of events: landmines are themselves effects of histories of war; they were placed by humans to injure and maim other humans. The word evokes that history, but it also stands for it, as a history of war, suffering and injustice. Such a letter shows us how the language of pain operates through signs, which convey histories that involve injuries to

bodies, at the same time as they conceal the presence or 'work' of other bodies.

The letter is addressed to 'friends' of Christian Aid, those who have already made donations to the charity. It focuses on the emotions of the reader who is interpellated as 'you', as the one who 'probably' has certain feelings about the suffering and pain of others. So 'you' probably feel 'angry' or 'saddened'. The reader is presumed to be moved by the injuries of others, and it is this movement that enables them to give. To this extent, the letter is not about the other, but about the reader: the reader's feelings are the ones that are addressed, which are the 'subject' of the letter. The 'anger' and 'sadness' the reader should feel when faced with the other's pain is what allows the reader to enter into a relationship with the other, premised on generosity rather than indifference. The negative emotions of anger and sadness are evoked as the reader's: the pain of others becomes 'ours', an appropriation that transforms and perhaps even neutralises their pain into our sadness. It is not so much that we are 'with them' by feeling sad; the apparently shared negative feelings do not position the reader and victim in a relation of equivalence, or what Elizabeth V. Spelman calls co-suffering (Spelman 1997: 65). Rather, we feel sad about their suffering, an 'aboutness' that ensures that they remain the object of 'our feeling'. So, at one level, the reader in accepting the imperative to feel sad about the other's pain is aligned with the other. But the alignment works by differentiating between the reader and the others: their feelings remain the object of 'my feelings', while my feelings only ever approximate the form of theirs.

It is instructive that the narrative of the letter is hopeful. The letter certainly promises a lot. What is promised is not so much the overcoming of the pain of others, but the empowerment of the reader: 'I hope you feel a sense of empowerment.' The pain of the other is overcome, but it is not the object of hope in the narrative; rather, the overcoming of the pain is instead a means by which the reader is empowered. So the reader, whom we can name inadequately as the 'Western subject', feels better after hearing about individual stories of success, narrated as the overcoming of pain as well as the healing of community. These stories are about the lives of individuals that have been saved: 'Chamreun is a survivor of a landmine explosion and, having lost his leg, is all the more determined to make his community a safer place in which to live.' These stories of bravery, of the overcoming of pain, are indeed moving. But interestingly the agent in the stories is not the other, but the charity, aligned here with the reader: through 'your regular support', you have 'helped to bring about' these success stories. Hence the narrative of the letter ends with the reader's 'empowerment'. The word 'landmines', it is suggested, now makes 'you' feel a sense of empowerment, rather than anger or sadness.

This letter and the charitable discourses of compassion more broadly show us that stories of pain involve complex relations of power. As Elizabeth V. Spelman notes in *Fruits of Sorrow*, 'Compassion, like other forms of caring, may also reinforce the very patterns of economic and political subordination responsible for such suffering' (Spelman 1997: 7). In the letter, the reader is empowered through a detour into anger and sadness about the pain of others. The reader is also elevated into a position of power over others: the subject who gives to the other is the one who is 'behind' the possibility of overcoming pain. The over-representation of the pain of others is significant in that it fixes the other as the one who 'has' pain, and who can overcome that pain only when the Western subject feels moved enough to give. In this letter, generosity becomes a form of individual and possibly even national character; something 'I' or 'we' have, which is shown in how we are moved by others. The transformation of generosity into a character trait involves fetishism: it forgets the gifts made by others (see Diprose 2002), as well as prior relations of debt accrued over time. In this case, the West gives to others only insofar as it is forgotten what the West has already taken in its very *capacity* to give in the first place. In the Christian Aid letter, feelings of pain and suffering, which are in part effects of socio-economic relations of violence and poverty, are assumed to be alleviated by the very generosity that is enabled by such socio-economic relations. So the West takes, then gives, *and in the moment of giving repeats as well as conceals the taking*.

But is the story 'about' pain, whether in the form of 'our sadness' or the other's suffering? My reading of this letter has involved reading *claims* to pain as well as sadness and suffering. But what does it mean to be *in* pain or indeed to *have* it? 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 (Scarry 1985: 5). So that which seems most self-evident – most there, throbbing in its thereness – also slips away, refuses to be simply present in speech, or forms of testimonial address. And yet, as we have seen, claims to pain and suffering on behalf of myself or others are repeated in forms of speech and writing. There is a connection between the over-representation of pain and its unrepresentability. So, for example, I may not be able to describe 'adequately' the feelings of pain, and yet I may evoke my pain, again and again, as something that I have. Indeed, I may repeat the words 'pain' or 'hurts' precisely given the difficulty of translating the feeling into descriptive language. The vocabularies that are available for describing pain, either through medical language that codifies pain (see Burns, Busby and Sawchuk 1999: xii) or through metaphor that creates relations of likeness (see Scarry 1985), seem inadequate in the face of the feeling.

What claims of pain are doing must be linked in some way to what pain does to bodies that experience pain. Rather than assuming that pain is unrep-

resentable, this chapter explores how the labour of pain and the language of pain work in specific and determined ways to affect differences between bodies. I will return to the question of how pain enters politics after reflecting on the lived experiences of pain.

PAIN SURFACES

We could begin by asking: What is pain? What does it mean to be in pain? Pain is usually described as a sensation or feeling (Cowan 1968: 15). But it is of course a particular kind of sensation. The International Association for the Study of Pain has adopted the following definition:

- (a) pain is subjective; (b) pain is more complex than an elementary sensory event; (c) the experience of pain involves associations between elements of sensory experience and an aversive feeling state; and (d) the attribution of meaning to the unpleasant sensory events is an intrinsic part of the experience of pain. (Chapman 1986: 153)

This definition stresses how pain, as an unpleasant or negative sensation, is not simply reducible to sensation: how we experience pain involves the attribution of meaning through experience, as well as associations between different kinds of negative or aversive feelings. So pain is not simply the feeling that corresponds to bodily damage. Whilst pain might seem self-evident – we all know our own pain, it burns through us – the experience and indeed recognition of pain *as pain* involves complex forms of association between sensations and other kinds of 'feeling states'.

In medical discourse, it is taken for granted that there is not a simple relationship or correspondence between an external stimulus and the sensation of pain (leading to the development, for example, of the gateway theory of pain) (see Melzack and Wall 1996). 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 (Kotarba 1983). There are many instances when the relationship between the intensity of pain and the severity of injury is not proportional (Melzack and Wall 1996: 1). 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 are 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. (Melzack and Wall 1996: 15)

If pain is not simply an effect of damage to the body, then how can we understand pain?

Rather than considering how the feeling of pain is determined (by, for example, previous experiences), we can consider instead what the feeling of pain *does*. 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' (Freud 1964b: 26). Crucially, the formation of the bodily ego is bound up with the surface: 'It is not merely a surface entity, but is itself the projection of a surface' (Freud 1964b: 26). Freud suggests that the process of establishing the surface depends on the experience of bodily sensations such as pain. Pain is described as an '*external and internal perception*, which behaves like an internal perception even when its source is in the external world' (Freud 1964b: 22, emphasis added). It is through sensual experiences such as pain that we come to have a sense of our skin as bodily surface (see Prosser 1998: 43), as something that keeps us apart from others, and as something that 'mediates' the relationship between internal or external, or inside and outside.

However, it is not that pain *causes* the forming of the surface. Such a reading would ontologise pain (and indeed sensation more broadly) as that which 'drives' being itself.³ Rather, it is through the flow of sensations and feelings that *become* conscious as pain and pleasure that different surfaces are established. For example, say I stub my toe on the table. The impression of the table is one of negation; it leaves its trace on the surface of my skin and I respond with the appropriate 'ouch' and move away, swearing. It is through such painful encounters between this body and other objects, including other bodies, that 'surfaces' are felt as 'being there' in the first place. To be more precise *the impression of a surface is an effect of such intensifications of feeling*. I become aware of my body as having 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!'). The recognition of a sensation as being painful (from 'it hurts' to 'it is bad' to 'move away') also involves the reconstitution of bodily space, as the reorientation of the bodily relation to that which gets attributed as the cause of the pain. In this instance, having 'felt' the surface as hurtful, I move my toe away from its proximity to the surface of the table. I move away from what I feel is the cause of the pain, and it feels like I am moving away from the pain.

Such an argument suggests an intimate relationship between what Judith Butler has called 'materialisation' – 'the effect of boundary, fixity and surface' (Butler 1993: 9) – and what I would call *intensification*. It is through the intensification of pain sensations that bodies and worlds materialise and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, surface and fixity is produced. To say

that feelings are crucial to the forming of surfaces and borders is 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*, and 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. As Rose-lyne Rey puts it: 'Through his [sic] skin – the boundary between the self and the world . . . every human being is subject to a multitude of impressions' (Rey 1995: 5).

This surfacing of bodies involves the over-determination of sense perception, emotion and judgement. It is through the recognition or interpretation of sensations, which are responses to the impressions of objects and others, that bodily surfaces take shape. I am not saying here that emotions are the same thing as sensations, but that the very intensity of perception often means a slide from one to another, as a slide that does follow as a sequence in time. Hence whilst sensation and emotion are irreducible, they cannot simply be separated at the level of lived experience.⁴ Sensations are mediated, however immediately they seem to impress upon us. Not only do we read such feelings, but how the 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*. For example, the sensation of pain is deeply affected by memories: one can feel pain when reminded of past trauma by an encounter with another. Or if one has a pain one might search one's memories for whether one has had it before, differentiating the strange from the familiar. Indeed, even before I begin my search, the sensation may impress upon me in a certain way, bypassing my consciousness. Only later will I realise that the hurt 'hurts' *because* of this or that. Even though pain is described by many as non-intentional, as not 'about' something, it is affected by objects of perception that gather as one's past bodily experience. Indeed, Lucy Bending suggests that although pain may not be about something, it is still 'because something', and this 'because' involves acts of attribution, explanation and narration, which function as the object of pain (Bending 2000: 86). It is not just that we interpret our pain as a sign of something, but that how pain feels in the first place is an effect of past impressions, which are often hidden from view. The very words we then use to tell the story of our pain also work to reshape our bodies, creating new impressions. *The slide between sensations of pain and other kinds of 'negative feeling states' is bound up with the work that pain is doing in creating the very surfaces of bodies.*

It may seem counter-intuitive to say that pain is crucial to the formation of the body as a perceiving surface. For example, don't I already have a sense of where my body is *before* I feel it as 'being hurt'? Isn't that knowledge necessary to the very ability to feel that pain as a pain in different parts of the body? How else would it be possible for me to say, 'I have pain in my toe'? 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),⁵ though it may be felt differently by different bodies. So I do have a sense of myself as body, before I encounter an object. 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.

This process 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' (Leder 1990: 4). And so, experiences of dysfunction (such as pain) become lived as a return to the body, or a rendering present to consciousness of what has become absent: 'Insofar as the body tends to disappear when functioning unproblematically, it often seizes our attention most strongly at times of dysfunction' (Leder 1990: 4). 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 (Leder 1990: 74–5; see also Chapter 7). Indeed, bodies in pain might come to our attention in this very process of turning in; their 'forming' is a 'reforming'. 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,⁶ 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 implies 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 or less aware of bodily surfaces depending on the range and intensities of bodily experiences. The intensity of pain sensations makes us aware of our bodily surfaces, and points to the *dynamic nature of surfacing itself* (turning in, turning away, moving towards,

moving away). Such intensity may impress upon the surfaces of bodies through negation: the surface is felt when something is felt 'against' it. As Elaine Scarry suggests, the experience of pain is often felt as negation: something from outside presses upon me, even gets inside me (Scarry 1985: 15). When there is no external object, we construct imaginary objects or weapons to take up their empty place: we might use expressions like 'I feel like I have been stabbed by a knife' (Scarry 1985: 55). 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 too 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 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 were 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 narrative – 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 the body, 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.⁷ As pain sensations demand that I *attend* to my embodied existence, then I come to inhabit the surfaces of the world in a particular way. 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 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 (see Chapter 8). As Elizabeth Grosz puts it, in the case of pain: 'The effected zones of the body become enlarged and magnified in the body image' (Grosz 1994: 76). 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 when I am in pain. 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 does pain do.

Notably, Jean-Paul Sartre describes pain as 'a contingent attachment to the world' (Sartre 1996: 333). 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 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 off the body 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.

The contingency of pain is linked both to its dependence on other elements, and also to touch. The word 'contingency' has the same root in Latin as the word 'contact' (Latin: *contingere*: *com*, with; *tangere*, to touch). 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 (see Ahmed 2000: 44–50) and these 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.

For example, to be touched in a certain way, or to be moved in a certain way by an encounter with another, 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 that feeling may convert quickly into a reading of the other, such that it becomes hurtful, or is read as *the impression of the negative*. In other words, the 'it hurts' becomes, 'you hurt me', which might become, 'you are hurtful', or even 'you are bad'. These affective responses are readings that not only create the borders between selves and others, but also 'give' others meaning and value in the very act of apparent separation, a giving that temporarily fixes an other, through the movement engendered by the affective response itself. Such responses are clearly mediated: materialisation takes place through the 'mediation' of affect, which may function in this way as readings of the bodies of others.⁸

THE SOCIALITY OF PAIN

Such a model of pain as contingent, as that which attaches us to others through the very process of intensification, might seem counter-intuitive. As I pointed out in the opening of this chapter, pain is often represented within

Western culture as a lonely thing (Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997: xiii). For example, Kotarba describes how pain experience is 'inherently private and remains unnoticed by others unless actively disclosed by the sufferer' (Kotarba 1983: 15). 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' (Melzack and Wall 1996: 41). 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, though 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 (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Sartre 1996). But we can ask Wittgenstein's (1964) question: What about the pain of others? Or, how am I affected by pain when I am faced by another's pain? Because we don't inhabit her body, does that mean that her pain has nothing to do with us? For me, these are personal questions. I would say that my main experiences of living with 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 realised they had got it wrong and they changed her diagnosis to transverse myelitis. It meant that her illness isn't degenerative. 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 experiencing 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 recognise 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.

Pain, which is often experienced as 'already there', is difficult to grasp and to speak about, 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 (see Chapter 6 for an analysis of love). I want to have her pain so she can be released from it, so she doesn't have to feel it. This is love as empathy: I love you, and imagine not only that I can feel how you feel, but that I could feel your pain *for you*. But I want that feeling only insofar as I don't already have it; the desire maintains the difference between the one who would 'become' in pain, and another who already 'is' in pain or 'has' it. In this way empathy sustains the very difference that it may seek to overcome: empathy remains a 'wish feeling', in which subjects 'feel' something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels.⁹

The impossibility of feeling the pain of others does not mean that the pain is simply theirs, or that their pain has nothing to do with me. I want to suggest here, cautiously, and 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 (1985: 4). 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. 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 realise 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. Such 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 how you come to surface, 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 acted 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. To return to my introduction to this chapter, it is the very assumption that we know how the other feels, which would allow us to transform their pain into our sadness.

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. Even in instances of pain that is lived without an external injury (such as psychic pain), pain 'surfaces' in relationship to others, who bear witness to pain, and authenticate its existence.

But to talk about the lived experiences of pain in such general terms may seem problematic. Isn't there a 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 homogeneous group of bodies who are together in their pain. A political model of pain cannot gather together all the different pain experiences (this is 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.

How does pain enter politics? Does pain become political only through speech, or through claims for compensation? Pain has been considered

by some as a very problematic 'foundation' for politics. Working with Nietzsche's model of *resentiment*, for example, Wendy Brown argues that there has been a fetishisation of the wound in subaltern politics (Brown 1995: 55, see Nietzsche 1969). 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 and so on) as a reaction or negation (Brown 1995: 73). Following Nietzsche, Brown suggests that reactions to injury are inadequate as a basis of politics since such reactions make action impossible: 'Revenge as a "reaction", a substitute for the capacity to act, produces identity as both bound to the history that produced it and as a reproach to the present which embodies that history' (Brown 1995: 73).¹⁰ Brown's reworking of Nietzsche shows how an over-investment in the wound, 'come[s] into conflict with the need to give up these investments' (Brown 1995: 73).

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 'getting hurt' or injured. It turns the wound into something that simply 'is' rather than something that has happened in time and space. The fetishisation of the wound as a sign of identity is crucial to 'testimonial culture' (Ahmed and Stacey 2001), in which narratives of pain and injury have proliferated. Sensational stories can turn pain into a form of media spectacle, in which the pain of others produces laughter and enjoyment, rather than sadness or anger. Furthermore, narratives of collective suffering increasingly have a global dimension. As Kleinman, Das and Lock argue, 'Collective suffering is also a core component of the global political economy. There is a market for suffering: victimhood is commodified' (Kleinman, Das and Lock 1997: xi). This commodification of suffering does not mean that all narratives have value or even equal value: as I show in Chapters 6 and 7, following Judith Butler (2002b), some forms of suffering more than others will be repeated, as they can more easily be appropriated as 'our loss'. The differentiation between forms of pain and suffering in stories that are told, and between those that are told and those that are not, is a crucial mechanism for the distribution of power.

We can reflect critically on the culture of compensation, where all forms of injury are assumed to involve relations of innocence and guilt, and where it is assumed that responsibility for all injuries can be attributed to an individual or collective. The legal domain transforms pain into a condition that can be quantified as the basis for compensation claims. The problem of wound fetishism is the equivalence it assumes between forms of injury. The production of equivalence allows injury to become an entitlement, which is then equally available to all others. It is no accident then that the normative

subject is often secured through narratives of injury: the white male subject, for example, has become an injured party in national discourses (see Chapter 2), as the one who has been 'hurt' by the opening up of the nation to others. Given that subjects have an unequal relation to entitlement, then more privileged subjects will have a greater recourse to narratives of injury. That is, the more access subjects have to public resources, the more access they may have to the capacity to mobilise narratives of injury within the public domain.

How should we respond to this transformation of injury into an entitlement that secures such forms of privilege? I would suggest that our response should not simply be to critique the rhetorical use of injury or wounds, but to attend to the different ways in which 'wounds' enter politics. Not all narratives of pain and injury work as forms of entitlement; so for example, to read the story of white male injury as the same as stories of subaltern injury would be an unjust reading. Whilst we cannot assume that such differences are essential, or determined 'only' by the subject's relation to power, we also cannot treat differences as incidental, and as separated from relations of power. The critique of wound culture should not operate as generalised critique, which would mean 'reading' different testimonies as symptomatic. As Carl Gutiérrez-Jones argues, the critique of injury needs to recognise the different rhetorical forms of injury as signs of an uneven and antagonistic history (Gutiérrez-Jones 2001: 35).

So a good response to Brown's critique would not be to forget the wound or indeed the past as the scene of wounding. Brown does 'part company' with Nietzsche by suggesting that 'the counsel of forgetting . . . seems inappropriate if not cruel' for subjugated peoples who have yet to have their pain recognised (Brown 1995: 74). I would put this more strongly: forgetting would be a repetition of the violence or injury. To forget would be to repeat the forgetting that is already implicated in the fetishisation of the wound. Our task might instead be to remember how the surfaces of bodies (including the bodies of communities, as I will suggest later) came to be wounded in the first place. Reading testimonies of injury involves rethinking the relation between the present and the past: an emphasis on the past does not necessarily mean a conservation or entrenchment of the past (see Chapter 8).¹¹ Following bell hooks, our task would be 'not to forget the past but to break its hold' (hooks 1989: 155). In order to break the seal of the past, in order to move away from attachments that are hurtful, we must first bring them into the realm of political action. Bringing pain into politics requires we give up the fetish of the wound through different kinds of remembrance. The past is living rather than dead; the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present.

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*. To think through how pain may operate in this way we can consider the document, *Bringing Them Home*, which is a report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (1996). *Bringing Them Home* reports on the Stolen Generation in Australia, a generation of indigenous children who were taken away from their families as part of a brutal and shocking policy of assimilation. Generations of indigenous children grew up with little or no contact with their families, or with their community and culture. They were often taken from their homes in a violent manner.

When considering the damage to 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' (Erikson 1995: 187). The skin of the community is damaged, but it is 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, and this loss from which recovery is so difficult. 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 compiling of this document does not necessarily mean that the stories of pain are heard. Or, if they are being heard, it does not mean that they are being heard justly. *Bringing Them Home* is concerned with a process of healing, in which the 'wound' caused by the invasion of Australia and tragedies of the Stolen Generation is healed: 'That 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.'¹² The document emphasises the importance of recovering rather than forgetting the traumas of the past, which are defined as both 'personal' and 'national'.

Importantly, the testimonies given by indigenous men and women are introduced by the document as demanding national shame rather than personal guilt:

That 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. (Governor-General of Australia, *Bringing Them Home*, 1996)

The question of who is doing the healing and who is being healed is a troubling one. The preface suggests that the response to the pain of indigenous Australians should be the shame of the white nation, which is, paradoxically, not made up of white individuals. The burden of the document falls unequally: indigenous Australians tell their personal stories, but white readers are allowed to disappear from this history, having no part in what was done. Reconciliation becomes, in this narrative, the reconciliation of indigenous individuals into the white nation, which is now cleansed through its expression of shame (see also Chapter 5). As Fiona Nicoll (1998) 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 non-indigenous hearings of indigenous testimonies can involve forms of appropriation. The recognition of the wound of the stolen generation provides, in the terms of the document, 'our identity as a nation'. The acknowledgement of their pain hence slides easily into the claiming of national pain. In this way, the healing of wounds is represented as the healing of the nation: the covering over of the wound caused by the theft of indigenous Australians allows 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 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 empathise with the other in order to heal the body (in this case, the body of the nation), involves violence. But our response to how the other's pain is appropriated as the nation's pain, and the wound is fetishised as the broken skin of the nation, should not be to forget the other's pain. Our task instead is to learn how to hear what is impossible. [Such an impossible hearing is only possible if we respond to a pain that we cannot claim as our own. Non-indigenous readers do need to take it personally (we are part of this history), but in such a way that the testimony is not taken away from others, as if it were about our feelings, or our ability to feel the feelings of others.

So I read through the document. Admittedly, it hurts to read the words, they move on me and move me. The stories, so many of them, are 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 also 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. These are stories of separation and loss. These are stories of pain. My response is emotional: it is one of discomfort, rage and disbelief. 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; it impresses upon me, and creates an impression. Of course, these impressions are not only personal. It is not just me facing this, and it is certainly not about me. And yet, I am 'in it', which means I am not 'not in it'. Here I am, already placed and located in worlds, already shaped by my proximity to some bodies and not others. If I am here, then I am there: the stories of the document are shaped by the land I had been taught to think of as my own. The 'knowledge' of this history as a form of *involvement* is not an easy or obvious knowledge. Such knowledge cannot be 'taken in' – it cannot be registered as knowledge – without feeling differently about those histories, and without inhabiting the surfaces of bodies and worlds differently. I 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, is on indigenous land. To 'feel' differently about this land, as belonging to others, is not about generosity; it is not premised on giving up one's home, but on recognising that where one lived was not one's home to give or to give up in the first place (see Ahmed 2000: 190). The reading cannot then be about my feelings: to be affected by the story as a form of 'un-housing' is to be affected by that which cannot be 'taken' or 'taken back' as 'mine'.

The testimonies of pain that gather in the form of the document involve more than one story: many stories, placed alongside each other, weave the document together. Each story is readable, as the story of this other, a singular other, as a singularity that is irreducible to 'the one'. This other is touched by other others, and other stories of pain and suffering. So one story, I will read with you, but I will not read this story *as one*. It is Fiona's story.¹³ That is all I have to start with, your first name. I say it out, 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? 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 mothers tried to hide their children and blacken their children's faces and tried to hide them in caves.' The event unfolds before me. I close my eyes. 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 the screams 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 curled up in the foetal position. We can understand that, 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 telling the story of her mother, the daughter tells of a pain she cannot understand; she cannot write the story from the point of view of the mother's trauma. Even the daughter cannot be with her. There is a gulf that cannot be overcome by empathy, even by somebody in the story, connected by a bond of love; even by the daughter whose pain is also part of the story, whose pain 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: 'curled up in the foetal position'. Bodies, kept apart, moving away from each other, from the reader: 'We got there in the dark and then we didn't see our mother again. She just kind of disappeared into the darkness.' The pain of this mother's disappearance takes the shape of a darkness that overwhelms. The darkness is the edge of the story, signalling what the reader cannot see and feel.

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: 'From 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. Words can only tell the story in a way that confirms the violence: 'You forbade 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 the body of the community and on Fiona's body are treated with a care that is a torture 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 pain 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. They did this. They did this. I want you to say it. But no 'them' appears to allow

me the safety of such projection. 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. My anger at this story, at the possibility of this story, does not find an object; it cannot be contained by an external object. In not having a 'them' to blame in the story, my anger seeps outwards, towards all that makes the story possible.

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 to 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 mother's got a heart for her children and for them to be taken away, no-one can ever know the 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 are the feelings that made that injustice so unjust. And yet still, before her mother, Fiona recognises the limits of her own feelings and the impossibility of feeling the feelings of others: '*no-one can ever know the heartache*'. The mother's pain is here evoked as unfeeling both 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 also does not bring us together. 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, here, now. And then: '*All the years that you wanted to ask this and ask that, there was no way we could ever regain that. It was like somebody came and stabbed me with a*

knife.' The experience of pain – the feeling of being stabbed by a foreign object that pierces the skin, that 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 coming and goings of bodies, in time and in space: '*every morning as the sun came up the whole family would wail*'. 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*, and which comes together in the painful feeling that togetherness is lost. The language of pain aligns this body with other bodies; the surface of the community comes to be inhabited differently in the event of being touched by such loss.

The testimonies of pain by indigenous Australians work not as appeals to sympathy; they give flesh to feelings that cannot be felt by others. The stories of pain that cover these pages are stories of separation, of losses that cannot be undone. In Fiona's testimony, the pain takes the form of the separation of mothers from daughters, daughters from mothers. The pain of such women is not evoked or sentimentalised as the true burden of community, but moves the story on, as a sign of the persistence of a connection, a thread between others, in the face of separation. The connection is not made as a form of fellow-feeling, and it is not about feeling the other's pain. Pain is evoked as that which even our most intimate others cannot feel. The impossibility of 'fellow feeling' is itself the confirmation of injury. The call of such pain, as a pain that cannot be shared through empathy, is a call not just for an attentive hearing, but for a different kind of inhabitation. It is a call for action, and a demand for collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, but on learning to live with the impossibility of reconciliation, or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Sarah Franklin who brought this letter to my attention.
2. In due course I will examine how words have associations that do not need to be made explicit as key to the emotionality of language. I will consider such words as 'sticky signs' in Chapters 2, 3 and 4.
3. In fact, psychoanalysis offers a radical critique of the model in which pain and pleasure become individual and social 'drivers'. We can identify this model as utilitarian. Take Bentham's classic formulation: 'Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do' (cited in McGill 1967: 122). My emphasis on sensation as crucial to the surfacing of bodies is not about making pain and pleasure 'sovereign masters'. I am suggesting that pain and pleasure cannot be

- separated from the attribution of value to objects, but that the value of objects is not determined by sensation. So whilst pain and pleasure may affect how bodies are orientated towards others, this does not mean we simply calculate pain and pleasure as if they were properties, as if they 'have', or even 'are' value.
4. I am hence departing from the recent tendency to separate sensation or affect and emotion, which is clear in the work of Massumi (2002). Certainly, the experience of 'having' an emotion may be distinct from sensations and impressions, which may burn the skin before any conscious moment of recognition. But this model creates a distinction between conscious recognition and 'direct' feeling, which itself negates how that which is not consciously experienced may itself be mediated by past experiences. I am suggesting here that even seemingly direct responses actually evoke past histories, and that this process bypasses consciousness, through bodily memories. Sensations may not be about conscious recognition and naming, but this does not mean they are 'direct' in the sense of immediate. Further, emotions clearly involve sensations: this analytic distinction between sensation or affect and emotion risks cutting emotions off from the lived experiences of being and having a body. Pain may be a very good example to challenge the distinction between sensation and emotion: it has regularly been described as both, or as a special category between sensation and emotion. See Trigg (1970) for an analysis of pain as both sensation and emotion and Rey for a critique of this distinction in models of pain (Rey 1995: 6).
 5. 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 1996: 3). This reminds us that some pain sensations can function as warnings as well as reactions that help bodies to navigate their way through the world.
 6. 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 that affects what they can do with their lives. It is important to write the lived experience of period pain into our theorising of embodiment. The discomfort we might feel in writing such pain into a philosophical body is like many discomforts: it is caused by not quite fitting the body (in this case, the philosophical body) we inhabit. See Chapter 7 for an analysis of discomfort.
 7. 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 1983).
 8. Given the emphasis here on the subject's perceptions and readings in the making of objects and others, is this a radical form of subjectivism? It is important for me to indicate how this argument is not subjectivist, but one that undermines the distinction between the subject and the object. I am suggesting that 'no thing' or 'no body' has positive characteristics, which exist *before contact with others*. So it is not that a subject 'gives' meaning and value to others. Rather, subjects as well as objects are shaped by contact. Such forms of contact do not make something out of nothing: subjects as well as objects 'accrue' characteristics over time (a process which shows precisely how these characteristics are not a positive form of residence) that makes it possible to speak of them as prior to contact. So my argument that the subject's perception and reading of objects and others is crucial does not necessarily exercise a radical form of subjectivism; it does not posit the subject's consciousness as that which makes the world. The subject materialises as an effect of contact with others and has already materialised given such histories of contact.

9. There are different forms of what Robert C. Solomon has called 'fellow-feeling' (1995, see also Denzin 1984: 148; Scheler 1954: 8–36). They include compassion, as well as empathy, sympathy and pity. These different forms cannot be equated. For example Spelman differentiates between compassion, as suffering *with* others, from pity, as sorrow *for* others (Spelman 1997: 65). All of these forms of fellow-feeling involve fantasy: one can 'feel for' or 'feel with' others, but this depends on how I 'imagine' the other already feels. So 'feeling with' or 'feeling for' does not mean a suspension of 'feeling about': *one feels with or for others only insofar as one feels 'about' their feelings in the first place*.
10. See Chapter 8 for a critique of the distinction between reaction and action.
11. Although Brown refuses to echo Nietzsche's call to forget, her conclusion is to replace the language of being ('I am') with the language of desire ('I want'). I suggest that we should also challenge Nietzsche's presumption that the future is open, and that the past – and the present – is what holds or binds the subject. We need to think about how the past remains open in the present, such that the story of the 'I am', or 'how did I come to be', is a story that also opens up the future of the subject. See also Chapter 8.
12. The report is available on the following web site:
<http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/stolen/> Last accessed on 20 February 2004.
13. Confidential evidence, Case 305. My copy of the report does not have page numbers, but Fiona's testimony is the last one in Chapter 8 on South Australia.