American Dolorologies

Pain, Sentimentalism, Biopolitics

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ONE

WHAT IS DOLOROLOGY?

Who is embodied, and how, and what is served by the sensual turn?
—Lauren Berlant, “Critical Inquiry, Affirmative Culture”

In October 1852, one of the chief medical authorities in the emerging field of clinical obstetrics, Dr. James Young Simpson, wrote a ferocious letter to his London colleague Dr. Henry Ramsbotham. Simpson, the first medical professional to administer anesthetic agents in childbirth, made a comparison between the agonies of labor pain and those of corporeal punishment of slaves in order to convince his doubtful critic of the benefits of etherization. His comparative argument elucidates how pain in marginal bodies took on social and political meanings in the nineteenth century:

I wonder that you and Dr Lee should still persist in asking your patients to shriek and suffer in deference merely to your professional prejudices. Yesterday I was reading a letter from Dr Howe describing a public slave-whipping scene in New Orleans where a poor shrieking girl had a series of horrid lashes inflicted to serve merely the temper and prejudices of her master. And while the doctor gave a most heartrending account of her agonies he adds that what struck him as worst of all was all the other masters maintaining that this inhuman and cruel practice of theirs was the only safe practice with slaves, just as on equally untenable grounds you will . . . maintain that the shrieking of patients in labour is the only safe practice for them. To my mind and heart, the one doctrine does not appear less shocking at this time of day than does the other. (quoted in Waserman 1980, 160)
The comparison of labor pain and the pain of being tortured intends to advertise the etherization of women during parturition, which in Simpson’s context meant the alleviation of pain in white and upper-class female bodies. Evoking this pain together with the suffering of black women under the yoke of American chattel slavery wed both types of pain in one humanitarian perspective. Corporeal pain for Simpson signifies “untenable” and “inhumane” practices, whether these are the physical abuses of black bodies in enslavement or the medical neglect of female bodies suffering from birth-pain. Both bodies in pain equally affect the sensibilities of the humanitarian and compassionate subject. Thus, they are also aligned and evaluated in a comparative relation: torture causes pain in black bodies like childbirth does in female bodies. This comparative recognition of pain further compels the white male doctor to the same compassionate response, and he is poised to rescue both marginalized bodies from their agonies in the name of medical and social progress. Simpson exemplifies a humanitarian subject engaging with the pain felt by other bodies: this subject recognizes, articulates, evaluates, and alleviates the shocking pain in different bodies as the object of politics. With “mind and heart,” the medical professional as politicized citizen compassionately feels with marginal bodies, forcefully articulates their pain, identifies its cause, and administers the right social and medical remedies—be it abolitionism or etherization. The passage frames anesthesia for women and the emancipation of slaves as part of the same liberating project—the recognition, articulation, comparison/differentiation, and alleviation of unspeakable pain in marginal bodies. Moreover, Simpson’s claim to a compassionate sensibility makes clear that the capacity to “feel with” and “deal with” pain in other bodies resides primarily with white male experts.

The central argument of *American Dolorologies* asserts that Simpson’s recognition of pain in white and black female bodies exemplifies a complex discursive logistics that pervades scientific and social discourses on the body, difference, and the political throughout the nineteenth century. This logistics produces differences in subjects by showing how their bodies are differently capable of painful affect and in need of rescue through compassion. Bodies and subjects are constructed as their relative pain of oppression and violation is recognized and discursively defined. Speaking on behalf of hurting bodies, this compassionate discourse articulates the pain of racialized and gendered bodies which can only shriek in inhuman agony and therefore “fail” to speak for themselves. In this act of compassionate recognition (or, as we will see, negation), the sufferings of different bodies are rendered comparable and as such speak to the nature of differences between subjects. Aligning labor and torture with race and gender differences, it further collapses naturalizing and politicizing views of pain into each other. Consequently, this humanitarian discourse crucially defines the
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This book proposes that the discursive evocation of pain negotiates the social meanings of race and gender in American modernity on the level of corporeal materiality: pain acts as discursive currency to produce racialized and gendered bodies, even as it is evoked to argue their social and political inclusion. I will call these strategic mobilizations of pain dolorologies. The term borrows from anesthesiologist John Bonica’s definition of “dolorology [as] the scientific study of pain” (1954, 23). In my usage, dolorology means the racialized and gendered encodings, symbolic meanings, material effects, and political functions of pain in North America. Dolorology denotes the discursive evocation of pain as it executes an alignment of bodies, their hierarchization, and the naturalizing, politicizing, and symbolic effects of this turn to the affective dimensions of subjects. American Dolorologies analyzes discursive agencies and operations that construct and negotiate subjects through bodily pain. It investigates the regulation of bodies in pain as they are recognized as socially and politically meaningful, and which bodily experiences are not recognized and abjected. It asks how pain is mobilized to inscribe racial and gender difference into bodies, and how this evocation is at the same time instrumental to liberal projects.

James Young Simpson’s invocation of pain, difference, and compassion is in no way a singular occurrence, but rather testifies to a pervasive discourse of pain, which this book will trace from 1750 to the late nineteenth century. Simpson’s alignment of labor pain and torture, race and gender, and abolitionism and anesthesia indicates that this discourse is neither uniformly compassionate and inclusionary, nor is it exclusively concerned with “natural” pain or biological difference. The discourse of pain I call dolorology rather designates a fundamentally ambiguous site where liberal forms of recognizing marginalized suffering are conflated with biologizing circumscriptions of marginal bodies. At the core of dolorology are these ambivalent views of the suffering body in American modernity, and the diverse clusters of discourse partaking in them: medicalization, comparative sciences, abolitionism, inclusionary politics, theories of feeling and affect, etc. Dolorology demarcates a logistical arrangement and constellation of these diverse strains, rather than a unified politics or “culture of pain” (Morris 1991). Pain is a site of cultural negotiation of what bodies and traumatic experiences mean in various registers of knowledge and how these meanings are or are not relevant to the political value of subjects. In order to grasp these both conflicting and colloborating politics of the body in pain, I situate dolorology between two crucial epistemic transformations that characterize modernity: sentimentalism and biopolitics. Dolorology is an organizing mechanism that governs the cultural meanings and causes of suffering and thus prescribes the potential remedies that will restore the damaged humanity—as freedom from hurt—of the body in pain.2
distribution of meanings between the compassionate recognition of subjects and the scientific objectification of bodies. It functions as a relay between the sentimental and the biopolitical circumscription of politics. It defines the meanings of suffering in different bodies and how these matter to the nation, science, and constructions of race and gender. As these two registers of discourse extend their grasp on the embodied subject, pain is mustered as the exchange value between affective recognition of suffering and the scientific classification of the body feeling pain.

Both strains—sentimentalism and biopolitics—are vital components of American modernity that have frequently been viewed as opposing forces seizing on the interpretative value of bodies in the nineteenth century. While sentimentalist modes (such as the stylistic conventions of the slave narrative) have been associated with an inclusionary politics, aiming to register diverse sufferings of marginalized groups, the scientific gaze on the body has been identified as one of the central agencies that organizes and biologizes racial and gender difference in modernity. Within the perspective of dolorology, both orders of discourse (and paradigms of interpretation) intersect in their access to pain, the negotiation of its meaning for politics and scientific classification. This so far seldom acknowledged “collaboration” between sentimentalism and biopolitics is exhibited in nuce in Simpson’s comparative view of torture and childbirth and their association with racialized and gendered bodies, as the following introduction of the two terms will elucidate.

**SENTIMENTALISM AND PAIN**

Simpson’s urgent call for humanitarian action—invoking “heart-rending,” “cruel,” “untenable” qualities of pain—is exemplary for the conventions of sentimental discourse. His language of pain is inextricably bound up within an “aesthetic ideology of the sentimental” (Woodward 2004, 72), the grounding of politics in affect and the egalitarian project of American modernity it supplements. In order to construct itself as the emancipation of all subjects from violent oppression and exclusion, American egalitarianism narrates itself through the suffering and pain of excluded and oppressed bodies. Its sentimental rhetoric promises the alleviation of suffering: through compassionate recognition by, sentimental representation within, and affective inclusion into the national body. America as the project of universal equality for all subjects in this view is understood as the project of a complete recognition and alleviation of suffering, or what Debra Walker King polemically calls a “pain-free society” (2008, 27). The national promise of pain-freedom for all citizens is reflected in the plethora of narrations of suffering (and redemption) in American culture that ranges
from early-republic jeremiads to antebellum captivity and slave narratives to contemporary trauma narrative, minority testimonies, and the various conservative backlashes against these. As Lauren Berlant concisely argues, much of American culture and discourse (both popular and critical) is thus working with an “alphabet of . . . pain” (2000, 33) that tries to register and represent the forms of exclusion and oppression that are continuously produced in liberal democracies.

Sentimental discourse in America in this view does not merely specify a literary genre. Initially dismissed by cultural scholars as a vulgar mode of literary discourse, associated with the domestic, corporeality and anti-intellectualism, sentimentalism has, since Jane Tompkins’s study *Sensational Designs* (1985), been reevaluated as a “national project about imagining the nation’s bodies and the national body” (Samuels 1992, 3). In Tompkins’s wake, the sentimental evocation of emotion, suffering, and bodily states of exception has been described in terms of a “liberating method” of literary and political discourse that is firmly attached to the idea of American democratic culture. Phil Fisher calls sentimentalism “a politically radical technique, training new forms of feeling” that enables the representation and inclusion of marginalized subjects: “[T]he weak and helpless within society gain by means of sentimental experience full representation through the central moral category of compassion” (Fisher 1985, 17). Saidya Hartman, writing on the sentimental techniques of abolitionist writing, contrastingly stresses sentiment’s complicity with white hegemony. Sentimental modes supplement the judiciary and cultural exclusion of subjects precisely by focusing primarily on the body and thereby precluding the political representation of marginalized subjectivities: “[S]entiment facilitated subjection, domination, and terror precisely by preying upon the flesh, the heart, the soul” (1997, 5).

These ambivalent evaluations of sentimentalism’s focus on the body’s affective and painful states indicate the double movement carried out by the discursive mobilization of pain, namely, to speak the body in specifically empowering and simultaneously hurting, naturalizing, and abjecting ways. Karen Sanchéz-Eppler’s *Touching Liberty* argues that sentimentalism crucially prescribes the forms of embodiment and humanity available to subjects through the (potentially) empowering recognition of their suffering. Writing on the sentimental formulas of nineteenth century abolitionism, she argues: “[T]he physical oppression and the juridical exclusion of black . . . bodies gives rise to a political movement and a literature that strive . . . to speak the body, but that in so representing the body . . . exploit and limit it” (1997, 8).

*American Dolorologies* traces this dialectical currency of “bodies in pain” in sentimental discourse and its prescriptive effects for the discursive representation of embodied subjects. It charts the ways in which discourses
that seek to recognize pain and enact compassionate inclusion at the same
time violently construct and determine the social, political, and national
significance (or insignificance) of different bodies. This understanding of the
corporeal underpinnings of processes of subjection resonates with a recent
body of scholarly work that has significantly reframed American culture’s
contemporary preoccupation with pain, feeling, and compassion. The terms
“trauma culture” (Berlant 2001; Kaplan 2005), “wound culture” (Seltzer
1998), “culture of compassion” (Berlant 2004a), or “testimonial culture”
(Ahmed and Stacey 2001) have emerged as critical monikers to describe a
link between subjectivity and pain, and the public sphere in which these
traumatic subjects are publicized. Linda Williams argues concisely that “pain
[has been advanced] as the true core of personhood and political collectivity”
(2001, 43). These works inspire my approach to pain as a historical artifact.
While “the contemporary subject is achieved through a proximity to trauma”
(Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 4), the discourse of pain and trauma as subject
making also evoke modern genealogies of the body. Historical perspectives
on contemporary notions of identity, trauma, and the public sphere have so
far rarely been acknowledged or consistently researched. In Lauren Berlant’s
extensive work on democracy, liberalism and sentimental displays of compas‑
sion and their imbrication with questions of race and gender, she dubs this
nexus as the discourse of “national sentimentality.” The history of this com‑
plex is coextensive with the history of American liberal society: “[National
sentimentality is] a liberal rhetoric of promise historically entitled in the
United States, which avows that a nation can best be built across fields of
social difference through channels of affective identification and empathy”
(2000, 34). The concept therefore denotes a historically deep structure of
social representation that assembles the intelligibility and political agency
of subjects via their relative capacity for “having” and “feeling with” pain.
Berlant highlights that sentimental evocations of “bodies in pain” are thus
always connected to the privileging of certain bodies and subjects, and the
dismissal, distortion, and pathologization of others:

[Sentimentalism’s] core pedagogy has been to develop a notion of
social obligation based on the citizen’s capacity for suffering and trauma. This structure has been deployed mainly among the
culturally privileged to humanize those subjects who have been excluded. . . . But . . . the humanization strategies of sentimentality
always traffic in cliché, the reproduction of a person as a thing, and
thus indulge in the confirmation of the marginal subject’s embody‑
ment of inhumanity on the way to providing the privileged with
heroic occasions of recognition, rescue, and inclusion. (2008, 35)
Sentimentalism, though arguing on behalf of the recognition and inclusion of subaltern bodies, is thus situated within hegemonic systems of differentiation and objectification: it always potentially reiterates and reinscribes the hierarchies of race and gender. Moreover, the discursive seizure of pain—as a deeply corporeal phenomenon—enables the reaffirmation of difference in the “ontological” and “natural” domains. The recognition and evocation of pain as a political discourse of humanization thus produces corporealized subjects that can be both included on behalf of their pain and marginalized through the differences confirmed by this pain. Emphasizing this fundamental ambivalence of humanizing discourses, American Dolorologies is situated in proximity to Judith Butler’s notion of “vulnerability,” which seeks to conceptualize the discursive construction of a body’s capacity to be violated and addresses the question how violation is made recognizable and meaningful. “Vulnerability” for Butler fundamentally shapes the discursive construction of what it means to be human:

A vulnerability must be perceived and recognized . . . and there is no guarantee that this will happen. Not only is there always the possibility that a vulnerability will not be recognized and that it will be constituted as the “unrecognizable,” but when a vulnerability is recognized, that recognition has the power to change the meaning and structure of the vulnerability itself. In this sense, if vulnerability is one precondition for humanization, and humanization takes place differently through variable norms of recognition, then it follows that vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject. (2004b, 43; my italics)

In other words, the capacity to be wounded and violated, and thus to emerge as a subject of humanity (and humanitarian sentiment) depends on and is shaped by the norms of recognition. Sentimental displays of suffering in this view are materializations of racial and gendered difference, though sentimental discourse articulates them against the limiting, exclusionary, and violent effects of these categories.

American Dolorologies seeks to supplement the wide-ranging cultural and philosophical perspectives on this problematic with a historical inquiry into pain as a discourse. Like Berlant and others, I argue that the genealogy of the complex interrelation between sentimentalism, humanity, social norms of recognition, and the body is coextensive and interdependent with the emergence of American democratic culture. This historical backdrop suggests not only sentimental modes of discourse as a crucial historical
context for the emergence of dolorologies, but, further, a second epistemic shift relevant to the mobilization of “bodies in pain”: this shift is framed by the Foucauldian concept and genealogy of biopolitics, and deployed mainly in biologizing, objectifying, and naturalizing discourses on the body, for example, the emergent life sciences of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. To my mind, most of the aforementioned authors do not explicitly acknowledge the biopolitical dimensions of sentimentalism. This book seeks to establish this important connection between the political and sentimental discourses in the modern period, and the simultaneous biopolitical evocation of the body in scientific knowledge production during the same era.

PAIN AND BIOPOLITICS

Coming back to Simpson’s letter, the biopolitical context is evident: his recognition of marginal pain takes place within a larger movement of the medicalization of reproduction. Simpson’s argument about childbirth and anesthesia is situated within the professionalization of medicine and the emergence of clinical knowledge in disciplinary fields such as obstetrics and gynecology. His evocation of birthpain in white women in this view takes place on the advent of scientific regimes that subject reproduction and the female body to increased medical and social observation, management, and control. Obstetrics and gynecology in the nineteenth century organize “reproductivity as a biopolitical substance” (Deutscher 2008, 56): medical experts increasingly discuss female bodies with regard to notions of fertility, the health or degeneration of populations, and as indexes of racial purity. Simpson’s argument about pain in childbirth is, I argue, part of a discourse paving the way for late-nineteenth-century ideas on population management in relation to eugenicist ideas of the racial composition of the nation.

Obstetrics as a discourse is exemplary for the production of populations as biological entities, which Michel Foucault has described as the central task of biopolitics. The objectifying circumscriptions of bodies and their pain deployed within these fields of scientific knowledge production is part of what his later work identified as a new technology of power aimed at governing the human as a form of biological life. The biopolitical mode of power focuses less on the disciplining and surveillance of individual bodies than on the governing of populations as biological forms of life:

[W]e see something new emerging in the second half of the eighteenth century: a new technology of power [that] does not exclude disciplinary technology, but it does dovetail into it, integrate it, modify it to some extent, and above all, use it by sort of infiltrating it, embedding itself in existing disciplinary techniques. . . . Unlike
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discipline, which is addressed to bodies, the new nondisciplinary power is applied not to man-as-body but to the living man, to man-as-living-being; ultimately, if you like, to man-as-species. [It] is addressed to a multiplicity of men [presenting] a global mass that is affected by overall processes characteristic of birth, death, production, illness, and so on. [This] seizure of power is not individualizing but, if you like, massifying. . . . After the anatomo-politics of the human body established in the course of the eighteenth century we have, at the end of that century, the emergence of something . . . I would call a “biopolitics” of the human race. (Foucault 1997, 242–43; my italics)

The concept of biopolitics aims at grasping those technologies of power that not so much exert discipline on individual bodies, but differentiate and comprise bodies and subjects into populations. Contrary to his earlier texts,11 Foucault’s genealogy of biopolitics has explicitly acknowledged the crucial function of categories of difference within power regimes. As he argues on the figuration12 of racism, which emerges in the eighteenth century, these axes enable to establish the state as an assemblage of racially differentiated populations. Power seizes on these by observing, measuring, and managing their composition, degeneration, mixture, purity, etc. With the “emergence of biopolitics,” Foucault writes,

[R]acism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States. . . . It is primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die. The appearance within the biological continuum of the human race or races, distinction among races, the hierarchy of races . . . all this is a way of fragmenting the field of the biological that power controls. It is a way of separating out the groups that exist within a population. It is, in short, a way of establishing a biological type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain. This will allow power to treat that population as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate, to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely, as races. That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower. (1997, 254–55)

The discourse of dolorology enacts this caesura by constructing racialized and gendered bodies. It differentiates and compares their relative capacities for pain and distributes different entitlements to socially significant
suffering on behalf of this capacity. As Simpson’s quote indicates, it does so by evoking a highly individualizing recognition of pain (e.g., the anonymous slave girl’s “personal” story). However, the “body in pain” within dolorology always signifies a collective of bodies among others, which are differentiated or aligned with each other by their access to pain. While thus producing seemingly personal narratives of suffering and compassion, these are made intelligible primarily as speaking for a socially suffering group. Simpson’s broad generalization of birthpain and slave pain and their comparison illustrates how pain fragments the broad field of traumatic experience in liberal societies and establishes prototypical “bodies in pain”: the slave girl’s pain can, for instance, be recognized as the pain of “slavery,” of “womanhood,” or of “black femininity.” The corporeal body therefore metonymically embodies different populations constructed via their simultaneous political suffering and natural/biological pain. By determining which racial and gendered bodies feel which pain, and relating this to the social and political entitlements of generalized populations, dolorology enables the collapse of biological and political discourses into each other. Or, as Foucault puts it, “biological existence [is] reflected in political existence” (1990, 143), which is to say that political entitlements are negotiated in biological and biologizing terms, and biological circumscriptions of pain in bodies work to regulate how subjects are recognized as suffering within the political domain.

This imbrication of politics with the biological in modernity has been critically elucidated by feminist and critical race studies for at least two decades. These bodies of scholarship, investigating the scientific undergirdings of racism and sexism, crucially inform my approach and archive. Londa Schiebinger argues that the life sciences and their projection of bodies onto the objectifying categories of gender and race function as a necessary countermeasure to the modern discourse of egalitarianism beginning in the late eighteenth century. The knowledge production on biological difference poses a regulatory strategy within liberalism to contain the threat of empowering movements: “[W]ithin the republican framework, an appeal to natural rights could be countered only by proof of natural inequalities” (Schiebinger 2004, 143). The shift to biopolitics is therefore crucial to the emergence of democratic and liberal rule in Western societies and the stabilization of hegemonic notions of the universal subject of democracy as white and male. Biopolitics in this reading is instrumental in the exploitation and exclusion of bodies and subjects via racializing and gendering differentiation within democratic systems. The rise of scientific medicine, anthropometry (physiology, phrenology, comparative anatomy, etc.), Darwinism, and countless other disciplines of scientific knowledge production projects bodies and populations onto racial and gendered strata. These knowledges ontologize and naturalize those differences the political sea change explained to be abolished
and thus materially enabled the continuation of systems of enslavement, the ideology of separate spheres, political disenfranchisement, and violent oppression within liberal democracy.

American Dolorologies locates the biopolitical meanings of pain mainly in the scientific, medical, and generally objectifying discourses that construct the “truth” of bodies and their differences through practices of surveillance, measurement, and comparison. The emerging life sciences and their attending paradigms of “scientific racism” and “scientific sexism” categorize and naturalize bodies and their potential ranges of experience and pain. Biopolitics thus shapes to a large extent ideas of public bodies, their differences and political meanings, and represents a crucial part of the project of fashioning distinctive American bodies with recourse to the question of whose pain carries which meaning. The book traces the genealogy of these body-producing knowledges and their interaction with sentimental and political discourses. It maps how these evoke pain and taxonomies of pain-capacities as a vital relay over which the meanings and privileges of bodies and subjects are negotiated. The scientific debates on the use of anesthesia in childbirth around 1845 are a case in point, for they negotiate the meanings of, expertise on, and capacities to have pain along the lines of gender and race. Pain is measured, aligned with racially infused physiological differences, degrees of civilization and thus humanity. This nexus enables scientific discourse to simultaneously speak on behalf of the (suffering) body, evaluate its meaning for science and democracy, and link its performativity to an “inner truth” of race and gender. Further, these medical discourses demonstrate that these notions of the body in the nineteenth century are part of a widely received popular knowledge that underwrites literary, political, and other cultural texts. In this view, scientific articulations of pain are not separate from popular, political, and sentimental discourses, but rather amalgamate with these to form American Dolorologies.

PAIN AND SPEAKING

Apart from these historical frames, which will be investigated in the following chapters, my analysis of the discursive mobilization of pain further implies a crucial epistemological consideration that speaks to contemporary theoretical and political constellations. While American Dolorologies primarily proposes a historicizing genealogy to present-day diagnoses such as “wound culture” or “trauma culture,” the ambivalences of pain’s evocation also partakes in debates that surround late modern narratives of pain and their political deployment. One crucial aspect concerns the ongoing identification of painful experience with the “nondiscursive”—what Elaine Scarry in her classic book The Body in Pain has called pain’s “unspeakability” (1985,
4). As pointed out in relation to James Young Simpson’s compassionate recognition of slave pain and female pain, sentimental discourse installs a fundamental discontinuity between “being in pain” and “speaking” it: the sympathetic doctor articulates an experience, which those suffering can only utter in “shrieking.” Pain, in other words, is discursively mobilized on behalf of bodies that are constructed as unable to speak their pain. Humanitarian discourse in other words risks to affirm the speechlessness of those suffering under its exclusionary mechanisms precisely through the discursive articulation of unspeakable pain in “other bodies.” The articulation and recognition of pain and suffering within the intimate public sphere therefore is not tantamount to the oppressed subject’s emancipation from it, as Lauren Berlant’s polemic points out: “[T]he recognition by the dominant culture of certain sites of publicized subaltern suffering is frequently (mis)taken as a big step toward the amelioration of that suffering. It is a baby step, if that” (2000, 33).

Recognition, I propose, is rather a double-edged process of “promise and damage” (Seitler 2003, 83) within discourse itself—a rhetorical maneuver that simultaneously constructs pain as an “exceptional” and “unspeakable” phenomenon changing the rules of discourse toward inclusion, and reinscribes the norms of recognition, experience, and the intelligibility of bodies and subjects. This perspective takes up contemporary criticism of the problematic linkage of minority discourses with narratives of trauma and the representational and political dilemmas arising from this connection. Feminist scholars have diagnosed and criticized this nexus—termed by some as the victimology-tradition of feminism—and its function within late modern cultural economies. All detect a fundamental ambivalence that emerges when identities and their claims to social recognition are predominantly depending on a “logics of pain” (Bell 2000, 60). Especially Wendy Brown’s influential States of Injury (1995) has explored the nexus of pain and subjectivity as the central problem of contemporary identity politics. In her argument, minority discourses and the hegemonic institutions recognizing them increasingly pursue a “moralizing politics” that aims at developing a righteous critique of power from the perspective of the injured [and thus] delimits a specific site of blame for suffering by constituting sovereign subjects and events as responsible for the “injury” of social subordination. It fixes the identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions. (Brown 1995, 27)

Both marginalized and hegemonic discourses therefore rely on the politicization of personal experiences of pain, a strategy that for Brown leads to a problematic “wounded attachment” within identitarian discourse, an
What is dolorology? The equation of identity and trauma: “Politicized identity . . . enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatizing, and inscribing pain in its politics. . . . a politics of recrimination that seeks to avenge the hurt even while it reaffirms it, discursively codifies it” (ibid., 74; my italics). Claims to pain not only may intervene in hegemonic discourse (and thus empower the project of identity politics), but also produce subjectivities that are identified, normalized, and ultimately marginalized through that pain.20 While this dialectic is crucial to the historical mobilizations of pain within sentimental discourse,21 Brown's observation on the “discursive codification” happening in testimonies of hurt, pain, and suffering points to a mechanism intrinsic to the performative process of articulating pain. As she argues on narratives of painful experience articulated within various strands of feminism, these always evoke a particular notion of the body that is “nondiscursive”; “Within the confessional frame, even when social construction is adopted as method . . . ‘feelings’ and ‘experiences’ acquire a status that is politically if not ontologically essentialist—beyond hermeneutics” (ibid., 42). While the evocation of pain as something beyond discourse or hermeneutics poses an intricate problematic to antiessentialist politics,22 the same mechanism—the mobilization of pain as nondiscursive—interests my project as a crucial discursive maneuver within hegemonic recognitions of pain in marginalized bodies.

Pain is mustered, as Simpson’s performative invocation of the shrieking victims of “white terror” and “female nature” reveals, as a quasi-ontological dimension of experience that is able to cast a universalizing bond between all feeling subjects. This humanitarian performative simultaneously justifies that a white male subject can—under the guise of compassion—speak for the experiences of marginal subjects and bodies. The compassionate recognition of marginal suffering by agents of the dominant culture therefore deals in the construction of pain as a universal affect enabling the sympathetic communication between bodies and subjects. In order to function as the relay enabling compassionate cross-identification via strata of difference, pain is figured as that which is excluded by or exceptional to discourse—i.e., unspeakable. Pain, bodily agony, and the affective experience of violation thus come to figure as indices of a “bottom-line humanity.” It is precisely on behalf of this humanism that hegemonic discourse justifies its evocations of pain, defends the racial and gendered logistics it enacts, and reinforces the privileges of speaking realized by its recognition.

As a project investigating the discursive enlistment of pain for negotiations in the political domain, American Dolorologies is vitally interested in these historical, political, and epistemological modalities of speaking pain. How and by whom is pain spoken when the subject in pain cannot speak? How does pain enter discourse, and thus emerge as objectified, its source
identified, its remedy obvious, its agony almost overcome? In other words, which subject positions “master” whose pain through language and how does this mastery work? How does pain and its speakability relate to different subject positions, the power relations between them, and their respective histories and genealogies? These questions decidedly refuse to circumscribe an ontology of pain, but rather illuminate its powerful discursive currency as a rhetoric of “universal true feeling” (Berlant 2000, 34) that stabilizes hegemonic norms of recognition.

CHAPTERS

This book analyzes three historical junctures of biopolitical and sentimental discourse, covered in chapters 2, 3, and 4, which address the emergence of American Dolorologies within three fields: the establishment of modern aesthetics, exemplified by Edmund Burke's treatise on the sublime (1757); the introduction of anesthesia into modern medicine (1846), illustrated by debates surrounding the question of birthpain, race, and medical compassion; finally, the photographic articulation of pain in black American bodies that emerge before, during, and after the abolition of institutionalized slavery in America (1865). These genealogical forays are concluded by a reflection on contemporary articulations of pain in cultural discourses.

As the first part into the historical investigation of this discursive constellation, chapter 2 discusses Edmund Burke's aesthetic theory in Enquiry into the Sublime and the Beautiful (1757). Burke's text performs the shift from a monarchical system of aesthetics (as decorum) to an aesthetics that legitimizes the bourgeois subject as the agent of democratic politics. As a text vitally thinking about pain in both political and physiological terms, this prominent example of the Scottish Enlightenment serves as a privileged entry into both the philosophical origins of sentimental discourse and to early formulations of biopolitical knowledge. Burke's Enquiry brings the two fields of the biological and political together: it frames aesthetic sensibility in physiological, that is, material terms—a linkage that is achieved by coupling aesthetic perception with muscular action, and—crucially—pain. Burke's is as much a text on physiological differences of human bodies, health, as it is on the bourgeois capacity to know. It presents both a microphysics of the white bourgeois body, differentiated by gender and, to a lesser extent, race, that is interested in the physiological processes of perception; and a treatise on sensitivity, feeling, and compassion as necessary ingredients for the universal, democratic subject. Burke links the two fields—sensibility and the biological—in crucial ways and precedes the later American discourses that evoke pain both in biological/scientific and sentimental/political terms. The formation of the universal subject within aesthetics—i.e., the bourgeois
subject as producer of knowledge—decisively employs a dolorology that links this subject of knowledge to a gendered and racialized corporeality.

Chapter 3 follows the gender and racial performances of Burke by discussing pain’s function in the formation of professional medicine in the first half of the nineteenth century. Taking the rise of clinical obstetrics as example, pain emerges as a crucial discursive site over which this process is negotiated in several ways. Burke’s model of painful knowledge production informs the practices and performances of male medical (and scientific) professionals of that era, linking a particular performativity of pain to privileges of knowledge production, white masculinity, and medical authority. These masculine modes of pain are contrasted with an analysis of the debate around the medical, political, and biological meanings of female birthpain. In 1846, the introduction of ether anesthesia into medical (especially obstetric) practice gave rise to a discussion around the causes, uses, and remedies of pain during parturition. This medical framing of female pain as pathology enabled the figuration of the “overcivilized nervous [white] female,” which is juxtaposed against a painless and primitive black femininity. The debates of white male experts around birthpain in this view install a comparative dolorology that distributes different levels of sensitivity to pain across different bodies and thus crucially negotiates the meanings of gender, civilization, and race via the relay of bodily pain. These biopolitical circumscriptions of the “female body in pain” are popularized in birth manuals for women, published in the second half of the nineteenth century. These texts transform the scientific dolorology—linking capacities for pain to notions of civilization, race, and gender—into modes of self-conduct and self-surveillance for white women within a populationist framework. As the United States during that time experienced an unprecedented influx of immigration, I argue, these manuals increasingly construct pain as speaking to the health of white women, and therefore the racial integrity and purity of the white nation. These texts produce what I call “governmental scripts” regulating the norms of self-conduct by which white women are designated as purveyors of racial health and, ultimately, agents of a eugenics from below.

Chapter 4 traces the racializing effects of articulating pain within a different field: it charts the comparative dolorology that aligns black and white male bodies during the Civil War era as their respective pains are visually negotiated in abolitionist photography. The small archive of photographic abolitionism projects Robyn Wiegman’s observation that “the black body becomes a representational sign for the democratizing process of U.S. culture itself” (1991, 325) onto the visual representation of black and white bodies in pain. Emerging within abolitionist discourse, the photographs reflect the public recognition of devalued pain in black bodies into a politically valid “suffering from slavery.” Mostly emerging as propaganda pieces during the
war, these pictures place predominantly the male black body injured by enslavement in competition with other bodies: white soldiers suffering for emancipation and national unity, “white slave children” representing the pain of miscegenation, or racial science’s representations of the black body as biologically inferior. The pictures negotiate the national and racial significance of pain—a comparative dolorology that decidedly regulates how black American subjects are incorporated into the national body after slavery. The photographic transformation of Southern slaves into black American subjects is not only engaged in the liberation and humanization of captive bodies by recognizing and alleviating their pain of enslavement. Moreover, the question of humanization implies integrating black bodies in the regimes of biopolitics that views people as racial populations, whose intermixing needs to be evaluated, managed, and secured.

The concluding coda will revisit the figurations and constellations of race, gender, and “bodies in pain” distilled from the historical chapters in the contemporary sphere. While arguing for the continuity and historical pervasiveness of the dolorological discourses of the nineteenth century, the coda will address further discursive investments into a rhetoric of pain after September 11, 2001. Here, through the construction of the event as national trauma—the national body as “in pain”—the relative levels of pain-tolerance and compassionate feeling are redistributed among the figures of the democratic and the terrorist subject. Through a reading of the highly formalist terrorism/torture thriller Unthinkable, I argue that the invocation of terrorism impacts on the conventions of national pain in two ways: on the one hand, the discourse on terrorism and torture reiterates and revamps the historical association of subjectivities with levels of pain; on the other, the terrorist poses a new figuration that is constructed as external—exceptional—to the American dolorologies of national sentimentalism and therefore is wielded to legitimize liberal democracy’s new forays into the relentless infliction of pain in “other” bodies and nations.

The guiding question of these discussions is how pain allows for the distribution of gender and racial differences and their corporealization. I focus thus on the exchange of pain between the sentimental and the scientific, their contradictions and collusions, and how both partake in the production of not so much the modern “subject of pain,” but in the materialization of bodies differently capable of pain, suffering, and compassion. Considering the vast and populated landscapes both archives provide, the cursory form of my project is justified. The historical examples I focus on—Burke’s material formulation of the modern, bourgeois subject of aesthetics; the gendered logics of anesthesia; and the photographic recognition of racialized bodies in pain—are exemplary of particular intersections. They do not constitute an extended history of pain. They aim to give clues on the various constella-
tions of bodies in their access to pain—and thus the rhetoric of politically relevant suffering. The historical chapters provide sketches of a genealogy to more contemporary discourses revolving around pain, compassion, and recognition of suffering or vulnerability.

Without trying to relativize the important empowering successes achieved through articulations of pain and social injury, my book aims for a “dialectical history of promise and damage” (Seitler 2003, 83) that sheds light on the ideological forms undergirding the objectivist discourses fueling and the material repercussions resulting from the persistent connection of pain and subjectivity. My historical account of pain, understood in its biopolitical and sentimental uses, therefore concurs with Robyn Wiegman’s remark on the problematic relation between today’s critical, identitarian discourse and its historical precursors. She argues that contemporary political interventions often fail to attend to the continuity between the ideology in the text and our own politics and subject positions. Accordingly, she recommends that the rethinking of historical shapes of Western racial and feminist discourse—and thus the critical arsenal of cultural studies—should be a “vehicle for shifting the frame of reference in such a way that the present can emerge as somehow less familiar, less natural in its categories, its political delineations, and its epistemological foundations” (1995, 202). The examples hint at a genealogy of the systematically and politically powerful evocation of different bodies in pain, a discursive constellation I call dolorology. They further aim at defamiliarizing the rhetoric of pain and trauma so common to contemporary cultural productions and democratic discourse.
The chapters of Burke’s *Enquiry*, when taken only by their titles, seem composed of quotes from the motorcar pages of men’s magazines or pulp adventure novels (“Terror,” “Difficulty,” “Magnificence”), and the cosmetic advice sections of women’s magazines (“Proportion not the cause of Beauty,” “The real effects of fitness,” “Grace”). Interspersed are phrases that sound like a bereaved child repeating to itself how the world of things and proprieties works: “Beautiful objects small,” or “Sweetness relaxing.” Not to ridicule the text, but rather to draw attention to some of the explicit genderisms of the Burkean text that—though primarily in reaction to his later *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790)—prompted his contemporary critic Mary Wollstonecraft to issue the following sentences on Burke’s composure as a writer and public figure. In her *Letter to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke* of the same year, better known as *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, she mocked

the compassionate tears which you have elaborately laboured to excite... like a celebrated beauty anxious to raise admiration on every occasion by witty arguments and ornamental feelings... all your pretty flights arise from your pampered sensibility;... vain of this fancied preeminence of organs, you foster every emotion till the fumes, mounting to your brain, dispel the sober suggestions of reason. It is not in this view surprising, that when you should argue you become impassioned, and that reflection inflames your imagination, instead of enlightening your understanding. (2010 [1790])
While Wollstonecraft’s text is primarily intended as an attack against the antirevolutionary sentiments expressed in the *Reflections*, most of her acidic comments on Burke’s “rhetorical flourishes and infantine sensibility” target as well the stylistics and arguments of his earlier aesthetic arguments in the *Enquiry*, its gendered logistics and peculiar orchestrated prose. The critical and parodist point of her inversions is precisely a gendered one: in portraying Burke as a thinker invested in the pomp and glitter of “artificial affections,” she characterizes his position as feminized in the derogatory sense—linked to shallow affect, sentimental effect, and pleasing rhetorics. Wollstonecraft constructs Burke’s “linguistic femininity,” as Barbara Taylor writes, in order to denounce him as, “in his own terms, a beautiful writer, with all the connotations of fanciful and denigrated femininity implied by this” (2003, 65).³ Wollstonecraft claims her own position as being secured by reason and affective compassion, the “prostituted” nature of the term feeling notwithstanding: “[I]n my eye all feelings are false and spurious, that do not rest on justice as their foundation, and are not concentrated by universal love.”

The rhetorical skirmish over the proper way to feel, to employ feelings and affect within politics and philosophy shows that Wollstonecraft and Burke well understood sensibility and sentiment as indicative and necessary to the pertinent questions of social reform and political participation. The eighteenth-century discourse on sensibility, inaugurated by Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1692), sought to install the bourgeois subject as capable of moral sentiment, an inherent sociality and therefore entitlement to political power. Following Locke’s treatise, social reformers such as Rousseau and Adam Smith, as Sarah Knott writes, invested “humanity” with a moral sense that acted intuitively and knew good from evil. . . . Sensibility was part of a new thinking about human psychology and solidarity, a philosophical attempt to discover a system of morals and society. The fundamental sociability of man, the natural and active virtues of sensibility and their persuasive charms, these were useful understandings in the face of dismantling of old hierarchies of deference and order and traditional bonds of obligation. (Knott 2009, 8)

The theorizations of sensibility in the eighteenth century were thoroughly politicized and ideological discourses: they installed both the bourgeois subject as sole and sovereign interpreter of the world, society, and justice, and sympathy as the natural cohesive principle of bourgeois society. “Sensibility” as a discourse seeking to empower bourgeois society thus with moral and political authority was flanked by scientific knowledge production. To support the image of man as capable of the “virtues
of sensibility,” the new discipline of physiology developed the concept of “irritability.” Scientific figures such as Albrecht Von Haller—his De partibus corporis humani sensibilibus et irritabilibus was published in 1754—or Robert Whytt, appointed Edinburgh professor of medicine in 1747, focused on questions of how man physically accesses and relates to external phenomena and stimuli, and thus is able to produce meaning, action, and directives for governance. Nerves and their “irritability” were the central relay over which physiology constructed the Enlightenment subject both in relation to the world and to society: the political idea of a “fundamental sociability of men” (Knott 2009, 8) qua sympathy was mirrored in biological concepts like Robert Whytt’s “nervous sympathy.” According to historian Elizabeth Forget’s article on “sympathy” in physiology and social theory of the eighteenth century, Robert Whytt “was the first to give the term a clearly defined structural and functional significance” (2003, 291), and thus demonstrates the “similarity between nascent ideas in social theory and the model of the human body” (300).4

The centrality of the body—irritable and sympathetic—for the discourse of sensibility further reflects the eighteenth century’s concern with the subject’s power to perceive and to know, and the meanings of pain and suffering. As Boltanski has shown in readings of, Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Adam Smith, the social cohesion of emerging bourgeois society was grounded primarily in a “politics of pity,” which based the relations among subjects primarily in the political responsibility to identify, feel with, and eliminate suffering and thereby reach a “just society” (1999, 35). Cynthia Halpern extends this to the argument that modern notions of the political and the public revolve around the body in pain and its recognition through other bodies: “Suffering is . . . capable of being understood and necessarily so, as a political question, that is, as one that opens up a public moral space for decision-making and that demands a public response through the exercise of power” (Halpern 2002, 2).5

The importance of suffering and compassion to bourgeois society necessarily is tied to the institution of an irritable body that is capable of perceiving and interpreting bodies, their differences, capacities, and conditions—and thus to the question of aesthetics and perception. Aesthetic theories such as Burke’s Enquiry, investigating the perceptive and sensational capacities of the human subject and their relation to epistemological and social questions, thus served a crucial function to bridge the bodily and the social meanings of the term sensibility. As Berlant (2004b) argues, the bourgeois project of aesthetics can be understood as a politically empowering “training of the senses.” Aesthetics in this view does crucial work in discourses of Enlightenment, in that it constructs the bourgeois subject as perceptively capable, and simultaneously establishes the fundamental modes
of who and which bodies can be perceived and recognized as the matter of sentimental politics. Aesthetics thus crucially negotiates the rules of compassionate recognition.

Early feminist critics such as Wollstonecraft, who is often read as an “uncompromising rationalist” (Taylor 2003, 58), were well aware how important claims to sensibility and feeling were. As political agency was derived from inherent moral principles and these were dependent on one’s connections to sensibility, the claim participation in society had to address the gendered meanings not only of social theories, but also of aesthetics. Unsurprisingly, the gendered assumptions behind Burke’s ideas on sensibility are laid out less in his political writings, but fundamentally in the aesthetic principles of the Enquiry. His central concepts of “sublime” and “beautiful” are thus important ideological constructs within a political struggle. Wollstonecraft’s scrap with Burke over the politics of feeling, and her reversal of his gendered rhetoric, suggests that the doctrines of sublime and beautiful posed a conceptual challenge to the early feminist that was at last equal to her dissent over political attitudes.

My following analysis excavates the gendered performances implicit in the Burkean theory and asks how the text manages to produce a theory of feeling and sensibility that was in a way “democratic” enough to incite Wollstonecraft’s critical engagement, and at the same time succeeds in rearticulating privileges of participation in structures of sentiment, which instilled her polemical reaction. I argue that Burke, by anchoring his gendered logistics of sensibility in the corporeality of pain (and the capacity to feel it) grounds the access to feeling and therefore political morals in a realm of the bodily that is beyond the reach of Wollstonecraft’s rhetorical reversals. The theory of the sublime is decisive to modern conceptions of the democratic subject, precisely because it articulates a seemingly liberal theory of participation, while simultaneously ensuring its unequal distribution of access on a corporeal level. The Enquiry in this view provides a fundamental backdrop to the double-faced character of universal liberties devised in the eighteenth century, on which Londa Schiebinger, in line with many other feminist critics, has commented in this way: “The 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man said nothing about race or sex, leading many to assume that the liberties proclaimed would hold universally. . . . Within this republican framework, an appeal to natural rights could be countered only by proof of natural inequalities” (2004, 143).

GENDERED AESTHETICS

Burke’s Enquiry is evenly distributed over the discussion of two, strongly distinguished concepts, the sublime and the beautiful. These are associated
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from the outset with the Lockean distinction between the bodily sensations of pain and pleasure. The senses supply Burke with a “democratic” foundation of aesthetics, on which he writes: “We do and we must suppose, that the confirmation of their [the senses’] organs are nearly, or altogether the same in all men, so the manner of perceiving external objects is in all men the same, or with little difference” (65; my italics). Sensational perceptions fall into two distinct categories for Burke, those instilling pain and those giving pleasure. Burke conceives of these as independent, positive qualities, meaning they are not bound up in a continuous scale registering the diminishing in one as an increase in the other. Pain and pleasure “in their most simple and natural manner of affecting . . . are not dependent on each other for their existence. . . . I can never persuade myself that pain and pleasure are mere relations which can only exist as they are contrasted” (80–81).

The stern discontinuity between these emotions is important since Burke equates them with two distinct sets of aesthetic criteria (which he analyzes in parts 2 and 3 of the Enquiry), and with two modes of self-conduct: pain is exclusively tied to the notion of self-preservation, and works in the confrontation with danger and death to produce the aesthetic emotion of the sublime. The opposite—pleasure—is associated with the principle of society, sociality, and generation, or what Burke calls “the multiplication of the species” (88); its affect is beauty. As several critics have pointed out, these separate spheres are equated with masculinity and femininity in obvious ways. The beautiful is characterized by “smoothness,” “smallness,” “delicacy,” and “mildness”; the sublime always inhabits the “great,” “vast,” and “powerful.” The sublime incites admiration because it is fearsome, the beautiful is loved because it marks the subordinate—Burke leaves no doubt that the aesthetic is reflective of a gendered power dynamics: “There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us” (147). The infusion of the observing subject with love renders beauty a “social quality” (89), and the site of the social is tied to everything pertaining to reproduction and the multiplication of the species: “The object therefore of this mixed passion which we call love, is the beauty of the sex. Men are carried to the sex in general, as it is the sex, and by the common law of nature; but they are attached to particulars by personal beauty. I call beauty a social quality” (89).

The beautiful is first and foremost a quality that secures heterosexual reproduction as a hierarchical relation. Women, which feature in many of Burke’s elaborations on the beautiful as prime examples, are in this way not only “sex objects” (Balfour 2006, 328) that inspire lust and the instinct for reproduction. The feminine is always subordinate, and by virtue of its
beauty it is virtually tied to the reproductive role, for “the idea of utility . . . is the cause of beauty, or indeed beauty itself” (139). The Burkean system in this way uses gender in two ways: firstly, the juxtaposition of self-preservation and society and “generativity” explains all social relations and the sentiment that inspires them as feminized, while the struggle with terror and pain are masculinized. Moreover, women figure in this logic solely as beautiful objects to be perceived for the purpose of reproduction, that is to say, subordinated to an observing male subject whose instincts seem to waver between seeking out the sublime shock and carrying the burden of multiplying the species. In answer to passages like these, Wollstonecraft wrote mockingly that Burke had indeed written a textbook for subordinate feminine performance in genteel culture:9

> These ladies may have read your Enquiry concerning the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful, and, convinced by your arguments, may have laboured to be pretty, by counterfeiting weakness. You may have convinced them that littleness and weakness are the very essence of beauty; . . . they might justly argue, that to be loved, women’s high end and great distinction! they should “learn to lisp, to totter in their walk, and nick-name God’s creatures.” (2010 [1790])

In contrast to the social world of the beautiful, masculinity finds its domain in the sublime, associated with impressions such as “magnitude,” “vastness,” “danger,” or, tellingly, “solitude”; “absolute and entire solitude, that is, the total and perpetual exclusion from all society, is as great a positive pain as can almost be conceived. . . . In the balance between the pleasure of general society, and the pain of absolute solitude, pain is the predominant idea” (90). Associating the sublime with the properties of natural phenomena, and being alone in their experience, Burke imagines the subject engaged in sublime emotions as the prototypical “man in the open air,”10 who experiences the greatness of nature and is thrown back onto his own self-preservation. The mastery/survival of these phenomena through the cognitive apparatus, or imagination of the aesthetic subject leads to sublime emotion, for Burke a feeling of relief. Consistently, Burke portrays those phenomena productive of and the sublime emotion itself as greater, stronger, and more potent than the beautiful: “The passions which belong to self-preservation, turn on pain and danger; [they] are the strongest of all the passions” (97).11

As the rigid opposition between pain and pleasure and the resulting extreme antagonization of society and self-preservation indicate, the democratic foundation of sensibility is counteracted decisively by Burke’s employ-
ment of physiological observations and arguments. In his introduction to the *Enquiry*, Burke introduces a fine distinction regarding sensual perceptions, which democratically affect all bodies in the same way. The internal processing of these sensations in the faculty Burke calls the “imagination,” is where bodily differences may lead to different experiences: “[T]here is no difference in the manner of . . . being affected . . ., but in the degree there is a difference, which arises from two causes principally; either from a greater degree of natural sensibility, or from a closer and longer attention to the object” (72). As I argue in the following, these degrees of natural sensibility are expressive of the second register Burke’s aesthetics works in, namely, the corporeal production of differential bodies, which overrule the gender-bending rhetoric analyzed above. The notion of corporeal pain—as a bodily event within the process of perception—is the “ruling principle” (Sarafianos 2005, 59) in this production.

**SUBLIME PHYSIOLOGY**

On the sublime, Burke writes: “[L]ittle more can be said, than that the idea of bodily pain, in all the modes and degrees of labour, pain, anguish, torment, is productive of the sublime; and nothing else in this sense can produce it” (127). This passage is representative of a whole bodily logistics underlying Burke’s aesthetic theory, which spells out aesthetic perception in corporeal terms revolving around physical pain. By pain, Burke literally refers to physical agony in the eye of the beholder, a bodily state of exception: “[P]ain and fear consist in an unnatural tension of the nerves. . . . [T]his is the nature of all convulsive agitations, especially in weaker subjects, which are the most liable to the severest impressions of pain and fear” (161–62). The perception of a sublime object enters the sensual apparatus of the aesthetic subject by “producing a contraction, or violent emotion of the nerves” (162), or muscles of the eye. The sublime emotion that may be produced by this contraction results from the subsequent physical relief of muscle and nerve, which Burke describes as inciting a feeling of “delight.” Sarafianos describes this status of the sublime as an “after-effect” of painful contraction or tension: “[T]he feeling of sublime is produced when we are ‘released from the severity of some cruel pain,’ or ‘when we have just escaped an imminent danger.’ Indeed, the proper tense of the sublime is the present perfect” (2005, 61). The sublime emotion is felt when an almost overwhelming pain—a bodily and perceptive state of exception—has been overcome and worked through.

Whether the sublime sentiment can be distilled from the painful contractions depends entirely on the “fitness” of the muscular apparatus of the perceiving subject. The only body capable of the sublime is the body fit
enough to endure and master the pain of its perceptive organs. Burke repeatedly indicates that fitness is necessary to turn pain into sublime perception, while to the not properly trained and “languid” body, the confrontations with pain are merely hurting and “uncapable of giving any delight” (74):

In [the] languid inactive state, the nerves are more liable to the most horrid convulsions, than when they are sufficiently braced and strengthened. . . . [T]he best remedy for all these evils is exercise or labour, and labour is surmounting of difficulties, an exertion of the contracting power of the muscles; and as such resembles pain, which consists in tension or contraction, in every thing but degree. (164)

In turn, as this passage indicates, the repeated perception of the painful sublime maintains the aesthetic subject’s perceptual fitness. To be capable of the sublime means in other words a continual muscular exercise or training in bodily states of exception, in perceptions that are always almost too much. This model of self-exposure to painful experience equates a literal “gymnastics” (Sarafianos 2005, 67), or a “training of the senses” (Berlant 2004b). The regime of “fitness for pain” is necessary for the subject in order to preserve its sensibility and thus remain productive of aesthetic knowledge: “[D]ue exercise is essential to the coarse muscular parts of the constitution, and that without this rousing they would become languid, and diseased, the very same rule holds with regard to those finer parts . . . ; to have them in proper order, they must be shaken and worked to a proper degree” (165; my italics). If not sufficiently trained, unhealthy and “languid,” the self-perfecting apparatus of Burke’s aesthetic muscle risks losing its capacity for sensibility, and consequentially, loses its moral grounding and political agency: “A rectitude in judgment . . . does in a great measure depend upon sensibility” (75), and: “As the performance of our duties of every kind depends upon life, and performing them with vigour and efficacy depends upon health, we are strongly affected with whatever threatens the destruction of either” (88; my italics). Sensibility is articulated as a disciplining and self-perfecting politics of the body, a form of corporeal self-government. Both Ryan (2001) and Sarafianos therefore argue that Burke presents an important figuration of a body politics characterizing the bourgeois body, which for Sarafianos prefigures the biopolitical circumscription of “life” and the emergence of “health/disease”—discourses dominating late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth-century views on the body:

Burke’s aesthetics demonstrate that if from the eighteenth century onwards the body emerges as “a bio-political reality,” and medicine
is promoted into a “bio-political strategy,” this shift was possible through a series of interdiscursive alignments. In the Enquiry’s case, Burke’s aesthetics are indistinguishable from the historical birth of aesthetics as a science of sensibility and the transformation of medicine into an aesthetic of health, now both of them jointly unraveling the art and the science of optimal living. (2005, 77)

While “health,” the trope that pervades nineteenth-century science especially in relation to the biopolitical entity of populations, appears only marginally in Burke’s text, the aesthetic subject’s perceptual fitness is the teleology of his system of sublime pain. Working with pain, engaging in bodily states of exception, the training of the sensual apparatus and the mental faculties enabling the transformation of pain into sublime emotion—these notions open up the perspective to consider the Enquiry as a project to corporealize bodies. As the rigid gendering of the sublime and beautiful suggests, the corporeal politics of (perceptual and thus epistemological) fitness translates into material prescriptions and possibilities that fundamentally differentiate male and female bodies. What Sarafianos terms Burke’s “material epistemology” (71), missing the gendered terms it rests on, therefore implies the hierarchization of gendered bodies not only by the associated aesthetics, but also by their capability to master pain.

In his ingeniously titled sections “Sweetness relaxing” (xxii) and “Why smoothness is beautiful” (xx), which immediately follow the masculine fitness-theory of painful exertion in the fourth part of the Enquiry, Burke develops the effects of the beautiful on sensual organs. As examples of the beautiful, he names, for example, milk, fruit, or gentle rocking movements: “Rest certainly tends to relax; yet there is a species of motion which relaxes more than rest; a gentle oscillatory motion, a rising and falling. Rocking sets children to sleep better than absolute rest” (182). After this beautification of the domestic sphere in the aspects of mothering and childhood, “smallness,” “color,” and “variation” are further considered in their physiological effects, and all demonstrate for Burke the inherently relaxing, comforting, and lulling effects of beauty:

[From this description it is almost impossible not to conclude, that beauty acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system, There are all the appearances of such a relaxation; and a relaxation somewhat below the natural tone seems to be the cause of all positive pleasure. . . . Such things as we have already observed to be the genuine constituents of beauty, have each of them separately a natural tendency to relax the fibres. (177–78; my italics)
The beautiful, in its connections to the realm of the social and to all things feminine, thus has the opposite effect on the sensibility-apparatus of the observer: it relaxes, makes passive, weakens the sensual muscle; it inspires complacence, unfitness, and unhealthy bodies. Or, as Burke puts it in a nutshell in his admirable section title: “Fitness not the cause of beauty” (III.vi.).

Burke manages to biologize the differences between male and female by these contrary directionalities—“contraction versus relaxation”—embedded in the dualisms of “sublime versus beautiful” and “self-preservation versus society.” By attaching the notion of society to the question of “multiplication of the species” and linking reproduction (from love to mothering and education) to ideas of the beautiful, he materializes female bodies as naturally engaged in and associated with perpetual relaxation (which is also their foremost quality as aesthetic objects). By linking the notions of “health” and “disease” to the respective states of sensibility, femininity emerges not only as presenting a threat to the ideal of the self-perfecting (and therefore masculine) body. Rather, the female body simultaneously indicates a pathology that links femininity to decline, loss of momentum, inactivity, and mere pleasantness. For a natural lack of aesthetic fitness female bodies cannot transform a painful “state of exception” into the sublime. They are thus not capable of any exercising perception, but either reside in a static realm of mere reproduction-aimed pleasantness or are constantly suffering from “horrid convulsions” (154).

This early figuration of a “pathological femininity” in connection to sentiment resonates strongly with the physiological theories of female inferiority that proliferated at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Amounting to what Claudia Honegger has termed “female special-anthropology” (1996), these theories isolated the female body as biologically completely different from a generalized human body, associated with masculinity and subject to general scientific inquiry on “mankind.” Burke’s remarks on the physiological inferiority and resulting “horrid convulsions” of women also provides an eighteenth-century reference point to a genealogy of female nervousness and hysteria, a point that Sorisio considers: “[E]ven before hysteria became a category of disease for middle-class women in . . . the nineteenth century, scientists had already established the perception of middle-class women as highly nervous and sensitive, yet not seriously ill” (2002, 30). By virtue of the discontinuity between the sublime and the beautiful, the male body emerges as rigidly opposed to female “languidity.” The masculine position is for Burke marked by a sort of “double burden”: while the male has the responsibility for multiplying the species and thus must follow its instinct to love the beautiful object, that same attraction also implies a dangerous amount of relaxation—for the overly relaxed subject (Burke defines
love as relaxation) is at risk to lose “the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the natural and necessary secretions” (164). The specter of impotence threatening from within the male instinct to procreate can only be countered by engaging in pain and sublime experience, in order to overcome feminine weakness and preserve the natural superiority of the masculine.

The Burkean subject of the sublime is constantly striving to develop and improve its health and flexibility: “[F]or Burke pain is far more than a passive check on the entropies of pleasure; it is an active power for the optimization of power” (Sarafianos 2005, 65). Read with the physiological discourses of the time, the Enquiry produces sensibility as a process in the physical realm of nerve and muscle, and their refinement as an exclusively masculine performance. It therefore equates the self-made man with a particular body politics that on the one hand understands both mental and physical faculties as precision mechanisms that need to be maintained, and on the other, that the subject can preserve and perfect its own functionality (and health) by consequently and painfully overachieving and shocking itself: the ideal of the ever-exercising and overachieving doctrine of masculinity. This figuration of a gendered microphysics, which is decidedly different from common notions of the sentimental male as “feminized by emotion” (see, e.g., Chapman and Hendler 1999, 5), prefigures nineteenth-century capitalist, political, and scientific masculinities and their equation with a mode of “perpetual crisis” (Connell 2002, 249).

What is at stake in the analysis of the Burkean pain-model and its attending figuration of the self-making man is therefore a gendering of pain and perception that established two crucial figures of modernity: the white male privileged to master pain into sublime insight, and the white female in the domestic space who may experience pain, but never can resolve it in the sublime. The Burkean Enquiry works as a text effecting the terms of democracy and participation on one hand, and those of naturalization and corporealization of gender on the other. The formation of “sensibility” (and the political project of sentimentality), revolving around bodies in pain, thus works in accord with a proto-biopolitical project: it essentializes differences between gender performances into “corporeal cores” or essences, while at the same time retaining a sense of equal opportunity with the physiological fundament. So, as much as “Burke’s political prose defends a traditional world in which the feminine and masculine figures . . . cannot be dissolved into the play of signifiers” (Zerilli 1994, 62), this defense is laid out in distinctly modern and modernizing terms. The Enquiry can therefore be situated within a theory of Enlightenment that understands the emerging fields of knowledge, such as the new disciplines of aesthetics or physiology, as reframings of objectifying gendered hierarchies and the gendered body.
The doctrines of sensibility, spelled out in physiological terms, enable Burke to devise two mutually exclusive corporeal bodies: the male body is produced by its capability to engage (repeatedly) in painful aesthetics and “bodily states of exception,” whereas female bodies exist in (and induce) a state of pleasant perceptive an-aesthetics, or anesthesia. Pain both enables and reiterates the male body as producer of sublime knowledge, as it confines the female to either pain-free tranquility or “horrid convulsions” (154). Burke’s use of pain thus enables a materialization (Butler 1993) of gender difference as objectified differences in bodies, which translates further not only into a gendered access to perceptions and knowledge, but also into different ways in which men and women can participate in “true feelings” (sentimental politics) and the “pain of others” (compassion).

As Levecq writes, discourses of “sensibility in the eighteenth century reflected new ways of conceptualizing the body” (2008, 16). Burke’s treatise participates in this discursive refashioning of the embodied subject of Enlightenment, in that he grounds aesthetics in physiological and scientific knowledges of his time. Viewing the body thus as a sensitive, perceptive, and muscular apparatus, Burke devises a microphysics of the aesthetic subject, which excludes feminine subjects from knowledge by virtue of their different “natural degrees of sensibility” and their diminished ability to deal with perceptive pain. The Enquiry achieves in this way what Sarafianos calls a “material epistemology” and produces the human body as a “bio-political reality” (77). Its fusion of physiology with questions of access to knowledge, moral authority, and sociality—and the gendered bias it secures on the level of “natural” differences—demonstrates that Burke’s theory presents a vital precursor of the discourses of scientific sexism in nineteenth-century life sciences.

MUSCLE COMPASSION

The eighteenth century invented . . . a synaptic regime of power, a regime of its exercise within the social body, rather than from above it.

—Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge

Returning once more to Wollstonecraft’s controversy with Burke over the French Revolution, one of her important points of direct polemic against Burke concerns his capacity to feel proper universal compassion. Burke’s Reflections (1790) had lamented rather extensively and romantically over the image of queen Marie Antoinette, attacked by the revolutionaries in her boudoir in the palace of Versailles:
It is now sixteen or seventeen years since I saw the queen of France, then the dauphiness, at Versailles; and surely never lighted on this orb, which she hardly seemed to touch, a more delightful vision. . . . Little did I dream that I should have lived to see such disasters fallen upon her in a nation of gallant men, in a nation of men of honour and of cavaliers. I thought ten thousand swords must have leaped from their scabbards to avenge even a look that threatened her with insult. —But the age of chivalry is gone. . . . It is gone, that sensibility of principle, that chastity of honour . . . (169–70)

Wollstonecraft stings right into Burke’s chivalric preference for aristocratic suffering and his blindness to the revolutionaries’ lower-class pain that had motivated the storming of the palace. Exposing Burke’s classist notion of compassion, explicit in his depiction of “gallant men” defending the chaste honor of the queen, she writes:

Misery, to reach your heart, I perceive, must have its cap and bells; your tears are reserved, very naturally considering your character, for the declamation of the theatre, or for the downfall of queens, whose rank alters the nature of folly, and throws a graceful veil over vices that degrade humanity; whilst the distress of many industrious mothers, whose helpmates have been torn from them, and the hungry cry of helpless babes, were vulgar sorrows that could not move your commiseration, though they might extort an alms. (2010[1790])

Wollstonecraft’s class critique of pain and compassion highlights further Burke’s racialized and sexualized terms when he depicts the storming of Versailles as a “captivity narrative” (2001, 85). Burke’s early employment of this staple of nineteenth-century sentimental fiction likens Marie Antoinette to the stereotypical “damsel in distress” and—more importantly—the revolutionary masses to Native Americans:

It was (unless we have been strangely deceived) a spectacle more resembling a procession of American savages, entering into Onondaga, after some of their murders called victories, and leading into hovels hung round with scalps, their captives, overpowered with the scoffs and buffets of women as ferocious as themselves, much more than it resembled the triumphal pomp of a civilized martial nation. (159)
Both the class privilege of compassion and the devaluation of the “savage body” open up further critical perspectives on the Burkean text that will guide my following analysis: that of compassion or sympathy, and of the racialization of bodies. Focusing on the direct repercussions Burke’s aesthetic treatise on sensibility had for the political modes of sentimentality, I ask for the implications of the corporeal logistics underlying the Enquiry for the question of compassion: which bodies for Burke are capable of “feeling with,” and which bodies are privileged to have their pain recognized by the subject of aesthetic sensibility—specifically in regard to race. How does Burke’s physiological and aesthetic gendering of sensibility translate into degrees of access to the bourgeois virtue of compassion, to suffering, and the “politics of pity”?

Public violence against bodies—not only royal, but also criminal or marginalized bodies—and the republican subject’s sympathy for these bodies was an important site of bourgeois sentiment’s articulation and a crucial mode of political engagement in the eighteenth century. The publication of Burke’s Enquiry in 1757 coincided with the infamous public execution of Damien, patricide and criminal, on the streets of Paris. The description of Damien’s execution is familiar as the spectacular opening section to Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1979). Foucault juxtaposes a contemporary report of the event with a manual for prison discipline from 1838, in order to set the intricately ritualized and symbolic brutalities of sovereign power against the objectification of the punished body within the “microphysics” of disciplinary power. The relation of these objectifying regimes to a politics of (moral) sensibility, sympathy, and compassion—feeling the pain of others—is noted by Foucault as “discourse of the heart” (1979, 115), which bourgeois critics of the punishment practices of sovereign power simultaneously articulated.22

Burke’s theory of aesthetics and sentiment thus is situated in a time of shifting paradigms: the public display of corporeal pain (as index of the universal power of the king) is increasingly discredited and replaced by two mutually supporting discourses: on the one hand, by a scientifically articulated care for the details, conditions, and specificities of the body as it comes under the grip and gaze of social control; what Foucault has dubbed the “microphysics of power.” Supplementing this, a moralizing and sympathetic discourse emerges that reads pain in bodies not so much as a problem of excess within the juridical economy of sovereign power, but as a concern to all “feeling” subjects of government, that is, a democratic discourse that argues in reference to a common denomination of “human” as a feeling, compassionate, and “naturally” sympathetic entity.

The central tropes of the politics of pity are therefore sentiment/sensibility: the identification of the political and the social with (bodily) affects
and feeling; and compassion/sympathy: the capacity of the “human being” (or, the universal subject presupposed in democratic rule) to feel with others, and therefore to reflect (and act upon) the pain of other subjects as one’s own. Sentimentality provided the possibility of social cohesion in the shift from sovereign to republican social systems, assuring a fundamental sense of “community, in the form of shared sentiment” (Nudelman 1992, 946), departing from “the presumption that the body itself could function as a universal symbol” (Sorisio 2002, 56). The self-legitimization of democratic forms of government in this view depended heavily on the citizen’s capacity for compassionate feeling and sympathetic sensibility. Emotional access to the pain of others constitutes the all-important criterion to install the bourgeois citizen as morally capable of government, as contemporary texts from Samuel Johnson’s *Nature of Good and Evil* (1757)—which attacked all “soul-hardening cruelties” from public torture to vivisection—to Wollstonecraft’s claim to “all feelings . . . concentrated by universal love” indicate.

From Burke’s rigid distinction between the spheres of always lonely self-preservation and society, it might be concluded that all passions ensuring the community of individuals would be associated with the beautiful, and therefore the “relaxation of the fibres.” Sympathy or compassion, one might surmise, would therefore fall to the beautiful feelings, female bodies, and would not be connected to the muscular and masculine gymnastics of sublime pain. As Ryan points out, the Burkean theory here makes an important exception:

> [I]n a seeming contradiction, Burke . . . connects the experience of the sublime with fellow-feeling . . . he claims that the sublime experience despite its origins in solitude provides a stimulus towards action and society. By linking delight to pity and pity to interest in other people, Burke gives the sublime a benevolent impulse. . . . Sublime delight strengthens the bonds of sympathy . . . the sublime effect overleaps our reasoning capacity, even our will, and draws us by impulse to sympathize with others. (2001, 277)

In Burke’s explanation of “sympathy,” which he indeed lists together with “imitation” and “ambition” under what might be called the social drives, he devises a theory of reciprocal feeling in the body of sensibility, which is—muscular fitness provided—capable of sharing emotional and affective exposure with another body. The emotions or sensations in the body perceived in his view directly translate into sublime or beautiful sensations on behalf of the observer. The compassionate observer therefore feels what his object of perception feels:
It is by the first of these passions [sympathy, imitation, ambition] that we enter into the concerns of others; that we are moved as they are moved, and are never suffered to be indifferent spectators of almost any thing which men can do or suffer. For sympathy must be considered as a sort of substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man, and affected in many respects as he is affected; so that this passion may either partake of the nature of those which regard self-preservation, and turning upon pain may be a source of the sublime; or it may turn upon ideas of pleasure. (91)

Burke discusses at some length both the questions why theatrical and artistic displays of tragedy may offer “delight,” and are therefore connected to the sublime, and why generally an observer is drawn toward the suffering of others. In what sounds like an admission to an aesthetics of Schadenfreude, he writes: “We have a degree of delight, and that no small one, in the real misfortunes of others” (92). However, the reciprocity of “feeling with” for Burke has direct political repercussions because it supplies the aesthetic subject not only with a natural drive toward the pain of others, but also with an unmoderated access to their pain, and a direct awakening to political action. “Sympathy” for Burke equals the sublime shock of a humanitarian compassion, in which the pain of the other becomes the sensitive subject’s own pain:

[A]s our Creator has designed we should be united by the bond of sympathy, he has strengthened that bond by a proportionable delight; and there most where our sympathy is most wanted, in the distress of others. If this passion was simply painful, we would shun with the greatest care all persons and places that could incite such a passion . . . yet there is no spectacle we so eagerly pursue, as that of some uncommon or grievous calamity. . . . The delight we have in such things, hinders us from shunning scenes of misery; and the pain we feel, prompts us to relieve ourselves in relieving those who suffer; and all this antecedent to any reasoning, by an instinct that works us to its own purposes, without our concurrence. (93; my italics)

“Delight” is intended by Burke not as denoting the potentially voyeuristic pleasures of observing, but rather as the aftereffect of a sublime shock of pain, by which the sympathetic subject is “alarmed into reflexion, and convulsed into action” (Gibbons 2003, 104). “Convulsion” is meant literally in this expression, since the sublime sensation caused by regarding the pain of others again invokes the muscular apparatus, which is not moderated by reason:
Burke’s innovative physiological analysis of the sublime undergirds his theory that the sublime is an overpowering force that limits the exercise of our mental and reflective capability: the sublime leads not to an exaltation of the soul or of our mind but to a strengthening of our body, to a strong nervous system, which ultimately compels us to action. (Ryan 2001, 277)

The corporeal aspect of this compassionate “drive” is also stressed by Gibbons as speaking to the immediacy of the Burkean subject’s engagement with other people’s pain. He differentiates Burke’s direct link to the pain of others against the moral theory of Adam Smith: the latter, Gibbons explains, installs two instances in the compassionate subject: “the impartial spectator . . . and ‘the agent’ engaging in acts of sympathy and charity” (2003, 102). Participation in the pain of others is for Smith therefore always moderated through an abstract authority or a “willed uninvolve¬ment” that maintains a distance within sympathy. In contrast to this detached mode of compassion, Burke’s positioning of the sublime as an emotion also resulting from watching others in pain indicates that his compassionate subject is engaged in an aesthetics of shock, which exerts the perceptive muscle as much as a personal experience of pain would do. Gibbons cites from Burke’s Reflections in order to argue that this indeed “felt” compassion nevertheless invests the sympathetic subject with the capacity for action and critique:

The shock of the sublime is not simply to induce intense sensation; it is to ensure that “we are alarmed into reflexion.” The sublime is what disrupts custom in the sense of unthinking, “sluggish” habit, and thus contains a reflective and critical element from the outset, notwithstanding its charged, almost visceral impact. (2003, 105)

Reminiscent of the “double burden” found earlier in the relation of male subjects to society—the twofold obligation to multiply the species (i.e., engaging with “relaxing” love) and to refine the senses (engaging with the sublime fitness)—Burke invests the aesthetic subject here with the capacity and necessity not only to feel with the pain of others, to identify with it in corporeal terms, but also to alleviate it.

This obligation to “feel with” and “relieve from” depends on the ability to feel and master pain in the first place—the domain of the male muscular apparatus, which enables the transformation of pain into sublime, and sublime into political action against pain. The male aesthetic subject that Burke’s discourse constructs is thus rendered also as that position which is alone able to sympathize with other bodies in pain and to derive knowl-
edge and agency from it—feeling the pain of others and transcending its petrifying agony at the same time. Pain and sympathy in this view are tied to male hegemony, in which masculine compassion is the sole institution to diagnose, feel, and master pain and alone is capable of relieving it, that is, causing social change.

The question for sympathy and compassion is in this view fundamentally tied to the gendered body politics of the Enquiry. While female bodies may engage in the contemplation of suffering bodies, Burke indicates, the muscular composure prohibits the transformation of the pain perceived into sublime emotion, and thus owning that pain. The female body is in danger of being overwhelmed by its own “drive” to sympathy, of remaining stuck in “horrid convulsions” in that it cannot “relieve itself” by “relieving others.” She may feel the pain of others as her own, but she will never own, master, or relieve it in the way the ever-fit muscular apparatus of masculinity will, for whom the sublime pain of the other equals political action. Burke’s construction is definitely modern at this point, since it articulates a notion of decidedly democratic bodies: in physiological and perceptive terms, all bodies are the same and linked through a universal affecting power of pain and compassion. Female bodies in this model are not so much excluded from the “body . . . as a universal symbol” (Sorisio 2002, 56) and the universal bond of sympathy, but rather fail universality in terms of an “unfit” corporeal self-government. The physiological foundation of pain, sympathy, and politics in this view ensures that female bodies are prevented from access to the political on the same terms that they are granted inclusion in the great universal bond.

On the same grounds, masculinity is secured from the potential excesses of emotional engagement: for the male body, watching the pain of others spells humanitarian fitness. He has the capacity to feel with and deal with pain, thus employing pain as a form of cultural and corporeal capital. The male is the only position to be able to articulate pain, understand it in corporeal terms “as his own,” and to develop knowledge and agency from it. The male body thus owns suffering of others like its/his own, able to spell out its meaning and political relevance. This investment of masculine subjects with the ability of bodily (self-)ownership, the access to pain and its subsequent objectification into experience, provides a corporeal extension of liberal theorist John Locke’s concept of the “proprietal self” (see Herzig 2005, 25–35), that is, the self-ownership of the subject of liberalism. In Burke, the capacity for pain and its sublime mastery instantiates self-ownership. It marks the site where the idea of proprietal selfhood is materialized and performed, where the subject comes into its own as always already gendered and, as I will further argue, racialized.
THE RACIAL SUBLIME

I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed in that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing . . . taking me out of the world . . . every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society.

—Frantz Fanon, Black Skin White Masks

As Burke's above-quoted comparison of the revolutionary masses of Paris to uncivilized “American savages” suggested, Burke was highly aware of “other” bodies that were disrupting the white bourgeois subject’s aesthetic and moral categories. More prominent than the reflections on “savages” in the American colonies, Burke's Enquiry features an elaborate meditation on black bodies, demonstrating that Burke reflected also on the racialized dimensions of sublime aesthetics. Meg Armstrong stresses that “aesthetic discourse at least since Burke and Kant locates [the] subject within a global network of ‘bodies’ (sensual signs of the sublime) whose gendered, national, and racial markings are integral to that subject’s self-identification (if not also its unspoken and illegitimate desires)” (1996, 217). The global network of bodies, established largely through the extensive trafficking of humans in the transatlantic slave trade, is present as a racializing reflection on “black” bodies in the Enquiry.

Race enters sensibility in the Enquiry's discussion of the phenomena “darkness” and “blackness.” The treatise deals with these in five specialized sections in the physiological chapter 4. Burke makes an explicit differentiation between these and the other phenomena productive of either sublime or beautiful emotions, which are covered mainly in parts 2 and 3. The exceptional status of “darkness” and “blackness” among perceptions is implicitly justified by Burke when he links both sensations to the idea of a “negative sublime”—a perceptual induction of pain by negative properties: absence, emptiness, vacuity. “Darkness” for Burke is characterized not by being fearsome or painful in itself, but in its absence of light, orientation, or indeed, perception itself:

[I]n utter darkness, it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us; we may at every moment strike against some dangerous obstruction; we may fall down a precipice the first step we take; and if an enemy approach, we know not in what quarter to defend ourselves; in such
a case strength is no sure protection; *wisdom can only act by guess*; 
the boldest are staggered, and he who would pray for nothing else 
towards his defense, is forced to pray for light. (172)

Burke describes “being in the dark” obviously as the most perilous 
situation the subject of sensibility can find itself in. A situation of complete 
alienation, the subject’s perceptual apparatus literally fails against the over-
whelming absence of everything, there is nothing to perceive and therefore 
no sublime relief of the perceptive muscle. In consequence, “darkness” is 
stated by Burke as one of the few examples for an experience of perceptive 
pain from which no sublime emotion may arise: “When danger and pain 
press *too nearly*, they are incapable of giving any delight; and [are] simply 
terrible” (86; my italics). The epistemological pleasure of self‑preservation—
i.e., overcoming the pain of sublime perception—is thus denied to the sub-
ject of sensibility, the mastery of pain becomes impossible for the sheer 
and utter terror of darkness, threatening to overwhelm the subject. Burke’s 
description preforms the imaginations of colonial literature, where the “dark-
ness” of the African continent often threatens the colonizing European with 
sheer, ununderstandable terror. “Darkness” in Burke figures likewise as a total 
breakdown of white European knowledge and modes of sensibility: it quite 
literally sucks up all the “light” of perception and civilization.29 “Darkness” 
emerges as the ultimate other of European sensibility.

“Blackness” translates in Burke’s formulation literally as a “part of 
darkness” (175). Discussed primarily in terms of a color‑property of objects, 
blackness is treated in the *Enquiry* as something like a tangible and percep-
tible darkness. It is the concrete property of absence:

Blackness is but a partial darkness. . . . In its own nature it can-
not be considered as a colour. Black bodies, reflecting none, or but 
a few rays, with regard to sight, are but as *so many vacant spaces* 
dispersed among the objects we view. When the eye lights on one of 
these *vacuities*, after having been kept in some degree of tension 
by the play of the adjacent colours upon it, it suddenly falls into 
relaxation; out of which it as suddenly recovers by a convulsive 
spring. (175; my italics)

In physiological terms, Burke explains the terrifying effects of black-
ness with the contradictory thesis that black objects constitute a simulta-
neously relaxing and shocking perceptual hole between other nonblack 
objects. The vacuity of light that is blackness constitutes a resting point 
for the ever‑exercising eye, which at the same time results in the shock 
of perceiving emptiness, or, as Fanon indicates, “non‑being” (1967, 109).
Blackness is like so many holes in the subject’s perceptive armor. Burke dedicates considerable space to his reflections on the physiological processes in the white observer’s eye and the specific demands that “blackness” and “darkness” pose to the perceptive muscle:

It may be worthwhile to examine, how darkness can operate in such a manner as to cause pain. It is observable, that still as we recede from the light . . . the pupil is enlarged by the retiring of the iris, in proportion to our recess. Now instead of declining from it but a little, suppose that we withdraw entirely from the light; it is reasonable to think, that the contraction of the radial fibres of the iris is proportionably greater; and that this part may by great darkness come to be so contracted, as to strain the nerves that compose it beyond their natural tone; and by this means to produce a painful sensation. . . . I believe any one will find if he opens his eyes and makes an effort to see in a dark place, that a very perceivable pain ensues. (174)

Looking at “black” therefore means to confront a contradiction in terms, a body that provokes both effects of sublime (pain) and beautiful (relaxation) on the level of nerves and muscle—potentially destabilizing and transgressing the clear-cut boundaries of aesthetics. “Blackness” and “darkness” thus mark a dangerous site of excess within the field of sensibility. The weaker muscular apparatus associated with female bodies is at particular risk upon engaging these phenomena, as Burke remarks: “I have heard some ladies remark, that after having worked a long time upon a ground of black, their eyes were so pained and weakened they could hardly see” (174).

The racial meaning of “blackness” is obvious in Burke’s retelling of the Cheselden boy, an often commented case of sight restored to a blind boy that occurred in 1728. Burke narrates the boy’s story of regaining sight and perceiving for the first time a black female body, the only instance in the text where blackness is conceptualized as the property of a human body. The Cheselden boy works for Burke as an example of vision unimpaired by cultural associations, able to perceive blackness as it is, and it is terrible:

Cheselden tells us, that the first time the boy saw a black object, it gave him great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight. The horror, in this case, can scarcely be supposed to arise from any association . . . there is no reason to think, that the ill effects of black on his imagination were more owing to its connexion with any disagreeable idea. (173)
Notably, Burke distinguishes between the uneasiness caused by objects and the outright horror of black femininity. The black woman is presented as an amplification of the already ambivalent status of blackness, in that it personifies the dangerous mixture of the vacuity of “blackness” (terrifying emptiness) with femininity and thus beauty—thereby displacing the directionalities of looking, loving, and admiring. The uncanniness derives from the simultaneous association of subordinate and powerful status, which “threatens the power or integrity of the boy’s gaze” (Armstrong 1996, 220) by shaking its aesthetic prescriptions. As both Armstrong and Mitchell have pointed out, this treatment of black femininity marks a specific contradiction within Burke’s theory itself, a necessary point of unintelligibility, or the excess of vision: “The black female is one such abject being, a product of the ideological contradictions produced by Burke’s (gendered) distinctions between beauty and sublimity” (Mitchell 1994a, 131).

“Blackness,” as a transgressive mixture of powerless and powerful, presence and absence, therefore is painful to perceive not because it is sublime, but because it threatens the principles of sensibility itself. Its perception, no matter how sensitively “fit” the perceiving body is, remains painful, but in an unproductive, negative way. Burke, in a concluding section, moderates this negative pain of blackness in order to preserve the functioning of his aesthetic categories, which he achieves by somewhat excluding “black” from his binaries of sublime mastery and beautiful subordination altogether:

Though the effects of black be painful originally, we must not think they always continue so. Custom reconciles us to everything. After we have been used to the sight of black objects, the terror abates, and the smoothness or glossiness or some agreeable accident of bodies so coloured, softens in some measure the horror and sternness of their original nature; yet the nature of the original impression continues. Black will always have some melancholy in it, because the sensory will always find the change to it from other colours too violent; or if it occupy the whole compass of the sight, it will then be darkness; and what was said of darkness, will be applicable here.

(176–77; my italics)

Burke uses the concept of “custom” to moderate the horror of black bodies, and to construct their sensation as originally terrible, but then also agreeable and weak. Through custom the subject can master the ambivalences of blackness and transform its negative, disruptive force. Not into delight however, or a sublime emotion, but into a sort of indifference to the black body, which is smooth and subordinate, but still a little terrifying at the same time. The threatening aspects of blackness are therefore
modulated into melancholy, and Burke ascribes the melancholic status to the black object itself.

Since Burke's theory of sensibility and compassion builds on a direct pathway from one body's pain to another's, the peculiar emptiness and melancholy of black bodies positions them squarely out of the "universal bond of sympathy." While the *Enquiry* never reflects on the question of pain in racialized bodies (it is not known who the "negro woman" is), the aesthetic qualities of blackness indicate that, within the terms laid out by Burke, it can yield only disappointment to the—now decidedly white—male observer. Their perception results either in overwhelming negative pain, or points to an indifferent, painless melancholy—never that sublime relief, which springs the subject of sensitivity into political action.

The crucial aspect of Burke's remarks is that he transforms perceptive negativity—"vacuity"—into a characteristic of the black object itself. The black body emerges as characterized by an inner contradiction between terror and emptiness, it exists only as perpetual absence. "Blackness" appears thus the terrible but powerless thing, unhappy for itself. It can never be relieved of itself and inspires the sentimental—explicitly white—subject not to sympathy but only depression. Regarding both that Burke reflects primarily on objects, not people, and that most "black" bodies that he might have seen have indeed been brutally dehumanized as "human-cum-thing" (Judy 1994, 224), I suggest to read the *Enquiry's* remarks as indicative of this objectifying relation between white observers and black bodies. They formulate the property status the British slave trade forced on black bodies both in terms of perception: an aesthetic of racialized objecthood and the physiology and sensibility of white observing. Moreover, they demonstrate that the racialized nonhumanity of the slave subject relies on a notion of "failed humanity," or humanity being denied for an inherent non-ontology.31

This dialectic of the white male self-perfecting body vis à vis a black "empty" body is in accord with my analysis of the corpo-realizing (naturalizing and materializing) project implicit in the *Enquiry*. While there are large conceptual differences between Burke and the naturalizing notions of race in nineteenth-century scientific racism, the *Enquiry* clearly develops a quasi-ontology of "black bodies as objects" that carry essentializing repercussions for black subjects. The example of the black woman suggests that for Burke European and African bodies do not exist in a similar corporeal sphere, but are differentiated in their relation to "being" itself, by their respective capacities of or to ontology. This difference in ontology demonstrates that—via pain—Burke distributes humanity differently among racialized and European subjects. While the reflection on non-European bodies in Burke thus shows an early connection between "sensibility" and notions of racial otherness, "race" is not conceptualized by Burke in terms of nineteenth-century racial
classifications. Rather, considering his various equations of “blackness” with emptiness, vacuity, melancholy, and the negative sublime, the racial body marks a only present absence in Burke’s bourgeois aesthetics—it is not even considered as something else than an object.32

My reading decidedly counteracts an argument advanced by Gibbons, who tries to appreciate Burke as an Irish philosopher and writer thus sensible to colonial conditions. He interprets textual instances such as Burke’s impassioned opening speech to the impeachment of Warren Hastings, who was involved in massacres committed under British colonial rule in India.33 Here Burke had condemned the cruel politics of colonialists by drawing on a sentimentalist vocabulary of suffering, which Gibbons carries to the conclusion that a “crosscultural sensibility” is at work in the shock tactics of the Enquiry:

The disjointed, convulsive aesthetics of shock precipitated by the sublime allows sympathy to cut across radical cultural differences. . . . This is the collision of opposites, the “spark” in Burke’s terminology, which “transfuses their passions from one breast to another,” and which generates the imaginative leap, at an ethical or sympathetic level, across two radically different cultures. (2003, 106)

Burke’s direct and congruent communication between the suffering body and the pain of the observer for Gibbons thus works as a pre- or subcultural bond, where differences in culture are overcome through the sublimity of pain. His approach is interesting but difficult,34 as he considers the sympathetic bonds devised by Burke to imagine him predominantly as a thinker interested in a transatlantic community of suffering. The Enquiry therefore emerges as a sophisticated theory to devise an aesthetics of the oppressed in Gibbons’s analysis, intended to alert the sensibilities of British colonial powers in India, America, and of course, Ireland to the misery of the colonized. While I do agree that “Burke’s aesthetics provided him with a set of diagnostic skills which enabled him to probe the ‘cultural terror’ . . . in colonial societies” (Gibbons 2003, 8), I would argue, in the light of the findings above (Burke’s comments on the African body are not taken into account by Gibbons), that these diagnostics refer back to his ontologizing catalogue of aesthetics. The Enquiry produces—via the crucial difference between negative “black” and positive “white” pain—biological bodies differently capable of pain, therefore differently inciting sympathy and differently able to claim humanity. While Burke may have therefore commented on the pain in foreign bodies, that politicized standing is not only produced in gendered terms, but also is flanked, or rather framed, by considerations about which of those different bodies produced through
colonial rule are able to feel pain in the first place.

Moreover, the recognition of pain, as the previous section has shown, is formulated as depending on white male subjectivity, which alone is capable of engaging, overcoming, and transforming pain into knowledge. This narration of self-fashioning is denied to other subjectivities, which remain stuck in pathological reactions or non-irritability. The visual relations intrinsic to the scientific and social discourses of modernity are tied to the empirical, naturalizing, and corporeal construction of an observer that is as much characterized by racializing and gendering body politics as it is by the same token able to inhabit the disembodied position of objective knowledge—thereby rendering its own dependency on these strata invisible. The capacity to experience and transform pain into a meaningful discursive event is the central trope necessary to the constitution of this hegemonic subject position. In this regard, the Burkean formulation of a material epistemology is most exhibitive of the power processes at work within the constitution of the bourgeois observer. It also shows how the visual regimes of modernity are fundamentally tied to the corporealizing rhetorics of pain in order to distribute the privilege of vision and knowledge production among subjects and bodies.

The Burkean treatise therefore illustrates the work of pain in modernizing theories of man and the social such as sentimental humanism: while structurally claiming egalitarianism by building explicitly on “universal” notions of pain and sensibility, these same corporeal terms enable a corporealization of the sentimental body that serves to exclude racialized and feminine subjects from the masculinized humanitarian project. The Enquiry indicates that this exclusion happens in finely differentiated registers for women and racialized subjects—physiological inferiority of women, barbarity and non-civilization of American Indians, and non-ontology of African bodies.

AMERICANIZING PAIN

... everything suffers from translation ...

—Thomas Paine, Rights of Men

Studies of British sensibility and American sentimentalism, as Mary Chapman and Glenn Hendler argue in their anthology Sentimental Men: Masculinity and the Politics of Affect in American Culture (1999), are separated by conceptual and cultural gaps: first, a geographic and chronological divide that has only recently been bridged by cultural and literary historians (Knott 2009; Levecq 2008; Stern 1997). The second discontinuity—much more pervasive and difficult to overcome—is the fundamental association of
American sentimental rhetoric, its foregrounding of feeling, compassion, and the bodily, with femininity and “women’s culture” (Berlant 2008). For the editors of *Sentimental Men*, gender implications pose a profound difference between the British and American traditions of the cult of sentiment. Their book traces a shift in sensibilities during and after the American revolutionary period, where—with the firm installation of the ideology of separate spheres and the formulation of a decidedly American national project—“American sentimentality [becomes] thoroughly feminized” (Chapman and Hendler 1999, 3–4). European sentimentalism, with its influential Scottish and British thinkers of sensibility, in contrast, incorporated important male protagonists such as Sterne, Richardson, or Adam Smith that secured “the affective dynamic underpinning of politics” (3). Chapman and Hendler thus devise their anthology on American sentimental masculinities as an answer to what they diagnose as an (Americanist) “critical unwillingness to imagine” both male sentimentalists and the continuities between the British and the American traditions:

[L]iterature on the sentimental seems divided . . . into studies of eighteenth-century English “sensibility” which acknowledge the centrality of the man of feeling and the importance of male writers and philosophers to the cult of sensibility, and studies of nineteenth century American sentimentality, which often gender sentiment female. (15)

I will conclude my reading of Burke’s *Enquiry*, which provides material blueprints for nineteenth-century sentimental bodies in America, by engaging with this “critical unwillingness” and provide several connections between Burke’s arguments and American topoi. As I want to suggest, Burke’s painful sublime crosses the Atlantic in three interrelated passages that are of interest to this project: in gendered scripts governing the performance of sensibility and sentiment; the nexus of sensibility, compassion, and democracy; and the ideology of sublime aesthetics as it informs national(ist) discourses of the early republic.

The first transatlantic passage happens as the European politics of sensibility provide vital gendered scripts for compassionate behavior that govern postrevolutionary America—as I have shown, both for male and female subjects. The two crucial figurations I have extracted from Burke’s treatise—the compassionate, self-exerting male observer and his either pathologically “nervous” or domestically “beautiful” female counterpart—translate into material performances of masculinity and femininity that pervade nineteenth-century American cultural texts, investigated in the next two chapters. Counteracting the simplifying equation of sentimentalism with
femininity, these relational figures constitute material models for American sentimental bodies.

Another pervasive route of Burke’s circumscription of pain, aesthetics, and compassion concerns the imbrication of American democracy with modes of political articulation that foreground pain and compassion. Phil Fisher has described sentimentalism in terms of a “liberating method” of literary and political discourse, “a politically radical technique, training new forms of feeling,” and thus inherently democratic. He writes that, in the emancipatory project of the United States, these modes of affective discourse enabled the representation and inclusion of marginalized subjects: “[T]he weak and helpless within society gain by means of sentimental experience full representation through the central moral category of compassion” (1985, 17). In Lauren Berlant’s more skeptical definition, this equation characterizes American sentimentalism as a political discourse grounded in the notion of pain: “[Sentimentalism’s] core pedagogy has been to develop a notion of social obligation based on the citizen’s capacity for suffering and trauma” (2008, 35). Burke’s fundamental theorization of pain and compassion within the terms of aesthetics and physiology crucially informs this particularly American conflation of suffering, feeling, and democratic politics.

A gateway to open up perspectives on the transatlantic traveling of Burke’s painful, bourgeois sensibility to the sentimentalism undergirding American democracy can, ironically, be retrieved from perhaps the fiercest American critic of Burke’s later opinions in the *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Thomas Paine. While his *Rights of Man* attacked the decidedly antirevolutionary stance Burke had taken against the actions of 1789, Paine’s earlier “radical populist” (Knott 2009, 12) treatise *Common Sense*—the political agitation piece that is generally regarded as the decisive inspiration to convince Americans for the cause of independence—reflects that while the “father of the American revolution” disagreed with Burke politically, he justified his dissent in the precise terms of sensibility and sympathy. In the preface to his text of 1776, he unhesitatingly renders himself, the American cause, and—pars pro toto—the project of universal emancipation as subjects not of politics, but of feeling:

The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind. Many circumstances have, and will arise, which are not local, but universal, and through which the principles of all Lovers of Mankind are affected, and in the Event of which, their Affections are interested. *It is the Concern of every Man to whom Nature hath given the Power of feeling;* of which Class, regardless of Party Censure, is THE AUTHOR. (my italics)
Paine’s rhetoric of sympathy, feeling, nationality, and universality indicates that the translation of the “politics of pity,” established in the European context as the democratic foundation of bourgeois sovereignty against the principles of monarchical rule, were appropriated by American discourses in slightly different ways. His characterization of “feeling men” as a class, and the conflation of humanist compassion with America show that Common Sense, and the American nationalist discourses it ignited, used sensibility less to solve questions of class emancipation, but to sanction a national project as a universal one. In more Americanist terms, the politics of feeling are here dissolved into a framework articulating American exceptionalism—an ideology of America as an exceptional model for the universalist rule of feeling and compassion.

In a similar vain, scholars such as Christine Levecq (2008), Andrew Burstein (2000), and Sarah Knott have worked out the continuities and routes of translation of European sensibility to American sentimentality during the Revolution, and designate the politics of sensibility as decisive factor in the emerging nation’s self-fashioning:

The American Revolution emanated in part from cultural commitments to sensibility that were brought to the forefront by imperial turmoil. For in the long turbulence appeared the opportunity, indeed the seeming necessity, to remake society from the ground up where the “sensible” self was open to personal change and an agent of social reform. (Knott 2009, 8)

Knott traces the import of theories of sensibility through the transatlantic channels of print culture, political, philosophical treatises, the import of medical theories propagating the doctrine of nerves and sensibility, and particular migrating figures such as Thomas Paine or sentimental writer Robert Bell. For Knott, sensibility served as the dominant “mode of self” in which the American subject could imagine itself as able to construct a righteous society independent from European political structures—relying solely on the authority of human sensibility. Sensibility as the principle social cohesion and political agency presents a “governmental” supplement to the revolutionary politics of the 1780s, in which a politically independent and inherently social American subject is organized. In Paine’s expression, this equation of sociality with feeling, and the foundation of politics in an individual governmentality of affect, further sanctions the fierce antigovernment liberalism of the early American republic: “Society is produced by our wants, and government by wickedness; the former promotes our happiness POSITIVELY by uniting our affections, the latter NEGATIVELY by restraining our vices” (Paine 1779; my italics).
An important difference between European sensibility and American sentimentalism can be attributed to this development of sensibility as a mode of self, or a governmental regime. The European theories of sensibility worked as a counterideology to monarchy, installing a universal bourgeois subject as an alternative to aristocratic authority, derived from lineage and divine rights. The bourgeois subject, formulated within the rigid gendered and racialized order I have attested for Burke’s *Enquiry*, is invested with political authority by claiming a natural sociality, a common bond among all “men.” Sensibility and sympathy in this way emerge primarily as political maneuvers to enable the transformation of disenfranchised classes into socially capable citizens—with “natural” capabilities of democratic rule, cohesive compassion, and the separation of sexes.35

In the American context, sensibility provided answers not to questions of class ideology, but to those of the nation-state and national identity16—“America” standing in as metonymy for the universal project of humanism, as Paine’s evocation of the “Lovers of Mankind” suggests. Whereas European theories installed therefore a universal man (and a not-universal woman), capable of sympathetic feeling as political authority and predicament of Republicanism, its American appropriation constituted an equally gendered *national* subject entitled to political rule not through compassion for the lower classes (against monarchy), but compassion for *itself* (as a universal position). The European doctrine of “feeling” as class emancipation, upon its transatlantic transformation, emerges as—primarily—“feeling American.”

A more complex picture of this “utopian sentimental vision” (Knott 2009, 8) and its connection to European theories of sensibility emerges, when the translation of Edmund Burke’s painful and sublime aesthetics to America is considered. Classical Americanist accounts of the American sublime—such as Marx (1973) and Nye (1993)—have established that the sublime was used as a concept to sanction both the exceptionality of America as the “New World,” filled with natural wonders, and the technological achievements of its new citizens—a complex Leo Marx poignantly terms *The Machine in the Garden*. Both agree that the sublime from the early nineteenth century on works primarily as a national(ist) aesthetic, epitomized by Emerson’s concise formula of the American situation “I and the Abyss.” Rob Wilson, in his critical work on this question, points out the political implications of this appropriation of an “aesthetics of overwhelming” (1991, 3) for the development of a national subjectivity:

> Crossing the Atlantic, the sublime underwent an ideological seachange. If the Enlightenment sublime had represented the unrepresentable, confronted privation, and pushed language to the limits of imagining the vastness of nature and stellar infinitude as
the subject’s innermost ground, the Americanization of this sublime rhetoric represented, in effect, the *interiorization* of national claims as this Americanized self’s inalienable ground. (4)

Wilson takes the “interiorization” to the conclusion that the transcendence implicit in the sublime—the perceptual state of exception of observing natural and technological wonders populating the nation—effectively worked as an aesthetics of national forgetting. He reads Emerson’s classic formulation of the American situation as an employment of the sublime to imagine American exceptionalism and historical innocence: canonical formulations of American subjectivity—such as Emerson’s “empty spirit in vacant space”—for Wilson aesthetically “forget” both the foundational violence of colonization, enslavement, and genocide, and the destruction of nature and indigenous people through industrial expansion. The aesthetic and perceptual state of exception of the sublime in this view wipes the nation’s slate clean: “The sublime, by converting powerlessness and a lurking sense of social self-diminishment—or historical guilt—into a conviction of dematerialized power awaiting national use, eventuated in the figure of self-reliance” (12). The state of exception incited by the sublime, interiorized within the national subject—compassionate and capable of sublime sensibility—sanctions the imagination of America and its national subjects as innocent, entirely self-contained, and exceptional—and works thus as a *mode of forgetting*.

My next two chapters will take up these aspects of the specific constitution of American subjectivities in relation to pain: sentiment as materialization of gender, democratic sympathy as a *mode of self*, and the evocation of the sublime as *mode of forgetting*. These aspects, as my reading of Burke has demonstrated, crucially are constituted through the evocation of bodily pain, and its implied materiality: (1) the discursive distribution of capacities for pain constructs gendered and racialized bodies; (2) sympathy and compassion as “bodily” democratic virtues not only replicate a gender dichotomy that materially excludes women from social participation, but further evolve into individualizing *material scripts* of performance of gender and race; (3) pain is evoked in sentimental discourse as a discursive mode of exception that cloaks these processes of materialization and naturalization it simultaneously enacts.

Pertaining to sensibility and sympathy as a *mode of self*, the next chapters follow figurations of gendered and racial subjectivity and how these are articulated in relation to capacities for productive pain and feeling with the pain of others. How are Burke’s corporeal foundations of sensibility related to the idea of compassion as a “national mode of self”? How do the *corporealizations* articulated in theories of sensibility translate to the American
economies of bodies, sentiments, and politics? By arguing that the compassionate subject, perceiving and recognizing with sublime pains the suffering bodies of others, not only enacts but literally embodies American democracy, perspectives on the corporeal dimensions of national subjectivity are opened up. Understanding Knott’s “mode of self” as a fundamentally biopolitical concept, I will ask for the bodily performances that compassion enables, demands, or prohibits—and the cultural capital that the engagement with pain yields for different embodied subjectivities.

The mode of forgetting traces the rhetorical effect these performances of compassion trigger. “Feeling with” as the engagement with the sublime spectacle of suffering in other bodies, within Burkean terminology spells out as both a perceptual and a “democratic” state of exception; the compassionate subject is physically and politically “convulsed into action” by the shocking image of the body in pain. Suffering, to be recognized, always must present that state of exception, both for the physical apparatus of the compassionate observer and for the larger context of American universal democracy. This exceptional recognition of bodies in pain—in an act of national compassion—thus enables the rhetorical evocation of not only the compassionate subject as by default innocent, but also the democratic landscape as naturally pain-free. Furthermore, suffering in this view is recognized not in relation to discursive stratifications of subjects, but as an evocation of universal humanity. Within the politics of compassion and suffering, therefore, one suffering’s recognition literally eclipses and forgets structural violence, and reconstitutes the national compassionate subject as again innocent and universal. In turn, the body in pain poses both a visible sign of the material consequences of democratic politics, an index for the measuring and evaluation of progress, and the instance that enables the reinstallation of democracy as structurally egalitarian.

These missives indicate how the question of “feeling pain” and “feeling with pain” moved center stage in nineteenth-century American culture. The dialectic of proto-biopolitical and sentimental discourses found in Burke, enabled principally through the boundary object “pain,” will critically guide my analysis in the next two chapters on nineteenth-century American discourses. Both will visit hegemonic discourses—the medicalization of bodies in scientific medicine, and the humanization of black bodies in visual abolitionist discourses of the Civil War—where gendered and racialized figurations of subjects are installed through their proximity to pain. It is my focus in these chapters to follow the sentimental modes of self by looking for particular figurations of subjects as performances of pain: for example, universally compassionate white masculinity; the nervous woman as risk and resource to American democracy; the black body as it is variously abjected from and recognized within the modes of national compassion.
The next two chapters will align these aspects by asking for their respective figurations in nineteenth-century American sentimental discourses on pain, suffering and democracy. I concentrate on (1) the compassionate subject, engaging in the sublime pains of feeling with other people’s pain; (2) the evocation of the body in pain; and (3) the discursive state of exception in which both meet and the inclusion or exclusion of one’s suffering is decided by the other’s compassionate response. What emerges from the analysis of these figurations—their racial and gendered organization, the biopolitical framing they are situated in, the particular governmental performances they articulate—is what I call American Dolorologies: the biopolitical logistics, sentimental meanings, and political uses of pain in American bodies.
Far from being broken, the fantasy link between knowledge and pain is reinforced by a more complex means than the mere permeability of the imagination. . . . The figures of pain are not conjured away by means of a body of neutralized knowledge; they have been redistributed in the space in which bodies and eyes meet.

—Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*

The case of infamous nineteenth‑century surgeon J. Marion Sims, father of American gynecology and inventor of the speculum, exhibits a dolorological constellation that is of interest to this chapter. It introduces three bodies materialized through their proximity to pain: the compassionate white male scientist, the nervous white woman, the painless female slave. These figures dominate medical and social discourses around medicine, civilization, race, and gender in the first half of the nineteenth century and their bodies come to matter (or not matter) in the professionalization of medicine during that era. While my principal subject is the introduction of anesthesia in parturition around 1848 and its various effects on racial and gendered meanings of pain, I draw on Sims to establish the basic constellation of bodies characteristic for the underlying biopolitical shift.

Sims’s recollection of the events leading to his discovery of the speculum in 1845 began with an accident. He was called to visit in Montgomery, Massachusetts, where a white woman, Mrs Merrill, had fallen from her horse onto her pelvis. In the doctor’s terms, she suffered from a “dislocated uterus.” As Sims recalled in his autobiography, the observation and treatment of female anatomy caused him extreme discomfort, which he only overcame by a sense of overwhelming sympathy for the poor woman: “If there was
anything I hated, it was investigating the organs of the female pelvis. But this poor woman was in such a condition that I was obliged to find out what was the matter with her. It was by a digital examination, and I had sense enough to discover that there was retroversion of the uterus” (1885, 231). With disgust, and barely enough concentration to unfold his medical expertise, Sims adventured into the field of gynecology out of sheer compassion with the suffering woman. While he managed to almost magically relieve the patient of her pain, he remained unsatisfied with the results of the “digital examination,” because his fingers were not able to see:

I turned my hand with the palm upward, and then downward, and pushing with all my might, when all at once, I could not feel the womb, or the walls of the vagina. I could touch nothing at all, and wondered what it all meant. It was as if I had put my two fingers into a hat, and worked them around, without touching the substance of it. While I was wondering what it all meant Mrs. Merrill said, “Why, doctor, I am relieved.” My mission was ended, but what had brought the relief I could not understand. (233)

Sims framed the central problem of gynecology as one of darkness, which (recalling Edmund Burke) is a source of sheer terror and pain for the observer trapped in it: “[I]n utter darkness, it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand; we are ignorant of the objects that surround us” (Burke 1757, 176). But having once ventured into the dark, Sims was determined to bring light into the undiscovered territory and transport his magical cure of Mrs Merrill to scientific understanding. He remembered the female slaves Anarcha and Betsey, who had been send by their “kind hearted . . . masters” (227) to Sims’s small clinic for treatment of vaginal fistulas, which had rendered them “unfit for the duties required of a servant” (227). He rushed to experimental action immediately, as he recalled in his autobiography, seizing on the unfit slave body to conquer the darkness of female sexuality:

Arriving [at the hospital] I said, “Betsey, I told you that I would send you home this afternoon, but before you go I want to make one more examination of your case.” She willingly consented. I got a table about three feet long, and put a coverlet upon it, and mounted her on the table, on her knees, with her head resting on the palms of her hands. I placed the two students one on each side of the pelvis, and they laid hold of the nates, and pulled them open. Before I could get the bent spoon-handle into the vagina, the air rushed in with a puffing noise, dilating the vagina to its fullest extent.
Introducing the bent handle of the spoon I saw everything, as no man had ever seen before. The fistula was as plain as the nose on a man's face. The edges were clear and well-defined, and distinct, and the opening could be measured as accurately as if it had been cut out of a piece of plain paper. The walls of the vagina could be seen closing in every direction; the neck of the uterus was distinct and well-defined, and even the secretions from the neck could be seen as a tear glistening in the eye, clear even and distinct, and as plain as could be.

The invention of the speculum, the first application of anesthesia in childbirth, and the emergence of gynecology and clinical obstetrics elicited by these events—these processes indicate not only the shift to medicine becoming a professionalized and scientific discipline, and the female body becoming medicalized and subject to experts. They also reflect the installation of professional scientific medicine as a visual regime, and the gendered and racial implications of these looking relations.

The epistemic shift that Foucault calls the emergence of the medical gaze has been frequently understood as a move toward a disembodied, abstract scientific authority present only in apparatuses and visual constellations. Following his influential analysis (1989), the medical gaze transforms the scientific observer into a neutral and objective “producer of truth,” while the body subjected to the gaze emerges as an objectified assemblage of textual signs. At once acknowledging the scope of Foucault’s argument and problematizing his neglect of the gendering implicit in the medical gaze, my first argument aims at the corporeal costs, investments, and repercussions of Foucault’s epistemic shift. Departing from the particular modes of corporeal performance I have discussed in relation to sensibility and compassion in the last chapter, this chapter readjusts the perspective slightly: here the sentimental, bodily performances of compassion and pain will be looked at, as supplements to the biopolitical project of scientific medicine. How do the gendered materializations in Burke’s theory of sensibility translate to scientific knowledge production, to the bodies occupying medical science in the nineteenth century? What are the modes of compassion and suffering—of feeling and feeling with—informing the shift to the medical gaze? What embodiments and corporeal performances do scientific authority and patient objectivity entail, demand, prohibit?

J. Marion Sims’s example in vital ways exhibits the discourses and rhetorics of pain—felt and felt with—that interest this chapter. The medical gaze on female sexuality, which Sims rescues from the darkness of the uterus, is orchestrated and enabled through the corporeal figure of the heroic white male scientist, overcoming his own bodily disgust through pure compas-
sion for the suffering white woman and interest in scientific advancement. Seeing everything, “as no man had ever seen before,” in Sims’s recollection is a physical task, demanding of the physician the sacrifice of bodily integrity for the sake of knowledge production—overcoming loathing and revulsion and looking darkness in the eye. The mixture of voluntary exposure to pain, and the sensibility of feeling with other bodies, indicates the particular corporeal dimensions of scientific masculinity of the nineteenth century, or, as Sims’s son phrases it: “His manliness of nature was joined to the most tender sensibility and trusting simplicity—the strong pinions of the eagle folded around the warm heart of the dove” (24). The corporeal performances enabling white scientific masculinity, exchanging investments of pain for objective knowledge and authority, present the seldom-analyzed material basis of the medical gaze, and are the first object of this chapter.

One of the central sites of these sacrificial performances of scientific masculinity in the nineteenth century is the white female body and the strange risks its sexual and reproductive organs present, as a flood of publications on female anatomy argue. Medical debates in clinical obstetrics and gynecology, triggered by the introduction of anesthesia, show that femininity is rendered by negotiating the female body’s relation to pain, and—akin to Burke’s “horrid convulsions” in female observers—by its capacity to deal with this pain. The second object of this chapter concerns the question of anesthesia in childbirth. The debate around it, I argue, constitutes a central discursive hub where scientific masculinity and pathological white femininity are materialized as an exchange of pain—the scientist investing his suffering for the alleviation of white women unable to deal with their pain. The compassionate, and sacrificing obstetrician emerges simultaneously with the nervous woman, overwhelmed by her own sensibility.

While these debates reflect the nineteenth-century proliferation of pathologizing discourses on the female body and its particular agonies, they also draw on and perpetuate a larger racial rationale. On the one hand, the pathologization of white female bodies in pain is linked from its inception to potential risks to the welfare of the nation, and by extension, to the survival of the race. The figure of the nervous woman, and its diametrical opposite, the “true woman,” are central figures in the installation of a bodily regime of femininity constructing “overcivilization” and “nervousness” as threats to the racial purity of white America. The debates on pain in childbirth and its subsequent medicalization, as I argue, serve as a first entrance to a discourse of racial hygiene that prefigures later framings of female bodies within the term of eugenics.

On the other hand, the racial connotations of scientific medicine are visible in the discounting of black pain: Sims experimented extensively, repeatedly, and brutally on several African American women in his private
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Clinic between 1845 and 1851. His discovery of “vaginal visibility” (Kapsalis 2002, 269) is secured via the obviously more pathological (vaginal infections), but also more “willingly consenting” black female body, who bears the pain of sickness, examination, and operation with “grim stoicism” (Kapsalis 2002, 272): in a conflation of the enslaved body’s property status, prejudice about inferior biological sensibility, and a “master’s compassion,” Sims fundamentally discounts black pain as a factor. An indication for this critical relation between “ownership” and the claim to pain can be found in Sims’s thoughts on which particular pains must be accepted when procuring and experimenting on slave bodies. That pain is economic in the first place:

I made this proposition to the owners of the negroes: If you will give me Anarcha and Betsey for experiments, I agree to perform no experiment or operation on either of them to endanger their lives, and will not charge a cent for keeping them, but you must pay their taxes and clothe them. I will keep them at my own expense. (238)

A further argument of this chapter will therefore concern the precise terms of this dehumanization of black bodies, working through their expulsion from the economy of meaningful pain. Kapsalis points out that “[v]isibility, ownership, labor, capital, medical discovery, and slavery all met at the site of the first speculum exam” (2002, 269). This chapter will try to extend Kapsalis’s list of discourses participating in the emergence of the medical gaze, by directing attention to its painful dimensions and investigating corporeal performances of pain, suffering, sympathy, and sensibility enabling the American shift to scientific medicine.

MEDICAL MARTYRS

On one occasion he took something that rendered him quite insensible for upward of two hours. Mrs Simpson got a terrible fright. He tried everything on himself first!


The Century Illustrated Magazine (1894)

Londa Schiebinger writes in her foreword to the 2004 edition of Nature’s Body that the reformulation of science and scientific knowledge in the nineteenth century hinges on the formation of “the privileged firstborn twins of modern science: the myth of the natural body, and the myth of value-neutral knowledge” (2004, ix–x). This epistemic pairing, the production of objective truths about objectified bodies through scientific scrutiny, is generally
identified with Foucault’s epistemic shift to the visual regimes of modernity. His description of the constellation underlying the medical gaze—the objective eye of the medical scientist producing knowledge from the unfolding inner language of the body observed—stresses the absence of touch, intimacy, indeed bodiliness of this relation. Its visuality is, so to speak, pure, expressed in Foucault’s analogy of language and his formula seeing is knowing: “[T]he clinical gaze . . . is analytic because it restores the genesis of composition; but it is pure of all intervention insofar as this genesis is only the syntax of the language spoken by things themselves in an original silence. The gaze of observation and the things it perceives communicate through the same Logos” (1989, 133). The neutrality or purity of knowledge (Braun and Stephan 2005, 13), a fundamental characteristic of scientific authority in modernity, is therefore frequently associated with the classic equation of masculinity with rationality, disembodiment, and abstraction.

The symbolic association of scientific truth with disembodiment and purity argued by Foucault stands in stark contrast to (self-)descriptions of medical professionals such as Sims, who characterized himself not only by rationality, but also through “manliness of nature” and the “most tender sensibility” (see above quote). The foregrounding of bodily qualities, masculine sentiment, and corporeal sacrifice can be found in many descriptions of medical men, such as a praiseful orbituary of a physician and professor of medicine published in the Boston Medical Journal, written for a certain Dr. Joseph Huse:

The benevolent physician . . . has labored for half a century . . . administering relief to both rich and poor, through the rigors of northern winters and the scorching heat of sultry summers, suffering sleepless nights, irregularities in diet, and other privations, with the addition of heavy responsibilities to his suffering patients, resting on his mind to render his excited feelings still more severe . . .

The body of medicine’s professional and scientific authority is remembered primarily as a body constantly assailed by physical demands: endless compassion for the suffering, the harshest working conditions, extreme sensibility paired with extreme responsibility. In other words, a true martyr to his profession, who like J. Marion Sims, “while his feet were sorely wounded by the thorns that beset his daily path . . . kept his sublime head amid the stars” (1885, 15), as his son wrote in the preface to the doctor’s memoir. My juxtaposition aims at establishing the figure of the medical scientist as a corporeal performance, intimately connected to painful bodily feeling and objectivity at once: pain and knowledge. I propose a crucial connection between bodily states of exception and knowledge production, or what
Rebecca Herzig refers to as the “rise of an ethic of self-sacrifice in American science,” a cultural economy of suffering for science (2005). The figure of the scientific martyr is characterized by a particular tension, a precarious balance between investments of bodily pain and objective, removed, untouched description of facts.

The tense epistemology involving pain and rationality is visible in the following account of Humphrey Davy, a key figure in the invention of anesthesia techniques in the early nineteenth century. Around 1800, he conducted a series of autoexperiments to elucidate the anesthetic effects of nitrous oxide (laughing gas), and recorded his corporeal experiences in a precise, controlled, and sober language:

Having cut one of my fingers so as to lay bare a little muscle fiber, I introduced it while bleeding into a bottle of nitrous oxide; the blood that trickled from the wound became more purple; but the pain was neither alleviated or increased. When, however, the finger was taken out of the nitrous oxide and exposed to the atmosphere, the wound smarted more than it had done before. After it had ceased to bleed I inserted it through water into a vessel of nitrous gas; but it did not become more painful than before. (cited in Smith 1982, 22)

Crucial in this description of an experimental setup is how the scientist’s body and the sensation of pain become an index, which can be objectified in language to deduce a neutral observation. Davy invests his corporeal pain for the advancement of knowledge, subjects his body to painful experimentation, and objectifies the self-inflicted hurt into scientific truth. The passage illustrates a linking of pain and knowledge production, constructing the scientific self in a fundamental duplicity; “at once subject and object of the self-sacrifice, the agent determining action and the substance acted upon” (Herzig 2005, 4). Davy, as many of his scientific contemporaries, engages in bodily states of exception for the cause of scientific advancement. Schiebinger’s “firstborn twins” of modern science—the body and objectivity—are thus aligned not only as rational gaze and bodily object, but are both employed to create the male natural scientist as an embodied figure—bearing pain and objective knowledge at once.

As several scholars have demonstrated, this sacrificial logic of scientific performance was one of the primary modes of articulating authority in the medical field and other scientific areas from physiology to polar expeditions. The painful autoexperiment, risking and investing the body for exchange of knowledge, was a key characteristic of early positivist science and part of a larger “experimental culture” (Dierig 2004): scientists such
as Faraday, Alexander von Humboldt, or Charles Bell explored the rules of electrophysiology by exposing their own bodies to varying doses of voltage, transforming the intensity of the pain felt into qualified judgments on the nature of human organisms and electricity (Sarasin 2001). Chemists, and physicians investigated the contagion of diseases such as yellow fever by autoexperimentation, injecting bodily fluids and discharges from fever patients into their bodies and measuring the consequences (Herzig 2005, 1–4). Polar explorers paraded their frozen-off toes, implying a heroic relation between personal suffering and the profundity of the knowledge gained. In addition to the voluntary subjection to danger and pain, science emerged as a lifelong vocation and commitment, a “self-immolation on the altar of science” (Herzig 2005, 38). The rational and objective properties of scientific discourse were thus paired with performances of the scientist as sufferer of bodily pain and physical sacrifice. The scientific self depended on the twofold claim of maximum sensibility, the corporeal registration of minute sensations, and maximum abstraction and control, so that even the most severe pain and trauma could be mastered and transformed to medical and scientific knowledge production. Making science emerges thus as a repeated venturing into bodily states of exception, from physical agony suffered in self-lacerations or electrical shocks to the perilous exploration of hostile and dangerous environments.

The scientific subject is a figure building on Burke’s masculine observer of the sublime: it is performed by a body bearing and repeatedly engaging in pain, and further, by the ability to transcend that experience into objective knowledge, by owning it. The ability to master pain depends on the subject’s physiological capacities, its composition of nerve and muscle, or in Burkean terms, on masculine fitness. Scientific objectivity is thus linked to a white male body, simultaneously capable of extraordinary sensitivity to pain, and the self-control necessary for the ceaseless scrutiny of its experiences—it is characterized by corporeality and transcendence of the body at the same time.

Being able to own pain, so vital to the production of autoexperimental and scientific knowledge, is to be understood in a political and juridical sense here. As Herzig explains, the idea of a “self-possessed” body is the necessary claim to scientific selfhood, guaranteeing the willfulness of knowledge production: “[O]nly that which is owned may be forfeited” (2005, 22). Sacrifice in science builds on voluntary pain that performs the autonomous ownership of one’s body. She therefore links the investment of pain by white male scientists to one of the fundamental concepts of Enlightenment subjectivity, Locke’s concept of the “proprietal self,” which grounds the subject in a possessive relation to itself: “[E]very Man has a Property in his own Person” (cited in Herzig 2005, 21). The notion of self-ownership was
especially important in the early American republic, in distinguishing the newly independent “citizens” and the self-constructed national sovereignty from their European colleagues on the one hand, and the marginalized and enslaved populations of the New World on the other:

[The] revolutionary movement gradually transformed the presumed connection between property ownership and participation in the civic body and, with it, the character of the free self. No longer was political freedom automatically associated with the possession of productive property, with the holding of land or currency. . . . Most states granted suffrage not only to the propertied elite but to all adult white men . . . the possession of the self, rather than possession of dispensable capital, became the politically consequential form of proprietorship [and] defining condition of civic participation. . . . This transformation set the stage for a reorganization of selfhood and, concurrently, of the self’s membership in larger associations, be they divine, national, or . . . scientific. (Herzig 2005, 20–21; my italics)

Self-ownership, implying the ownership of one’s body, in this view not only articulates the capacity to consequential experience—scientific or political—but further enables the racial and gendered meaning of citizenship and professional ethos in the early republic. Herzig references both the notorious Constitutional Convention of 1787, which fractured slave subjects into “three-fifths of a person” (who thus held no right to bodily experience), and the extensive debates over property rights for white women, which featured prominently in the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. Burke’s predominantly physiologically reasoned white male ownership of pain is in this way instrumental to liberal conceptions of personhood, and shapes the gendered and racialized construction of the scientific subject.

The capacity to voluntarily endure bodily “states of exception” and the mastery of this painful experience makes or denies self-ownership. It marks the site where the idea of proprietal selfhood is materialized and performed, and where the subject comes into its own as always already gendered and racialized. The modern notion of self-ownership, the centerpiece of liberalism, thus must be read as entailing a relation between subjectivity and corporeality that privileges the male white body as alone capable of true self-possession and thus objectification of the body’s painful experiences. In this perspective, the power relations at work in the linking of pain and experience qua self-possession become evident. The split between the rational subject and the body of experience secures the neutrality of knowledge production as a position at the same time disembodied, that is,
objective and only attainable by privileged white masculinity. The logic of pain, in other words, ties the formation of the scientific subject to the masculine body and simultaneously renders this differential construction as invisible and neutral. The modern self-fashioning of science as productive of “value-neutral knowledge” in this perspective relates to a functionalization of pain enabling the simultaneous corporealization of the scientific subject as male and disembodied. The “purification of science” is stabilized and materialized through the discursive relay of pain that regulates degrees of embodiment, subjectivity, and self-possession in corporeal terms. The gendering of the scientific subject, in other words, is instantiated and maintained through a corporeal supplement, the voluntarily suffering and therefore white male body of the scientist.

ANESTHESIA AND THE MEDICAL GAZE

A host of disciplines from the eighteenth century on were engaged in the twofold production of natural differences between men and women and the gendering of scientific knowledge, as many feminist scholars have pointed out. Jordanova (1999) argues in her analysis of the sexual relations in biology and medicine that the fashioning of the male physician as rational observer works via a construction of femininity as marked by bodyliness, irrationality, and passivity. She remarks that anatomical models in the eighteenth century predominantly portrayed female bodies, conveying not only the “sexual potential of medical anatomy” but also the figuration of femininity as symbolic naturalness: “Female nature had been unclothed by male science, making her understandable under general scrutiny” (164). As a consequence, as Honegger (1996) has shown, biology and medicine distinguished bodies into “universal human,” and the vast and very differently conceptualized field of “female special-anthropology,” which constructed the female body as primarily sexualized, pathological, and tied to reproduction.

Gynecology and obstetrics emerged in the early nineteenth century as the disciplinary expression of the pathologization of the female body. The two disciplines were solely engaged in describing, constructing, and controlling the body marked by difference, and tied fundamentally to male medical expertise. Thus, obstetrics, especially as it evolved into a clinical practice, supplanted the tradition of female midwives and thus female professional expertise. The clinicalization of births, and thus the control of reproduction through male experts, is a process that began in the second half of the eighteenth century (see Forman Cody 1999) but gained decided momentum from 1845 on, when the first public demonstration of anesthesia gave physicians the opportunity to eliminate pain. Significantly, the crucial debate surrounding the first applications of chemical pain alleviation in Europe and
America in the late 1840s concerned birthpain, and thus specifically the meaning of pain in female bodies. The introduction of anesthesia, significantly, happening in a field concerned with female “special-anthropology,” enabled the distribution of gendered meanings of pain unto bodies and secured gender ideology by tying it to particular bodily performances. The debate around pain in parturition marks a crucial discursive hub in which the central currents of nineteenth-century sensibility and sentimentality, biopolitics and natural differences, and their reformulation as corporeal figurations are deployed: the compassionate white male scientist, the nervous female, the insensitive savage.

The reorganization of the relation between scientific subject and object within a regime of constant visibility—the emergence of the medical gaze—is reflected in the comparison between pre-anesthetic surgery and accounts of surgery with anesthesia. Before the 1840s, in what is often referred to as “heroic medicine,” surgery represented a trade specializing in speed, force, and nerves of steel. Operations were short, brutal, and bloody, often resulting in the patient’s subsequent death by shock. Practitioners frequently specialized in a few operations, for example, the dreaded “lateral” version of lithotomy—the removal of stones from the bladder by way of cutting the perineum. Anatomical knowledge was often limited among these specialists to that which pertained to their “trademark” cut (see Stanley 2003, 84–87).

The physician’s relation to the patient was characterized by two aspects of this medical practice: on the one hand, the surgeon had to be able to bear and restrain the patient’s wild reactions, screams, and convulsions, and often employed several assistants to hold the body operated on. Simultaneously, the patient’s reactions and articulations of pain played a decisive role in the operation in that they provided a sort of physical feedback, indicating to the surgeon the severity of the injury, the deepness and location of the cut, or the degree of inflammation. The subject of the operation in this regard was an actual person, and this patient constituted a vital participant in the surgery, whose bodily pain mattered as it interacted with the surgeon’s proceedings. “Heroic medicine” in other words, involved the precondition of two self-possessed bodies in communication—through the precise and professional bodily performance of the surgeon, and the articulation of painful sensation by the patient. This specific constellation, with its performances of both surgeon and patient, changed with the introduction of anesthesia in the late 1840s. Dr. Valentine Mott, renowned surgeon and professor of surgery at Columbia University, described the benefits of anesthesia in 1863:

[H]ow often have I dreaded that some unfortunate struggle of the patient would deviate the knife a little from its proper course, and that I who fain would be the deliverer should involuntarily become
the executioner, seeing my patient perish in my hands by the most appalling form of death! Had he been insensible, I should have felt no alarm. . . . This discovery [of anesthesia], then, has not only taken from surgery its greatest horrors, but has also very much increased the facility and safety of operations; and in this way, “The domain of surgery is extended.” (cited in Papper 1995, 5; italics are Mott’s)

Medical professionals, as the passage indicates, evaluated the positive effects of anesthesia in two ways: first, anesthesia enabled the completely passive and immobile patient, as an object of the operational process. Surgery, formerly a craft associated with the “barber,” could thus be rendered as a scientific practice akin to the objective knowledge produced in anatomical research. Anesthesia made the projection of the abstract and idealized anatomical maps gained from corpse dissection unto the living body possible.8

Second, and more importantly, however, anesthesia allowed the medical professional to articulate surgical intervention within the terms of compassion and sympathy. No longer needed medical practice be framed within “necessary” cruelties of “physical suffering . . . which was only to be met with quiet endurance and resignation” (Metcalfe 1857), as a physician wrote on the beneficial effects of chloroform in 1857. Surgery and, by extension, clinical medicine could now be articulated thoroughly as compassionate and humanitarian undertakings, which, despite their gruesome but now “invisible” techniques, were not at odds with the larger project of sensibility. Anesthesia, in other words, allowed the surgeon to be rid of the barber, a discursive shift that allowed the association of surgery and clinical medicine with reason and exactitude, as well as with compassion and empathy: “No longer . . . need operators feel that firmness of purpose would war with the most generous and gentle sympathy” (quoted in Stanley 2003, 306). The lack of passion in the anesthetized body enabled the surgeon as a simultaneously objective and compassionate institution.

Anesthesia constitutes an extension of that discursive and epistemological shift that is denoted by the medical gaze9 and the corporeal performances attending it that I have outlined above. Moreover, the discursive value of anesthesia consists in the transformation of invasive medicine into a practice of compassion and sympathy, and in line with the doctrines of sensibility crucial to nineteenth-century sociality. It enables the figuration of the white male doctor as a veritable “master of pain,” not only shouldering the burdens of scientific experiment and martyrdom, but also transferring patient pain unto his power of compassionate judgment and alleviating action—the medical professional in this view invests his pain in order to create “freedom from pain” for all others and emerges as the solitary authority to name, engage in, and control “states of exception” in bodies. The
superior sensibility and self-possession of white male bodies articulates in this view a hegemony of feeling.

THE PAINS OF REPRODUCTION

Anesthesia, the ability to control whose bodies are in pain, demarcates a discursive relay wherein compassion and sensibility meet the biopolitical institution of the medical gaze. Biopolitics is linked to the emergence not only of republicanism and democratic rule, but also to the emergence of “population” as an important factor for managing lives, bodies, and behaviors in self-governing, capitalist societies (Foucault 2008, 2009). The figure of population, understood as “human resource” necessary for the (re)production of capitalism and democracy, expressed factors such as workforce and birth/death relations, or in short, the health of the social body. Jana Sawicki has stressed that this effectively constituted reproduction and the female body as a primary site of biopolitical rule, and she describes biopolitics as a project tied to male hegemony, an aspect crucially neglected by Foucault:

If, as Foucault claimed, biopower was an indispensable element in the development of capitalism insofar as it made possible a “controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production,” then it must also have been indispensable to patriarchal power insofar as it provided instruments for the insertion of women’s bodies into the machinery of reproduction. (1999, 191)

Medicine, and especially the disciplines of gynecology and obstetrics, in this perspective constitute central areas in which patriarchal power constructs the biopolitical meanings of female bodies, control and manage them as capitalist (and democratic) resources and risks. Lisa Forman Cody links the birth of clinical obstetrics to changing concerns of a rising liberal public sphere that is characteristic of the shift to biopolitics and demographic control:

[Pop]ulationist rhetoric invoked healthy births in socioeconomic works, treatises on the nation’s manners, and philanthropic appeals. Spokesmen for London’s five large lying-in hospitals . . . reminded the public that their institutions “secure the birth, and protect the tender lives of infants, who may hereafter be usefully employed in trade and manufacture, or supply the waste of war in our fleets and armies.” (1999, 483)

The growing interest of liberal societies in the managing of demographics, measuring mortality against birth rates and the projection of
populations as human resources of national governing in this perspective made reproduction a public concern. The institutionalization of reproduction as subject of governance installed an economy of “traffic in women” that secured medical science as the only authority to speak on the female body, and simultaneously installed it as a discursive field speaking to the well-being of the nation-state. Understanding biopolitics as complicit with a politics of sentimentality, it is consequential that the sweeping transformation of reproduction into a vital resource to be managed and supervised by male experts was crucially facilitated by the question of pain, reproduction, and its meanings for the female body, epitomized in the question of “anesthesia in parturition.”

Compassionate men and oversensitive women are the major protagonists in this discursive construction of the meanings of pain in reproduction. The questions around birth pain and its possible alleviation through ether and chloroform comprises the first and most extensive debate on anesthesia. Morton’s public demonstration of ether anesthesia in 1846 was received by a wide professional audience, and a mere several months later, European and American universities discussed the issue of anesthetized births for white women. A flood of international medical experts, many of them protagonists of the young obstetric discipline, participated in it via publications in medical journals and newspapers. Women’s voices were not heard, since births had been viewed from the second half of the eighteenth century on as primarily business of male medical experts, the so-called accoucheurs. The accoucheur, as many feminist critics since Ehrenreich and English’s pioneering *For Her Own Good* (1978) have pointed out, largely replaced the female midwife and thus inferiorized experiential knowledge to masculinized scientific training. Lisa Forman Cody stresses that the redistribution of control over the reproductive body is also framed within a gendered politics of sensibility, the capacity to “feel with” the soon-to-be-mother’s pain. She cites British male midwife John Leake: “[For] a man of this profession . . . who [is] blessed with sympathy and benevolence of heart, this will afford the most exalted pleasure; especially where such assistance is given to women, who are to be considered as the weaker sex, and unable to help each other” (1999, 479).

Sympathy, therefore, does not imply a feminization of the profession, but rather enables a fundamentally masculine performance of compassion as professional ethos, constructed against a female incapacity to simultaneously empathize and rationally deal with the pain and risks of reproduction: “A woman’s mind, from the delicacy of her bodily frame, and the prevalence of her passions, is liable to so many excesses and inordinate motions” (481). The male accoucheur thus “presented himself as personifying both reason and feeling,” a performance of masculinity constructed against a potentially
pathological “oversensibility” of the female midwife, as Forman Cody concludes: “Leake presented women as feeling more than men to be sure, but also feeling incorrectly” (482). The debate on anesthesia in childbirth sits squarely on these earlier shifts rendering reproduction and female pain in the domain of compassionate, medical masculinity, and considerably extends the pathologizing circumscriptions of “incorrect feminine feeling” implied in it.

The discussion around anesthetized births begins with James Young Simpson’s pamphlet “Answer to the Religious Objections Advanced Against the Employment of Anesthetic Agents in Midwifery and Surgery,” published in December 1847 (see also Caton 1985; Poovey 1987). By time of publication, its author had already supervised births with the help of ether and in the following years became an internationally recognized expert on obstetrics and an outspoken proponent of anesthetized parturition. The text introduces the central missives through which the discourse of anesthesia in childbirth enabled the insertion of “women’s bodies into the machinery of reproduction,” and was cited and answered to by obstetricians and gynecologists such as Walter Channing, Walter Meigs, or W. Tyler Smith, author of the important Manual of Obstetrics (1850).

Simpson initially devises obstetric anesthesia as a sympathetic project, following the humanitarian and compassionate impulse the medical profession claims for itself from the nineteenth century onward. In a different article of 1847, Simpson proclaims medicine as motivated by “that great principle of emotion which both impels us to feel sympathy at the sight of suffering in any fellow-creature, and at the same time imparts to us delight and gratification in the exercise of any power by which we can mitigate and alleviate suffering” (cited in Poovey 1987, 159). Framing clinical medicine thus in terms of universal sensibility, anesthesia in childbirth for Simpson constitutes a compassion for the “weaker” sex; it follows the moral obligation to “save frail humanity from the miseries of tortures of bodily pain” (Simpson 1959[1857], 42). The motivation for the medical scientist and obstetrician to intervene into reproduction thus initially appears as not only a task of risk control and surveillance, but also of sympathizing. As Simpson’s contemporary John Pretty writes in his manual Aids During Labour (1856), male expertise both gives safety, and saves: “Not only is it his [the accoucheur’s] duty to all that art can accomplish to effect a safe delivery, but also to save suffering as much as possible” (2–3). As I argue, this double task of obstetrics is soon dissolved into a single one, and Simpson’s article exhibits this argumentation. I will therefore follow its peculiar reasoning at some length.

As the title indicates, Simpson devises his pamphlet as a reaction to various religious criticisms that he claims have been brought forth against obstetric anesthesia. He concedes that the general arguments against painless parturition rest on the biblical curse pronounced upon Eve in Genesis.
3,16: “In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children.” Simpson’s following argument, described by Primavera as “charmingly quaint” and ironical (Primavera Lévy 2009, 28), executes a textual exegesis of the biblical curse that tries to elucidate the precise meaning of the phrase and whether it implies a necessity of pain for women. Simpson devotes considerable space to the etymological pondering of the biblical curse:

I shall, therefore, in the first place, quote the words of it in full from the third chapter of Genesis, interpolating in Roman letters the Hebrew originals of those two nouns which are the more immediate subjects of doubt and difference of opinion: “Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow (‘itzzabhon) and thy conception; in sorrow (‘etzehb) thou shalt bring forth children.” (36)

Simpson goes on to investigate the precise meaning of the Hebrew words translated as “sorrow” by citing their many occurrences in the biblical text, arguing that their original denotation is rather “work” or “toil” than bodily pains. Derived from the verb root ’atzabh, as Simpson writes, “the Hebrew word for labour (in the sense of work or toil) is exactly like the english word labour, used also to import the act of parturition” (37). Simpson thus defines the religious attitude that birth must be painful as a fallacy of translation, and cites several instances of a biblical reference to actual “pain,” which he explains to be denoted in words stemming from the roots hhil and hhebhel. By thus distinguishing the meanings of labor as muscle work and labor as pain, Simpson gives his interpretation of the exact meaning of the biblical phrase:

\[H]il and hhebhel . . . mark and designate the sensations of agony accompanying parturition, as contradistinguished from the muscular efforts (or labour) (‘etzehb) in which the physiological part of the process of the expulsion of the child essentially consists. . . . [W]e are then, I believe, justly entitled to infer that the Hebrew term which, in our English translation of the primaeval curse, is rendered “sorrow” (Genesis iii. 16), principally signifies the severe muscular efforts and struggles of which parturition—and more particularly human parturition—essentially consists; and does not specifically signify the feelings or sensations of pain to which these muscular efforts or contractions give rise. (39)

God’s curse, in Simpson’s etymological reasoning, thus effects only the work of the uterus, not women’s pain. Consequently, Simpson argues, anesthesia cannot be refused on behalf of the biblical words, for the muscular
contractions denoted by “sorrow” are not hindered or in any way impacted on by the application of anesthetics:

The state of anaesthesia does not withdraw or abolish that muscular effort, toil or labour; for if so, it would then stop, and arrest entirely the act of parturition itself. But it removes the physical pain and agony otherwise attendant on these muscular contractions and efforts. It leaves the labour itself (‘atçebh) entire. (38)

Simpson’s textual strategy implies a biopolitical and decidedly gendered consequence readily recognized by his contemporaries. Anesthesia, he argues, does not interfere with the physiological work of the uterine muscles, which effectively enacts the “natural process of birth.” What ether and chloroform rather impact on is the experience of the “muscular efforts,” virtually, as the term an-aesthesia (coined by Oliver Wendell Holmes) exhibits, excluding women from the aesthetic perception of their own bodies. By textually separating labor from pain, Simpson therefore effectively splits his female patients into two, obviously conflicting faculties, the female reproductive body and female sensibility. Anesthesia in this perspective rescues the functionality of the uterus from the sensibility of the woman surrounding it, who, as the “weaker sex,” experiences labor as pain.

Simpson’s colleague Walter Channing, in his Treatise on Etherization in Childbirth (1868), is less sophisticated in his analysis of what anesthesia impacts on: “There is no pain in the pure functional actions of the uterus. Pain is the consequence of resistance to the contractions of the womb.” Channing had been the most outspoken American proponent of anesthesia, and his widely circulated Treatise not only listed 581 cases where he had successfully administered the medication, but further pushed Simpson’s argument on anesthetized states in parturition to its physiological and biological consequences:

We know that voluntary or animal power is very much, if not wholly, suspended during this state. We know that organic power remains. Nay, more, we know that it is often increased, that of the womb for instance; and in the exceptional cases, in which uterine contraction is diminished, or in which it entirely ceases, we know that this is temporary, and that no danger to either mother or child has hence ensued. We know, finally, that during and in consequence of etherization, circumstances highly favorable to safe as well as to easy labor arise. Among these may be enumerated the increase of secretions in the organs immediately concerned in labor, and a more perfect relaxation or dilatability than existed before its use.
The juxtaposition of “voluntary power” and “organic power” is crucial in this passage. What anesthesia effects for Channing is the isolation of the natural reproductive muscle of the female body and its proper functionality. This exposure, the laying bare of female muscle work, is achieved precisely by stripping the patient of her possessive relation to this body, of an owned experience of labor as pain. Obstetric treatises and manuals discussing the topic relentlessly stressed that anesthesia did not at all interfere with the natural processes of parturition, but rather enabled the physician to rescue the natural muscle work of the female body from an incapacious sensibility. As anesthesia in surgery produces a purified view of the natural human body akin to the corpse of anatomy, in childbirth it lays bare the nature of femininity as reproductive muscular function.

Smith’s Manual of Obstetrics demonstrates one discursive effect of this crucial argument, the equation of the uterus with feminine nature, implying the definition of woman solely through reproduction: “[T]he uterus governs the entire female organism whether a woman is pregnant or not” (cited in Poovey 1987, 145); or, in the words of the author of Parturition Without Pain, it is “as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built a woman around it” (Holbrook 1872, 15). This equation in the argumentation around anesthesia is doubly crucial, in that it allows indeed for reducing women to “the natural role of reproduction,” and the installation of the male obstetrician as the singular authority to produce, or indeed save, this “nature of womanhood” from the inferior sensibilities of women, who are obviously not possessing or able to properly experience their bodies. If masculinity, as I have argued before, thus is materialized through compassion and engaging in pain, the “natural” female body, as constructed in the biopolitical discourses of obstetrics and gynecology, is best embodied in the painless states of anesthesia. What anesthesia in these terms effectively achieves is the separation of reproductive capacity and women.

This aspect of the anesthesia discussion confirms the feminist truism of the general confinement of women to the “procreative function” (Poovey 1987, 148) executed by medicine and natural sciences in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a move stabilizing the gendered doctrine of separate spheres, and the exclusion of women from public and political participation in democracy by biological determination: “[W]ithin the republican framework, an appeal to natural rights could be countered only by proof of natural inequalities” (Schiebinger 2004, 143). While the arguments of Simpson, Channing, and many others therefore were part of this general circumcision of the female body as “nature,” they carry wider implications. Locating the “nature” of women in the uterus, and anesthesia in childbirth as the scientific, compassionate, and masculine rescue of natural femininity, the medical experts extended the biological rendition to the question from
what risk natural reproduction had to be saved. As the ether-enabled split between muscular apparatus and sensibility (or bodily experience) suggests, their arguments render women themselves as the primary risk that threatens “easy parturition” (Channing 1868).17

**BIRTHPAIN AS RACIAL RELAY**

We are, indeed, fully prepared to believe that the bearing of children may, and ought to become, as free from danger and long disability to the civilized women as it is to the savage.

—M. Holbrook, *Parturition without Pain* (1872)

The first part of my analysis of the anesthesia discussion has elucidated the male experts’ answers to the compassionate question, “Need women feel pain in parturition?” (no), and demonstrated scientific medicine’s power to define and naturalize female bodies via these prescriptions. My following argument traces the parallel scientific articulations of why women experience birthpain. The eminent figuration of the “nervous woman,” constructed by obstetrics and gynecology in the nineteenth century, is one of the answers to that question. Many feminist historians have identified the pathological figure of the “nervous woman”—and its extreme formulation as “the hysteric”—as the principal discursive hub through which scientific discourse legitimizes the exclusion of women from the modern public sphere. While the powerful gendered discourses operating through nervousness have been thoroughly researched,18 the emergence of this figuration, as my sources and scholars such as Laura Briggs (2000) suggest, is also participating in racializing discourses in vital ways. My following reading, focusing on the medical experts’ discussion of pain in childbirth, distills the racial meanings of pain as they intersect with and unfold around questions of gender and the biopolitical production of women’s bodies. This perspective registers approaches to race and gender as mutually dependent and entangled discourses, which have been advanced by scholars such as Wiegman (1995), Dietze (2011), or Stepan (1982). The discursive strategies employed by medicine in the late 1840s to construct the biopolitical meanings of female pain enable wider discourses of gendered and racialized identities. Specifically, they link race and reproduction, and transform the biopolitical knowledge on pain, race, and gender into a governmental microphysics of power. These were articulated in a proliferation of pseudoscientific (white) women’s manuals and practical books on parturition in the second half of the nineteenth century, such as Pretty’s *Aids during Labour* (1856), Holbrook’s *Parturition without Pain* (1872), and Dye’s *Pain-
less Childbirth: Healthy Mothers and Healthy Children (1882). These sources serve as the main material background of my argument.

James Y. Simpson’s arguments on “religious objections” are predominantly concerned with the legitimization of clinical obstetrics in religious and compassionate terms, and consider the reasons for birthpain only marginally. The argument he presents however, albeit in a footnote, powerfully constructs the pain of parturition as a particular gendered and racialized pathology, by introducing the aspect of civilization into bio-medical discourse. The footnote follows a blunt remark comparing the different “mechanical obstacles” of parturition in women and cows—bipeds and quadrupeds—which he carries to the conclusion that “the human mother is provided with a uterus immensely more muscular and energetic than that of any of the lower animals” (38). Having thus situated female anatomy on a biological scale reaching from animality to humanity, and invoking the paradigm of comparative anatomy, Simpson stresses how the civilizing move to walk upright effects a “vastly greater amount of muscular effort, toil, or labour” (38) required in human parturition. The evocation of the “great chain of being” implicit in Simpson’s evolutionary observation triggers the footnote, in which he links pain in childbirth to questions of race and civilization:

In some of the black tribes of the human race the muscular efforts and exertions of the uterus seem to be accompanied with comparatively little or no physical pain—there is labour without suffering. But the black woman was cursed as well as the white; and surely it cannot be irreligious to reduce the sufferings of the civilized female to the degree and amount which nature has left them existing in the uncivilized female. (38)

The passage articulates an association of “civilization” (civilized versus uncivilized)—as racial difference between black and white races—with degrees of likelihood of birthpain and, further, reproductive capacity. While the “black tribes” serve Simpson here primarily to argue the existence of childbirth without pain (and thus the nonapplicability of the primal curse to labor pain), the association implicitly articulates a racial taxonomy of physical pain that carries different biopolitical effects for white and black female bodies. Simpson’s insertion of female bodies into a racialized scale ranging from “little or no physical pain” to “excessive suffering” indicates that medical authority articulates the meanings of gender through race, and vice versa. The two implied questions busying many scientific disciplines from medicine to anthropology in the nineteenth century—why black women experience no pain, and why white women suffer so much—are thus part of the same maneuver: securing the meanings of bodies and their “states of
exception” as objects of white and male expertise. I will follow the figurations and biopolitics of white and black femininity that evolve from Simpson’s observation and its subsequent reiterations in medical literature somewhat separately, insisting that both are fundamentally entangled with each other.

When Simpson equates lower stages of “civilization” with the capacity for easier parturition, he draws on a construction of the black female body as characterized by reproductive prowess and heightened sexuality that had been widely accepted in Western science since the middle of the eighteenth century. The comparative study of the female pelvis—pelvimetry—had evolved into a vital part of comparative anatomy, which Wiegman (1995) describes as the “dominant mode of racial meaning” (47) in nineteenth-century America, propagated by influential anthropologists, biologists, and physicians such as Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon, authors of Types of Mankind (1854), or J. H. Van Evrie (see Sorisio 2002, 14–46). Comparative anatomy produced racial and gender differences from the study of diverse bodily aspects, such as the size and shape of skulls, bones, skeletons, lungs, or the pelvis. Its different disciplines and the scientific “truths” of racial difference they produced have been extensively researched, for instance, phrenology and craniometry, popularized by Samuel Morton’s Crania Americana of 1839 (see Colbert 1997), comparative physiognomy (see Wallis 1995), spirometry (see Braun 2005), and pelviometry (see Schiebinger 2004). The latter discipline was epitomized by Cuvier’s infamous report on the dissection of the Hottentot Venus (1817). The physiological markers postulated by white scientists, generally remarking the greater size and muscularity of black reproductive organs, sanctioned the construction of “savage females” as not only overly “sexualized” and “lascivious” (Sorisio 2002, 24), but further capable of producing more offspring. Since the eighteenth century, this anatomical knowledge had been orchestrated by ethnographic and travel literature describing both easy births and “easy morals” observed among various indigenous peoples from Africa and Asia to North America.

While Simpson—probably because of the justifying nature of his argumentation—did not explicitly equate the “easier births” of “savage tribes” with a diminished susceptibility to pain, his contemporaries made the connection between easier reproduction and physiological capacities for pain. The differences found in pelviometry and comparative anatomy are transposed into differences in “feeling,” as obstetrician Thomas Denman’s observation, for instance, indicated already in 1807: “[L]ower orders of women have more easy and favorable births than those who live in affluence . . . they suffer less because they are stronger, and have less feeling and apprehension” (cited in Caton 1999, 122). Simpson’s comparison of the “savage woman” with the “suffering civilized female” reflects the transposition of comparative anatomy’s taxonomies and the racial doctrines it supported, into what I call
comparative dolorology, that articulates pain and the capacity to feel it as an index of civilization and racial evolution: civilization is visible not only in physiognomies and skull shapes, but also in the capacity for pain. Martin Pernick fittingly calls the racial and evolutionary discourse deployed over the link of sensibility to civilization the “great chain of feeling” (1987, 36), in analogy to the “great chain of being,” a concept associated with Charles Darwin’s theory that life forms and their physiologies equate different stages of evolutionary development, climaxing of course in the Anglo-Saxon male.

As medical historian Donald Caton notes, the doctrine of different degrees of sensitivity had been introduced by eighteenth-century physician Robert Whytt, who had argued for environmental factors that influence the nervous system and thus the sensitivity to pain, and the later transformations of this theory by Pierre Flourens (1812) and Johannes Müller (1824), who linked sensibility to the development of the brain (see Caton 1999, 117–21). In the increasing grip of the positivist sciences, sensibility (an always also “social” quality) was displaced by “sensitivity,” denoting a bodily impressionability grounded in the physiological. Susceptibility to pain in this sense was expressive of physiological refinement, development of the nerves, and consequently an evolution in terms of civilization as “sensitivity.” The doctrine was accepted throughout the nineteenth century, as the remark by Silas Weir Mitchell, notorious inventor of the rest cure and model for the doctor/husband in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s The Yellow Wallpaper of 1892, indicates: “In our process of being civilized we have won an intensified capacity to suffer . . . the savage does not feel pain as we do” (cited in Caton 1999, 121).

Even in the twentieth century, differences in pain capacity functioned as racial markers. Physiological characteristics, now formulated within more sophisticated vocabularies, were less substituted than supplemented by psychological factors (such as racism). In 1953 for example, an article in the medical journal Anesthesiology entitled “The Negro as Anesthetic Risk,” reasons about the “peculiar liability of the Negro to sudden death under anesthesia.” The article wavers undecidedly between both psychological and physiological reasons; it reformulates truisms of nineteenth-century scientific racism within a new clinical vocabulary, but also names racial oppression as a psychological factor. Eventually, the author asserts:

No real rapport can be established with the Negro patient. . . . His inarticulateness and inability to introspect and to analyze ideas and emotions are additional barriers. . . . The Negro’s primitive reactions to life accounts for the high proportion of wounds of violence in this race. . . . [T]hese patients lack the intellectual ability to interpret fully and to describe the sensation of pain. . . . [T]he opinion is
often offered that the cardiovascular system of the Negro is inferior to that of the white race. (Poe 1953)

Ultimately, the article defends a rearticulation of fundamental and natural difference between white and black bodies, which is evidenced in the patient's decreased “sensitivity” to and understanding of pain: “That the nervous system of the Negro differs in many ways from that of the white race is supported by much evidence.”

The nineteenth-century linkage of civilization as race to bodily sensitivity implies a range of effects. It inserts white and black female bodies into a scale of degrees of civilization, indexed by the capacity to feel pain. Female bodies become a vital index of the respective advancement of civilization, allowing for the articulation of biologically conceived races as civilizations. Sensitivity to pain thus reflects the topoi of social Darwinism, also known as “cultural evolutionism—the idea that human groups differed in the stage of evolution which they had obtained” (Briggs 2000, 248), and supplements its doctrines with a double economy of sensibility: on the biological and cultural evolutionary scale, civilization refers to an increased sensitivity to pain, and, within in the political framework of sentimentalism, to a higher level of sympathy as humanity. On the same ground, the black body is constructed as inferior humanity: the object-status of black bodies, and the notorious “three-fifths of a person” rule in contemporary politics designating the restricted capacity of self-possession of black subjects, are here spelled out as the inferior ability of black women to feel pain, to “own” their bodily experiences, and consequently to feel any sympathy in the terms of sentimental humanism.

Pertaining to the American slave economy, the negation of sensitivity in black female bodies served a crucial purpose: the insertion of African American women into the “working/breeding” regimes of plantation slavery. As, among others, Kapsalis stresses, the logistics and perpetuation of plantation slavery depended heavily on “the slave woman’s reproductive capacity” (Kapsalis 2002, 268), especially after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade in 1808 had outlawed the import of enslaved subjects from abroad. To increase slave capital in the plantation economy, female slaves were sexually exploited by their white masters in addition to the exploitation of their workforce: “Owners had a financial interest in slaves producing children and openly encouraged ‘breeding.’ Women known as breeders bought higher prices on the slave market” (D’Emilio and Freedman 1988, 99–100). Obstetrician John Pretty’s remark, directed at a white female audience considering anesthetized parturition, in this respect designates implicitly one of the crucial points of the plantation economy: “In no particular is there so marked a difference between women in a savage and civilized state, as
the condition that exists after delivery: "the former return immediately to their pursuits as usual, while the latter require to be kept quiet in the recumbent position for several days" (1856, 8–9; my italics).

The simultaneous association of the black female body with a heightened sexuality and a diminished capacity for pain—the crucial double meaning of bearing children with facility—therefore sanctions their rigorous subjection within the slave economy where reproduction is part of the exploitative power impacting on black women: the slave’s reproductive labor in birth is no different from plantation labor, and the disavowal of pain reflects the thorough commodification of African American women in the slave economy.

Further, an inferior capacity for pain in the African body is interpreted as a fundamental incapacity for sympathy, and thus for sociality in terms of feeling with others. This view frequently was used to justify the severing of family structures among slaves, especially required for the selling of children when they reached a marketable age. Sorisio traces this aspect in Van Evrie’s work Negro and Negro “Slavery” of 1861, an important publication of scientific racism:

Negro women’s maternal instincts . . . are “more closely approximate to the animal.” . . . While the Negro mother has “boundless affection” for her infant, at twelve to fifteen she is “relatively indifferent to it” and “at forty she does not recognize it.” . . . Science, once again, defended legal and social practice. Children could be separated from their mothers at an earlier age. (2002, 35)

J. Marion Sims’s medical experiments on slave women, as mentioned in my introductory analysis, entail a further articulation of the nonsentient black female body.21 Significantly, the women Sims operated on suffered from vaginal fistulas, which resulted less in a diminished ability for work in the field than for reproductive work. Sims’s judgment that he rescued those women “unfit for the duties required of a servant” (1885, 227) in his private clinic therefore implies their diminished worth, a loss of “functionality” in the slave economy. “She will not die, but will never get well,” Sims told the master of one of his subjects. The experiments Sims conducted led not only to the invention of the speculum. The gynecological technique he was to pioneer through many operations on at least seven women over the course of several years up to 1849 was the “silver suture”—the use of silver wires for the intrauterine removal of fistulas. Sims’s memoir references three women by name (Betsey, Anarcha, and Lucy), on each of whom he performed up to thirty operations:
Besides these three cases, I got three or four more to experiment on, and there was never a time that I could not, at any day, have had a subject for operation. But my operations all failed, so far as a positive cure was concerned. This went on, not for one year, but for two and three, and even four years. (241)

Unsurprisingly, the pain of his “subjects” during these operations almost never enters his recollections, and if so, only to reify the “grim stoicism which may have been part of their racial endowment” (Kapsalis 2002, 273) under surgery: “That was before the days of anesthetics, and the poor girl, on her knees, bore the operation with great heroism and bravery” (Sims 1885, 237). What Sims’s memoir features, however, are remarks that stress the objecthood of these women, their property relation to Sims, and the financial trouble the research caused the young doctor: “I kept all these negroes at my own expense all the time” (241). Sims’s “most important discovery of the age for the relief of suffering humanity” (246), in other words, is organized through a displacement of pain in black bodies through physiological and ownership discourses. And further, the discussion around the reproductive pain and pathology in white female bodies—the object of gynecology and obstetrics—in this perspective is relayed over the construction of the black female body as not only reproductively superior but also insensitive.

The simultaneous construction of black femininity in terms of reproduction and sexuality, and a supposedly diminished capacity to feel pain that indexes “evolutionary primitivism” for the white specialist, is an important figuration not only in Sims’s discourse: it enables white science to transfer the scientific knowledge gained from black women unto white women without losing racial difference. The basic assumption allowing this exchange, as Kapsalis notes, is the fundamental “internal sameness” (2002, 275) of women in their reproductive role. Installing reproduction as the “nature” of femininity enabled medical experts to wield the black female body—though sexually excessive and pathological—as indeed closer to the “natural” function of women. The “romanticized natural primitive” (Sorisio 2002, 23) was used in certain ways as an idealized projection of womanhood. Birth manuals and obstetric texts of the time reiterated this trope in plenty of forms and modulations. For example, John Pretty’s Aids During Labour (1856) links lesser pain and easier reproduction in “the savage state” to the opinion that healthy births occur when women live in “natural simplicity”:

In a state of natural simplicity, women, in all climates, bear their children easily, and recover speedily. . . . In a savage state,
women . . . bear children with facility. . . . If we are to believe some who have lived among barbarians, and written of their habits, childbirth in them is uniformly easy . . . nearly as much so as the performance of the simplest of the animal functions. (3–4)

The association of racial identity with pain here is modulated into an argument about the nature of femininity, allowing for the positioning of women of all races in an ideal state of “simplicity” while maintaining the racial differentiation of civilized and savage. Londa Schiebinger notes the fundamental connection of femininity to nature and the “primitive” in her comparative study of male and female skeletons, where gender difference trumps distinctions in civilization:

[A]natomists came to believe that differences between male and female bodies were so vast that women’s development had been arrested at a lower stage of evolution. . . . Neither in the development of the species nor in the development of the individual were women thought to attain the full “human” maturity exemplified by the white male. In terms of both physical and social development, these anatomists classified women with children and “primitive” peoples. (1987, 63)

The gendered comparability of white and black women in terms of reproduction, simultaneously undergirding and depending on the white male gynecologist/obstetrician, plays a crucial role in medical science’s impact on the negotiations of gender roles on the one hand, and racial difference on the other, in the antebellum republic. Nancy Stepan writes that “gender was found to be remarkably analogous to race, such that the scientist could use racial difference to explain gender difference, and vice versa” (cited in Sorisio 2002, 23). Though black femininity is always secured as marginal in terms of a “natural pathology”—black sexuality described as “heathen, lascivious, and excessive” (Kapsalis 2002, 274)—the figuration of “natural simplicity” characteristic of African American women featured prominently in medical and popular science texts to construct the “unnatural state” of white American women.

This instance of a comparative dolorology—employed in the negotiation of racial and gender difference—demonstrates how the pain of reproduction and its link to civilization works as a relay, through which white male science constructs two politically crucial figures: the “overcivilized” white woman, who experiences birthpain as pathology; and the primitive, sexualized African woman, lacking sensitivity to pain. Hazel Carby has named this alignment of white and black women in antebellum America “[white
femininity’s] dialectical relationship with the alternative sexual code associated with the black woman” (cited in Sorisio 2002, 34). Laura Briggs elaborates on the mutual dependency of these two figurations, in which the construction of race and gender works in interlocking ways: “[T]he frailty and nervousness of one group provided the raison d’être of obstetrics and gynecology, while the insensate hardness of the other offered the grounds on which they became experimental ‘material’ that defined its progress” (2000, 247). The discussion of reproductive pain (or supposed absence thereof) in female bodies functions as a central discursive platform over which white and black femininity are constructed against each other by white male agents of power.

**OVERCIVILIZATION AND SELF-CONDUCT**

Medical discourses on pain and sensitivity in this view lock white and black female bodies in a complex, dialectical relationship in the antebellum period. Oversensitivity and nonsensitivity, spelled out as indexes of civilization and refinement, are racializing tropes to maintain white women’s disenfranchisement in patriarchal society and black women’s subjugation within the plantation economy. The medical discourses of this period repeatedly engages black and white female bodies in a taxonomy of comparability—or “internal sameness”—which legitimizes the simultaneous pathologization of white and objectification of black women through the same trope of sensitivity to pain. Hegemonic medical discourses of the nineteenth century provide in this view a critical site over which the terms of social participation of women are negotiated, not only in terms of gender, but more fundamentally in terms of race. They pit white and black women in an unspoken competitive relation over which racialized femininity is closer to “true femininity” in terms of dealing with pain, and thus reproduction.

This racial underpinning of the medical discourses on reproduction, civilization, and birthpain transformed remarkably in the second half of the nineteenth century, a shift which the remainder of this chapter will follow. In the first half, the medical doctrine of white women’s nervousness, hysteria, and sexual pathology, as Sorisio argues, “naturalizes the Doctrine of Separate Spheres, the concept that a true woman was pious, pure, submissive, and domestic” (2002, 30). While this function of medical science as countermeasure to women’s suffrage, epitomized by the Declaration of Sentiments in 1848, has been frequently criticized by feminist historians, the persistent racial workings of this discourse have seldom been analyzed.

Several factors influenced the American discourse on reproduction and race in the later nineteenth century: the abolition of the South’s slave economy after the Civil War and the subsequent “emergence” of African
American citizens, and an increasing concern over immigration numbers in the wake of the 1849 gold rush (reflected in the implementation of immigration policies, starting with the Page Act of 1875 which was the first federal immigration law regulating the entry of immigrants considered bad). Against this background, scientific racism and sexism influencing the U.S. racial order changed considerably, and the discourse of ontologized differences, which stabilized the plantation economy, were rearticulated in terms of racial populations.

Here, the comparative dolorology installed by white male science unfolds into a biopolitical regime: the discourse over birthpain in female bodies, especially after 1865, is transformed into a discourse over populations and their desired numerical reproduction, their biopolitical management, their projected development, their growth or diminishing. Racialized questions of birthpain in medical literature increasingly relate to comparable rates of fertility on the one hand, and the white female body as the risk-frayed and endangered source of white, racial sustenance on the other. The discourses of scientific racism and sexism, constructing ontologized differences, in other words are transformed into biopolitical rationales employed in the management of racialized populations, which in Foucauldian terms can be called the shift to a governmental system of rule. Jonathan Xavier Inda has described the logic of governmental biopolitics as follows:

"[G]overnment" designates not just the activities of the state and its institutions but more broadly any rational effort to influence or guide the conduct of human beings through acting upon their hopes, desires, circumstances or environment . . . whether these be workers, children, communities, families, the sick . . . the principal target of government is population. (2005, 1–4)

My focus for the analysis of the governmentalization of birthpain—the projection of the meanings of individual bodies onto racialized populations—will be on the construction and agency of white women in this process, and how the discourses of birthpain and sensibility informed crucially the racial repercussions of debates over womanhood, racial populations, and reproduction.

“Frailty and nervousness,” and thus excessive pain in childbirth, were relentlessly articulated in medical treatises on (white) female sexuality throughout the nineteenth century. Its causes were linked to “morbidity,” “malformation,” “a weakened system,” “excessive sensibility”—a rhetoric that deploys white women as having degenerated from their natural reproductive functions. The discourse of degeneration entered the medical and obstetric literature on and for women slowly but steadily. John
Pretty in 1856 traced pain in parturition primarily to the cause of the education of white women and a delayed entrance into the machinery of reproduction, an argument targeting mainly the lifestyles of middle-class women and articulating the classic notion of the lifelong mother: “Not only are women educated in a most unnatural way, and their proper development checked . . . they also too often, from marrying unnaturally late in life, fall pregnant at an age when many women have almost or quite ceased child-bearing” (6). While this description is intelligible within the framework of “naturalizing . . . separate spheres” (Sorisio 2002, 30), aimed at keeping white women’s social and political participation at bay, later medical accounts transform arguments on “proper femininity” into questions of female and racial health. In Walter Channing’s 1868 Treatise on Etherization, the racializing trope of civilization is articulated clearly in the pathological and physical terms of “morbidicity.” He describes the effects of white, middle-class refinement on the reproductive muscles as resulting in “morbid conditions of the passages, such as excessive sensibility and others, with which all practitioners of midwifery are so well acquainted. . . . It is to relieve the unnecessary suffering which results from those conditions referred to, that etherization is employed.”

Holbrook’s Parturition without Pain (1872), largely a compilation of medical experts’ opinions on the topic, cites a certain Dr. Dewees and his opinion on pain as morbidity: “[P]ain in childbirth is a morbid symptom; that it is a perversion of nature caused by modes of living not consistent with the most healthy condition of the system” (22). As medical experts articulated, civilized refinement renders white women incapable of dealing with both their biology and their social demands. As a case in point for this reasoning, American physician George Engelmann’s book Labour Among Primitive Peoples (1882) transforms the racialization of pain into a civilization check for white women, and exhibits the effortless transitioning from the higher sensibility of white people to the danger of the modern “over civilized” woman:

Among primitive peoples, still natural in their habits and living under conditions which favor the healthy development of their physical organization, labor may be characterized as short and easy, accompanied by few accidents and followed by little or no prostrations. . . . The nearer civilization is approached, the more trying does the ordeal of childbirth [become.] The system suffers from the abuses of civilization, its dissipations, and the follies of fashion. On account of the idle life led, and the relaxed condition of the uterus and abdominal walls, there is greater tendency to malpositions; additional difficulties are presented by weakened organization,
and the languid neurasthenic conditions of the subjects in civilized communities. (cited in Caton 1999, 122)

As is visible in Engelmann’s account, the rhetoric of “pain in women” as it links reproduction and civilization spans several genres and modes of address. Engelmann’s simultaneous evocation of racial anthropology, cultural evolutionism, cultural critique, and medical observation reflects a shift in knowledge production that the discourses of gynecology and obstetrics partook in. For while female sexuality—as a gendered and racialized figuration—was increasingly subjected to male scientific inquiry in the nineteenth century, its pathologizing circumscriptions were since the introduction of anesthesia frequently articulated in popular treatises and health manuals that did not address male professionals, but were aimed at white women themselves. A contemporary advertisement for Books on Health for Women (Holbrook 1872) may suggest the diverse aspects of life that the question of reproduction and the female body touched on: *Uterine Diseases, Our Girls, What to Wear?, Painless Childbirth, or: Healthy Mothers and Healthy Children, Sexual Physiology, Parturition Without Pain.*

Reaching a wide and white female readership, these health manuals, *books for women* and *codes of direction* regulated everything from dress to diet and proper social and sexual conduct. They provided powerful tools to male hegemonic discourse to construct white “women’s lives [as] structured around their biological capabilities for motherhood” (Poovey 1987, 148) on the one hand, and as reflecting the dangers of civilization on the other. White femininity was thus constructed not only as in need of constant professional monitoring and male expertise to ensure its “natural” functioning, but also as a rigid regime of self-control. The transition from medical treatises—such as John Pretty’s *Aids during Labour* (1856), aimed at male medical experts—to birth manuals and practical books like *Parturition without Pain* (1872), which targeted women (and husbands), reflects a transposition of scientific, pathologizing discourses to governmental programs, prescribing the proper modes of self-conduct for women pursuing *Painless Childbirth* (1882), for instance, avoiding “morbidity” and racial degeneration. The discourses of anesthesia, and the more general evocation of “pain in white women’s bodies” facilitate thus the changing modalities of biopower in democratic-capitalist systems.

Like the earlier texts negotiating the effects of anesthesia in parturition for a medical audience, these governmental texts articulate a notion of white femininity as a split corporeality: a natural reproductive body, corrupted by a too-civilized mind and lifestyle. The possibility of pathologies emerging with the advancement of culture and civilization is delegated to the female body and its reproductive function. Holbrooks’s *Parturition without Pain* lists cultural advancements as they threaten reproduction: “Engrossing literary
pursuits, no less than anxiety, care, and an overtaxed physical system, interferes with procreation” (1872, 111). Pain in “overcivilized” women functions as an index for both the advance in and the risks of cultural evolution, and the ideals of the white American middle class—education, fashion, urban lifestyles—translate to nervousness, sterility, low fertility. Excessive sensibility, nervousness, and overcivilization are in this view diagnoses engaged in the negotiation of gender roles. The vital connection between the biopolitical framing of white reproduction and the discourse of nervousness is made by Laura Briggs:

“Overcivilization” did two simultaneous kinds of cultural work in response to crises of modernity: stabilizing the meaning of racial difference while providing a (reactionary) response to the changing roles of women and meanings of gender. . . . “Overcivilized” women avoided sex and were unwilling or incapable of bearing many (or any) children, “savage” women gave birth easily and often, and were hypersexual. (2000, 249)

The shift toward both a concern over populations, and prescriptions of “proper” feminine behavior as a governmental form of self-conduct is important to note here. It reflects a transition in the discourse of gendered science from a focus of the pathology of a generalized female body toward the concern over situated female bodies, their reproductive health, which is aligned with the future of racialized populations. The frequent diagnosis of “overcivilization” triggers programs of self-management for women (temperance, early marriage, concentration on motherhood, avoiding exhaustion) and a catalogue of risks to reproduction, which are to be avoided for the sake of the race. With the shift to governmental modes of power, the pathological relation between femininity and culture is thus increasingly circumscribed within a paradigm of “health,” both in terms of female health and the health of white civilization in general.

FROM WOMEN’S ANESTHESIA TO FEMINIST EUGENICS

The fear of degeneration (through education, sexuality, sociality) of white women, expressed in excessive birthpain, sterility, and a resulting low fertility, effectively constructed not only the pathologized figure of the overcivilized, hysterical woman, which medical discourse wielded as symptomatic for the social participation of women. The hysterical was further framed within a larger racial rationale concerned with the reproduction of whiteness. Excessive birthpain and its attending symptoms of fewer and late-born children were used to construct white women as a danger to the numerical superiority
of the white population. Gynecological and obstetric literature, “by insisting that white women were becoming sterile and weak while non-white remained fertile and strong . . . encoded white women’s transgressive behavior as a danger to the future of ‘the race’” (Briggs 2000, 250).

In the Reconstruction era, when African American birth rates were no longer contained within the human chattel economics of slavery, and immigration numbers—especially from Asia—reached new heights, the construction of “primitive” women giving birth with facility was reformulated as the potential threat of white society’s being outnumbered by “foreign” bodies aspiring to citizenship. The nervous woman, experiencing hard and few births, was thus constructed as a figure signifying the phantasmatic concept “race suicide” (see King and Ruggles 1990), that is, the self-destruction of the white race through lower birth rates.

The white reproductive body thus not only functions as the site where white women’s rights are fought off in gendered terms, it further comes to embody the vital resource of white racial dominance. This identification of white femininity with the future of the race leads to a noticeable shift in women’s medical literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century. While immigration steadily increased, the poorer districts of the urban centers grew, and African Americans from the Southern states began populating the cities, women’s manuals supplemented their biological explanations of female pathology with arguments regarding populations, selective reproduction, health, and “sexual hygiene.” Evolutionist and social Darwinist thoughts from Darwin’s Origin of Species (1859), Herbert Spencer’s The Social Organism (1860), and especially Francis Galton’s immensely popular work on heredity, Hereditary Genius (1869), began appearing in popular treatises on reproduction. Under rubrics such as “Shall sickly people raise children?” or “Small Families,” these texts developed an early eugenicist politics which articulated the purification of races as a governmental program for women and husbands. Holbrook’s Parturition Without Pain cites Galton in 1872 with an elaboration of what his findings on the heredity of personal attributes (such as health, intelligence, refinement) meant for sexual and reproductive discipline:

The time may hereafter arrive . . . when the population of the earth shall be kept as strictly within the bounds of number and suitability of race . . . in the meantime, let us do what we can to encourage the multiplication of the races best fitted to invent and conform to a high and generous civilization, and not, out of a mistaken instinct of giving support to the weak, prevent the incoming of strong and hearty individuals. (cited in Holbrook 1872, 100)
The white female body’s role is thus transposed: while its sexuality continues to be circumscribed in terms of fragility and high risk of pathology, its reproductive function emerges as the site where white society has to manage its preservation and evolution, its racial health. Excessive nervousness, overcivilization, and other pathologies not only signify the “otherness” of women, but are reformulated as threats to racial composition and in need of careful surveillance and management. The women’s manual Healthy Mothers and Healthy Children, for example, cites a certain Dr. Baker to argue the direct relation between white women’s morbid anatomy and racial degeneration via the concept of heredity:

While the reproductive organs are not the seat of life, it is a well-established fact in physiology and pathology that they exert a most profound influence upon the performance of every function of the animal economy. Concerned as they are with the transmission of life, it is through them that vital and other characteristics are handed down to posterity, so that the welfare of the future generations depends materially upon their inheritance. Children born of parents suffering from diseases of these organs are generally defective in vital and other qualities, ill-tempered, sickly and short-lived. (Dye 1882, 19)

Darwinist and social Darwinist thinking installs the white female body at a critical juncture between evolution, the management of populations, and racial future. “Other” bodies, invested with painlessness and therefore ease of reproduction, are now increasingly described in terms of not only blackness, but more generally racial otherness, class, and the associated “levels of barbarity.” Healthy Mothers, for example, lists class position as an important influence on fecundity:

Social position, no doubt, has something to do with fecundity, and without making any inquiry into the sexual relations of the rich and poor, I will state that women who live in luxury and fashion are not so prolific as their poorer sisters. [There is] greater prevalence of uterine diseases among wealthy ladies in proportion to their numbers, which may partially account for the difference in the size of families. On the other hand, many weak and feeble women have a numerous progeny. (Dye 1882, 228)

Weakness and feebleness here relate obviously not to the reproductive capacity of lower-class women, but rather to their attributes in terms
of social, mental, and bodily “fitness”—and their desirability. Books such as Healthy Mothers and Healthy Children translate these implicit threats to racial and class dominance into governmental prescription for white women and husbands. They feature numerous suggestions for female self-conduct that articulate a positive eugenics, namely, the encouragement of artificial selection and racial improvement through a private politics of marriage and reproduction:

We should seek in marriage to neutralize . . . the morbid hereditary elements which may be found in husband and wife. . . . We should seek to oppose the debility of one parent by the strong constitution of the other. . . . Among the lower animals the most studious care is taken to breed only from the very best quality of the stock: quantity is sacrificed to quality; and is the welfare of the human race of any less importance? (Dye 1882, 28)

The paradigm of health and racial welfare presented in the medical discourses on reproduction put white women in a significant social position as “mothers of whiteness.” In the same way that nervousness and excessive sensitivity had been associated with whiteness, the management of her reproductive body, refinement of hereditary qualities became the virtue of “healthy mothers.” It was therefore no contradiction when women’s manuals asserted not only the importance of women’s autonomy in questions of whom to marry, and frequently suggested abortion and the use of contraceptives for those considered “unfit”: “Would these parents do wrong in refusing to be instrumental in multiplying a race of paupers?” (Holbrook 1872, 31). In fact, the paradigm of racial health required white women to enact autonomy and responsibility, because they were considered to be the main source of hereditary attributes—both diseases and positive attributes—and therefore the source for the improvement of the race: “We assert that it is the privilege of every woman to control her maternal function—to say when she shall have children, and how many” (Dye 1882, 28).

The social Darwinist concepts of heredity and eugenics were widely accepted and propagated by prominent figures such as William Graham Sumner, Alexander Graham Bell, and Theodore Roosevelt beginning in the 1880s. Several protagonists of early-nineteenth-century feminism, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Margaret Sanger, and Victoria Woodhull embraced the increased significance of white motherhood and white women’s national responsibility implied in these discourses for purposes of women’s empowerment. Prominent feminist Elizabeth Cady Stanton, co-author of the 1848 Declaration of Sentiments, for instance, is quoted at length in Holbrook’s Parturition without Pain. The activist gives her account of how
to achieve pain-free childbirth, and in her argumentation fuses a demand for emancipation with a discourse on health, racial difference, and, finally, inherited physiological and racial qualities:

We must educate our daughters to think that motherhood is grand, and that God never cursed it. And the curse, if it be a curse, may be rolled off, as man has rolled away the curse of labor . . . . If you suffer, it is not because you are cursed of God, but because you violate his laws . . . . We know that among Indians the squaws do not suffer in childbirth. They will step aside from the ranks, even on the march, and return in a short time bearing with them the new-born child . . . . I am the mother of seven children. My girlhood was spent in the open air. I early imbibed the idea that a girl was just as good as a boy, and I carried it out. I would walk five miles before breakfast, or ride ten on horseback. After I married I wore my clothing sensibly . . . . I never compressed my body out of its natural shape. When my first four children were born, I suffered very little. I then made up my mind that it was totally unnecessary for me to suffer at all; so I dressed lightly, walked every day, lived as much as possible in the open air, eat no condiments or spices, kept quiet, listened to music, looked at pictures, and took proper care of myself . . . . I know this is not being delicate and refined, but if you would be vigorous and healthy, in spite of the diseases of your ancestors, and your own disregard of nature’s laws, try it. (Stanton, quoted in Holbrook 1872, 79; my italics)

Stanton’s passage links several discourses and interventions: in her argument, white women are able to claim autonomy and refute the stigma of hystericalized pain by propagating and enacting healthy lifestyles. Health in turn invokes the paradigm of not only racial otherness and “the savage,” as in Stanton’s reference to the pain-freedom of Native Americans. The discourse of healthy living and the resulting painless births further references the idea of racial heredity and racial purification—and the important role of white women in the maintenance and management of both. Stanton’s demand for “vigour” and “health” thus manages to extract a “racial dividend,” which emerges from the discourse over reproduction, sensitivity, and civilization: empowerment of white women can be bought from the malestream by investing in the racial logistics expressed in the questions over birthpain and healthy lifestyles. As Susann Neuenfeldt demonstrates in her analysis of nineteenth-century essays by women writers (2011), white women procured this racial dividend by enabling American culture to forget the foundational genocide of Native Americans. Stanton’s argument
achieves this mode of forgetting by imagining Native American women as reproducing effortlessly and without pain, thus presenting Native Americans as a "savage" species, whose reproductive fate is secure and unhampered by genocide because of their status as savages.

The equation of healthy women and racial health with the attending imperatives for both women’s autonomy and reproductive responsibility, was frequently asserted in more explicit terms than Stanton’s. Diana Seitler cites Victoria Woodhull, an outspoken feminist who famously ran for American presidency in 1874: “The first principle of the breeder's art is to weed out the inferior animals to avoid conditions which give a tendency to reversion and then to bring together superior animals under the most favorable conditions” (2003, 67). Gail Bederman has argued that this racially based feminism advocated strongly that women’s sexual responsibility was integral to racial survival, and legitimized women’s rights by an appeal to nativist ideologies: “White, native born Americans could choose either women’s sexual dependence, leading to racial decline and barbarism, or women’s sexual equality, leading to racial advance and the highest civilization ever evolved” (1995, 136).

The same tropes of excessive pain that in the first half of the nineteenth century allowed medical science to naturalize the separate spheres doctrine were claimed by feminists to project a negative image of “unfit” and “degenerate women,” which was often explicitly identified with immigration, poverty, and racial difference. The shift from medical science’s focus on scientific sexism to the racial management of populations allowed white feminists to articulate women’s rights in terms of racial necessity—only free, autonomous, and healthy white women could defend white supremacy against the ever‑multiplying racial minorities. Several feminists thus claimed racial status from the equation of levels of civilization with capacities for pain and continued to be prominent figures of the eugenics movement until well into the twentieth century (see Lindquist Dorr 1999; Doyle 2004). Seitler, who has traced the eugenic politics informing significant aspects of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s writing, asserts the ambivalence of late-nineteenth-century white feminist politics, which frequently achieved gender empowerment by adopting the racist and classist discourse of health and moral hygiene as national purity:

While the “new woman” was stretching the boundaries of gender definition, white, middle-class feminist reformers were busy worrying over the destruction of the home through moral and social “contagion” in the form of prostitution, sexual disease, drunkenness, and the new public character of femininity. Because of women’s capacity to pass down either health or disease to future genera-
tions, young girls, as potential mothers, became the focus of a campaign to stave off the degeneration of the nation. (Seitler 2003, 66–67)²⁹

The concept of nation here represents primarily the racial community of whiteness, while the forms of moral corruption are frequently associated with the racial and class status of immigrants and other nonwhites. Feminists such as Gilman or Stanton claim social participation by insisting that the “fate of the race” depended on them, while male medical experts and politicians were able to construct and manage white women as simultaneous source and threat to racial purity and white dominance, both in terms of civility and numbers. The scientific and discursive trope of comparative pain and sensibilities—which I call comparative dolorology—that categorizes women of different races in terms of their reproductive capacity, therefore, cuts two ways: it enables medical science to construct the overcivilized white women versus the insensitive savage women. Moreover, it allows white feminists to argue for white women’s social emancipation (thereby repudiating the stigma of hysteria) by asserting their responsibility to maintain racial health and integrity. “Nervousness” in the nineteenth century, in other words, builds on notions of whiteness, as does the feminist counterstrategy of propagating painless, “healthy mothers.”

The shift of gender concepts achieved by nineteenth-century white feminists built significantly on a nexus of civilization and pain that participated in discourses of racially constructed bodies. Pain as an index for civilization enabled the transposition of the naturalizing and pathologizing effects of medical science from ontology (scientific sexism and racism) to governmental programs concerning the self-conduct of racialized populations. The discourse of pain—and the racially differentiating dolorology it projects—in this view informed a patriarchal discourse, which white feminists effectively criticized. But moreover, its equation of race, evolution, and sensitivity provided the discursive means by which white women could claim social and national status. In the late-nineteenth-century cultural climate of increasing fears of immigrants, Jim Crow segregation, and class differentiation, this resulted partially in feminism’s identification with a nativist agenda³⁰ and the racially charged terms of health, hygiene, and reproduction.

ANESTHESIA AND DEMOCRACY

In short, abolition of pain and suffering became a major motive for reform of nineteenth-century society.

—Donald Caton, What a Blessing She Had Chloroform
The three figurations—white men, white women, and black women—that I introduced in the beginning of this chapter are aligned in a complex manner in the connective space of dolorology that emerges from debates around anesthesia in obstetrics. The debates and texts on different pain potentials in these bodies lock the three figures in dynamic relations: white male science on anesthesia regulates which bodies have access to pain, experience, and self-ownership, and whether this access or exclusion speaks to pathology, civilization, or knowledge. This biopolitical master discourse frames white and black women in a competitive relation over reproduction, proper femininity, and the meanings of race. Moreover, these racial meanings underlying the gendering discourse of nervousness (and insensitivity) dictate the terms by which white women could liberate themselves from the stigma of overcivilization. Women of color emerge in this triangle as a basically silent catalyst. They figure as medical material for scientists’ interrogation of femininity, embodying a simultaneously idealized (fertile) and pathologized (hypersexual, savage) female body. With the shift toward governmental discourses, this same “savage femininity” is reformulated as a populationist, reproductive threat. As a catalyst, the racial construction of the “savage woman” triggers and supports the gender negotiations between white women and white men. I’d like to stress that, while feminism’s partial subscription to the racial meanings of pain and reproduction is particularly important, this argument is best understood “within” a male scientific master discourse on pain that fundamentally links sensibility not only to gender, but also to race. Discourses of gender are thus always constructed, negotiated, and altered in relation to discourses of race and class. As the discourses around birthpain have shown, pain enables hegemonic discourse to negotiate bodies as gendered and racialized at the same time, and relate their corporealities to questions of racial futures, social participation, and national identity.

A further argument has addressed the dramatic change in the rationale of racial differentiation toward the end of the nineteenth century: scientific racism—which before the Civil War was the vital discourse to legitimize chattel slavery—is reformulated into the more decentralized and governmental forms of personal health, hygiene, and individual responsibility for “racial integrity”—addressing mostly white women. The epistemic shift in this process is one from idealized types of racial essences to racial populations and their management as risks and resources within a racialized national project. Not only do these discourses differ radically in how they think the racialized subject (essences versus risk potentials)—they also transpose centralized race politics (e.g., miscegenation laws) into the sphere of personal autonomy and white racial responsibility. And further, they to a certain extent dictate the terms of their critique, as is visible in early feminism’s significant participation in the discourse of racial health. The discourse around pain
in childbirth—or the nexus of sensibility, civilization, and reproduction—is the cultural site through which these issues are negotiated.

Pain’s essentializing effects are therefore visible not only in the pathologizing gender discourses of male medical sciences, where it serves simultaneously the stigmatization of white women, the objectification of black women, and the (scientific) authority of white men. Apart from this indeed hegemonic character of the discourse on pain, the nexus articulating “the great chain of feeling” (Pernick 1987, 36) further contributes to the important shift toward social Darwinist paradigms in American cultural and racial discourse in the late nineteenth century. These are vitally manifest in increasingly governmental texts prescribing racially legitimate forms of femininity and constructing white women’s role in American society in simultaneously more autonomous and more racially charged terms. The discourse of pain enables the projection of “racial responsibility” onto primarily white women’s bodies, as early eugenicist and evolutionist arguments from Darwin to Spencer and Galton begin to influence notions of the political and the national. Several white feminists crucially participate in this racial logic as they fend off gendered stigmatizations. Laura Briggs has described the discourse of civilization and sensibility, and its figurations of the overcivilized white female and the insensitive savage/immigrant, as an important site to understand the cultural anxieties and crises of nineteenth-century America:

The story of the sexuality and reproduction of the “savage” and the neurasthenic offered a great deal: it resolved the cultural ambiguities about race, immigration, imperialism, Indian wars, urbanization, and the “woman question” into a single, readily understood tale. White women of a certain class were failing to reproduce while “savage” women were prolifically fertile. Whiteness was imperiled. (2000, 266)

Juxtaposed with Elaine Scarry’s remark on the ritualized functionalization of pain’s “sheer material factualness” (1985, 14) by societies in crisis, this chapter has demonstrated how the corporealizations, enabled through the discourse of pain and civilization, have constituted vital sites where pressing questions of the national are resolved through bodily answers. The “body in pain” is borrowed to address and sanction class organization, social participation of gendered subjects, and the racial order of an America that confronted increasing immigration by “marginal bodies” and African American citizenship. In this cultural climate, pain enables the negotiation of the social through the body.

The following quote by public intellectual and Harvard professor of anatomy Oliver Wendell Holmes situates these pervasive constructions of corporeal subjects through the discourse on pain in a further context, namely
that of human rights, universal suffrage, and eventually, democracy. Holmes, who also coined the term “anesthesia” as such, greeted the introduction of ether in obstetric medicine as follows: “The agony which seemed inseparable from maternity has been divorced from it, in the face of the ancestral curse resting upon womanhood. With the first painless birth, induced by an anesthetic agent, the reign of tradition was over, and humanity was ready to assert all its rights” (cited in Caton 1999, 126). The biopolitics of pain—the construction of differentiated bodies and populations within discourses around pain—here is connected vitally to the sentimental and democratic discourses nineteenth-century evocations of pain participated in. Holmes’s quote demonstrates that anesthesia was constructed as an advancement in human rights and democracy—crucially understood as “freedom from pain.” Martin Pernick writes that scientists such as James Y. Simpson or Walter Channing saw themselves as part of a “larger mid-Victorian humanitarian movement for the relief of all human suffering. [Simpson] explicitly compared painless surgery and pain-free childbirth with such causes as feminism, antislavery, and the melioration of conditions for criminals and soldiers” (1987, 78). Exemplarily, Pernick cites the letter of James Young Simpson that also served as the introduction to this book. To recall, Simpson compares the painful spectacles of slave torture with the agonies of white women giving birth:

Yesterday I was reading a letter from Dr. Howe describing a public slave-whipping scene in New Orleans where a poor shrieking girl had a series of horrid lashes inflicted on her to serve merely the temper and prejudices of the master; and while the Dr. gives a most heart-rending account of her agonies, he adds that what struck him worst of all was all the other masters maintaining that this inhuman and cruel practice of theirs was the only safe practice with slaves—just as on equally untenable grounds you still . . . maintain that the shrieking of patients in labour is the only safe practice for them. (quoted in Pernick, 78)

Simpson here squarely aligns the medical technology of anesthesia with the context of abolitionism and women’s suffrage, the two great inclusionary projects of American modernity: both “anesthesia” and “abolition” were humanist interventions into “inhuman and cruel practice” and even contributions to the establishment of human rights to pain-freedom. The comparative dolorology underlying Simpson’s argument—that female slaves suffer in torture what white women suffer in reproduction—however, not merely enacts a humanitarian politics that cares explicitly for the suffering in marginalized bodies. Rather, the exchange of “heart-rending accounts” about
pain in these bodies between white male experts also indicates that compassion and sympathy on behalf of pain work as organizing forces within liberal democracy. And crucially, the capacity to compassion is radically intertwined with the same gendered and racialized positionalities that are materialized in what I have called *comparative dolorology* in scientific discourse. Medical historian Donald Caton has somewhat uncritically pointed to this connection between the biologizing discourses on pain and the exclusion of subjects from the democratic and inclusive virtue of “compassion”:

- Individuals whose sensibilities had been heightened by education and culture not only reacted more to their own pain but also became more “sympathetic” to the pain and suffering of others. The capacity of a social group to respond “in sympathy” was cumulative and formed the basis for a civilized society. Ignorance, hard physical labor, and bad living conditions, on the other hand, made people less sensitive to their own pain and less sympathetic to the pain of others. (1999, 118–19)

The link between pain and civilization which this chapter has explored in other words regulates which bodies can participate in democracy as a compassionate system, and which not. The scientific delineation of levels of pain-sensibility thus gives meaning to race and gender differences, and renders some bodies as more sympathetic and therefore democratic than others. White women in this alignment, for example, are able to claim compassion as “sufferers” (e.g., from overcivilization), and emancipation as “healthy women” via buying into the racialized logic underlying the “great chain of feeling.” In the same argument, “colored” bodies are constructed as less civilized, therefore less sensitive and also “less compassionate.” Consequently, they are less democratic bodies.

The next chapter is interested in the shift that the abolition of slavery in the wake of the American Civil War brought about, when black bodies were not only invested with pain from which abolition could relieve them, but also were negotiated in terms of their national feelings. How did black bodies, deemed as insensitive, enter the affective economy of the American public, in which sensibility to one’s own pain as well as compassion for other bodies in pain is so important?
PICTURING RACIAL PAIN

We must remember, first of all, that the black body seldom speaks for itself.

—Paul Gilroy, Between Camps

On December 3, 1861, Frederick Douglass delivered a lecture entitled “Pictures and Progress,” discussing the popular craze for daguerreotypes and photographic portraits. While his contemporaries Walt Whitman and Ralph Waldo Emerson had enthusiastically celebrated the new medium’s “egalitarian spirit” (Meehan 2008, 15), Douglass remained ambivalent about the political uses of photographic representation. He deemed pictures unlikely to exert decisive political force, because their “faithful rendering” failed to inspire emotion and compassion: “The dead fact is nothing without the living impression. . . . This is truth, but truth disrobed of its sublimity and glory. A kind of frozen truth, destitute of motion itself—it is incapable of producing emotion in others” (Meehan 2008, 462; my italics). For Douglass, pictures were a “cold” form of representation and necessarily failed as instruments of compassionate politics. Remaining thus ambivalent about photography’s capacity to instill American sentiments in favor of the abolitionist cause—and thus the true relation of “pictures and progress”—Douglass closed his lecture by switching to the prominent topic of 1861, and delivered a fervent call for the military participation of African Americans.

For the black abolitionist, photography may have offered nominal recognition within the public sphere, but in order to achieve the necessary “emotional recognition”—i.e., to possess a body that can be compassionately felt with—for Douglass only the corporeal sacrifice in the war against slavery sufficed. Photographic representation seemed to merely obscure the sustained denial of full self-possession for black Americans, who might have circulated as visual tokens but were excluded from the military struggle over
their enslavement. It is in this sense that Douglass criticized the “decidedly conservative” (455) nature of pictures: photography literally conserves its subject, interrupts change and movement. It fixes a person in a moment of frozen truth, which for Douglass meant the not fully humanized “runaway slave.” Photography’s stillness, in this view, signified the very opposite of what the prominent abolitionist fought for—the social, political, legal, and material transformation of slaves from mercantile objects into fully autonomous, feeling, and self-possessed members of the American body.

Douglass’s attack on the stillness of photography exposes an important problem of abolitionist discourse before the war: the often patronizing framings to black testimony that white abolitionists employed. Within the conventions of the slave narrative genre, the African American perspective was generally reduced to that of the “bodily witness” (DeLombard 2007, 5) to slavery, while white patrons provided the moral and political framework to black autobiographical texts. Authors were told to limit their testimony to plain enumeration of bodily experiences, a catalogue of violations to be interpreted by white editors and readers: “Give us the facts. . . We will take care of the philosophy,” Douglass was told (quoted in Westerbeck 1998, 158). The editorial practices of white abolitionists—framing first-person narrations of former slaves with introductions, prefaces, and letters of recommendation—oftentimes separated the positions of bodily experience and political commentary along the color line. William Lloyd Garrison’s preface to Douglass’s Narrative, for example, transitions from a display of compassion to one of patriotism, and from soberly stating the averageness of Douglass’s experience to sentimental exclamation marks:

He who can peruse [the narrative] without a tearful eye, a heaving breast, an afflicted spirit—without being filled with an unutterable abhorrence of slavery and all its abettors . . . without trembling for the fate of his country . . . must have a flinty heart, and be qualified to act the part of trafficker “in slaves and the souls of men.” . . . The experience of Frederick Douglass, as a slave, was not a peculiar one . . . his case may be regarded as a very fair specimen of the treatment of slaves in Maryland . . . many have suffered incomparably more, while very few on the plantations have suffered less, than himself. Yet how deplorable was his situation! what terrible chastisements were inflicted upon his person! (Douglass 2001, 6–7)

While black subjects thus passively illustrated Southern abhorrence and Northern patriotism, the privilege of compassionate feelings, reflection, and political action on behalf of this spectacle of pain was reserved for a
white readership. This racial division of intellectual labor within abolitionist discourse also related to biologizing notions of racial difference, and their meanings for the politics of antislavery discourse. Harriet Beecher Stowe, in Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1853), commented on the different makeup of the “negro’s” nervous system and the resulting differences in emotionality in order to legitimize white framing practices for black narrations. She writes:

They are possessed of a nervous organization peculiarly susceptible and impressible . . . they give vent to their emotions with the utmost vivacity of expression, and their whole bodily system sympathizes with the movement of their minds. . . . Like Oriental nations, they incline much to outward expression, violent gesticulations, and agitating movements of the body. . . . They will laugh, weep, and embrace each other convulsively, and sometimes become entirely paralyzed and cataleptic. (Stowe 2001[1853], 27)

Stowe’s evocation of black “vivacity of expression” seeks to establish African American emotions not as equal to the political virtue of white compassionate sensitivity. Rather, the black body seems caught between the corporeal extremes of affective-sympathetic convulsion and catalepsy or loss of sensation altogether. The oversaturated corporeality associated with blackness justifies a general delegitimization of slave testimony, and Stowe, unsurprisingly, proposes that only the “colder and more correct white race” (quoted in Spillers 2003, 177) is able to control and manage the intensely corporeal vivacity of expression of black subjects. African American authors were framed primarily as bodies of evidence even when making the transition to oratory at political rallies. As Douglass noted during his career as a public speaker, white abolitionists introduced him as “graduate from the peculiar institution . . . with the diploma written on my back” (quoted in Castronovo 1999, 43). And in 1896, he reflected on the demand to perform as a corporeal witness of slavery at abolitionist conventions: “I was called upon to expose even my stripes, and with many misgivings obeyed the summons and tried thus to do my whole duty” (quoted in Mailloux 2002, 102).

Contemporaneous to these evidential logistics deployed around the black body in slave narratives, a similar rhetoric of bodily evidence organized the naturalizing and objectifying discourses of racial science. The previous chapters already touched on physiometry, craniology, and comparative anatomy, disciplines that constructed bodily shapes as evidence of evolutionary progress and ontological differences between races. The new medium of photography, regarded as the medium of both veracity and objective truth, supplemented perfectly the descriptive procedures of racial science and its rhetoric of objective measurement, which related external differences
in bodies to biological inferiority. As Mandy Reid writes: “[P]hotography functioned as an important epistemological tool for scientists because it ostensibly recorded the ‘truth’ of its subjects” (2006, 285). One of the foremost racial scientists of the antebellum era, the Swiss-born ethnologist and zoologist Louis Agassiz, was the first to supplement the scientific rhetoric with the photographic medium, more than a decade before opponents of slavery employed the medium for abolitionist purposes. Already in 1850, Agassiz commissioned the photographic capture of seven different black slaves from a plantation in Columbia, a task that was executed by local photographer J. T. Zealy. The resulting fifteen so-called slave daguerreotypes depict the individuals as examples of “African types,” because Agassiz categorized them by their alleged African origins—“Foulah,” “Congo,” “Gullah,” etc. As Brian Wallis writes in his thorough discussion of Agassiz’s visual archive, the photographs adhere to a physiognomic and phrenological approach: they “attempt to record body shape, proportions, and posture,” and “emphasize the character and shape of the head” (Wallis 1995, 45–46). Reiterating the theories of Samuel Morton’s monumental studies in phrenology, *Crania Americana* (1839) and *Crania Aegyptiana* (1844), Agassiz’s images are intended to visually demonstrate the physiometry of “African types” as evidence for their inferior position on the evolutionary scale.

Importantly, Agassiz’s images oscillate between a typologizing and individualizing rhetoric that is similar to Garrison’s typifying introduction of Frederick Douglass’s experience: while on the one hand depicting a single, specified, and named person, they simultaneously exhibit that person primarily as a typical, impersonal, and exposed body that exemplifies a racial group. What Brian Wallis calls the typological gaze, the generalizing function of the typological portrait, is characteristic to the evidential logistics of both racial science (racial type) and abolitionist discourse (racial fate). Both gazes on the black body reduce the black subject to a silenced catalogue of bodily features as evidence, be it scars or skull shapes:

The type is clearly situated within a system [of knowledge] that denies its subject even as it establishes overt relations between its mute subjects. The emphasis on the body occurs at the expense of speech; the subject is already positioned, known, owned, represented, spoken for, or constructed as silent; in short, it is ignored. In other words, the typological photograph is a form of representational colonialism. (1995, 54)

The typological rhetoric articulated in discourses of both racial science and abolitionist writing, though also functioning as photographic portraits or personal narratives, in this view silences the represented subjects by making
PICTURING RACIAL PAIN

their bodies speak by themselves through “visible taxonomies” (Wiegman 1995, 33).

The typological gaze and the evidential body are concepts that shape the readings of abolitionist photography this chapter carries out. I interpret abolitionist photographs of the Civil War in light of the interlaced representational practices established by racial science and antebellum abolitionism. The 1863 publication of the photograph commonly known as The Scourged Back, depicting the extensively scarred back of an African American male, is the epitome of the visual discourse that during the Civil War tried to achieve what Frederick Douglass had deemed impossible: to instill compassion and affective recognition for slaves via photographic representation—to link “pictures” and (democratic/racial) “progress.” This discourse, which I call photographic abolitionism, emerged during the height of the Civil War and presented a renewed propagandistic effort by abolitionists that answered to crucial social events: in 1863 the first African American regiment was organized to controversial reaction within the Union; the New York Draft Riots reflected both the racial tensions and the increasing “compassion fatigue” among Northerners. In reaction, abolitionists of the North widely distributed photographic prints—in the popular format of “cartes de visite”—as a means of visual propaganda to turn public opinion in their favor. These pictures, depicting black and white injured bodies, sought to both visualize the “dehumanizing pain” of slavery and the “heroic pain” of fighting it.

Through a discussion of this often neglected photographic archive of abolitionism, my chapter argues that the visual transformation or “humanization” of slaves crucially revolves around a discursive evocation and distribution of pain among different bodies, and along racial lines. Photographic abolitionism—The Scourged Back constituting the crucial center of this discourse—negotiates the black body’s ability to suffer (from slavery, for liberation), and the white body’s ability for compassion (to feel and suffer with/for the slave). In this visual discourse, racialized bodies are constructed, compared, and negotiated in their capacity to feel pain, suffer, and compassionately feel with other bodies. The archive of photographs enacts a comparative dolorology that attaches various national and political meanings to different bodies in pain, and effectively governs how the injury, suffering, and trauma in racialized bodies counts toward the remaking and emancipation of America.

The dominant aim of these photographs is the iconographical production of the slave body as “human” and therefore illegitimately objectified into “mercantile object.” They negotiate the humanization of the black body by visually capturing it in a state of hurt, by representing it as a vulnerable body suffering from slavery and in want of liberation, humanity, relief from pain. Photographic abolitionism seizes the black body on the threshold between
captivity and liberation, and invests it with a capacity for pain that can be compassionately recognized and inserted into the visual discourse of national sentimentality, where it competes with other bodies for national significance. In this process—the photographic humanization of commodified and abject slaves—Northern abolitionist photography therefore not only represents, but also constructs and compares different racialized and gendered bodies and their claims to a nationally significant suffering.

Photographic abolitionism thus constitutes—like the genre of the slave narrative—an instance of sentimentalist uses of the black body in America. In Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s words, the sentimentalist rhetoric in abolitionism is crucially informed by a double logic: while trying to represent the abject experiences and violations of slaves as “humans,” they also vitally construct and demarcate the possible sites of black subjectivity: “[Abolitionism] seeks to speak the body, but . . . in so representing the body . . . exploit and limit it” (1997, 8). In the circumscription of black bodies, articulated through notions of pain and trauma, abolitionism produces corporeal scripts that crucially shape racial discourse for post-slavery America. The “humanization” of the slave body not only articulates the social and political value of the black body suffering from slavery, but also perpetrates naturalizing, pathologizing, and biological meanings of racial difference. Whereas Sánchez-Eppler and others have analyzed the narrative formulas and containments of black suffering, embodiment, and subjectivity exhibited in abolitionist literature, this chapter relates this observation to the photographic archive of abolitionism.

The issues at stake are thus: What sentimental and biopolitical notions of race and gender are articulated and inscribed through the photographic depiction of the pain of slavery, and what bodies and possibilities of embodiment are constructed? What are the discursive and corporeal effects of visual states of exception, presented in shocking photographs of slave experience such as *The Scourged Back*? How do these alignments of racial bodies and pain matter to and prescribe the post-slavery racial order of the nation? What forms of black suffering and thus black embodiment are visually incorporated into the logistics of an American dolorology that organizes different subjects’ access to pain?

The arguments of this chapter are unfolded in a series of readings, first in the visual circumscriptions of black and white pain, evidenced in the photograph *The Scourged Back*, its uncanny doppelgänger, and pictorial representations of white Union soldiers. These racializing evocations of pain—situated in the context of both slavery and abolition—constitute a crucial instance of comparative dolorology that constructs and regulates the meanings of bodies in pain, and, importantly, the raciality of national trauma. The photographic representations of pain in white and black male bodies are confronted with representations of black female suffering in visual
discourse. Contrary to the fetishization of scarred black male bodies and the nationally significant amputations of white soldiers, these photographs simultaneously address and silence slavery’s regime of sexual violence and circumscribe black female pain in the terms of racial reproduction. The images in various ways “disarticulate” (Michaelis 2010) the issue of miscegenation and sexual exploitation of female slaves as mothers. This pathologizing view on black reproduction ties in with a further series of images that explicitly try to visualize miscegenation as a post-slavery problem. In the popular series of photographs representing “redeemed slave children,” distributed in 1863 and 1864, abolitionist photography envisions the precarious biopolitical “future” of liberated racialized subjects by representing almost exclusively “visually white” children. These children function as “living mementos” of miscegenation and enable renegotiation of racial demarcations for segregated, post-emancipation America. These “miscegenation portraits” not only articulate a negation of the black family, but also negotiate the biopolitical meanings of miscegenation and emancipation and the various racial populations they produced.

HISTORIES OF THE BACK

[I]n the context of the plantation, the humanity of the slave appears as the perfect figure of a shadow.

—Achille Mbembe, Necropolitics

The picture *The Scourged Back*, in its singularity and iconicity, is commonly associated with the capability of bringing the trauma of slavery into view. It is reprinted in many present-day historical works on and representations of slavery (e.g., Blight 2004) and America (e.g., Faragher et al. 1995). While the image is often used to illustrate the brutality of white American enslavement practices, it has become iconic also through its appropriations by African American culture: it is, for example, featured prominently in the anthology of AfroAmerica, *The Black Book* (Harris et al. 1974); it has inspired the “chokecherry tree” that furrows Sethe’s back in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* (1987) and Jonathan Demme’s filmic adaptation. Rap musician NAS has reworked the motive on the cover of his 2008 unnamed album.

The photograph (Fig. 4.1) shows the exposed back of an African American man. Head turned sideways so that he is in profile, the man shows the pattern of scars covering a large portion of his back to the camera. With calm composure, he has angled his left arm to display the extensive scars. He seems wrapped in a thick blanket. The photographic print of
1863 became one of the central pieces in antislavery propaganda and was circulated by the thousands as a carte de visite during the Civil War. Its reproduction featured prominently in a Harper’s Weekly article published on Independence Day 1864, which denounced the practices of Southern slaveholders and presented the photographed man as Gordon, a fugitive slave picked up by the Union army stationed at Baton Rouge, Louisiana, which he promptly joined. Today a copy of the carte is kept at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, and the photograph is most frequently cited as The Scourged Back (inscription of the carte), or Gordon, the name many assume for the person depicted.

But there is a second picture (Fig. 4.2), uncannily similar to The Scourged Back, which has been largely neglected by historical scholarship. Judging from the clothing, the only slightly differing posture of the left arm, and the body’s similar positioning on the chair toward the camera, this image...
probably depicts the same man. In all likelihood taken in the same sitting, the photograph seems somehow flawed, as the person’s head is caught in motion which renders his facial features not clearly distinguishable. The image lacks the portrait-like characteristics found in *The Scourged Back*, but its main intent is also to display the extensive scars on the back of the man. The photograph, kept in the National Archives at College Park, is also in carte de visite format and dated 1863. The archive’s database has it registered under the following name, which is excerpted from the carte’s verso: “Overseer Artayou Carrier whipped me. I was two months in bed sore from the whipping. My master come after I was whipped; he discharged the overseer. The very words of poor Peter, taken as he sat for his picture. Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 04/02/1863.”16

GORDON and PETER—two images with contradicting histories, and two pictures depicting the same subject. To express the extreme instability of the
term *subject* in this context will be the goal of my reading. Both pictures stage—assuming the “identity” of the person shown in them—a fundamental misnaming of their subject. Understood within abolitionist visual discourse, they enact a discursive desire to visualize the pain and injury that enslavement does to the racialized body. At the same time, their ascribed histories destabilize the subject attached to that body. My reflection on the discursive act of “seeing black pain” in abolitionism will therefore critically engage with the double vision these two pictures and their paratexts enforce. By double vision I mean not only the constitutive misnamings of subjects (*Gordon* or *Peter*), but also the simultaneous reiterations of racialized and gendered subjectivity that “humanization” enacts. The visual registry of pain in abolitionism not only produces human subjects by articulating their visible (qua bodily) vulnerability, it also intersects with and reiterates discourses that reify specific notions of race and gender. *Gordon* and *Peter* in this sense denote different “reflexes of iconography” (Spillers 2003, 206), different discursive circumscriptions that seek to rhetorically contain and control the violated bodies in the photographs in order to conjure specific notions of a black subjectivity that is both caught within and liberated from slavery. They thus conceal the experience of slavery in its explicit representation, hiding it in plain view. Before I critically extend on the conflicting narrations attached to these images and their repercussions, I want to first measure out some of the distance between text and image, textual legibility and bodily facticity, political interpretation and what can be described as the rhetorics of “shock” at work in the image—a trope that recurs in many receptions of the image(s).

Part of *The Scourged Back*’s iconicity can be accounted to the picture’s ostentatious plainness, its uncompromising display of shocking violation: A black man displays the scars of a severe whipping, what more can be said about the image? Obviously nothing, if one follows historian Louis Masur’s reception of the photograph: “It moves us . . . viscerally” (1998, 1415). Masur’s evocation of a bodily, even visceral reaction to the picture suggests three meanings: (1) “Being moved viscerally” by the image means to affectively retrace its subject, the physical marks of brutal, corporeal punishment; it means a bodily reaction to a figuration of the hurt body. (2) “Being moved viscerally” means further to be transported to the scene of the photograph and to confront the presence and facticity of the subject it displays. And (3), “Being moved viscerally” means also to fall out of speaking, lose one’s means of description, and to fully realize the corporeal meaning implied in the act of seeing this image. The photograph thus presents what Roland Barthes in his essay *The Photographic Message* (1961) describes as a “traumatic image”:

Strictly traumatic photographs are rare, the trauma is entirely dependent on the certainty that the scene has really occurred: the
photographer had to be there . . . the shock image is by structure non-signifying: no value, no knowledge, at the limit no verbal categorization can have any hold over the process instituting its signification. We might imagine a law: the more direct the trauma, the more difficult the connotation. (1985, 19)

The traumatic picture ruptures language and signification; it leaves no room for “reading” it. Barthes argues for a kind of photographic state of exception, a suspension of interpretation the shock photograph enacts. Like pain itself, the shocking image interrupts the production of meaning. Barthes concludes that “the traumatic photograph is the one about which there is nothing to say” (19). Visualizing that which cannot be spoken—the pain of slavery—the picture of the body abused in enslavement replaces descriptions, accounts, enumerations—in short, the discourse—about slavery. For a critic contemporaneous to the photograph’s publication in 1863, this force of the visual to displace language, narration, and interpretation was also the primary appeal of the image: “This Card Photograph should be multiplied by the 100,000, and scattered over the States. It tells the story in a way that even Mrs. Stowe cannot approach, because it tells the story to the eye” (quoted in Collins 1985a, 44).

What is common in Masur’s and the nineteenth-century critic’s reactions to the traumatic image, is an articulation of unreadability, or even refusal to read, contextualize, and interpret The Scourged Back. Its proper mode of reception is presented as a “feeling with” the picture and the person it portrays, to enact a corporeal transmission between photographed hurt and the shock of viewing that evades interpretation. Laura Wexler has brilliantly called attention to this critical evasion of photography’s rhetoricity with her notion of photographic anekphrasis. Anekphrasis, in contrast to the classical concept of ekphrasis, is the “active and selective refusal to read photography—its graphic labor, its social spaces—[a] neglect of critical attention to the raced, classed, and gendered productions of the photographic image” (1997, 163). The traumatic image, or rather the suspension of interpretation performed by its recipients, is one of the rhetorical gestures articulating pain and trauma as the unspeakable, as a discursive state of exception. This gesture disarticulates the racial and gendered stratifications enacted by photography, and their recovery is the objective of my reading.

The focus of my interpretation is guided by the relation between pain, race, and the construction of the nation. In Lauren Berlant’s definition of sentimental culture, being recognized as a part of an affective community is conducted through the display of pain as a “true feeling”: the affective acknowledgment of that pain enables the “culturally privileged to humanize those subjects who have been excluded from the . . . social aspects
of citizenship” (2008, 35). I take the photographs as a cornerstone and highly effective extension of the iconographic measures taken by Northern abolitionism in order to direct America’s affective attention to the pain of slaves. The overarching question of my close readings of Gordon and Peter asks what the images—in their “revelation” and “display” of the hurt black body—tell about the transformation of the black body from “human-cum-thing” (Judy 1994) to the African American subject as citizen. In reaction to Debra King’s assessment that the “pained black body becomes a representational sign for the democratizing process of U.S. culture itself” (2008,8), I discuss the images in relation to the photographic representation of white soldiers’ bodies in pain. This contextualization of Gordon and Peter will enable the discussion of the different and differential work of pain and its function as a relay to distribute the meanings of “race” and “nation.”

GORDON

To be public in the West [is] to have iconicity.

—Michael Warner, The Mass Public and the Mass Subject

Art historian Kathleen Collins claims that The Scourged Back is the printed version of an original photograph that a certain Dr. Towle sent to his superiors from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, on April 16, 1863. She quotes the army surgeon’s enclosed letter, which later, Collins claims, served as a reverse inscription to the distributed carte:

I enclose a picture taken by an artist here, from life, of a Negro’s back, exhibiting the scars from an old whipping. Few sensation writers ever depicted worse punishments than this man must have received, though nothing in his appearance indicates any unusual viciousness but on the contrary, he seems intelligent and well-behaved. (1985a, 44)

Towle’s photograph was then probably communicated to the photography studio of McPherson & Oliver in Boston, and soon issued as a photographic print under the heading The Scourged Back, which received circulation even to European circles. This background sheds some plausible light on the situation and intent the picture was taken in, namely, by a medical professional who encountered the photographed man in Baton Rouge. While the military context is plausible, the photograph’s further usage in a Harper’s Weekly article extends this association considerably: on the Fourth of July, 1864, the magazine printed an etching made after the picture, flanked by two more pictures and a text titled “A Typical Negro”
(Fig. 4.3). The paratext narrates the story of the heroic escape of the slave Gordon, who had run away from “his master in Mississippi” and was picked up by Unionists at the frontlines of Baton Rouge (see Collins 1985a; Wood 2000, 267).22 The three etchings semantically construct a rise from fugitive to victim to soldier. Depicting a black person sitting in rags, the bared back as centerpiece, and an ostensibly “whiter” man wearing a Northern uniform, the pictures are captioned: “Gordon as he entered our lines,” “Gordon under Medical Inspection,” “Gordon in his uniform as a U.S. Soldier.” The person’s history as a fugitive slave, having barely escaped a unnamed cruel master and upon rescue promptly enlisting as a soldier, sticks closely to sentimental conventions of the written slave narrative: the plot pits bloodhounds and brutal slave hunters against the resourceful slave, who rubs his “skin with onions to throw off the dogs.” Gordon’s scars are circumscribed with associations of Christian martyrdom, originating from a “whipping [on] Christmas-day last,”23 a topos audiences were familiarized with through Stowe’s benevolently suffering Uncle Tom. The picture of the scarred back in this view performs a sort of Christian Ecce Homo, displaying the wounds of torture to an unbelieving audience.

Figure 4.3. A Typical Negro. Article and illustration. Harper’s Weekly, 4th of July 1864. Source: Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints Division (LC-USZ62-98515)
The paratextual framing performs a humanization of the slave not primarily by a depiction of suffering from enslavement by whites, but through a redeeming narration of escape and (white) rescue. As Marcus Wood interprets the three reproductions in Harper’s Weekly, the narration effectively contains the trauma of slavery within a heroic resurrection scenario:

Gordon’s experience in slavery can be defined only in relation to his present status as a pristinely uniformed private in the United States army. Before he enters the army, and after he has entered it, Gordon’s back is hidden by clothing. It is, in fact, only via the process of medical inspection that he may enter the military, and this in turn enables the documentation of his scarring and public display, through reproduction of the troops. The photograph provides a sort of forensic Lazarus. . . . The medical unit of the Union army has legitimated the record of Gordon’s suffering, and resurrected him as a soldier. (2000, 268f)

The image’s shock value is thus simultaneously exploited by and controlled within a compassionate narrative of relief and reinstatement of the nation, as the formerly abused black male victim is rescued and humanized through Northern white military and medical authority.

The paratextual overlay of the image transforms also the photographed subject. The (mis)identification as Gordon by the article aligns with the clear facial profile in the image, resulting in a picture that oscillates between portraiture (of a “subject” with a “history”) and medical examination of a specific case. Gordon emerges as an identifiable person, a singular fate. His stoic expression appears as an index of masculine, pain-defying bravery, even a pride of “displaying” the wounds he has endured and overcome. Their display seems, against the background of the story, to become a politically autonomous act, a self-conscious exhibition of endurance, which in the given context makes Gordon fit for military service. The final transformation in the triptych, which dons the uniform of the Union soldier, removes Gordon further from both wound and blackness—the figure stands proud, invulnerable and erect, and is depicted as white. In both illustration and textual narration, Gordon’s subjectivity is achieved through the body’s proximity to trauma and pain, from which it is perpetually distanced and removed. In Isabell Lorey’s terms, the article and etching “immunize” (2007) abolitionist discourse: while they do acknowledge the corporeal lacerations of slavery, they simultaneously neutralize the disruptive force of the wound through a series of stabilizations (stoicism, bravery), narrative closures (the army), and reinscriptions (whitewashing of Gordon), which also serve to convince white audiences of the “well-behaved” civility of black soldiers.
In another maneuver the article metonymically depersonalizes Gordon by describing him as “A Typical Negro,” reminiscent of William Garrison’s appellation of Frederick Douglass as a “fair specimen” of the enslaved. The metonymy that substitutes all African Americans with a “typical” and male example renders the man’s bodily state both monumental and average: the scars on the male body stand in for the bodily suffering of the “whole race,” and are simultaneously moderated by this metonymy. The inscription of “A Typical Negro” in this view reduces the black experience of slavery to the traces of whipping on a black male body: the rhetoric of the scar simplifies the systematic forms of abuse, physical and sexual exploitation, and dehumanizing practices of white supremacy to a form of physical punishment.

Gordon’s calm posture, moreover, associates racial stereotypes about the insensitivity of African Americans and their relative indifference to violent oppression, a common argument for proslavery advocates. This double connotation effectively situates the pain of slavery in bodies alone, as Wood explains: “The move from bodily wound to mental wound is not admitted” (2000, 232): suffering from slavery, in this view, is connected only to corporeal pain, which reattaches blackness to (male) bodiliness and passive forbearance. Especially this last point—already visible in Towle’s initial description of the man as not displaying “any unusual viciousness but . . . intelligent and wellbehaved”—mollified Northern white audiences in their fear of black rage and insurgency. While the fear of retaliation from slaves was prominent in white sensibilities at least since the publication of The Narrative of Nat Turner (1838), the anxiety of blacks joining the “brother war” and thus gaining access to weapons (to be used against white people) provided a topical background for the triptych, which erases the exposed trauma by hiding the scars under military uniformity.

The redemption narrative constructed by the Harper’s Weekly article subsumes the pain of slavery in different ways: Gordon’s pain is a personal transition (overcome by enlisting), which constructs white Northern abolitionism and the military cause as the humanization agency for abused slaves: entering as ragged, indifferent victims, they emerge as proud (and whiter) patriots. Within this national sentimental script, Gordon’s scars are further framed as simply the “Scourged Back” of “A Typical Negro.” This generalizes and eternalizes racial trauma, while simultaneously containing it through the stoic posture of the male hurt body. Since the article and triptych were published on Independence Day, the double history embedding Gordon’s scars participates in both national and racial discourse: a history of national trauma, which replaces the scars of slavery with the stripes of the army (and blackness with whiteness); and of racial trauma, which seals pain in a generalized and insensitive black male body.
Iconicity comes with no guarantee of affirmative possibilities.

—Sara Blair, *The Photograph’s Last Word*

Working differently from this narrative framing are the paratexts surrounding the image I have earlier introduced as *peter*. The shreds of facticity circumscribing it and its nearly identical mise en scène both suggest that it depicts the same person captured in the *Scourged Back*: the image was also probably taken in April 1863, is connected to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and also references the whipping’s having taken place around Christmas. The plot attached to the picture however suggests a radically different meaning. I quote the entire inscription as it is found on the card’s verso (Fig. 4.4):26

![Figure 4.4. *peter* (verso) (see Figure 4.2)](image)
BATON ROUGE, La. April 2, 1863: Ten days from to-day I left the plantation. Overseer ARTAYOU CARRIER whipped me. My master was not present. I don’t remember the whipping. I was two months in bed sore from the whipping, and my senses began to come—I was sort of crazy. I tried to shoot everybody. They said so, I did not know. I don’t remember that. I burned up all my clothes; but I don’t remember that. I never was this way (crazy) before. I don’t know what make me come that way (crazy). My master come after I was whipped: saw me in bed; he discharged the overseer. They told me I attempted to shoot my wife the first one; I did not shoot any one; I did not harm any one. My master’s Capt. JOHN LYON, cotton planter, on Atchafaya, near Washington, La. Whipped two months before Christmas.

The very words of poor PETER, taken as he sat for his picture.

The most notable difference of PETER is that the scarred body of the man, unlike that of GORDON, is given a voice and a narrative position in the first person: PETER is quoted in his “very words,” which in their description of confusion and lack of memory seem personal and affecting, while constituting in other places a concrete, “plain narration.” Though the image itself, the blurred head and less sovereign posture toward the camera, undercuts the portrayal of a distinct person, the inscription gives way to a more personal story than in the case of GORDON.

Three further aspects are notable in PETER’s narration. First, it tells the story of the whipping in differentiating terms, relegating the excessively violent punishment to the named cruel overseer and depicting the slave holder John Lyon as a benevolent caretaker: the whipping triggered an instance of inner-plantation justice and the overseer was punished for his practices. Further, PETER tells of his lack of memory concerning his psychological state and actions, accompanied with enclosed explanations of his state (“crazy”) by the person who recorded the words. The story also leaves open whether PETER was whipped because of the alleged “shootings” or if he acted violently after the torture. Whether the agitating intention of the story was thus to denounce the mental repercussions of the whipping (turning PETER to violent retribution), or to raise empathy for a slave traumatized and running amok and then being punished, remains unclear.

While the “very words” of the personal narration may or may not be white ventriloquism of a slave’s experience, several aspects of the text exhibit regulative strategies aimed primarily at white audiences. The rather tagged-on note, “Whipped two months before Christmas,” as well as the belittling title Poor Peter can be read as textual acts that channel the narration of violence and loss of self into sentimental formulas. Implying a com-
passionate white reader, the text frames the disturbing story by associating slavery with un-Christian practices, and the African American as deplorable, and ultimately passive victim. The explanatory annotations describing the man’s status as “crazy” can also be read as measures taken to simultaneously fortify the image’s display of violence and undermine the speaker’s agency. This effect is certainly amplified by the blurred apparition of the man’s head, which seems to be caught in more or less violent motion or nervous shifting of posture.

With regard to the identity produced by text and image, the outcome is equally as dilemmatic as in Gordon: the figure’s blurriness undermines the seemingly stable identity evoked by the narration, while the man’s repeated characterizations as “crazy” further draw his story into doubt. That Peter had his portrait taken to illustrate and autonomously authenticate his story—the inscription indicates the voluntary act or autonomous decision to “sit for his picture”—is radically undermined by the literally faceless subject and the simultaneity of identity and anonymity it constructs. Like Gordon, who is both singular for his bodily endurance and a typical example for “the race,” Peter relates a personal (and dubious) story of an unidentifiable male subject. Both images, in this view, deliberately collapse contrary meanings into each other: type and person, singular experience and formula, subject and object of the image.

These inner ambiguities of Gordon and Peter, which with all probability show the same man and were taken in the same sitting, and the contradictory status of their respective narrations and namings, are important in understanding the discursive functions of these photographs in abolitionist discourse. Because, unstable as the stories behind the man/men are, both exhibit the same logic of visually evidencing the unspeakable; both, albeit corroborating different stories, allow the politicized audience to imagine the slave’s body to “speak by itself,” and to do so by virtue of its objectively captured wounds. The pictures thus cater to a desire for self-evidentiality, something which WJT Mitchell has termed ekphrastic hope—the optimistic notion invested in the visual that the thing or person represented may speak by/for itself, undistorted by the ideological prescriptions of race. In Mitchell’s terms, the “goal of ekphrastic hope might be called the ‘overcoming of otherness’” (1994b, 156), which in this context corresponds to the white humanitarian/abolitionist subject’s desire to precisely feel as the “other”—according to sentimentalism’s basic sympathetic principle that one feels the pain of the other like one’s own. The images rhetorically construct a reciprocity of equal bodies in affective communication (pain/shock/compassion) that seeks to conceal the corporeal hierarchies of race that underwrite the differences between punisher and punished, liberator and liberated, subject and object of (photographic) discourse—of who speaks, who is made to speak, and
who is spoken for. The following section investigates how this rhetoric of affect complicates the memorial and mnemonic function of these images.

**PICTURING RACIAL PAIN**

Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative* (1845) famously begins with a meditation on the author’s ignorance about his date of birth: “I have no accurate knowledge of my age, never having seen any authentic record containing it. By far the larger part of the slaves know as little about their ages as horses know of theirs, and it is the wish of most masters within my knowledge to keep their slaves thus ignorant. I do not remember to have ever met a slave who could tell his birthday” (2001[1845], 13). Douglass denounces the denial of self-knowledge as one instrument white slaveholders use to dehumanize slaves, who are kept in ignorance about person, origin, and family relations. WJT Mitchell has taken Douglass’s statement to a complex reading addressing the question how slavery can be remembered, when “what [Douglass] is really saying (we suppose) is that slavery is a prevention of memory” (1994b, 187). One of Mitchell’s conclusions is that, from a perspective of remembered experience, the narration of slavery is an impossible undertaking. Since the enslaved subject is prohibited from knowledge of self and thus narratable experience, the genre of slave narrative implies a paradoxical narrative act:

The slave narrative is always written by a former slave; there are no slave narratives, only narratives about slavery written from the standpoint of freedom. It is not even quite accurate to say that the slave narratives are “about” slavery; they are really about the movement from slavery to freedom. A narrative which was simply about slavery . . . is conceivable, but unlikely, and neither could find an author to “own” it as autobiography, as a record of an actual life. Actual narratives, like actual lives, always play off slavery against freedom, which is perhaps why pure slave narrative [is] impossible. (1994b, 190)

The representation of American slavery (understood as the white system of practices, institutions, and discourses of dehumanization that turns black persons into things) can in this view only be remembered from a perspective of the liberated subject, as its “other.” Its narration must employ a temporality and a movement that frames enslavement—a condition of permanent violation—as something the narrator/subject is always already relieved and liberated from. Both temporally and spatially, slavery has to be always already left behind in order to be narratable.
In the analysis of Gordon’s and Peter’s paratextual framings, the logic of temporal and spatial separation has been obvious: both men have spatially left behind enslavement, though only Gordon’s escape is narrated as a story. The Harper’s Weekly article further performs a movement from brutalization to medical care and the redeeming integrative forces of the Union army. Gordon in this view has a future, and his story articulates a perpetual movement toward a national future, as he progresses from black abjection toward an American and whitened subjectivity. The narration surrounding Peter however is less temporally secure in that, while the reader is informed about him leaving the plantation, no future is prescribed or envisioned. Peter’s enslavement is presented as past, but the narration is explicit about the instability of this past, as the several references to his loss of memory exhibit. The narration on the back of the image repeatedly quotes his uncertainty about the exact actions and events before or after the whipping: “My master was not present. I don’t remember the whipping. . . . They said so, I did not know. I don’t remember that. I burned up all my clothes; but I don’t remember that.”

The black autonomous subject constructed in the image’s paratext—Peter who sits for his picture, and tells his story in his own “very words”—is a subject marked by a fundamental loss of memory and a past insecure to himself. The whipping as well as the possibly retaliating violence is rendered as an unstable event by the repeatedly declared lack of memory and the many references to his mental state. The “subject” of the photograph is constructed as unable to truly confirm the excessively brutal violation of his body in enslavement. The viewer however, to whom the trace of pain is exhibited, is “viscerally” able to confirm what has happened. The image constructs the experience of slavery as fundamentally lost to Peter, and its verification only available to the white viewer’s compassionate response. In the image’s structure, the memory of slavery remains ungraspable for the black subject. Its trauma denies knowledge of self, of actions, of events—in short, of experience.

What the photographic “subject,” visually testifying to the brutality of enslavement practices, retains, however, is memory situated in the corporeal—the scars on the back. Invisible to the black subject itself, they are ostentatious and readily decipherable through the compassionate gaze of the white viewer. The liberated slave’s memory is thus situated exclusively in the corporeal, where it is walled off as the opposite of politicized or politicizable experience; the black body stores what the black subject cannot iterate. Intelligibility, the connections of subjectivity and body, and the politics of experience are organized through white compassion, the almost tactile gaze of the white viewer: this gaze verifies that the damage done to the commodified body actually has been the pain of an embodied black subject violated by ens-
lavage. The images set up subjectivity and body against each other; they construct enslavement as an experience neither to be articulated, narrated, nor remembered by the black subject. On the other hand, the black body can never forget slavery. The photograph and its white audiences remember “viscerally” that fundamental vulnerability, which the black subject cannot recall and the black body cannot deny, behind his back.28

Abolitionism’s compassionate maneuver of recognizing the black body as a human body that has been in pain resonates with Judith Butler’s argument on the discursive prescription implicit in recognition itself: “[V]ulnerability is one precondition for humanization, [and] vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition if it is to be attributed to any human subject” (2004b, 43). The rhetoric of humanization, which these pictures subscribe to, is complicit with a thoroughly racialized logic of evidence, memory, and the body; the black body serves as evidence of an injured humanity. Its constitutive vulnerability, however, is only recognized by the white onlooking subject. The white photographer/viewer is both “viscerally moved” by the pain of the other and remains fundamentally invisible and discreet within the image’s setup. The black subject articulated in the image, on the other hand, is removed from the experiences that constitute vulnerability and thus humanity, relying on the white photographer/viewer to confirm, interpret and present29 the experience. The embodied black subject is thus constituted as fundamentally split in two: it is caught between a generalized (“Typical Negro”) and an allegorized (Scourged Back) corporeal vulnerability. Gordon and Peter are produced as subjects that can neither fully attach themselves to that vulnerability nor detach from its violation.

Furthermore, the black subject is separated from itself temporally, as vulnerability always resides in an “eternally” past corporeal memory (the scars), whereas black political subjectivity is articulated as either caught up in a present loss of memory (Peter), or disappears in a national futurity that “dresses” the wound in uniform to make it disappear (Gordon). The decisively present moment of remembering slavery, which allows the pain of black bodies to enter the political realm and to circulate as evidence, is in this configuration reserved for the exclusively white and upper-class audience of the photographs. Within the logic of evidence and memory, the privilege to in the present moment perceive, verify, remember, interpret, act upon, and ultimately “feel” the pain of slavery rests with white sensibility and its compassionate, yet disembodied gaze. The black subject, on the other hand, is equated with a traumatic embodiment: the body cannot forget what the subject cannot remember.30

Photographic abolitionism, in trying to denounce at once white violence against bodies and (re)capture the black body as suffering,31 therefore
substitutes the systematized corporeal violence governing the racial institution of the plantation for an epistemological violence. This violence locks liberated black subjectivity in the paradox of an eternally hurt body connected to the past and an eternally displaced memory. The photography of abolitionism articulates a double movement of inclusion and exclusion, or humanization and simultaneous dehumanization, which Lauren Berlant has pointedly described: “The humanization strategies of sentimentality always traffic in cliché, the reproduction of a person as a thing and thus indulge in the confirmation of the marginal subject’s embodiment of inhumanity” (2008, 35; my italics). Abolitionist photography, even as it tries forcefully to articulate pain to argue the humanity of abjected black bodies, remains caught in a racializing and racist logic. According to Laura Wexler, this logic is amplified by the silencing effects these shocking images have both on the viewer and the portrayed/betrayed subject: “[P]hotographic anekphrasis itself is an institutionalized form of racism and sexism” (1997, 163).32

Gordon’s and Peter’s paratexts articulate a temporality of events and movements that allow their stories to be told as “before/after” scenarios, the photos having been taken after their escape from enslavement. At the same time, the images fundamentally undermine this “liberating” and sentimental formula of transformation from thing to man: the photograph freezes the body in a state of hurt, and forces a passive, nonrelational display of pain onto the photographic “subject.” While the display of pain in black bodies as trace of American trauma thus may be aimed at producing African American citizens that have been healed by visual inclusion, it reduces their bodies at the same time to mementos of that trauma, defined always and only through the remembrance of failed democracy that their bodies evidence to white audiences. Black bodies simultaneously reference the failure and self-healing of white American democracy, without entitlement to “heal” themselves. The bodies of Gordon and Peter become “everyday signs of suffering” (King 2008, 5) and work as memorial sites of an always already lost black integrity and humanity. Looking at them means primarily to heal self and nation conceptualized as white: whiteness becomes the only witness of slavery, while black experience and testimony is displaced by still trauma. The scar, as these “white looking relations” (Gaines 1986) bring it into view, functions as an ideological figuration that arrests black subjects in past pain and severs them from political and visual autonomy. Moreover, the photographed scar as “proof” of slavery’s injuries relies on a rhetoric of the black body as evidence, which not only substitutes African American testimony with speechlessness, but further reiterates conventions of “objectivity” and “truth” that racial science had earlier connected to the black body.
These two photographic evocations of racial pain bring into view a racializing dolorology that empowers white subjects and pathologizes and objectifies black bodies. Pain is enclosed in the mute, male, and black body, circumscribed as the object of the white scientific/sentimental gaze. Utilizing the visual conventions of racial photography, the abolitionist images produce a black body that (in its humanization) remains locked in a racialized notion of pain, manifested in the visually fetishized scar. The photographs of Gordon and Peter may bring the injurious practices of slavery to the intimate public sphere, but they do so by employing a dolorological discourse of the “other”—in which pain materializes the racial body not as (equally) human, but rather as cut off from its own vulnerability and thus humanity. In this dolorological logistics—where pain distributes and materializes racial difference—white compassion and humanitarian politics are enacted in the process of visualizing and viewing black pain, which is attached to a temporal pathology.

Looking at these pictures for white audiences instantiates “heroic occasions of [simultaneous] recognition, rescue, and inclusion” (Berlant 2008, 35). Visual authority, or the politics of visualization, equate the white compassionate subject with a fundamentally disembodied subjectivity that looks at hurt(ing) black bodies; a subjectivity that at the same time invests itself with total affective (feel with) and universal political (deal with) power. The black subjectivity these white humanitarian discourses produce figures as an included exclusion: while humanized by a disembodied yet sympathetic whiteness, “the wounded black body is walled off . . . to protect the national body from [pain's] contamination” (King 2008, 5). While enlisting male black bodies in the registry of human suffering (and excluding black women), photographic abolitionism, in other words, simultaneously produces subjectivities that are isolated within the sentimental community, locked in a traumatically racialized body. Isabell Lorey calls this strategy of inclusive exclusion the “strategic immunization” of hegemonic discourse (2008): an absorption of the other without integration. The white gaze simultaneously incorporates black suffering in the national public sphere, and seals off the pain of slavery within the black body—thus, abolitionist discourse is able both to obscure the continuities of white supremacy (i.e., the complicity or similarities of Northern and Southern racial regimes), and to regulate the possibility of African American participation in national citizenship and “emotional universalism” (Berlant 2008, 37) after slavery. This process of visual immunization is at the same time orchestrated by a rearticulation of white male subjectivity and its relation to pain, slavery, and the nation. The next reading will look at this comparative representation of white pain, which regulates Gordon's and Peter's entry into a national dolorology, the discourse that distributes national meanings to bodies in pain.
WHITE PAIN AND THE NATION

Enlisting black bodies into national sentimental discourse as “novel objects of feeling” (Fisher 1985, 98) does not threaten the intellectual, humanitarian, or visual supremacy of white subjectivity, for recognition of black suffering fundamentally secures the superiority of white compassion. The increased presence of black suffering and the establishing of slavery as a national issue in the 1860s, however, necessitated a reassertion of whiteness as capable of not only compassion, but also a superior capacity for pain and feeling. In order to conceptualize the abolition of slavery as a problem pertaining to the nation (and not to white supremacy), white bodies also came to be represented as traumatized by slavery—albeit not in terms of racial oppression, but of national identity. As Linda Williams has pointed out, the sentimental novel and its highly gendered formulas of “romantic racialism” (2001, 57) had used “tears to cross racial barriers” (55), but further installed universalizing white figures as necessary intermediaries that simultaneously legitimized and moderated black pain in its relation to the national. She argues that the death of Little Eva in Uncle Tom’s Cabin instantiates such a scene of emotional intimacy achieved through white suffering:

The slaves weep for Eva who dies because of slavery and she, in turn, weeps for their enslaved state. Even Topsy succumbs to this tearful recognition of a white virtue overcome by the oppression of black suffering. Thus the novel asks its white readers to empathize with black suffering . . . through the medium of its white angel. When Eva finally dies, St. Clare, unable to bear Eva’s “mortal agony,” turns to Tom for comfort . . . slave and master bond in mutual sympathy for the . . . death of Evangeline. (55)

Common to sentimental texts, this setup of white mediating pain—making black suffering intelligible within the national—can also be found in the more immediate visual discourses of photography.33 While The Scourged Back propagated white alleviation of black pain, the advent of the war triggered a visual discourse that established the abolition of slavery as an increasingly national and decidedly white-embodied cause. Dissolving the issue of slavery into the question of the “Brother War,” white American bodies came to signify a national trauma that primarily threatened and disrupted Anglo-Saxon bodies. America was turning into “a Republic of Suffering,” as historian Drew Gilpin Faust writes: “Sacrifice and the state became inextricably intertwined. Citizen soldiers snatched from the midst of life generated [representational] obligations for a nation defining its purposes and polity through military struggle” (2009, 4–5).34 The Civil War provided
extensive depictions of white bodies in nationally meaningful pain. The images of Gordon and Peter had to compete with these white subjects for emotional citizenship—enrollment in the registry of those bodies suffering for the nation’s future.

One concise representation of white male suffering within a narration of national trauma can be found in a popular carte de visite issued also in 1863, entitled *The Brave Defenders of Our Country* and attributed to Chicago photographer John Carbutt (Fig. 4.5). The image, depicting three white men in a triangular composition, is taken in a studio environment, as the painted background trees and sky and the prop-like ragged flag reveal. The person seated on a wooden box on the left wears an unbuttoned Unionist’s uniform, and lifts the stump of his amputated leg to the observing and caring gaze of another man, dressed in a field doctor’s garment. Standing erect over the two, a man with an adjusted uniform looks compassionately down on the amputee, supporting him with his right hand while holding the tattered

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flag in the left. Contrary to the bleak, isolating, and documentary display of a single wounded body in *gordon/peter* that reveals no particular setting or narration, Carbutt’s image stages a complex tableau of interwhite compassion. The picture composes a triangle of mutual care and responsibility that contextualizes and secures the wound at the center of various empathic gazes: the suffering amputee with closed eyes, the doctor leaning carefully over the stump, medication and bandages at his side, and the compassionate superior simultaneously reminding of and keeping up the national cause. The “spectacle of loss” (Silverman 1992, 67) provided by the missing leg and the clearly visible stump, is contained within a sentimental narration of white brotherly love and shared feeling, which transforms the realism of the wound into a national allegory; the lost leg references the instability of a nation divided by the “Brother War,” the necessary amputation of the seceding South, and the duty to suffer for America.

This presentation of the white body in pain however is not only allegorical. Its highly staged and theatrical setting equate a reenactment of a stock scene of war. This reenactment or recreation of the wounding is crucial to the ideological function of the image. It is obvious that the wound is fully healed, so the original scene of bodily disruption and care has occurred some time ago. Staging a performance that recreates this initial wounding, complete with the dramatized display of pain on the amputee’s face, indicates that these white men have “moved through” the trauma; they have mastered the pain. This ideological construction of masculinity that masters pain through repetition has been analyzed by Kaja Silverman in her groundbreaking book *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*: “Mastery . . . results when those same experiences are actively repeated—when they are linguistically rather than affectively reprised” (1992, 59). White pain in this picture is thus not “felt with” the man himself; his reprisal creates less a visceral affect than a structured, theatrical, and allegorical transformation of pain and wounding into national sacrifice. Repeating and signifying trauma in a theatrical, representational setup, white pain is able to escape a pathologizing reading. Bodily trauma is inserted into an affective and symbolically calculated tableau to reinstall national integrity and nationalist resolve. In contrast to *The Scourged Back*, where the black body appears simultaneously marked and unaffected by the scars, white pain enables a sentimental syntax that both fetishizes the shocking presence of the wound, and constructs the traumatized white male body as capable of controlling its meaning. The most striking difference between the abolitionist photographs of traumatized black bodies and this sentimental tableau of traumatized whiteness is thus the unity of ideological message and the bodies portrayed: while *gordon* and *peter* are circumscribed as *self-displaying racial objects* of the white gaze (which constructs a meaning of pain unavailable to black subjects), the
white figures are the self-performing national subjects of the photograph’s narration. Though white masculinity may thus be traumatized, hurt, or disabled, it does not get stuck in that trauma, but rather moves on to perform its own self-presentation. The three white soldiers here specifically figure as an allegory of the nation, and present the lost leg as nationally meaningful sacrifice. Viewing The Scourged Back and Carbutt’s set piece side by side, the photographic articulation of an American dolorology becomes obvious: this visual discourse separates racial pain and national pain, and aligns the bodily suffering of black and white male bodies in a hierarchy of national significance for postwar America.

The abolitionist images invested in racial trauma not only competed with these propagandistic efforts to instill national sentiment. Especially in the later war years and after, Civil War veterans seized on this visual tradition of national martyrdom to compensate for small or nonexistent veterans’ pensions. As Connor and Rhode argue, wounded soldiers visually exploited their bodily disabilities and traumata to financial ends, mainly to support pension claims against the state, or to bolster their income by selling their images as commercial prints (2003). In their article on the collection of medical photographs in the Army Medical Museum in Washington, the authors explain that veterans extensively seized on medical photographs taken of their mutilated bodies (Fig. 4.6) to assert claims to emotional citizenship, both to the state for financial support and their countrymen for patriotic compassion:

Soldiers used their photographs taken by the Museum [which] documented their injury and the extent of their disability while reminding the pension examiners of the faces of the men who had fought to preserve the Union. The ex-soldiers in these pictures reestablish their personal identity and presumably could not as easily be reduced to ‘anonymous,’ numbered supplicants” (Conner and Rhode 2003).

One example is a carte de visite of an unidentified soldier kept by the Library of Congress. The Unionist during the Civil War had endured a double amputation of both arms in 1864 and in later years sold this carte of himself in uniform to increase his income. Photographs such as these were extensively taken by medical professionals during and after the war, mainly to document medical progress, and to provide study and research material for surgeons and other medical professionals.

The handling of bodies in these images however is very different from the objectifying gazes in Agassiz’s racial daguerreotypes or gordon/peter. These soldiers readily display their individual bodily traumas—the
Figure 4.6. Surgical photographs, Army Medical Museum (photographed 1861–65, printed later). Summary: Photographs show men displaying the wounds received during the Civil War. Upper left: John Brink, Private; Upper right: Sergeant Warden; Lower left: Samuel H. Decker, Private; Lower right: Allison Shutter, Drummer. Source: Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints Division (LC-DIG-ppmsca-10105).
shot arm, amputated hands or arms—and their wounds are carefully contained, not only in their shock value, but also in their symbolic relation to the person. All figures address the camera directly; they are comforted by soft chairs and cushions or wear clothing that links them to their military past; the man with the missing hands (lower left image) exhibits his prosthetic devices together with his disability. The bodily traumata of these men are carefully revealed by rolled-up shirtsleeves, or lifted trousers. What these visual strategies amount to is that white bodies are not characterized by their injuries, but rather by how they have been taken care of as individuals. The traumatic/traumatizing force of the wound is controlled by sentimental props and postures that contain the hurt white body within the conventions of the photographic portrait, thus maintaining these bodies as patriotic subjects.

The pain and suffering that these pictures represent is thus differently composed from the images ascribing pain to black bodies. Here, the suffering for the nation is always already mastered, and it carries sentimental value for the present. The mutilated white subject is able to insert its bodily pain into the emotional public sphere on behalf of itself; bodily sacrifices made for the nation can be exchanged for compassionate response, veteran status, and financial payback. White pain has thus market value and is tied to an embodied subject with specific claims to pain as cultural capital. Black trauma, as displayed in gordon/peter, on the other hand, is both singularly shocking and “racially typical,” both incommensurable and sealed off in the black body. The white male body retains an autonomy of mastering and literally dealing with pain and injury that is fundamentally denied to the black. These exchange values and public functions of white suffering and their unavailability to black subjects demonstrate clearly the racializing implications of the dolorology articulated in abolitionist photography: the images of bodies in pain insert subjects into the affective economies of Civil War and postwar America. They do so by differently circumscribing the corporeal: traumatized, nostalgic, and fundamentally objectified for the black male subject, who is invested with a failed embodiment, while white male bodies are constructed as active in suffering, retaining their subject status, and allegorically identifying the “republic of suffering.”

These different visual formulas that link pain to racial difference expressed a racializing body politics and were thoroughly conflated with the sentimental-emancipatory politics of abolitionism. I have tried to argue this conflation by pointing to three contexts surrounding and structuring the visual processing of the black body in pain: (1) via the fetishization of the scar, body, wound, and experience are aligned to produce the black male subject as always caught within past trauma, fixed in a nostalgic temporality;
(2) the iconographic reiteration of the objectifying gazes, categories, and epistemologies of scientific racism, by which the black body is fundamentally silenced; and (3) the enfolding of African American trauma within an elaborate symbolic discourse of white masculinity that articulates racial superiority by dealing with pain, and transforms trauma into self-mastery, and national sacrifice. The abolitionist and compassionate gaze on the black body in pain signifies a complex constellation of “iconographical reflexes” (Spillers 2003, 206). These reflexes—as they insert the trauma of African Americans into public visual and sentimental discourse—argue visually for slave humanity and simultaneously reinscribe racial hierarchies that conceal possibilities for the discursive authority of black experience.

**BIOPOLITICAL PORTRAITS**

This chapter has so far argued that abolitionist photography created visual demarcations that not only supplanted the slave narrative with silent images of traumatized and fetishized black male bodies. They further were instrumental in creating a decisive gap between black bodies as capable of only racial pain, and white bodies signifying national suffering. Constructing this competition over nationally significant pain in exclusively male terms, these representations were flanked by visual articulations of pain in black women’s bodies. These, however, evoke black suffering in radically different terms and the remainder of this chapter presents two examples that demonstrate the dolorological enlistment of black femininity. My examples are the visual representation of the Margaret Garner case of 1866, and an extensive set of pictures published between 1863 and 1864 and depicting “redeemed slave children.” They do not conceptualize slavery (and thus postwar black subjectivity) in terms of bodily punishment as did GORDON and PETER, but rather gesture toward enslavement’s practices of sexual violation. In these representations, the issue of miscegenation and sexual exploitation in slavery is simultaneously articulated and silenced. The visual treatment of miscegenation invokes both “racial trauma” and “national trauma” in the terms of reproduction; while the Garner case enables a sort of heroic pathologization of black mothers (who kill their “illegitimate” children), the images of “white slave children” negotiate the anxieties of post-slavery white America with regard to racial amalgamation and the consequences of slavery’s kinship politics. Especially the pictures of children, by staging variously “colored” bodies in constellations of racial belonging and kinship, negotiate the future of racial meaning and racial demarcations. They invoke and negate images of the “black family” and thus “emancipated” black American populations, and the “illegitimate children” of miscegenation. While thus acknowledging racial amalgamation, these pictures also
reflect the emerging discourse concerned with racial purity (see previous chapter) that effectively supplants the “hard” racial order of slavery with that of postwar segregation of racial populations.

The images crucially produce what I call the biopolitical meanings of race and sexual violation with regard to both slavery as an “instance of biopolitical experimentation” (Mbembe 2003, 21) and the biopolitical future of a nation that would become multiracial through emancipation. These instances of racial biopolitics work through a particular dolorogical relay: while the sexual exploitation regimes of slavery are negotiated through the trauma of black motherhood, the “children of miscegenation” are visualized as instances of a future-oriented white national pain. Invested in the biopolitical futurity of racial hierarchies, these images supplement the memorial bodies of black masculinity associated with the always already past violence of slavery I have discussed so far.

MARGARET GARNER’S NECROPOLITICS

The most prominent example of representations of traumatized black motherhood in abolitionist discourse is the infamous story of Margaret Garner. In 1856, the fugitive slave had escaped with her husband Robert and four children from Kentucky to Ohio, and upon detection by pursuing slave catchers killed one of her children to save it from enslavement. Audiences in the North obsessed over Garner’s infanticide, and her controversial case was subject to much debate and conflicting efforts of empathy. As Reinhardt (2002) traces in his article on Garner’s story, abolitionist discourse treated her largely with sympathy. Garner was represented seldom as villain, but the killing of her daughter was taken as an indictment of slavery and an example of heroic behavior. The story of Margaret Garner was significant because it represented the suffering and desperation of enslaved women, and because it allowed to project the pain of slavery onto the issues of motherhood and family bonds. Garner figured as a simultaneously suffering and saving mother, who could not endure the enslavement of her children and thus attempted to kill them, succeeding only for her youngest daughter. The pastor P. S. Bassett, who visited her during imprisonment, pondered explicitly on the question of Garner’s temporary insanity, but finally attributed a “mother’s love” to her:

I inquired if she was not excited almost to madness when she committed the act. No, she replied, I was as cool as I am now; and would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings. . . . She alludes to the child that she killed as being free from all trouble and sorrow, with a degree of satisfaction that almost
chills the blood in one’s veins; yet she evidently possesses all the passionate tenderness of a mother’s love. She is about twenty-five years of age, and apparently possesses an average amount of kindness, with a vigorous intellect, and much energy of character. (quoted in Harris et al. 1974, 10)

Compassion for Garner was organized by installing the disruption of families and the severed bond of maternity at the heart of the slave experience—the dilemma that audiences empathized with was the matrilinearity of slave status, which mothers passed on to their children. The law functioned as a cornerstone to the slaveholder practice of breeding, that is, the simultaneity of sexual exploitation and reproduction of human capital. Slave law in this view granted a deadly form of recognition to motherhood while denying mothers themselves any affirmative agency or maternal rights. By dealing death to her daughter, Margaret Garner refused the social death imposed on her family and replaced the exploitation and destruction of kinship relations with the deadly logic of “motherly love,” which chooses death over enslavement—or, as Castronovo argues, articulates “death as freedom” (2000, 123).

The Garner case, in other words, pushed the limits of what Jane Tompkins described as sentimentalism’s central symbolic narration—“salvation through motherly love” (1985, 125)—but was nevertheless accepted and read within its terms. Abolitionist voices from Frederick Douglass—“every mother who, like Margaret Garner, plunges a knife into the bosom of her infant to save it from the hell of our Christian slavery, should be held and honored as a benefactress”—to the Anti-Slavery Bugle—“Let the spirit of this despairing mother seize upon her oppressed race over the South and the whole Union cannot enslave them”—underscored the exemplary nature of Garner’s equation of freedom and death (both quoted in Reinhardt 2002, 93).

In 1866, Garner’s case was visualized by Southern painter Thomas Satterwhite Noble, in an oil painting entitled The Modern Medea. A year later, on May 18, 1867, the painting was reproduced as engraving in Harper’s Weekly (Fig. 4.7), covering a whole page. In stark contrast to the silencing, documentary representations of Gordon or Peter, the picture imagines Garner as a strong figure of agency and resolve within a dramatic setting. Capturing the moment of confrontation with her white pursuers, the painting takes an unequivocal stance for the infanticidal mother. Instead of showing Garner with the knife she used to cut the throat of her child, the image represents her empty-handed, executing a dramatic, accusatory gesture toward the recoiling and horrified men. She points to the dead child on the floor, her face expresses anger, and appears to hurl accusations toward the men.
In the visual setup of the illustration, Margaret Garner decidedly puts the blame on the white male aggressors and holds them accountable for their cruelty by seemingly offering them her dead child to take. Showing a peaceful smile of “salvation,” for it is beyond enslavement,41 the child’s body in turn acts as a threshold between the two parties in the illustration: death as freedom is the political gap enabling the slave subject to emancipate herself from the injurious grip of the master.

The picture dramatizes slave emancipation as a personal “necropolitics” (Mbembe 2003): the (re)production of death.42 By killing her daughter, Garner defiantly negates the pain and injuries of slavery as a self-repeating fate for her children and substitutes for it with death, thus keeping her maternal role and reproductive autonomy intact and averting the replication of pain: “She was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done” (in Harris et al. 1974, 10), as the aforementioned pastor Bassett articulates. The case of Margaret Garner thus enables audiences to conceptualize black women’s pain as subjectivity as a different “state of exception”; the pain Garner is invested with is not primarily connected to a bodily state of exception (as in, e.g., The Scourged Back) that constructs a universally understandable experience, but one articulated within the familial bonds of motherly love,43
which the sentimental mode understood as an equally universal emotion. As Reinhardt observes in his discussion of Lucy Stone Blackwell's writing on the case, this “mother-state of exception” equally produces the black subject as circumscribed by silence and the unspeakable. Stone, a well-known abolitionist and women’s rights activist, had visited the imprisoned Garner and described her encounter in several sentimental accounts:

When I came here and saw that poor fugitive, took her toil-hardened hand, and read in her face deep suffering and an ardent longing for freedom, I could not help bid her be of good cheer. I told her that a thousand hearts were aching for her, and they were glad that one child of hers was safe with the angels. Her only reply was a look of deep despair of anguish such as no word can speak. (quoted in Reinhardt 2002, 103; my italics)

Stone here sketches Margaret Garner both as a politically active subject who has committed a heroic deed and as a subject frozen in the unspeakability of that experience. The black female subject as mother thus is a politically dilemmatic figure, for its subjectivity is constructed via a “universally” understandable act of deviance that nevertheless cannot be spoken by the subject. Garner’s autonomy does not imply an African American or female voice, but is infused with a silence that again takes a white female body as an affective mediary.

As an iconic example of the suffering endured by female slaves, the abolitionist grip on Margaret Garner thus reveals both difference and similarity to the representations of the black male suffering of Gordon and Peter. The national registry of pain as a “true feeling” recognizes Margaret Garner as mother, her “point of entry” to the national matrix of suffering (for freedom) is reproductive. However, while Garner’s actions present a powerful (and fundamentally ambivalent) critique to white supremacy and the reproductive violence of slavery, their enlisting into (white) abolitionist discourse comes at a cost: even while recognizing and heroizing Garner’s defiant suffering, sentimental conventions lock her subject position within a fundamental political silence.

In addition to the sentimental (mis)recognition of the black mother’s pain, the discursive remodeling of Margaret Garner introduces another important aspect, again primarily through its disarticulation. As most contemporaneous reports on her case agreed upon (and few scholars have noted), Garner was mixed-race, as was the child she killed. Reinhardt collects some of the descriptions of Garner and her family which reiterate popular distinctions of shades of blackness:
Press reports describe Robert Garner as a “negro,” Margaret as a “mulatto” or “dark-skinned mulatto.” Margaret’s five-year-old Tom is described as “a negro,” and four-year-old Sam is a “mulatto,” while the dead daughter, Mary, is described as “almost” or “nearly white,” and infant Cilla is “much lighter in color” than her mother, even “light enough to show a red tinge in the cheeks.” (2002, 99–100)

These allusions to racial origin and a history of sexual violation are carefully elided in the postwar pictorial representations of Garner as well as in most scholarly discussions of the case. Noble’s painting and the Harper’s Weekly print (which both omit Cilla) depict Margaret Garner and her children as evenly dark-skinned. The killed child is represented as black, while its textual descriptions as an “almost white” girl reference its origin in either a racially illegitimate relation or the sexual violations of the master, with which the audience of these images had been familiarized by Harriet Jacobs’s narrative Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (1861).

As postwar visual discourse unifies the Garner family in racial terms, it also radically inverts the meaning of the story: by making the Garners “evenly black,” the images disarticulate the issue of sexual violation and the meanings of miscegenation for black femininity, reproduction, and the nation after slave emancipation. The two images connote Garner’s radical (necro)politics—better to stop reproduction dead than have it reinserted into the plantation system—with a notion of “pure” blackness. The visual avoidance of racial amalgamation points to two aspects: on the one hand, it references the anxieties of collapsing the racial hierarchies that underwrote the Garner story. Garner’s actions are not readily intelligible within the generic conventions of the tragic mulatta, but resonate more closely with the trope of the noble savage who accepts death—not for the white man, but for freedom. Through this representation, the issues of white compassion and black silent, but heroic suffering are easily maintained, also without having to address the question of sexual exploitation that dehumanized female slaves.

The visual blackening of the Garner family by Noble further concerns the future of slavery. The Garner case, viewed through the lens of miscegenation, produced the question of the precarious status of “almost white” children being born within the breeding regimes of the plantation—and their respective fates at the hands of slaveholders and after the abolition of slavery. Since Garner’s case gained popularity precisely for the heroic deadliness of her “longing for freedom” and the self-willed refusal to reproduce children as slaves, it became problematic as a narration of racial amalgamation. Arguably, the infanticide of an “almost white” child at the hands of a black woman was not visually representable, whereas the trope of “salvation
through death” had been amply established for black characters by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Williams 2001, 60). In other words, Noble’s visual discourse on Garner retroactively presents death as an acceptable and salvatory future prospect explicitly for the “black children” of “black women.” Given that both images appeared shortly after the end of the Civil War, the visual representation of Margaret Garner glorifies the black family’s “death-bound” self-determination precisely at a point when African Americans are able to reformulate the familial structures that slavery had denied them. The pictorial representation after the abolition of slavery reimagines the Garner story as an event within a “pure black family” and thus—crucial to postwar racial discourse—expresses not a narration of slave defiance and reproductive autonomy, but covertly argues the dysfunctionality and pathology of emancipated black families. As I argue in the following discussion of the visual archive of “white slave children,” this visual negation of black post-slavery kinship is further evoked to biopolitical ends.

**THE CHILDREN OF LOUISIANA**

>Dominant culture . . . misnames the power of the female regarding the enslaved community. Such naming is false, because the female could not, in fact, claim her child, and false, once again, because motherhood is not perceived . . . as a legitimate procedure of cultural inheritance.

—Hortense Spillers, *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*

The photographic archive frequently referred to as the *Redeemed Slave Series* constitutes the most extensive visual capture of “slaves” before the Federal Writers Project would extensively document five hundred African American “former slaves” from 1936–38. The photographs and cartes de visite from 1863 and 1864, which Kathleen Collins (1985b) has subsumed under the heading “Portraits of Slave Children,” circulated widely at the same time as *The Scourged Back*, and they inspired at least the same amount of fascinated compassion in white audiences. The portraits of predominantly white-looking slave children consist of two groups of pictures from different sources.

The earlier group comprises several portraits of a white-skinned girl named *Fanny Virginia Casseopia Lawrence* (Fig. 4.8), who was allegedly rescued from a Virginia plantation by the abolitionist Catherine S. Lawrence, and brought to New York. At least seventeen pictures of her, mostly displaying only her in elaborate dresses, bourgeois settings, and sincere, “educated” poses, were professionally taken and published in 1863 and 1864. Catherine Lawrence, who probably functioned as *Fanny’s* custodian, sold these cards in
order to raise money for the abolitionist activism of Henry Ward Beecher, who also figured as the institution converting Fanny to Christianity. Every card bears the following inscription: “Fanny Virginia Casseopia Lawrence, a redeemed slave child, five years of age as she appeared when found in slavery. Redeemed in Virginia by Catherine S. Lawrence, baptized in Brooklyn, at Plymouth Church by Henry Ward Beecher, May 1863.” The second, more diverse group of photographs was commissioned by Colonel George Hanks in 1864, obviously in an effort to copy Lawrence’s financial success. During the military presence of the Union army in Louisiana in 1863, Hanks had allegedly freed eight people—two boys, three girls, two adult men, one woman—from near New Orleans. Upon bringing them to the Northern states with the help of the National Freedman’s Relief Association, the “former slaves” were photographed in various constellations and settings, and the resulting cartes were sold to support schools for “freed-people.” This archive features
at least thirteen variously staged images of the predominantly light-skinned children (solo, or in groups) and black adults, and operate with diverse bourgeois props and scenes.

Despite some differences, these two sets of images negotiate similar aspects of national and racial identity. The immensely popular photographs—selling for twenty-five cents at the time—work symbolically on many levels; Mary Niall Mitchell calls them “spectacles with multiple meanings, inviting a combination of sympathy, speculation, voyeurism, and moral outrage” (2002, 373). While exploiting the white audience’s “fondness for the white child, understood as the embodiment of innocence” (Hall 2006, 89), and the sentimental iconography of bourgeois family albums and children’s portraits, the images further capitalized on the popular Northern fascination with and compassion for “white slaves.” These functioned as mementoes for what was thought to be one of the most horrifying phenomena of slavery: white slaves denoted those children of black slave women and white slaveholders that were white-looking, but due to the “one drop rule” and the matrilinearity of slave status were regarded as black slaves. As Hazel Carby writes, “[The slave woman’s] reproductive destiny was bound to capital accumulation; black women gave birth to property and, directly, to capital itself in the form of slaves, and all slaves inherited their status from their mothers” (1987, 24–25). The presentation of light-skinned children in these pictures served to denounce the inhumanity of breeding practices of Southern slavers and, further, to provoke anxieties that white people might be enslaved if the Southern regime was not ended (see Mitchell 2002, 375–77).

However, the photographs of the Emancipated Slaves series feature elaborate stagings of mixed-race but white-looking children together with black adults and bourgeois props. The visual constellation of these “racialized items” indicates a more complex engagement with the issue of miscegenation, which will guide my discussion. The pictures’ publication date coincides with the first usages of the term miscegenation, which stirred controversy among Northern audiences arguing about abolition and the future of racial hierarchies. The term gained currency through pamphlets such as What Miscegenation is! What We are to expect now that Mr. Lincoln is President (1864) or popular satirical illustrations such as The Miscegenation Ball (1864). As Shawn Michelle Smith argues: “The specter of racial mixing generated profound white anxiety on the eve of emancipation, for the liberation of slaves promised to break down the rigid racial boundaries whereby interracial rape had worked to reproduce white patriarchal privilege” (1999, 37–39). The discourse of miscegenation in the 1860s reflected a shift in American racial logistics, for it constructed white and black racial reproduction no longer in the rigid paradigm of “breeding” and/or “sexual exploitation,” but rather in the biopolitical terms of managing the purity of racial populations.
The images of white “redeemed” slave children pointed white audiences to the problematic of a “white non-white progeny” (Mitchell 2002, 373) and the history of sexual violation, which on the one hand signified the pervasiveness of enslavement practices (producing even “white” children as slaves), and on the other referenced an unclear future for racial demarcations after emancipation. The photographs therefore negotiate the particular future of the racial order installed under slavery; by addressing the “racial fate” and “racial belonging” of children resulting from the regimes of sexual exploitation in the South, these images circumscribe the question of suffering from slavery not only within the terms of black emancipation, but also through a complex visualization of the suffering (and ultimately failing) African American family. For their white audiences, the images perform an act of “racial witnessing” (Foreman 2002, 516) that fixates the meanings of the pain of “black families” for the national future. I will in the following discuss the various iconographical alignments of whiteness, blackness, slavery, and emancipation and their biopolitical meanings as presented in the pictures.

Passing Over

I begin with a photograph of the FANNY series (Fig. 4.8), which is interesting because its scenographical setup resonates with Noble’s image of Margaret Garner. Sold as an elaborate carte with an oval framing, it resembled sentimental family portraits and thus provided a familiar visual setup to bourgeois audiences. The photograph stages, like the Modern Medea painting, a black woman on the right, looking toward a white elderly woman (probably Mrs. Lawrence, who had “redeemed” the child) on the right, with the raggedly dressed slave child FANNY in between these two figurations of motherhood. The two representatives of slavery gaze expectantly toward the white female redeemer, who has her gaze fixed somewhere outside the image, her composure and tight clutching of hands signaling resolve and decision to rescue the child. Where the Garner picture shows the black mother offering her dead black child to the ruthless and horrified white pursuers, this picture stages a black mother who quietly “passes over” her white child from (black) enslavement into white freedom and security.

The image stages what Gabrielle Foreman has called “white mulatta genealogies”; it dramatizes the subjectivity of FANNY as she is caught and mediated between racial categories and their respective national, political, and juridical meanings. The figure of the “white mulatta” and her passing between and questioning of monolithic racial categories for Foreman provided many nineteenth-century African American women writers with critical tools to “disrupt the binary racial meanings [and] press for more
fluctuities in the sets of signifiers assigned to the classifications of white and black in the US and struggle for rights, recognition, and freedom” (2002, 506). The photograph however, while clearly staging the transgressive act of passing, enfolds FANNY’s literal in-betweenness within a hegemonic narration of white inclusion and exclusion: FANNY’s passing is dramatized as a passing over into whiteness legitimized by the white mother. While all the later images from the series elaborately support FANNY’s racial transformation via class-identifying dresses, poses, and props, the child’s imploring and anxious gaze toward the viewer indicates that whiteness is only granted to her through white compassionate recognition—a sentimental gesture of humanization and inclusion, which consumers of these images could repeat for themselves again and again.

This dramatization of allowing FANNY into whiteness is heightened by the marked difference in authority that characterizes the two figurations of motherhood. The photograph stages the black mother (who in all likelihood was servant to Mrs. Lawrence and not FANNY’s mother) as without agency, her gesture, rather, indicates a humble “letting go” of the child into the firm hands of the abolitionist and Christian white lady. Juxtaposed with the Garner print, this uneven competition between mother figures is interesting: where the representation of Garner had presented infanticide as a valid option for black mothers of black children, black mothers of white children are here explicitly called to accept their children’s racial “un-belonging” and “let them pass” into a precarious whiteness that needs to be constantly confirmed by the white gaze. The subtext of miscegenation, sexual violence, and the incoherence of racial demarcations is thus mollified by a reformulated sentimental tale of “redemption through (white) motherly love.” Where black maternity had been shown to exert salvation to death (as freedom), Mrs. Lawrence appears to signify the compassionate white woman’s love that offers a proper redemption of the innocent girl and subsequent inclusion into the white nation. Viewed together, FANNY and the Garner picture implicitly reverse the distribution of life and death between master and slave: whereas Garner is equated with a necropolitically sovereign motherhood, white motherhood here presents the sovereign production of future, legitimate forms of white American life—or, white biopolitics.

**Theatrical Slavery**

This failure of black maternity, unable to claim the white-looking child for an emancipated racial future, is echoed in the representation of black masculinity in the *Emancipated Slave* series. The discourse on miscegenation and slavery situated black men in a sexually and racially marginal position, since interracial relations were exclusively constructed as occurring between
white master and black female slaves. Miscegenation thus worked through the “provisions of [white] patriarchy” (Spillers 1987, 80), and racially mixed children were connected to “a Fatherland of ‘whiteness’ that promised (material) racial rewards, recognition, and inheritance” (2002, 506). Black men signified thus within the miscegenation discourse as either racially immobile and sexually powerless figures, or—within what Gabriele Dietze succinctly calls the “rape-lynching-complex” (Dietze 2013)—as brutal sexual predators of white women. White patriarchy figures invisibly in the photographs in two ways: on the one hand, the illegitimate white slaveholder(s) who produced the “slave children,” most likely through sexual coercion; on the other, in the fathering presence of Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, who according to the images’ inscriptions, had baptized the children and thus adopted them into the Christian family.

Black masculinity is featured in the photograph of wilson chinn, whom the Harper's Weekly article describes as “about 60 years old.” The
image is inscribed “Wilson Chinn, a Branded Slave from Louisiana. Also exhibiting Instruments of Torture used to punish Slaves” (Fig. 4.9). In front of a bleak background, the man stands calm and erect, one arm angled upward. He is dressed in coarse, simple jacket and trousers. A heavy chain is fastened to his left ankle, he carries an iron collar with long, upward-turned spikes around the neck, and by his feet lies an assortment of what seems to be a double-tongued lash and a spiked paddle. While the visual dramatization of Fanny and her exchange between two racially significant mother figures is invested in both issues of sexual violation and the negotiation of racial demarcations, Wilson’s portrait is thoroughly circumscribed in the past violence of slavery. Though he is technically also “redeemed,” this status is not narrated in the inscription and he is portrayed literally as still caught in the brutality of slavery’s punishment practices: his body is staged and dressed for an equally didactic and theatrical performance of the “instruments of torture” white audiences had learned to connect to Southern slavery. Interestingly however, the image does not explicitly reveal the branded initials on Wilson’s forehead, which the description in Harper’s Weekly elaborately narrates and the inscription mentions:

When 21 years old he was taken down the river and sold to Volsey B. Marmillion, a sugar planter about 45 miles above New Orleans. This man was accustomed to brand his negroes, and Wilson has on his forehead the letters “V. B. M.” Of the 210 slaves on this plantation 105 left at one time and came into the Union camp. Thirty of them had been branded like cattle with a hot iron, four of them on the forehead, and the others on the breast or arm.

In a similar way that Gordon focuses an objectifying and sympathetic gaze on the traces of violation, here the black male body appears as a passive memento to past injuries of enslavement, which he cannot forget. While the primary effect of Wilson’s “exhibition” of torture instruments may have been both didactic and thrilling to white Northern audiences, the mise en scène of the black male body’s almost compulsive reenactment of corporeal punishment practices again freezes him in a pathological relation to an always already past racial trauma. The powerlessness figured in the black mother is thus supplemented by a traumatized male figure. In combination with the predominantly white-looking children, these images construct African American family structures as fundamentally dysfunctional or nonexistent. The futurity of black subjectivity in these images is circumscribed by loss and the stoic acceptance of past hurt.
National Protection

While the *Emancipated Slave* series constructed the failure of African American parentage and consequently produced variously traumatized gendered black subjects, it also made the national futurity of the slave children visually explicit. In the diverse arrangements of the three whitest-looking children—Rosa, Charley, and Rebecca—two pictures especially dramatize the issue of national citizenship and emotional recognition via the sentimental iconography of the flag. One shows the eleven-year-old Rebecca—described in *Harper’s Weekly* as “perfectly white . . . complexion, hair, and features show not the slightest trace of negro blood”—kneeling and praying to an elaborately draped Union flag. The image is entitled *Oh! How I Love The Old Flag* (Fig. 4.10). Similarly explicit about the inclusion of the children

Figure 4.10. Oh, How I Love The Old Flag. Rebecca, A Slave Girl from New Orleans. Carte de visite (1864). Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division (LC-DIG-ppmsca-11124).
into a white nation is a photograph carrying the inscription Our Protection (Fig. 4.11). Here, the three children are wrapped almost fully in the comforting cloth of three American flags. While the two girls—leaning on their companion in the middle—look anxiously toward the viewer, the tall-standing Charley—the Harper’s Weekly description is “very fair, his hair light and silky”—gazes confidently toward his future. Inclusion into the white nation here produces a peculiar iconography of disembodiment, as the photographs perform two things via the usage of flags: they contain the children’s precarious status within the racialized nation by an innocent display of “child’s play” with the national symbol. And further, the protective cloth literally enwraps the children’s racial vulnerability (connoting their histories of sexual exploitation) within an act of national disembodiment; in contrast to the exposures of black bodies I have discussed earlier, these images hide the body scrutinized for racial meaning and provide their subjects with a

particularly white national invulnerability. Especially Charley, whose slave status the newspapers repeatedly declared as unbelievable (“Three out of five boys in any school in New York are darker than he!”) because of his perfect whiteness, seems to be able to claim white male Americanness without the confirming gaze of the viewer.

**Miscegenation Portrait**

The white trio of Charley, Rebecca, and Rosa catered perfectly to Northern desires for easily assimilable images of interracial mixing. Their performance of *white belonging* lead to the eventual dismissal of the other “redeemed” children, Isaac and Augusta, from the photographic project to rescue slave children through white compassionate gazes. As Mitchell writes: “When the sponsors opted to take the children on to Philadelphia for more appearance and sittings in photography studios, Isaac and Augusta were left behind” (2002, 372). The *Harper’s Weekly* article describes no spectacular white features for them, but instead remarks on composition of family, or the comparative intelligence of the two children—both markers attesting to racial identity:

Augusta Boujey is nine years old. Her mother, who is almost white, was owned by her half-brother, named Solamon, who still retains two of her children. Isaac White is a black boy of eight years; but none the less intelligent than his whiter companions. He has been in school about seven months, and I venture to say that not one boy in fifty would have made as much improvement in that space of time.

Isaac and Augusta are represented in a photograph entitled simply *White and Black Slaves* (Fig. 4.12), which shows the two alongside a redeemed adult, Mary Johnson. The image makes no use of national imagery or sentimental props, but speaks directly to the issue of miscegenation and the racial makeup of the future nation. Audiences read it as a racial portrait of the problematic familial structures resulting from slavery, which through the simultaneity of sexual exploitation by white masters and slave marriages could indeed consist of “white and black slaves.” The assembled “family” in the picture is presented as highly unstable and pathologic; lacking a paternal figure, the maternal figure’s blackness is presented as dividing the two children, exhibiting the precarious status of black maternity. The whiter child, Augusta, seems removed from the family triangle and caught in a melancholy gaze, for the viewer signifying the tragic mulatta’s pain of being recognized within a racialized family to which she does not seem to belong.
The fascination with children, racial demarcations, and the nation in the _Emancipated Slave_ series is associated with a further ideological and iconographic context: the cultural practice of photographic family albums, its preoccupation with “properties of the blood” (Smith 1999, 113–35), and its eventual functionalization within the eugenicist reformulation of racial identity. These albums achieved full popularity after Francis Galton’s publications on eugenics (e.g., _Hereditary Genius_, 1869), but also during the Civil War constituted an important cultural practice imbued with notions of racial purity. Tracing parallels between middle-class self-representations such as photographic family trees and Galton’s photographic work on racial heredity, Shawn Michelle Smith argues that
the association of photography with the reproduction of national identities continued throughout the nineteenth century, but by the turn of the century, the “nation” itself was posed as a racial construct. Indeed it is between the two terms of the family and the nation that Francis Galton located the site of racial reproduction. For Galton, the nation was simply a congregation of racialized families. [Thus,] photographs of live babies came to signify in racial terms in a culture permeated by eugenicist thought. (1999, 116–17)

The images of “white non-white” children resonate closely with this context. Read as exemplary photographic racial genealogies, the pictures of slave children and their fictional families reorganized whiteness and blackness for bourgeois audiences in America; by looking miscegenation in its “children’s eyes,” the images evoked thus not only sympathy for the “victims” of racial amalgamation, but also introduced the white viewer to a revised regime of family-centered race consciousness and the cultural technology of the “racialized gaze” (Hall 2006, 96).

The image Black and White Slaves, and the two series of Fanny and Emancipated Slaves in general, crucially negotiated the meanings of race for post-slavery America. Visualizing directly the corporeal repercussions of miscegenation, racial amalgamation, and sexual violation within the plantation system, these pictures visually redistributed racial belongings among children and adults. “White-enough” children were incorporated into an iconography of upper-class and national belonging, while the “too-black” children were integrated into portraits of failing black families, signified through powerless black mother figures and fathers trapped in slavery. As a visual discourse on the pain and (possible) “healing” of miscegenation, these images negotiate the fault lines between two symbolic bodies; the white-looking children are represented on behalf of a “white national body,” threatened by racial mixing and the scandal of commodified white bodies. Their bodies are enveloped in visual redemption narratives of racial passing, sanctioned by benevolent white mothers or the bodily protection of the flag. While these narratives of national healing visually secure white bodies, the “blacker” children and adults signify the racial pain of black collectivity. Here, miscegenation is visualized by racially uneven families. Post-slavery black kinship structures and reproduction are portrayed as traumatized and failing.

The visual reformulations of “whiteness,” “blackness,” and “interraciality” in these images thus project the trauma of miscegenation onto two newly formed, but immediately separated collective bodies: the “racialized” body of the emancipated black population, and the “racial” body of the
reunified white nation. By negotiating the painful boundaries between these collectivities and corporealties, the images enact the shift from Southern racial order to the postwar paradigm of segregated racial populations. The *Emancipated Slaves* series thus projects the racial differences of slavery—where race was secured by the dialectic of master/slave and human/thing—onto the domain of biopolitics, where the nation is constructed as a “congregation of racialized families” and populations to be observed, regulated, and carefully managed. It aligns the visual characteristics of different racial bodies with different possibilities of integration into the white national body. These different bodies have different possibilities of accessing racial pain and national healing; while an image such as *Black and White Slaves* imagines the “black race” as irrevocably traumatized by miscegenation and slavery, the picture of Rosa, Charley, and Rebecca wrapped in the flag stages an inclusionary portrait for white bodies. Importantly, the images transform the legal codes of slavery—e.g., the matrilinearity of slave status—into “visual codes” that allow the viewer to scrutinize, negotiate, and sanction bodies in terms of their racial purity and thus their function in the “separate but equal” racial order of postwar America.

The notion of race, according to Foucault, functions within biopolitical rule by “establishing a biological type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain. This will allow power to treat that population as a mixture of races, or to be more accurate, to treat the species, to subdivide the species it controls, into the subspecies known, precisely, as races. That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by biopower” (Foucault 1997, 254–55). While “race” within American institutionalized slavery—orchestrated by legal, scientific, social, and economic registers—worked to separate master and slaves, the caesura created in these racial portraits fundamentally reinscribe racial difference in biopolitical terms. These biopolitical portraits form a part of photographic abolitionism, and they crucially transpose the discourse over slavery as a violation of black “humanity” into a discourse of the *racial composition* of the nation as an assemblage of different, biologically separate racial groups. The racist logistics of slavery are reformulated as demarcations articulated in bloodlines, skin colors, and genealogies. While the images therefore may also offer sentimental narrations of racial redemption, racial mobility, and inclusion, their biopolitical message is essentially “conservative” in Douglass’s sense. As Rachel Hall writes: “The freezing power of photography assured white viewers that, despite the revolutionary changes taking place in the United States, the *nation* would remain white. Like a photograph soaked in the proper chemical solution, the nation’s composition was fixed” (2006, 90; my italics).
In Frederick Douglass’s speech on “Pictures and Progress” (1861), which introduced this chapter, the prominent abolitionist argued for an American body unified in the fight against institutionalized slavery: “They are not conducting the war on war principles. . . . We are striking with our white hand, while our black one is chained behind us. We are catching slaves instead of arming them” (Douglass 1985[1861], 467). Douglass furiously reminded his white audience that emancipation for him demanded a full incorporation of sovereign members into one national, multiracial body. The sentimental documents of photographic abolitionism I have presented in this chapter reflect the highly ambivalent terms in which this incorporation was imagined, regulated, and displaced in the visual discourse on slavery. The images, part of a visual propaganda effort to instill white compassion for black bodies, seek to articulate the issues of slavery and abolitionism in their affective dimension. They present the hurt bodies of male slaves, the soldiers suffering for America, the traumatized black mother, the melancholic child of miscegenation. All images address a national body that compassionately feels with these “bodies in pain,” and relates their suffering to national and racial meanings. As I have argued, these two contexts are carefully separated by the visual and paratextual rhetoric of these images and associated with different bodies articulated through their different racial and national belongings. Abolitionist photography—while enacting a “humanization” of the commodified slave body by granting it “vulnerability”—thus prescribes which bodies feel pain as “Americans” and which suffer as “racial bodies.” While the black male body, for example, is constructed as the eternally hurt living memento to the black race’s trauma of slavery, the bodies of interracial children are variously invested with the future of the racial nation. The national or racial significance of pain is further imbricated with a temporal dialectic of pastness and futurity; as Rachel Hall suggests, the parallel emergence of photographic images of the (black) “suffering slave” (The Scourged Back) and the (whiter) “redeemed slave” (Our Protection) articulates an ideological rhetoric of “before/after” emancipation: “The suffering slave and the redeemed child were idealized types that worked in tandem: in a strange reversal the adult became the ‘before’ to the child’s ‘after’ picture” (2006, 90).

While the images therefore articulate a visual dolorology that distributes the meanings of “bodies in pain,” their construction of black bodies as significant of “racial trauma” and of white bodies as signifying “national healing” is simultaneously a negotiation of which bodies matter in what way to post-slavery America. The crucial juxtaposition of GORDON’s/PETER’s
scars (signifying the always already past injuries of slavery) and the protected bodies of “white slaves” (representing the inclusionary “redemption” of slave humanity) illustrates this alignment of temporal, racial, and national belongings. The “before/after” effect created in this constellation not only evokes the notion of a successful transformation, but further enacts the crucial shift to “seeing” race in biopolitical terms; in the visual distance separating *The Scourged Back* and the *Miscegenation Portrait*, the meaning of racial difference is transformed from the master/slave dialectic to the calculus of blood mixtures, skin colors, the racial integrity of families, genealogies, and populations. This shift crucially undergirded the continuity of racial thinking in reconstructionist and segregationist America.

The centrality of miscegenation for the biopolitical circumscription of race is doubly powerful: the symbolic, visual inclusion of the white body of Fanny—where “blackness” can be assimilated because it is invisible—enfolds racial mixing in a narrative of white benevolence and compassion for the girl’s precarious whiteness. On the other hand, the family portrait of Isaac, Augusta, and Mary Johnson ascribes the issue of miscegenation and racial amalgamation primarily as the pain of fragmented and pathological black families. While the previous chapter demonstrated how the “insensitivity” of black female slaves served as a relay over which white women’s bodies is subjected to a biopolitical discourse on fertility and racial purity, photographic abolitionism produced the image of black reproduction as the site of pathology and trauma. This figuration enables not only the construction of racial amalgamation as a national problem emerging from and attached to black bodies (and thus calling for segregational measures), but also the counterimage of an imperiled whiteness threatened by “race suicide.” The two prominent figures of “racial hurt” evoked in these photos—united in the fragmented black family—therefore served as the backdrop against which the biopolitical meanings of “race” could be installed for postwar America: the eternally hurt (but never dead) black male slave body, and the traumatized black mother producing racially alienated children. The present absence of white men, and white male sexual violation, attests to the white patriarchal provisions maintained in these pictures.

The visual recognition of “racial pain” in antislavery photography therefore does not cause the negation or crisis of what Paul Gilroy (2000) calls “raciology,” but merely transforms its terms. While the *comparative dolorology* unfolded in photographic abolitionism around 1863 enlisted black bodies into a national visual discourse as “novel objects of feelings” (Fisher 1985, 98), their emergence did not necessarily threaten white supremacy, the paradigm of the “white gaze,” the white privilege of compassion, or the equation of the nation with whiteness. Rather, the different visual formulas that link bodily pain to racial or national meanings further articulate race
within the domain of biopolitics, and crucially link it to ways of seeing race. The pictures not merely reiterated the “representational colonialism” (Wallis 1995, 54) presented by the visual conventions of racial science, but further transposed it into a visual biopolitics. The iconography of biopolitics amounts, as I have shown, to a racial aesthetics, where the raciality of subjects is associated with powerful visual archetypes: the hurt black male, the traumatized and sexualized black mother, the tragic mulatta. Among others, Paul Gilroy has argued for a revision of scholarship on raciology that would have to appreciate and investigate the crucial visuality of racial discourse. What he writes on the visual practices of racial science in the nineteenth century should also be maintained for the visual archive of abolitionism:

The enduring power of . . . visual material . . . was more than an iconic counterpoint to the inscription of respectable racial science. It raises the interesting possibility that cognition of “race” was never an exclusively linguistic process and involved from its inception a distinctive visual and optical imaginary. . . . [T]his race-producing activity required a *synthesis of logos with icon*, of formal scientific rationality with something else—something visual and *aesthetic in both senses of that slippery word*. Together they resulted in a specific relationship to, and mode of observing, the body. (2000, 35; my italics)

As a means of concluding this chapter, I want to briefly point out two contexts in which the visual archetypes of “racial suffering” established by photographic abolitionism can be used to revise scholarly readings—one historical, and one pertaining to theorization.

The photographs articulate two archetypal figurations of the black body in pain—a stoic and resilient, yet eternally hurt black male body that though always already hurt and dehumanized, seemingly never dies; and a traumatized black female body, linked to racial impurity and pathological reproduction. This particular convergence of sexuality, violation, and notions of racial transgression figurated by black bodies relates to Gabriele Dietze's discussion of the “rape/lynching complex” (Dietze 2013), which crucially structures racial relations and anxieties of pre–civil rights America. I would argue that the almost phantasmic amount of visible vulnerability attributed to black male bodies in abolitionist photography contributes to the legitimation of the excesses of violence and visibility in Southern lynchings. As Linda Hentschel (2010) has recently suggested, these lynchings, attended by large white crowds and memorialized in photographs and postcards, were also crucially visual practices, where cross-racial gazes were brutally sanctioned and reversed. The particular figuration of black subjectivity articulated in
pictures such as *The Scourged Back*—invested with an endless vulnerability that the black subject can never fully realize—has in the “rape/lynching complex” led to an excess of white violation of black male bodies that never can hurt and kill enough, and never can produce enough visibility for both white racial purity and black hurt. In alteration of Richard Dyer’s statement, it could be said that the never fully human vulnerability attributed to the black body legitimizes the endlessly inhuman practice of lynching: “If blacks have more ‘life’ than whites, then it must follow that whites have [and do] more ‘death’ than blacks” (1993, 141).

The second intervention concerns the epistemological and political implications of dealing with the visual documents of abolitionism today. As I have argued, the image *The Scourged Back* today is frequently employed not only as a cipher for the trauma caused by American enslavement, if only for its often silencing shock value. The picture hence enables not only the highly ambivalent effect of “affective compassion” with the body represented, but also the displacement of analytic descriptions of slavery and racism as systems of practices, discourses, and materialities through the evidentiality of the visualized body. What I have pointed out as the visual state of exception enforced by the shocking display of this picture, supplements a rhetoric of the “unspeakable” with the undeniability of the visible. Naomi Mandel has thoughtfully criticized this silencing rhetoric surrounding the representation of and discourse on human atrocity: “Rhetorical production is conflated with objective fact, a conflation anchored by this injunction: not only is atrocity unspeakable, it must remain so. This conflation, I argue, enables the masquerade of rhetorical performance (evoking the unspeakable) as ethical practice (protecting survivors, respecting the memory of the victims, safeguarding identity, reality, or historical truth)” (2006, 209). Apart from the ethical implications of using visual documents that support the notion of “unspeakable trauma,” uncritically using these shocking pictures also reiterates an iconography of racial suffering and racial embodiment, without acknowledging their racializing and gendering discursive effects—or, as my chapter has demonstrated, their dolorological functions. This fixating iconography has been critically called into question by several scholars, most forcefully by Hortense Spillers, who maintains that these views on the violated black *body* in themselves enact the displacement of another history of experience. Writing on black embodiment in the shadow of American slavery, Spillers contends that the body that becomes socially visible and intelligible as gendered and racialized—i.e., the body that is in *view*—always conceals a form of “anti-embodiment” that is fundamental to enslavement, which she calls the *flesh*:

I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captivated
and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero-degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography. (Spillers 2003, 206)

In my understanding of Spillers’s argument, the “flesh” may stand in for that state of nonbeing, nonintelligibility, and unspeakability inhabited by the enslaved person. Importantly, the “flesh” does not denote something anterior or exterior to discourse and narration. Instead, Spillers calls the “flesh” a “primary narrative . . . its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard” (Spillers 2003, 206). To delineate the historicity of this primary narrative would mean to engage with the meticulous processes of dismemberment in their technicality and taxonomy of “taking apart” bodies. The “body”—as it is discursively and iconographically constructed in representation—for Spillers is thus always engaged in the concealment of the captivated subject’s corporeal history of violation. Views seeking to “capture” the black body—such as the documents of photographic abolitionism—partake in an incessant discursive work of concealment, a process that produces the socially intelligible body of the “liberated subject” and inevitably covers up the “flesh.”

To unriddle the narratives of the “flesh” has been called for by Bibi Bakare-Yusuf as a predicament for a history of the “lived body” in general. In her article “The Economy of Violence: Black Bodies and the Unspeakable Terror” (1999), she exposes the shortcomings of a history of the body that fails to engage with the commodification and abnegation of bodies and bodily experience in enslavement. Drawing on the notion of the “flesh” as site of an alternate corporeal history, her argument executes a radical critique of Elaine Scarry’s axiom of pain’s anti-epistemological status, and argues for a historicizing and discursive understanding of pain and violence within a history of the body. She states that Scarry’s anti-epistemology of pain obscures how pain is systematically circulated as a currency in organized forms of subjugation such as American chattel slavery, and continues to circulate in the construction and representation of black bodies. The “black body in pain”—though evoked in compassionate terms—always partakes in a white supremacist discourse of “active and systematic deconstruction” (318) of black subjectivity. The academic insistence on the “unspeakability” of pain, and the simultaneous canonization of representations of African American suffering consequently obscure pain’s decisive function in the ongoing production of dehumanizing notions of race.
Paradox designates a condition in which resolution is the most uninteresting aim.

—Wendy Brown, States of Injury

The concluding argument concerns late modern figurations of the body in pain. Spectacles of pain have proliferated in many forms in the contemporary American public sphere—if indeed pain hasn’t become its primary and all-pervading obsession. Confessional TV shows exchange narratives of personal trauma and hurt for public intelligibility; cinematic spectacles of suffering, from The Passion of the Christ (2004) to torture-porn favorite Hostel (2005), exhibit the body in pain for profit, thrill, and public outrage; news reports narrate national-scale catastrophes through individual testimonials of pain; reality game shows such as Survivor measure their contestants’ bodily pain capacities against their resistance to (or aggressiveness in) traumatizing and abusive group dynamics. There is also a proliferation of political discourse disclosing the injuries caused by contemporary forms of governing: public movements raise consciousness for excluded and abjected forms of living, feeling, and aching in Western democracies; critical discourses continue to shed light on the structural violence of regimes of power; the interventions of identitarian movements and groups successfully expand public recognition of social and political injury, changing the scope of intelligibility in the process.

These diverse affective phenomena are not always readily distinguishable in neoliberal regimes. Scholars such as Wendy Brown or Sara Ahmed have pointed out the coopting of identitarian politics in contemporary governmental regimes. These critical voices urge “[c]aution . . . against the assumption that ‘speaking out’ and ‘making visible’ within so-called radical politics can be separated from the conventions of self-expression in
neo-liberal forms of governance” (Ahmed and Stacey 2001, 4). Bill Clinton’s infamous tagline “I feel your pain” or Barack Obama’s ongoing focus on a “politics of empathy”1 are only the presidential cases in point for an ongoing politics of pain that links recognition of suffering to democratic progress. Academic debates have matched this capitalization on pain and compassion as necessary ingredients to the development of politics, ethics, or community making, such as in Rosi Braidotti’s call for the unification of feminist, gay, lesbian, and transgender identity politics under the label of a “community of the suffering.”2 The various diagnoses of America as “wound culture” (Seltzer 1998) or “trauma culture” (Kaplan 2005), in this view, describe a highly disparate, tension-laden, and ambivalent field of affective discourse, rather than a unified or unifying fixation on pain in contemporary Western societies.

Lauren Berlant has argued that these politics of affect dictate the continuous envelopment of the political in sentimental rhetoric. Sentimentalism holds up the promise that subjectivity is granted in the recognition of pain and that democracy is realized as the participation in an ideal of common suffering and compassion. Sentimental discourses “locate the human in a universal capacity to suffer and romantic conventions of individual historical acts of compassion and transcendence. [They] imagine a nonhierarchical social world that is . . . ‘at heart’ democratic because good intentions and love flourish in it” (2008, 6). Sentimental rhetoric produces a public sphere assembled around pain bonded by feeling with what is unspeakable: a commonality of passionate and compassionate bodily subjects, or a “fantasy of generality through emotional likeness in the domain of pain” (Berlant 2008, 6).

These arguments suggest a fundamental link between the sentimental evocation of pain and the discourses imagined as “at heart democratic.” Indeed, the emancipatory project of democracy relies on articulations of pain, the recognition of those suffering, and a unified politics as remedy of this suffering. This is certainly true for American culture and its foundational ideas of promise and exceptionalism. The cultural sites I have pointed to participate in this evocation of a public sphere, where oppressive hurtings and social injuries are “counted in” toward a better politics of integration, understanding, and recognition. The sentimental linkage of emancipation through the circulation of pain and compassion as politics indicates a larger genealogy that dominates American culture and that this book has tried to elucidate. This genealogy was traced back to America’s emancipatory foundation as a nation freed from colonial injury, and informed by a national history of successful incorporations of marginalized subjects into the national project (suffrage, abolitionism). American dolorologies has related this discourse to an apparatus of cultural technologies such as compassion,
testimony to oppression, and articulations of affect and pain, and the materializations of race and gender they covertly enact. My analysis concurs with Berlant’s observation that the various claims to pain as identity disarticulate their marginalizing effects in a rhetoric of universalization:

In the liberal tradition of the United States [testimony of pain] is not simply a mode of particularizing and puncturing self-description by minorities, but a rhetoric of universality located, not in abstract categories, but in what was thought to be, simultaneously, particular and universal experience. Indeed, it would not be exaggerating to say that sentimentality has long been a popular rhetorical means by which pain is advanced, in the United States, as the true core of personhood and citizenship. (2000, 34)

This connection of pain, nation, and subjectivity has, on the one hand, led to the public sphere becoming more and more a site of intimate “affect” exchange. This transformation is visible in the proliferation of mediated forms of confession, testimony, and other articulations of traumatized selfhood, such as reality TV or the culture of therapeutic discourse. These governmental forms of achieving public subjectivity through speaking pain imitate and appropriate the critical formulations of differential experience from identitarian movements, at times becoming indistinguishable from them: “We can also see a . . . collusion between liberal, capitalist forms of mass entertainment and individualist therapies, and the feminist importance of the personal” (Ahmed 2000, 12). The achievement of public visibility through the articulation of trauma and pain is furthermore supplemented by mainstream political discourse becoming compassionate and revolving primarily around the recognition of bodies in pain.3

Both forms of discourse—personal claims to pain as identity and hegemonic gestures of compassion, recognition, and inclusion—are intimately connected and dependent on each other, in that they both enact a paradoxical simultaneity of the particular and the universal: the hegemonic gesture transforms personal pain into universal concern (“I feel your pain”), and thus marks compassion as both ethical and democratic practice. Simultaneously, it fixates identity as social and corporeal injury, and via recognition, restabilizes its own ideal (of politics, law, nation) as “pain-free.” On the other hand, interventionist critiques articulate common histories of pain and injury against this fantasy and demand recognition and incorporation in that utopian space. They thus inevitably perform a “fetishization of the wound,” an equation of identity and suffering fixating the “identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions” (Brown 1995, 27). Both positions are in this view invested in similar structures: the collusion of the
sociopolitical and the bodily, where individual hurt is remedied by social redress; and, the ideal projection of the political as a pain-free space: “The object of the nation-state in this light is to eradicate systemic social pain, the absence of which becomes the definition of freedom” (Berlant 2000, 34). Furthermore, both employ a rhetoric of sentimentality that produces a quasi prediscursive, unspeakable, but incessantly evoked body in pain, which is simultaneously interpreted as specifically “suffering from” in a sovereign sentimental gesture, which grounds differences in bodies.

These sentimental discourses, while evoking a universal affective core of democracy that is reproduced by pain and compassion, are closely tied to what throughout this book I have called biopolitical meanings of pain. While the previous chapters have demonstrated the historical alignments of the sentimental uses of pain and the biologizing circumscription of feeling bodies, I’d like to briefly point to recent knowledge productions within the life sciences that illustrate how topical these alliances are. Especially neuroscience, which has repeatedly engaged in the issues of torture, painful affect, and compassion or empathy, currently rearticulates the biopolitical meanings of “feeling” and “feeling with.” George Lakoff, professor of cognitive science and linguistics at the University of California at Berkeley, for example explains compassion as a “biologically” democratic feeling:

We now know from the study of mirror neuron systems in the brain that empathy is physical, a capacity built into our very bodies. It is what allows us to feel what others feel and appears to be the basis for human connection and the capacity to care about others. Our native neural capacities for empathy can be strengthened by how we are raised, or it can decay when empathy is not experienced—or we can be trained to develop neural circuitry to bypass natural empathy. . . . I have found, in studies of largely unconscious political conceptual systems, that empathy is the basis of progressive political thought, and the basis for the very idea of social, not just individual, responsibility. . . . It is the same neural system that creates human connections with others. And the same neural system that lies at the heart of political democracy. Turning it off is turning off humanity, and with it democracy. (2009; my italics)

Lakoff’s argument updates eighteenth-century views of the “fundamental sociability of man” (Knott 2009, 6) with neuroscience vocabulary, and crucially demonstrates how scientific knowledge can serve to introduce the terms degeneration and heredity (see ch. 3) into the doctrine of democratic affect. By constructing compassion as a “neural capacity” that can “be strengthened” by nurture or “decay” when it is not experienced, Lakoff
invokes—in a fusion of nature and nurture, of biology and the social—the family (and by extension the nation) as the primary site where the individual body’s capacity for democratic sentiment is healthily cultivated, “trained” to discipline, or abjected to morbidity. While thus—in a markedly Burkean fashion (see ch. 2)—the “neural body” is retained as a site of universality, factors such as education, genetic disposition, neural training, or good/bad parenting install measures of differentiation between bodies that are properly “hardwired” for democratic compassion and those that are not. Similar to the calculations of civilization levels at work in nineteenth-century eugenics, these knowledge productions deploy thus primarily a biopolitics of affect and compassion, which can facilitate discriminations within the biological domain between those bodies capable of reproducing democratic affect and those that beget regressive political sensibilities. Such biologizing discourses receive their modes of differentiation and categorial clarity from popular cultural archives that also deal in questions of humanity and affect, and articulate them in the urgent modes of sentimental discourse.

Without trying to relativize the important empowering successes achieved through articulations of pain and social injury, my book has aimed for a “dialectical history of promise and damage” (Seitler 2003, 83) that sheds light on the objectivist discourses fueling, and the material repercussions resulting from, the persistent connection of pain/subjectivity and compassion/democracy. My historical account of pain and its biopolitical and sentimental uses concurs with Robyn Wiegman’s remark on the problematic relation between today’s critical, identitarian discourse and its historical precursors. She argues that contemporary political interventions often fail to attend to the continuity between the ideology in the text and our own politics and subject positions. Accordingly, she recommends that the rethinking of historical shapes of Western constructions of humanity and culture—and thus the critical arsenal of cultural studies—should be a “vehicle for shifting the frame of reference in such a way that the present can emerge as somehow less familiar, less natural in its categories, its political delineations, and its epistemological foundations” (1995, 202). My readings, which have targeted a genealogy of the systematically and politically powerful evocation of different bodies in pain—a discursive constellation I call dolorology—thus aim at defamiliarizing the rhetoric of pain and trauma common to contemporary cultural studies and democratic discourse.

This rethinking, as my concluding analysis of pain in the discourse on terrorism argues, is even more urgent since pain, trauma, and compassion have been installed at the center of our definitions of “the West” after 9/11. In my extended reading of the terrorist-thriller Unthinkable (2010), I aim at two aspects: on the one hand, I argue that contemporary circumscriptions of “America versus Terrorism” effectively update the historical figurations and
constellations of racialized and gendered bodies which the previous chapters have excavated, and on the other, I am concerned with the alarming escalation of the logistics linking democracy and pain that happens when the “other” is imagined as precisely the opposite: numb and unaffected by pain. This escalation implies ultimately not only a suffusion of politics with pain, but rather the complete substitution of democratic politics with bodily exposure that can only be called pornographic.

**DEMOCRATIC PORNOGRAPHY**

We moved from seeking intelligence, our original justification, to seeking confessions.

—Tony Lagouranis, ex-torturer of the U.S. Army in Iraq

The multifaceted displays of pain in American culture this book has analyzed have been all but surpassed by a national rhetoric of suffering that escalated after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Evoking the event as an injury to the nation’s body, President George W. Bush’s address on September 20 prescribed the interpretative framework of 9/11 in terms of national wounding, trauma, and retaliation. He declared: “We have suffered great loss. And in our grief and anger we have found our mission and our moment. . . . I will not forget the wound to our country and those who inflicted it” (Bush 2001). While Bush’s reaction thus identified the meaning of 9/11 primarily in terms of a “nation in pain” (which quickly turned into a “nation of resolve”), Barack Obama, then a state senator in Illinois, commented on the attacks in a different way in the local Chicago newspaper *The Hyde Park Herald* (2001). In an effort to understand what George W. Bush used primarily as a trigger for nationalist discourse and military action, Obama issued an analysis of the attacks that identified the sources of terrorism in an incapacity to feel pain and compassion:

We must also engage, however, in the more difficult task of understanding the sources of such madness. The essence of this tragedy, it seems to me, derives from a *fundamental absence of empathy* on the part of the attackers: an *inability to imagine, or connect with, the humanity and suffering of others*. Such a *failure of empathy*, such *numbness to the pain of a child* or the *desperation of a parent*, is not innate; nor, history tells us, is it unique to a particular culture, religion, or ethnicity. It may find expression in a particular brand of violence, and may be channeled by particular demagogues or fanatics. Most often, though, it grows out of a climate of poverty and ignorance, helplessness and despair. (my italics)
Obama here equates emotional numbness, insensitivity, and the failure to feel pain with antidemocratic attitudes and political fanaticism. Terrorism, understood as the refusal to feel with others, becomes antihumanist action and the negation of compassionate democracy. The suicide attackers of 9/11, utterly disregarding pain, emerge as the affective “other” of America. Against this image of the noncompassionate terrorist, Obama is able to evoke the United States as a seemingly infinite source of empathy, not only for its own suffering victims, but also for the “embittered children across the globe—children not just in the Middle East, but also in Africa, Asia, Latin America, Eastern Europe and within our own shores” (Obama 2001). Notably, Obama explicitly denies that the terrorists’ lack of pain sensitivity can be traced to cultural, religious, or racial differences. In naming poverty and ignorance as primary sources of insensitivity to pain and lack of compassion, Obama significantly departs from viewing race, culture, or religion as explanations of “fundamental(ist) numbness.” His argument effectively frames fundamentalism and disregard for human suffering as global problems within late capitalism, which also may explain why his stance was ignored at the time. Obama’s simultaneous act of recognizing terrorists as “victims” of poverty and ignorance, and compassion as the necessary countermeasure against their moral anesthesia, however, also reinstates “America” as the universal agent to “feel with” and “deal with” the problem of terrorism; the politician’s compassion presents sentimentalism and humanist sympathy as particularly American strategies of inclusion, which for him operate—“history tells us”—independently from racializing constructions. Obama’s statement is noteworthy in that it presents an attempt to regard “terrorism” through American sentimental registers. By naming “poverty and ignorance, helplessness and despair” as the sources of fundamentalism, Obama inadvertently enlists the attackers into a landscape of victims of globalized capitalism to be rescued by American democratic compassion. In Obama’s victimology then, terrorism emerges both as the ultimate madness and the test of compassion: the terrorist—incapacitated from feeling sympathy—figures simultaneously as the antihumanist enemy of American sentimentality and as the most radical challenge to compassionate and humanist recognition. Achilles Mbembe (2003) offers an insightful discussion of the bodily performances and meanings of the suicide bomber, which elucidates how the numbness of the terrorist preempts his or her assimilation into Western registers of compassion or sacrificial heroism:

The logic of heroism as classically understood: to execute others while holding one’s own death at a distance. In the logic of martyrdom, a new semiosis of killing emerges . . . the body here becomes the very uniform of the martyr. But the body as such is not only an object to protect against danger and death. The body in itself has
neither power nor value. The power and value of the body result from a process of abstraction based on the desire for eternity. In that sense, the martyr, having established a moment of supremacy in which the subject overcomes his own mortality, can be seen as laboring under the sign of the future. . . . The self-sacrificed proceeds to take power over his or her death and to approach it head-on. (Mbembe 2003, 37; my italics)\(^8\)

Mbembe’s analysis makes clear how the suicide bomber exposes the sentimental politics and performances of pain characterizing American culture to a particular and unassimilable “madness”;\(^9\) the attacker’s body has “no value” and thus lays no claim to vulnerable humanity or socially significant suffering. It is fueled by a logic of (self-)destructive disembodiment that upsets the dolorological framework of American culture, where the attainment of social and political subjectivity is precisely achieved by claiming embodiment through recognition of pain. The figure of the suicide bomber, feeling neither pain nor compassion, in this view poses a particular problem to the dolorological logistics of pain, vulnerability, and humanization: it appears, from a Western perspective, as a figuration of willed inhumanity and invulnerability.

Since this figuration—labeled “the terrorist“—entered the American public sphere, cultural texts circumscribing its symbolic value have proliferated. These texts negotiate the meanings of the terrorist body in terms of its negation of humanitarian compassion and particular disregard for pain within American cultural registers: two aspects reflected in the terrorist’s designated association with “inhumanity” and “invulnerability.”\(^10\) During the last decade, and even more so after the controversies over the American government’s illegal employment of torture and infinite detention at Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, the negotiation of the terrorist figure and the appropriate “democratic” response to terrorism has frequently been enacted over the dramatization of torture, and the particular evocations of pain, vulnerability, and limits of compassion it entails. The torture movie seems to have emerged as the principal genre in which the meanings of inhumanity and invulnerability, and the limits of sympathy with the “other” of democracy are symbolically negotiated.\(^11\)

The proliferation of torture as a narrative site where national, political, and ethical issues are affectively rearranged is obvious in contemporary cinematic productions. From a cursory look at these texts, it can be argued that two transformations within contemporary American narratives are visible: (1) the appearance of torture as a dramatic device in mainstream movies where (mostly white male) protagonists are either exposed to torturing and
sadistic villains—e.g., Syriana (2005), Casino Royal (2006), The Dark Knight (2008)—or engage in torture and confront the attending moral problems themselves; the television series 24 (2001–2010), dramatizing the limits of interrogation techniques in the war on terror, is a case in point. The other trend, which has been observed by several scholars, is the recent emergence of a cinematic genre frequently dubbed “torture porn” (Edelstein 2006) or “carnography” (Kattelman 2009). From the Saw series (from 2004) and Eli Roth’s Hostel (2005) to such works of exploitation as Captivity (2007) or Martyrs (2008), these movies stage arbitrary scenarios of torture and focus mainly on the damaged humanity they produce.12

This two-tiered popularization of torture as a narrative setting essentially negotiates cultural meanings of torture/terrorism in two ways. On the one hand, it serves to imagine to what extent an adversary without compassion or sympathetic restrictions is able to inflict pain on democratic bodies, that is, how the vulnerability of democratic bodies and sentiments is escalated through the positing of a compassionless enemy.13 More importantly, however, these narratives further circumscribe the relation of pain infliction and human dignity, in the sense of both the loss of humanity when one is tortured (thus, e.g., legitimizing escalating forms of retaliation), and the loss of humanity one experiences when one resorts to torturing an inhuman and invulnerable enemy for particular ends. Especially the latter question has become a staple of cinematic narratives ostensibly dealing with terrorism and the war on terror, where American protagonists are repeatedly challenged to evaluate what political ends justify what dehumanizing means of pain infliction. These settings thus seemingly negotiate ethical issues, which are inevitably imagined against an invulnerable adversary.

A recent example is the Senator production Unthinkable, directed by Gregor Jordan and internationally released to DVD in April 2010.14 I will subject only this movie and its dramatization of democratic compassion and inhuman torture to an extended discussion, but my arguments could also be applied to many other productions. Unthinkable, a self-described “suspense thriller,” posits a fictional scenario in which a terrorist threatens the country with nuclear bombs. A white American convert to Islam (Michael Sheen) sends the U.S. government a tape showing himself in three nondescript storage rooms, each of which contains a nuclear bomb set to detonate in less than a week, potentially killing hundred thousands of Americans. Helen Brody (Carrie Ann Moss), an FBI agent in Los Angeles, is tasked to track down the bombs’ locations, while an “independent contractor,” known only as H (Samuel L. Jackson), is brought in to interrogate the suspect, who has allowed himself to be caught. The protagonists are transported to a secret military facility near Los Angeles, where H proceeds to torture the suspect.
for information, while Helen Brody negotiates the legal and ethical grounds of H’s brutal methods with the military authorities present, and with her own conscience.

The suspect, calling himself Yusuf Atta Mohammed/Steven Arthur Younger, seems to know exactly what the interrogation will entail. H ratchets up the pressure, using increasingly more brutal methods of torture (against Brody's objections), but the suspect doesn’t crack, and instead restates his moderate demands.15 Even as H kills Mohammed/Younger’s (ostentatiously non-American) wife in front of the terrorist’s eyes, Mohammed/Younger refuses to reveal the locations. Only when H enters the torture box with Mohammed/Younger’s two children does the terrorist break down and confess. After an ensuing brief struggle among the military authorities, Mohammed/Younger is able to seize a gun and kills himself. As military special teams move in to defuse the three bombs in the nick of time, the camera reveals to the viewer a concealed fourth bomb—its timer running out as the credits roll.16

Unthinkable’s main dramatic device is the conflict between investigator Brody and torturer H, two figures crucially characterized by their relation to pain, pain infliction, and compassion. The two protagonists articulate the politics of compassion and the politics of torture, respectively—a dialectic embodied in the film by white femininity and black masculinity. H, presented as a cynical specialist in the dirty methods of military operations, excels in devising brutal methods of physical coercion, abuse, and injury; his interrogation of Mohammed/Younger starts out with an amputation of fingers, and “escalates” into waterboarding, further amputations, suffocation, prolonged electric shocks, cutting, and the killing of the terrorist’s wife. H’s approach to breaking the terrorist is revealed in a series of argumentative bouts with Brody, whose character takes up position as the concerned citizen. When H takes a break from torturing Mohammed/Younger, Brody confronts him in the bathroom:

Brody: Physical torture doesn’t work.

H: I guess that is why they have been using it since the beginning of human history? For fun?

. . . .

Brody: That’s what makes you so special? Our secret weapon against the enemy?

H: Its not about the enemy. Its about us. Our weakness. We are on the losing side. We are afraid, they are not. We doubt, they believe. . . . Look, this is a process, he has to believe I have no limits.
H articulates the logic of torture in dual terms: as a tactical and historical imperative, and as a performance. His “speciality” consists in the ability to perform the limitlessness of pain infliction that can be applied in the name of democracy in order to match and overcome the terrorist’s ideological invulnerability. Significantly, this performance of “inhumanity” within democratic politics is embodied by black masculinity. H’s corporeal performativity therefore recapitulates the emancipated/traumatized male slave body, which I have analyzed in the last chapter; African American masculinity signifies a historical and performative knowledge of pain and methods of infliction, and embodies a knowledge of the specific vulnerability of humanity and the body’s limits.

While being able to claim a seemingly limitless expertise on pain, H cannot transform this knowledge into political or ethical agency, thus remaining detached from his sense of vulnerability. As his methods prove fruitless and he proposes the “unthinkable,” he calls on Brody to legitimize this measure ethically: “Tell me I can do this. Justify me.” Black masculinity in this regard is constructed as the embodiment of a limitless knowledge and performance of pain infliction. Knowing thus intimately how and when torture will reveal the humanity and vulnerability of the terrorist (when it matches his inhumanity), the black subject, however, is not able to transform this expertise into an effective or affective politics; rather, H’s ability to signify limitlessness (and thus to break the numbness of the terrorist) constructs black subjectivity as filled with an ethical vacuity. Black masculinity is thus presented as included within the political sphere through its experience with pain, and simultaneously detached from the “felt” moral standards of democracy by a lack of “true feeling” and true humanity. As H enters the torture box for the first time, the white soldier engaged in interrogating Mohammed/Younger exclaims: “No way you fucking animal, you stay away from him.”

While H thus embodies the inhuman (but necessary) transgression of bodily and ethical limits within a logistics of torture, Helen Brody is equated with humanitarian sentiment and compassionate politics. In the initial stages of the interrogation, Brody tries to halt the military operation by pointing out the Geneva Convention and the illegal status of torture. When her interventions prove unsuccessful, she repeatedly tries to engage both H and the terrorist into a sentimental exchange of feelings, compassion, and humanitarian concern, appealing to both for an interruption of their displays of masculine invulnerability. She approaches Mohammed/Younger with sympathetic concern when she first enters the torture box in which he is held:

Brody: You looked at my watch, would you like to know the time? . . . I’d like to ask you a few questions about your wife Jehan
and your two children. . . . You must have been very upset when she left you.

Mohammed/Younger: I am not upset. I accept my fate, you should accept yours.

Brody: Your friends at the mosque, your family. Did you want to impress them with this? You must love them so much.

Brody implies that the white American Muslim acts upon an inferiority complex. This evokes a psychological understanding of Mohammed/Younger’s decision to become a terrorist in terms of what seems to be a convert’s overcompensation. The FBI agent thus embodies an essentially therapeutic approach to fundamentalist politics, which compassionately tries to access Mohammed/Younger’s feelings of shame. Brody in this line of thought is the only character to embrace the terrorist’s status as a convert to Islam—she calls him Yusuf, while the others stick to Mr. Younger—thereby signifying that compassionate American politics will recognize and include marginal identities if they confess or “come out” to their foundational trauma.19

Her efforts to inspire sentimental affect in the terrorist further address the site of the family, trying to awaken Mohammed/Younger’s compassion by telling him that his wife and children have not managed to leave the country in order to escape the blast radius. If the bombs go off, they will be killed along with millions of American citizens. White femininity thus defends the site of shared, racial understanding and reproductive compassion, interpelling the terrorist both as a white American and a responsible American father. The site of the family also provides Brody with the affective means to approach professional torturer H. As she discovers him taking a casual lunch break with his Bosnian wife Rena and happily chatting online with his two children, she engages the woman: “You know what he does? How can you? Your family, your children. You live in the same house with him. He is not normal.” The wife, who is later revealed to have once acted as H’s assistant, responds by recounting her own traumas of rape and murder experienced in Bosnia, thus exposing Brody’s outrage as naive.

Brody’s character throughout the film embodies a position of democratic and humanitarian sensibility, which is repeatedly diminished by H’s cynicism, Rena’s traumatic authority, and Mohammed/Younger’s stalwart noncompassion and invulnerability: “This [torture] is entirely necessary,” the terrorist tells her. In her frustrating confrontations with the escalating wages of bodily pain, Brody continuously has to adjust her compassionate sentiment to the logic of terrorism, torture, and (non-European) barbarism. The FBI agent’s moral concerns are therefore presented as indicative of
an “excessive sensibility” (see ch. 3), not on a par with the inhuman and invulnerable enemy (and the necessary countermeasures) encountered in contemporary politics. While white femininity’s democratic feelings are thus essentially discredited as an index of overcivilization within the “war on terror” frame of reference, Brody manages to claim decisive authority as the film’s narrative of escalating pain approaches the unthinkable measure. In order to “break” Mohammed/Younger’s invulnerability, make him talk, and thus save American lives, H finally proposes to torture the terrorist’s two infant children, with the words: “I might have to crank this up a notch or two.” While he dismisses the various reactions the military officials offer him ("Do what you have to"), he specifically calls on Brody to justify this measure: “You are the only person here with any decency. . . . If you can do it, then anybody can.” As the film dramatically reveals, the family is the singular locus of sentimental identification white femininity is not willing to concede, even on the cost of escalating civilian death. Brody exclaims: “We are fucking human beings. Let the bombs go off, we cannot do this.”

Invested with the authority to decide what is decent—i.e., what boundaries of sympathetic recognition can be transgressed to save America—Brody thus draws the line at reproductive ties and parenthood; to be human in Brody’s sense is defined as saving children. Importantly, this sense of humanity is Americanized, as it is constructed against the ethnicized barbarity embodied by H’s Bosnian wife Rena, who, in the ethnic conflicts of Yugoslavia, was made to witness the murder of her family by her Serbian neighbors. As H later reveals to Brody, she retaliated against her torturers by killing their families first. Rena’s thus traumatized femininity serves two narrative purposes. On the one hand, it assuages Brody’s ethical concerns over H’s methods, a narrative move that disarticulates possible American sites of racial trauma, which might explain H’s pathological knowledge of pain. Rather, the legitimization of his measures is outsourced to Rena’s non-American and nonwhite femininity. On the other hand, Rena’s ethnicized femininity signifies a primitive justice of retaliation from which alone Brody can rescue American (torture) politics by saving Mohammed/Younger’s children, thus incorporating them into the national assembly of feeling and recognizable bodies. The notion of barbarism that both makes H’s inhuman torture techniques applied for American democracy permissible, and imposes the limits of Brody’s willingness to compromise her sense of civilization, is thus situated outside of American cultural, national, or racial frames. Brody’s character in this view acts to defend a white American sense of national civility and “universal” compassion against the barbarism associated with foreign, non-American bodies. Unsurprisingly, the last shot before the disarming of the bombs shows Brody with Mohammed/Younger’s children in her arms, facing an unforeseeable, but familial, future.
Considering the two protagonists, the central conflict of the movie is articulated over a comparative dolorology of marginalized American bodies—white femininity and black masculinity. These compete with each other for the relative value of pain, vulnerability, and the specific limits of their humanity. The moral and affective agency of these American bodies is constructed crucially via ethnicized bodies, who signify un-American barbarity (Rena) and universal innocence (the children); both evocations legitimize the institution of white American motherhood as the primary agent to safeguard the standards of national sentimentality and universal humanism. The third central character, Mohammed/Younger, in his ambivalent embodiment of both white American masculinity and Muslim identity, crucially frames these marginal bodies and their performances of pain, pain infliction, and humanitarian compassion.

Serving as that embodied subjectivity on which Brody and H enact their respective politics, the white male terrorist is assailed affectively from two sides: H’s interrogation techniques seek to expose his bodily limits, namely, the moment when his ideological invulnerability “breaks” under the physical pain of torture; Helen Brody’s compassionate approach, on the other hand, tries to break Mohammed/Younger’s fundamentalist inhumanity, by seeking to inspire him to sentimental confessions of sympathy. Unthinkable’s narrative climax, where the race between vulnerability and humanity—and thus the affective authority of the racialized or the gendered body—is decided, is reached when Mohammed/Younger finally finds his limits by revealing compassion for his children. The terrorist’s breaking point thus crucially negotiates the agency of black male and white female bodies within the framework of dolorology. As has already become clear, Mohammed/Younger reveals his humanity in a reiteration of Brody’s familial compassion. While he withstands all of H’s interrogations of his bodily limits, thereby demonstrating that the white body will not be conquered or compromised by black “inhuman” vacuity, the threshold that Mohammed/Younger refuses to cross is the same as Brody’s. Before he shoots himself, the white male terrorist therefore recognizes white femininity as the legitimate agent of white compassion: “Please look after my children,” he addresses Brody. This final self-sacrificing evocation of kinship between the white woman and the white American authorizes white femininity as the purveyor of national sentimentality and universal humanism.

The deciding power of the white male body, physically negotiating the relative value of feeling pain and having sympathy for others, is throughout the film linked back to American identity. Besides being an American citizen, Mohammed/Younger reveals his peculiar patriotic fundamentalism when he announces his demands. Speaking to the American president via video
recording, the terrorist situates his performance within essentially patriotic frames of white American masculinity:

Mr. President. I am a Muslim and a loyal American. I love my wife, my kids. I love my country. I am currently being held on charges of terrorism. Since my capture I have been treated well by the honorable men and women of our armed forces. . . . I know you want to bring our men and women home to the nation we love. Thank you. And may Allah bless America.

Mohammed/Younger’s patriotic, family-centered terrorism in this view is constructed explicitly as a concerned citizen’s intervention into the perversity of the measures applied in the war on terror. Throughout the movie, the various characters accordingly reference the intentionality of his actions: “You think he placed himself here just to make a point?” one military official asks, to which H responds “He planned this, every step of the way.” By these statements, the film explicitly renders the terrorist/patriot’s performance as a moralizing coup de théâtre, a self-sacrificial act to physically demonstrate an American citizen’s compassion for the nation itself. Mohammed/Younger’s chosen breaking point in this view demarcates not the personal, emotional, or physical limits of a fundamentalist figure, but rather is performed to demonstrate where the limits of American national politics should be drawn.

Mohammed/Younger’s performance reinstates white masculinity as the hegemonic self-possessed body of democracy. Invested with the ability to willingly and heroically sacrifice and forfeit his body and humanity for the sake of demonstrating the one “true feeling” of familial as national belonging, the white male body functions as a martyr-like figuration of America’s sentimental consensus. In the film’s grand parable of bodily and ethical vulnerability, his performance enables the marginal bodies assembled within the nation to find their respective limits and thus capacity to act compassionate. Through white masculinity’s capability to perform both invulnerability and inhumanity, the marginalized bodies of Brody and H find their “exit strategy” from the escalation of pain infliction and dehumanization. White masculinity, filled with national and bodily resolve, is thus able to sacrifice his pain and life for national purposes; the white male body reaf- firms American sentimental politics (as universal humanism), and distributes levels of sentimental authority to the various embodied subjectivities probing the limits of his (and their) own pain and compassion. As Mohammed/Younger’s performance of ideal American vulnerability—“please look after my children”—makes clear, white femininity can function as an embodiment of compassionate, humanist politics, whereas black men or ethnicized
women are too tainted by trauma to find the proper limits beyond which patriotic politics collapse into inhumanity.

The evocation of sentimental/national collectivity by Mohammed/Younger—“the nation we love,” he says—in this view offsets H’s traumatized confession to the failure of national democracy (“We are weak”), while it resonates with Brody’s compassionate assertion of America as the embodiment of universal human decency (“We are human beings”). The white male body’s ability to simulate the terrorist—within a patriotic intervention—thus bluntly serves to negotiate compassion and humanity within national and racial terms: his performance shows the unfitness of black subjectivity within the national by exposing the black body’s distorted relation to pain, and it simultaneously invests white femininity with the authority to embody the compassionate core of America. White masculinity thus enacts the comparative dolorology that aligns the marginal bodies in their relation to the nation-state.

_Unthinkable_, along with many other cultural texts that dramatize the political, bodily, and ethical logistics of torture, departs from a simple yet powerful distortion: it constructs torture’s processes of dehumanization, violation, and injury as technologies of humanization that bring about the revelation of a subject’s “true” vulnerability. In fictional torture, the humanity of the victim and the torturer are revealed by the respective limits of pain endurance and sympathy both are willing or unwilling to concede. Narrative deployments of torture are thus tales in which existential, “true humanity” is constructed via the trope of escalating bodily pain, which either is halted by the victim’s confession of bodily limits (“I can’t take it anymore”), or the torturer’s confession to empathy with the victim (“We cannot do this”). _Unthinkable_ deploys this narrative of revelatory torture within the setting of a political state of exception (the secret military facility), where the restrictions of law are suspended and thus “true” performances of universal humanity can be produced through bodily states of exception. The social emptiness, in which the film’s evocations of limits and limitlessness float, constructs torture as an existential and universal drama of “human” pain and compassion.

As my analysis demonstrates, this existential rhetoric essentially conceals the negotiation and naturalization of social categories of difference. While narrated as individuals differently thrown into and positioned within the exceptionalist frames of the war on terror, the figures of H, Brody, and Mohammed/Younger are functionalized for a rigidly choreographed reignment of racialized and gendered subjectivities. The film’s narrative, aiming at a discursive evocation of “universal true feeling,” executes this alignment by associating the different subjects pursuing the proper American response to (inner-national) terrorism with various levels of pain tolerance, which
is produced both by bodily injury and sympathetic hurt. The final test, of Mohammed/Younger’s compassion for his children, is part of the torture process. Pain and sympathy—recalling Edmund Burke’s physiological fusion of the bodily and the social (see ch. 2)—are thus constructed as traits of the corporeal, which are differently accessible for or denied to racial and gendered bodies. Within the existential (or antisocial) setting projected by the film, evocations of pain and compassion effectively are constructed as bodily performances; indeed, pain tolerance and compassion are rendered as qualities instantiating the racialized and gendered body.

\textit{Unthinkable}, in this view, frames questions of political (and national) participation explicitly within dolorological registers, which regulate how nonwhite and white, and male and female bodies can access the universal true feeling of compassion, which is constituted as the core of national identity. As I have referenced throughout my discussion, the film’s torture tale actualizes the historical personage of race and gender, which my preceding chapters have established and which I here recapitulate briefly. Emotional primitivism is located in the nonwhite and non-American immigrant woman, which endangers national sentimentality with affective barbarity; black masculinity is invested with an essentially traumatized corporeal subjectivity. Possessed by an excessive carnal knowledge of pain and the inability to transform it into humanitarian politics, the black male body embodies an ethical vacuum, a flawed humanity that must finally be isolated within the negotiation of national, political, and sentimental values. This affective segregation is voiced by white femininity, who in the figuration of white motherhood is called upon to embody the pain of American civilization. Able to declare the fault line between which kinds of torture politics are human and which are barbaric/bestial, white femininity thus acts as the guardian of civilization that keeps the injurious performances of masculine violence and nonwhite barbarity in check and defends the heterosexual family as the central site of white American sentimental politics. White masculinity is constructed through the self-sacrificial mastery of pain for the good of the nation and the physical enactment of true humanity. Enduring and transcending all states of bodily exception exerted on him by marginalized subjects, the white male body alone is privileged to \textit{embody}, \textit{perform}, and \textit{demonstrate} the “crisis” (Haschemi Yekani 2011) and breaking point of national integrity and American humanity. Exposing thus the inhumanity the various marginal bodies are capable of, white masculinity physically reinstates the national promise of compassionate recognition: “Please look after my children.” Race trumps gender here, since both Mohammed/Younger’s and Brody’s investment in the family as the central site of compassionate rescue enable a white coalition against the tainted humanity of nonwhite bodies.
Unthinkable’s setup of bodies, affects, and levels of humanity, in which bodily pain is identical with racial and gendered subjectivity, not only resembles but crucially updates and totalizes the dolorological figurations I have analyzed in the historical chapters. The relative capacities to “feel” pain and compassion serve to construct and differentiate racialized and gendered bodies, invest them with natural limits, link these to differently privileged subjectivities, and thereby legitimize their relative position, authority, and participation in the affective formulas of national sentimentality. The limits of affective democracy in this view become something that can be physically felt within the domain of the corporeal, provided the body is physically able—a fusion of sentiment, the biological, and national politics. This fusion is most concisely evoked through the metaphorization of that assemblage of ideology, pain, and the body, which is denominated by torture. And furthermore, the projection of torture as that site at which the “humanitarian core” of democracy can be produced as bodily, affective performance is crucially enabled through the construction of the phantasmatic body of the invulnerable and inhuman terrorist, the ultimate biological “other” of embodied American national sentimentality.

As the terrorist body and the narrative of national woundedness impact on the sentimental and biopolitical registers of American dolorology, my reading of Unthinkable demonstrates that dolorology, and the racializing and gendering meanings it distributes via pain, has not at all ceased to work. Rather, narratives such as Unthinkable, which symbolically substitute all ideological positions within the political sphere with visceral performances of pain, render politicized subjectivity directly as bodily capacity. The individuals in the torture movie (with the notable exception of white masculinity) are not situated with respect to their political agencies, but find political existence in their bodily endurance/vulnerability and their limits of feeling and feeling with, which can only be found on the threshold of the inhuman/bestial: “We are fucking human beings,” Brody exclaims. The human/humanitarian limits evoked by the film thus enact a complete collapse of the social into the sphere of biological bodiliness—the American subject’s crisis of political rationality is articulated as a crisis of humanity as a species. Set off against gendered and racialized performances of inhumanity and barbarity, the limits or limitlessness of bearable pain performed by the various bodies thus enables the discrimination between inherently democratic and undemocratic bodies: “Biological existence [is] reflected in political existence” (Foucault 1990, 193). The subject’s potential for participation in democratic qua human affect is thus deeply positioned within the corporeal. As I have argued throughout this project, democratic sentiment thus is linked to a gendered and racialized biopolitics of pain, which experiences its original revelation in the rhetorically existential “bare life” scenarios of
torture. While the torture movie thus remodels contemporary politics as the exchange of pain between generalized bodies caught in their exposed humanity, this rhetoric of a (political, legal, corporeal, and national) “state of exception” reaffirms and literally inscribes the hierarchies of race and gender. The racial and gendered performances of pain become totalized as the primal scene of humanity’s subjectivity, the rescue of which is articulated as the realization of national and sentimental belonging.

The contemporary proliferation of fictional torture scenarios and the culturally pervasive representations of actual torture, while functioning as humanitarian meditations on the compassionate core of democracy, are thus powerful efforts to refract social positions as levels of gendered and racialized vulnerability. These are distributed among bodies constructed as exposed in their biological existence. The torture scenario, in other words, is that technology of narration which evokes the ideological partner as “bare life” in order to reinscribe difference more deeply, and thus to ground “levels of democracy” in bodily capacities for pain. In critical reception, these narrations of politics as pain, evidence—especially in their relentless fortification of white male affective and democratic potency—what I would like to call democratic pornography.

UNSCATHED LIFE

People without social emotions like empathy are not objective decision-makers. They are sociopaths who sometimes end up on death row.

—David Brooks, “The Empathy Issue”

I’d like to offer some concluding thoughts on the cultural significance of a text such as *Unthinkable*, the substitution of social politics with bodily pain it enacts, and the possible transformation or extension of *American dolorologies* it presents. *Unthinkable* draws the line whereby the unspeakable/unthinkable “true pain” of the democratic American body is revealed in the compassion for Mohammed/Younger’s innocent children. While the stakes of suffering children were shown to rescue the white American father from his inhuman performance and inspire white femininity to find her affective limits, torturer H believes in the logic of escalating pain until the end: “There are no innocent children!” he shouts at Brody. The fault line between those bodies who feel human compassion and those who don’t is therefore drawn at the site of the family, the recognition of the reproductive ties between child and parent as affective ones.

In *Unthinkable*’s dramatic narrative, the compassionate recognition and rescue of the children from the all-pervading politics of pain results in the
potential sacrifice of those parts of the population endangered by the nuclear bombs: “Let the bombs go off, we cannot do this!” Brody’s decision over which bodies and lives are more “savable” suggests that the rescue of two Arab-looking children from the pain of H’s torture methods in exchange for escalating civilian death instantiates “true” democratic feeling. What the film deploys in this view is a logic of “compassionate reproduction,” in which the endurance of American sentimental consensus is not achieved by defending a population against terrorism (i.e., “homeland security”), but by white compassion for the innocence of nonwhite children, who it is hoped will reproduce the standards of white national sentimentality for future populations. Establishing thus familial reproduction as the privileged channel by which the future of national sentimentality is guaranteed and extended, the narration suggests that true democratic and national affect is nurtured, secured, and situated within the family, which is tasked with the reproduction of democratically capable populations.

This narration can also serve to legitimize interracial family structures, where figurations of white femininity can moderate the racial difference of her (adopted) affective offspring through white “motherly love” (Tompkins 1985,125). This cross-racial reproduction of compassionate sentimentality, updating the last chapter’s scenarios of racial passing for redeemed terrorist children, unfolds a double move. On the one hand, it enacts a “deracialization” (Feder 2007, 72), as the racial difference between nonwhite children and white American motherhood is overcome through “true” inclusionary recognition. On the other hand, this loss of difference through familial (and democratic) inclusion reinforces the discrimination between the two racialized models of parenting present in the film: the heroically compassionate constellation of Brody/Younger and the torturing couple H and Rena. While disarticulating the racial positioning of the nonwhite children, the narrative enacts the construction of the body of whiteness as the agent of a universalized compassion against the racialized subjects, who are pathologically excluded from compassionate reproduction because they cannot affectively discover their limits of humanity. The film thus enacts a “redeploying [of] race in a different, but no less effective way” (Feder 2007, 72), namely, by evoking the traumatized racial family as the site where “flawed humanity” or inhumanity is reproduced and the white family constructed as the locus of universal goodness. This projection of dichotomies such as feeling/unfeeling, human/inhuman, democratic/fundamentalist, health/pathology onto racially differentiated sites of reproduction enables a reading of Unthinkable’s drama in populationist and biopolitical terms: the traumatic, pathological, and limitlessly violent population of racialized bodies assails the compassionate core of the nation in distress. American civilization’s rescue can only be enabled through the combined efforts of a sacrificial white masculinity
(which masters the inhuman pain inflicted by marginal bodies) and the affective reproduction of white femininity, which rescues the national body for the ideal of pain freedom and universal affective inclusion.

Democratic dramas such as *Unthinkable* sentimentally negotiate and prescribe which practices, constellations, and discourses become intelligible as, for example, "good parenting," "social responsibility," "care" "feeling" or "feeling with"—and they crucially regulate the intelligibility of bodies and subjects within these parameters. What I have throughout this project denominated as sentimental and biopolitical discourses, both vitally engaging and circumscribing the body at the site of painful affect, in this view not only crucially intersect, but rather must be understood as mutually reinforcing and collaborating discursive fields. They both invoke universalizing definitions of "affective humanity" and powerfully reinscribe the differences that stall the subject's recognition within this universality ever more deeply into bodies. Haschemi Yekani agrees with the severity of these discursive inscriptions: “Cultural artefacts can indeed change what it means to be human, and greatly needed are more texts that are ‘universally’ relevant by fostering the critical assessment of universality” (2011, 273; my italics).

In that vein, *American Dolorologies* has argued for a de-universalization of one of the most common tropes for universal sameness, biological existence, and sentimental recognition, namely, the body feeling pain. Under the constant grip of discursive powers, sometimes as its agent, but certainly as its primary site of relentless unfolding, the body in pain is indicative of what Lauren Berlant has described as the contemporary “impersonality of the personal,” or, in other words, the discursive occupation of feeling:

> What interpretation can we offer when feeling, the most subjective thing, the thing that makes persons public and marks their location, takes the temperature of power, mediates personhood, experience, and history, and takes over the space of ethics and truth, or when the shock of pain is said to produce only clarity despite the fact that shock can be said to produce as powerfully panic, misrecognition, the shakiness of perception's ground? (2000, 35)

Offering a skeptical response, one interpretation of her diagnosis could be that the ways in which feelings mark personal locations are the same ways in which power tells bodies and subjects who they are, what they should be, and what they can feel. This paradoxical alignment of recognition and subjugation has been at the heart of this book, and its historical antecedents have been shown to reside in the center of democratic culture.

Ways to dismantle this alliance between what embodiment feels like and which ways of being embodied are within one's reach are not easy
to find. One strategy to which this book has gestured at various points is to radically question the association of democratic inclusiveness—or indeed, democratic presence—with freedom from pain. Simply put, there are no ways of embodiment that escape power’s prescriptive grip and thus are free from suffering, mishap, panic, and aching. Unscathed life as such is a myth only upheld by the damaging investment of certain identities with trauma and pain, and their sentimental inclusion on behalf of the promise of pain freedom. Especially the perspectives opened by Disability Studies scholars have in the last two decades worked to break down barriers between disabled and nondisabled bodies, those traumatized and dysfunctional and those allegedly in full control over their lives and bodies. These critics have consistently shown that “ability” as the default state of “human” is only a fleeting, transitory period in most lives (see Garland-Thomson 2011). However, by consequently organizing culture around the idea of “ability” and isolating disability as a marker of only some bodies, the myth of unscathed and undamaged life is sustained. A similar notion can be derived from the arguments of American Dolorologies: the “wounded attachments” (Brown 1995) resulting from discourses on pain frequently function primarily to associate majority lifestyles with a default state of non-hurt. Focusing academic scrutiny on the multitudes of particular pain, panic, and shakiness coming with all forms of embodiment could immensely help to exorcise the historically deep segregation of those hurting, those that have bravely overcome pain, and those who regard themselves as standing in the magic circle of painlessness, or the good life. To live means to occupy all these positions, some more often than others, and to sometimes be confused which position relative to pain one occupies. Such an understanding of pain as positionality enables a more critical perspective on cultural processes, norms, and forces that constantly push and align bodies and subjects in relation to pain and fix them in these positions.
NOTES

CHAPTER ONE. WHAT IS DOLOROLOGY?

1. According to medical historian Donald Caton, Simpson’s interest in the painful experiences of marginalized bodies reflects the sensibilities of a broad social movement in the nineteenth century, which he calls “the humanitarian movement . . . it included labor laws, women’s suffrage, child protection laws, welfare programs for the poor, reform of prisons and schools, the antivivisection movement, and the abolition of slavery. . . . Common to these social programs . . . was a preoccupation with pain” (1985, 498).

2. I will use this phrase, taken from Scarry’s 1985 classic The Body in Pain, to denote those bodies deployed in discourses of dolorology.


4. See Gresson’s inspiring study on “white pain” in multicultural society, in which he has recently traced the contemporary hegemonic backlashes that, e.g., appropriate and resignify “racial pain” from minority critiques (2005).

5. This view informed the classic androcentric canons of American Studies such as F. O. Matthiessen’s The American Renaissance (1941) or Lewis’s American Adam (1955), which privileged the frontier-sharpened “man in the open air” against the “d—d mob of scribbling women,” as they were famously condemned by Hawthorne. Or, Ann Douglas’s fierce attack on The Feminization of American Culture (1988), where she accused sentimental women writers of “vanquishing masculinity” (quoted in Chapman and Hendler 1999, 5). Women’s studies and feminism have fundamentally criticized the reason/emotion dichotomy underlying these arguments, traced them back to the Cartesian mind/body split as one of the foundations of Western thought and the gendered hierarchies these dualisms simultaneously articulate and hide.

6. A good overview of the manifold works on sentimentality and the ideology of separate spheres can be found in Kaplan (2002). Kaplan herself complicates the domestic ideology of sentimentalism by juxtaposing the domestic as a national project (as in “domestic politics”) against the foreign or the national other, and thus positions sentimentalism in the framework of imperialist expansion. For her, “the cultural work of domesticity might be to unite men and women in a national domain and to generate notions of the foreign against which the nation can be imagined as home” (112).
7. My project is chiefly interested in the racial and gender dimensions of pain, and their various intersectional synergies (Collins 1999; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Taylor et al. 2011). While I do not think that other axes of difference such as sexuality, ability, age, or creed/religion are less important, my focus on the negotiation of racialized and gendered bodies derives from the discursive examples my project scrutinizes: the medicalization of women in the nineteenth century, and the emancipation of black American slaves.


9. Most of the mentioned authors make no explicit connections between the Foucauldian paradigm and sentimentalism. Two notable exceptions are Robyn Wiegman's classic American Anatomies (1995), which reads sentimental negotiations of racial and gender dynamics within Foucauldian methodologies, and Sarah Knott's recent work on sensibility in the American Revolution, which acknowledges the scientific discourses of the late eighteenth century, e.g., the study of nerves and nervousness (2009).

10. The biopolitical function of pain in enslaved bodies is not as obvious in Simpson's argument. The pain of slave torture, as I argue in chapter 4, however, is a central relay in hegemonic formulations of “freed slaves” as a black American population during and after emancipation.

11. Foucault's almost notorious ignorance of the racial and gendered dimensions of the modern subject's genealogy has been pointed out by many scholars, most prominently in feminist theory. Some of the canonical critiques can be found in Bartky (1988), Bordo (1999), and Butler (1989); newer approaches are Deutscher, (2008), Inda (2005), Oksala (2004), and Feder (2007). Most agree that his later work, especially the lectures, incorporates at least broad conceptualizations of race.

12. I will use the term *figuration* throughout the text to denote particular discursive constellations of knowledge, bodies, subjectivity, and power. While the term is used generally without a critical definition in the English language, I find Sarah Kember's definition of *figuration* within feminist contexts helpful: “A figuration is a performative image of the future; performative in so far as it embodies an epistemological and ontological shift which acts . . . in the present” (1996, 257). Kember calls, e.g., Haraway's concept of the cyborg a *figuration*. I'd like to note that the term has an extensive critical life in sociology, stemming from Norbert Elias's work. By *figuration*, different from Kember's and my usage, Elias denotes specific collectivities of individuals—“a structure of mutually orientated and dependent people” (2000, 482). *Figuration* for Elias is thus situated between the social and the individual.

13. Within the “History of Science” genealogies my project works with, the beginnings of what is concisely called the “life sciences” are variously dated. Among others, my frames of reference are: Philipp Sarasin's history of biopolitical discourses on “health” and “hygiene” (2001), which begins with Georg Ernst Stahl's theory of nerves of 1708; Londa Schiebinger commences her investigation of scientific racism and sexism with Petrus Camper's measurement of skulls in the 1750s (2004); Foucault has identified different medical, scientific, legal, and political discourses that constitute the shift to biopolitics—i.e., the governance of life—in the middle of the eighteenth century, e.g., in his lecture of March 17, 1976, in the series *Society Must Be Defended* (1997).
14. Achille Mbembe, who critically aligns Foucault’s concept with the innovative work on slavery by Orlando Patterson (1982) argues that “slavery . . . could be considered one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation” (2003, 21). In this view, biopolitics is a vital component of slaveholding societies in general, since enslavement functions not only through the biological differentiation of master and slave, but further is characterized by biopolitical practices that allow differentiation between legitimate (“breeding”) and illegitimate (“miscegenation”) forms of racial amalgamation. However, building on Patterson’s description of slave-status as a form of “social death,” or “death in life,” Mbembe argues that Foucault’s notion of the governance of “life” (enabled by racism) must be extended and corrected to register the particular form of “necropolitics” through which enslavement works: it maintains the slave’s life only in a destructive, death-dealing relationship, outside of “social life.” This nexus of biopolitics, necropolitics, and slavery is further discussed by Plonowska Ziarek (2008).

15. Wiegman (1995) argues convincingly that nineteenth-century scientific regimes construct the meaning of race and gender generally within a paradigm of bodily comparability: comparative anatomy, comparative phrenology, etc. I will in this sense also argue for a “comparative dolorology” in my historical chapters.

16. The term is Londa Schiebinger’s (2004), and I use it here to comprise the plethora of scientific discourses constructing the female body as separate and inferior from the male (as human) body. These constructions of femininity, while also always racially inflected, work differently from scientific racism, but in many ways are associated with them. Some of these intersections are discussed in my project; other scholars have also mapped and problematized the relations and strategic displacements between scientific racism and sexism: see Stepan (1982), Wiegman (1995), Jordanova (1993, 1999), and Gilroy (2000).

17. The figuration of pain as the “nondiscursive” can be found in many contemporary theoretical positions.


19. See, e.g., Stringer (2000) for a concise introduction into the debate on feminist “victimology,” which she tries to interpret as an “art of hunger” for political redress.

20. This dialectic of pain resonates closely with Judith Butler’s earlier quoted observation that “vulnerability is fundamentally dependent on existing norms of recognition” (2004b, 43).

21. The fixating effects of this “victimology,” e.g., crucially structure the abolitionist use of African American perspectives and experiences in the genre of the slave narrative (Carby 1987; Castronovo 1999; DeLombard 2007).

22. I’d like to note that the political questions posed by the ontological effects of “pain” are radically different for hegemonic and marginal positions.

CHAPTER TWO. SUBLIME PAIN AND THE SUBJECT OF SENTIMENTALISM

1. The comparison is not too far-fetched: as Sarah Knott has found (2009, 262), British treatises on sensibility frequently found themselves recycled in the
lifestyle pages of nineteenth-century American magazines. Burke's section on “The physical cause of love” (Part 4, Section xix of the *Enquiry*), she writes, was reproduced, anonymously but under the same title, in an issue of *Columbia Magazine*. For her, it proves the point of transatlantic connections by theories of sensibility and sentimentality, but the reproduction also indicates that British high romanticism frequently translated as American popular culture.

2. The gendered logistics of the *Enquiry* have been elaborately discussed by several scholars (see Furniss 1993; Armstrong 1996; Fulford 1999; Mattick 1990). While of these authors only Fulford points explicitly to the implications of Burke's gender-aesthetics for the discourse of sympathy and thus social participation, Meg Armstrong is the only to trace the connections between gendering and racializing the *Enquiry* makes.

3. Wollstonecraft was to extend these accusations against femininity indeed toward the “biological” women of England in the concluding chapters of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Her diagnosis of women's oppressive state at times appears an outright dismissal of sentiment per se: “In short, women, in general, as well as the rich of both sexes, have acquired all the follies and vices of civilization. . . . Their senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected; consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling. . . . Ever restless and anxious, their over exercised sensibility not only renders them uncomfortable themselves, but troublesome, to use a soft phrase, to others. All their thoughts turn on things calculated to excite emotion; and, feeling, when they should reason, their conduct is unstable, and their opinions are wavering, not the wavering produced by deliberation or progressive views, but by contradictory emotions.”

4. Edinburgh after Whytt saw prominent physiologists such as William Cullen, John Gregory, and Alexander Monro develop these ideas, while scientists like Glisson, Bordeu, and Barthez in France, and von Haller, Stahl, and eventually Alexander von Humboldt in Germany extended physiology and the study of nerves on the continent (see Forget 2003; Sarasin 2001; Sarasin and Jakob 1998). Edmund Burke was probably familiar at least with Whytt's theories.

5. Halpern's (2002) work on the connections of politics and the question of suffering, pain in other bodies, analyzes perception and recognition as the crucial discursive issue in the eighteenth century, because it confronted the principal problem of how a “community of free men” could to be constituted. As she argues in a crucial historization of Boltanski's work (1999), the formulation of the autonomous agency characteristic to the democratic involved and very much depended on a reconfiguration of what suffering meant. Whereas within the political theories of, e.g., Hobbes suffering is a natural precondition of existence, thinkers of the bourgeois society such as, e.g., Rousseau regarded suffering as a condition brought about by society itself. The diagnosis and alleviation of pain thus was formulated as the principle aim of liberal society (see especially her chapters 3–5).


8. In some formulations, the feminine seems to be understood as mere “trigger” for the procreative male instincts: “Beauty is . . . some quality in bodies, acting mechanically upon the human mind by the intervention of the senses” (146).

9. Balfour (2006) indeed remarks that the aesthetic treatises of Burke, Kant, and others—which reached an increasingly female readership—effectively worked as instruction manuals for gender performance: “Despite the extraordinary proliferation of women’s writing at the end of the eighteenth century . . . the domain of aesthetic philosophy was still one of the most resolutely masculine . . . so it was still most exclusively to men that women turned to learn about the difference between the beautiful and the sublime, which was bound up with learning about the differences between men and women” (325). Armstrong has forcefully called for a deciphering of Burke’s theory in Butlerian terms of gender performance (1996).

10. The phrase is from F. O. Matthiessen’s description of Whitman. This associative field of Burke’s sublime has widely influenced American and American Studies’ considerations of the sublime, and facilitated its recruitment as a “national aesthetic” (Nye 1993; Wilson 1991). The saturation of the sublime with gender prescriptions, as well as its biopolitical repercussions however, are almost always overlooked in its American employment, and I will discuss this connection in the last portion of this chapter.

11. This catalogue of gender clichés was criticized by early feminists such as Wollstonecraft. As Taylor analyzes in early feminist discourses, these conventions could be powerfully criticized by inverting their polarities. Wollstonecraft’s rhetorical maneuvers against Burke’s Reflections are one indication for this strategy, another is her short story The Cave of Fancy written in 1787 and published posthumously, which casts a female spirit engaged in sublime thoughts against a rather helpless male hermit in a reversal of sublime and beautiful (2003, 63). In other words, since the corporeal basis of sensibility, the sensual organs, were deemed “the same in all men,” as Burke writes, the potential reversal of which sphere a subject inhabited was possible. The access to true feeling and sensibility, anchored in the stronger emotion of the sublime, in this view grounded on a democratic body, and was open to rhetorical inversion and negotiation. This “equal access” to the symbolic, however, is counteracted by Burke’s physiology.

12. Burke is not too interested in a distinction between nerve and muscle—and the attendant difference between irritability and contractility—which contemporaneous physiologists such as Albrecht von Haller had begun to establish (Sarafianos 2005). The important aspect for him is “violent contraction”: “I do not here enter into the question debated among physiologists, whether pain be the effect of a contraction [of muscle], or a tension of the nerves. Either will serve my purpose; for by tension, I mean no more than a violent pulling of the fibres, which compose any muscle or membrane, in whatever way it is done” (162). On the “nerve-muscle” debate in the eighteenth century, see also Steinke (2005).

13. The gymnastic aspect marks a characteristic difference to another contemporary image of the body in pain in relation to the sublime, namely Johann J. Winckelmann’s description of the Laocoön-group in 1755. Winckelmann invested the sublime display of terrifying agonies with the authority to stand as aesthetic principle
of neoclassicism per se: “noble simplicity and calm grandeur.” Winckelmann took artistic delight in Laocoön’s simultaneous expression of maximal pain and maximal composure. Burke, who probably knew the German’s famous depiction, fills his Enquiry with graphical descriptions of the sublime as following from veritable fits of pain, which seem antithetical to the overall calmness and grandeur of Winckelmann’s heroic, “Greek” suffering: “I say a man in great pain has his teeth set, his eye-brows are violently contracted, his forehead wrinkled, his eyes are dragged inwards, and rolled with great vehemence, his hair stands an end, the voice is forced out in short shrieks and groans, and the whole fabric totters” (161). Where Winckelmann’s Laocoön bears his painful fate with quiet greatness, and thus rests firmly within the aesthetic of politeness, Burke lets his subject struggle and shake from being in pain, thus privileging pain within an economy of fitness and health that shakes to life, rather than inspiring “nobility in death.”

14. The “self-perfecting machine” is one of the organizing tropes of modern positivist notions of the human body—especially in eighteenth-century ideas of vitalism (see Sarasin 2001; and Sarasin and Jakob 1998).

15. A similar argument on the imbrications of eighteenth-century discourses on morals and politics with physiologist knowledges is also advanced by Catherine Packham’s article on Adam Smith (2002).

16. Burke’s biological separation of male and female can be historically aligned to Lacqueur’s famous, but equally controversial thesis of the “one-sex model” dominating discourse on the sexes since the Middle Ages, which saw femininity and masculinity united on a continuous scale of differentiation (the female constituting the “lesser man”) and not fundamentally different. According to Lacqueur (1990), this model was succeeded in the eighteenth century by the construction of the sexes as discreet and discontinuous. Burke’s articulation of two very distinct “natures” resonates with this context, in that the male and female—sublime and beautiful—are not only irreconcilable with each other, but indeed mutually exclusive and potentially harmful if mixed: “[I]f the qualities of the sublime and beautiful are sometimes found united, does this prove, that they are the same, does it prove, that they are any way allied, does it even prove that they are not opposite and contradictory? Black and white may soften, may blend, but they are therefore not the same. Nor when they are so softened and blended with each other, or with different colours, is the power of black as black, or of white as white, so strong as when each stands uniform and distinguished” (158). The black and white distinction indicates the equally forceful contrast of race(s) in the Enquiry, which I will analyze in the next part of my argument.


18. Note also the complicity of Burke’s rendering of the feminine with a “homosexual panic,” which is obvious with Burke’s simultaneous effort to craft the masculine as “admirable” while at the same time excluding any possibility for same-sex relations. As Gould (2001) argues, the introduction of “desire” for the female as a supplement to love is exclusively grounded in this need to forcefully heterosexualize the aesthetic model.

19. This interpretation of Burke’s physiologism goes in line with an observation that Furniss makes. On the grounds of his considerations of labor, he reads
the Burkean subject as expression of a work ethic that carries connotations of both gender and class: “In effect, Burke seeks to create an image of the upwardly mobile man of ability (the ‘self-made man’) as an heroic and virtuous labourer whose sublime aspirations are quite different from the beautiful but debilitating luxury of the aristocracy (and of women)” (1993, 2) His characterization of the *Enquiry* as a supplement to the political writings however, leads him to the conclusion that Burke’s graphic descriptions of pain, muscles, and nerves serve merely as rhetoric and its physiological excursions are essentially “fictional” (30).

20. A further argument in this direction might be extracted from Anne Mal­lory’s article commenting on the notion of “boredom” in Burke’s antirevolutionary writings. Here, similar to the idea of anesthesia (non-feeling), Burke is shown to attack the revolutionaries of Paris for their lack of compassion, and their “lazy but restless” temperament (2003, 227). For him, the revolution happens primarily not from “true feelings,” but from an irritable and fundamentally bored sensibility, only excitable by atrocity.

21. See Gibbons (2001) for a detailed discussion of Burke’s rhetorical evocation of Native Americans as “barbarians,” and the association of revolution with “civilization” enabled through that trope in his *Reflections*.

22. The “discourse of the heart” is hardly acknowledged in Foucault’s genealogy as a supplement to disciplinary power, but it has been identified and contextualized within Foucauldian frameworks by several scholars (see, e.g., Boltanski 1999; Samuels 1992; Camfield 1993).

23. To harden the soul, and thus numb the important inherent “symphatic sensibility” between human bodies, was the principal argument with which the spectacular punishments of the Ancién Regime were criticized (see Foucault 1979, especially chapter II).

24. See also Crary’s important work on the emergence of the observer as an “embodied authority” around 1800 (1993).

25. Which it nevertheless implies. Burke was recognized by several critics as the founder of “sensationalist aesthetics” (see Wilton 1981, 29; and Halttunen 1993, 1995).

26. In this the *Enquiry* differs fundamentally from the later Kantian theory of the sublime, which eventually references back to the sublime core of the human mind, *Vernunft*, or reason. Where Kant is, as Ryan (2001) suggests, basically fortifying the Cartesian “mind/body” hierarchy by subsuming everything to reason, Burke, by way of his physiological foundation of sublime, is able to articulate a self-governing corporeal subject, with all the naturalizing and gendering implications that the nineteenth-century regimes of scientific knowledge production would turn into the objective science of “natural differences.”

27. See also Boltanski’s philosophical discussion of the “moral spectator” (1999, ch. 1).

28. On British colonial and slave trade enterprises, see Armitage and Braddick (2002), and Morgan (2000).

29. The colonial novel translates the Burkean liminality of darkness into narrations of white men breaking down in and overwhelmed by the darkness of the jungle (see Haschemi Yekani 2011). This light/dark dichotomy (see also Husman 2010), relating to barbarity and civilization, dominates also colonial literature such
as Stedham’s *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolting Negroes of Surinam* of 1796 (see Klarer 2005), which became an important publication for the abolitionist movement. As Marcus Wood writes, these accounts also frequently draw on depictions of tortured black male bodies to illustrate the violence in the colonies, while at the same time referring to the black body as almost without emotion or an unreal incapacity to feel pain. In Stedham’s depictions of black torture victims in the Narrative, he finds an equal rendering that relates to the “vacuity” Burke attests to black bodies: “These figures, who exist outside white legal and moral codes and who relate only to white legal property codes, cannot be shown to feel. In this sense they are systematically cut off from participation in their own trauma . . . the suffering appears to operate within a vacuum, moral, physical, and descriptive” (2000, 232).

30. See Crary (1993, 66). Note also that Burke’s use of the Cheselden boy obviously contradicts Crary’s remark, that “[i]n all the speculation surrounding the . . . Cheselden boy, no one was ever to suggest that a blind person restored to sight would initially see a luminous and somehow self-sufficient revelation of colored patches.” Where Crary takes Diderot’s discussion of the case as index that the eighteenth century was not capable to think of the observer as an innocent position, for there was no consciousness of the subjectivism of vision in general, Burke’s use of the case seems to indicate two things: that cultural constructs shape our vision, and that black things are terrible, i.e., aesthetic in themselves.

31. See also Armstrong, who writes: “While [it] may serve as a basis for power and mastery with aesthetic ideology, the sublime is also a figure for the terror of images and passions which transgress the ‘natural’ orders of society. In aesthetic discourse, the threat of this excess must be simultaneously provoked by, contained within, and sacrificed to the economy of sublime vision” (1996, 214).

32. A general notion of racial difference—or “races”—for the eighteenth century is however argued by Saakwa-Mante, who observes that the concept of polygenesis—one of the fundaments for the ontological differentiation of races occupying nineteenth-century racial scientists—was well established in Continental thought around 1730 (Saakwa-Mante 1999). While the notion of “races” may have thus been familiar to Burke, it does not feature in the *Enquiry*, whose chromatic considerations rather fall in line with racially infused color-theories also recognizable in many philosophical writings from the seventeenth to the twentieth century (see Husman 2010).

33. See an extensive discussion of these in Gibbons (2003, 113–18). I do not want to enter into longer discussion here, for I think that Burke’s biopolitical implications are not at odds with his quarrels with colonialism. Rather, Burke’s outraged descriptions of colonial violence, quoted by Gibbons, to me circle primarily around two topos: the violation of the (racial) family as a sympathetic body and the loss of (white) “civilizing” power through colonialist violence. “They [the Indians] were assaulted on the site of their sympathy. Children were scourged almost to death in the presence of their parents. . . . The son and father were bound together, face to face, and body to body, and in that situation cruelly lashed together, so that the blow which escaped the father fell upon the son, and the blow which missed the son wound over the back of the parent. The circumstances were combined by so subtle
a cruelty, that every stroke which did not excruciate the sense, should wound and lacerate the sentiments and affections of nature” (2003, 114). The foreign body is here suffering primarily as a family, something generally denied to enslaved subjects (see Spillers 1987). Gibbons notices Burke's “lurid” attention to sadistic detail. The second aspect of his descriptions is the barbarity of committing violence and repeats the basic concern of colonial rulers to lose their civilization in colonial conditions. Burke condemns the torturing of young Indian “virgins” by members of the East India Company, and sentimentally refrains from description: “[T]hese infernal furies planted death in the source of life, and where that modesty, which, more than reason, distinguishes men from beasts, retires from the view, and even shrinks from expression, there they exercised and gluttoned their unnatural, monstrous and nefarious cruelty” (quoted in Gibbons 2003, 114).

34. I have several troubles with Gibbons’s approach (2003), which nevertheless holds crucial insights on Burke’s engagement with the colonial. On the one hand, Gibbons wholeheartedly ignores Burke’s thoughts on “blackness,” which indicate a set of hierarchies that (in Burke’s view) would render the Irish as white oppressed and therefore dependent on different strata of racial discrimination. The analysis of gender difference I have carried out so far is of equal nonimportance to Gibbons. However, I think a true discussion of the colonial cannot be addressed without a consideration of racism and sexism. I am therefore quite opposed to Gibbons when he tries to rescue Burke as a “counter-Enlightenment” thinker, who in a very post-modern fashion counts the failings and cruelties involved in Enlightenment politics (see also Gibbons 2001).

35. This is also indexed by the observation that Burke was much more attacked for his classism than for his sexism.

36. On “ideology versus common sense” as a distinction between Europe and the United States, see also Fluck (2002, 218).

37. This point is also raised by Claviez (2009).

CHAPTER THREE. ANESTHESIA. BIRTHPAIN AND CIVILIZATION

1. I’ll give the alleged names of the slaves in small caps; for further explanation see also the next chapter on “racial photography” where the practices of naming and misnaming slave subjects are centrally investigated.

2. Sims subjected the women to repeated surgical procedures in his various projects, such as his experiments on new techniques for caesarean operations, which he is said to have performed more than a dozen times on one subject alone (see Briggs 2000; Kapsalis 2002; Pernick 1987, 55–58).

3. According to Foucault, medical discourses heavily changed in the ways they conceptualized the role of patient and physician, the relation between medicine, body, and sickness. In opposition to the preclinical system, which followed a semiotics focused on symptoms, classifications, and therapies—often still based on humoral theories of the organism—modern medicine conceived of the body as an intricate and complex machine, where diseases could objectively be grounded on lesions and specific malfunctions. In this episteme, medical diagnosis figured as a
process of knowledge production working through description and observation, a
subjection of all bodily processes and conditions to a regime of “constant visibility”
and complete intelligibility. What Foucault thus describes with the “medical gaze”
is the installation of a regime of visibility that effectively severs the body from the
patient, and constitutes it as a passive and fully transparent object for the rational

4. On the language politics of Davy’s experiments, with regard to normalized
and pathological states, see Griesecke (2005).

5. See, e.g., Dierig (2004), Dror (1999), Schmidgen (2005), Rheinberger
(1993), and Steinle (2002).

6. See also Lisa Forman Cody’s article (1999) on the performativity of male
midwives.

7. This has been established by many feminist critics, and is also visible
from an almost biblical flood of literature on “female pathologies” being published
throughout the nineteenth century. See, e.g., Bleier (1984), Bordo (1993), Fox Keller

8. The progress in anesthesia methods reflects a sort of quest for the living
dead body: after ether, medical science pursued techniques of introducing anesthetics
via the bloodstream and thus making the continuous application—and longer,
more intricate operations—possible. In 1942 followed the implementation of the
poison known as “Curare” into surgery by Griffith and Johnson, which strips the
body of its respiratory reflexes and involuntary muscle twitching, thereby turning it
into a virtually undead body that is devoid of any reaction and totally dependent
on life-maintaining medical machinery and supervision. The anesthetist in today’s
operation rooms is mainly concerned with keeping the operated body in a state of
limbo between life and death (see Hirschauer 1996, 93–100).

9. Of course, this reading leaves out many issues of the development of anes‑
thesia techniques that have been very thoroughly researched by medical historians.
In fact, the early history of anesthesia is a meticulously researched area, at least
from a medical history perspective. The classical accounts are Caton (1985, 1999),
Stratmann (2003), and Smith (1982); for the political and social aspects of anesthesia
see Pernick (1987) and Browner (1999); an interesting account of the connections
between literary imagination and scientific innovation concerning anesthesia can
be found in Papper (1995); an illustrated and thorough account of anesthesia his‑
tory, including an analysis of pre-nineteenth-century methods of anesthesia, can be
found in Brandt (1997).

10. If sympathy and sensibility are seen from ca. 1750 on as fundamental
resources for democracy and the “universal bond” of humanity, then the unfit female
physiology Burke describes circumscribes women as a potential democratic liability.
Wollstonecraft amply understood this point, as her scornful criticism of “oversensitive
women” in the concluding chapters of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman indicates.

11. For an extensive account of the contributions, see Caton (1999); for a criti‑
cal one, see Farr (1980). The debate is not to be thought of as overly controversial,
though many medical professionals participated in it. On the contrary, obstetricians
and doctors in Europe and America were surprisingly quick to employ ether, nitrous
oxide, and chloroform in their procedures and to report their findings and experiments
in medical journals—quarreling less about the general question whether anesthesia was advisable or necessary, than about the optimization of chemical mixtures. The public also rapidly accepted the new remedy: following the example of Queen Victoria in 1853, who subjected herself to a medium chloroform treatment by Dr. John Snow, chloroform-aided parturition—*anesthesia à la Reine*—became fashionable among middle-class women. See Caton (1999, 63).

12. See also Donnison (1988), and Daly (1978).

13. The prestigious American obstetrician Walter Channing, brother to abolitionist William Channing, also exhibits this greater humanitarian cause, as he welcomes the invention of anesthesia, but laments the many animals that had died in French scientists' Flourens experiments on the effects of ether and chloroform on the respiratory apparatus: “[T]he poor lower orders have suffered terribly. Vivisections have been done without number and without mercy. It would seem, that ether had come to destroy life, not to save it. I have read the reports over and over, and doubt not for a moment that many animals have suffered, and many more have been killed, in the toil” (Channing 1868).

14. The “religious objections” Simpson went up against have been proven nonexistent by several medical historians (see Farr 1980; Russell 1998). Their findings thus “demolish . . . one of the most established myths of recent medical history” (Russell, 180), namely that the rise of scientific medicine was predominantly a constant struggle against the obscurantist and conservative ideas of religious authorities. Simpson’s arguments therefore present not what their title indicates—an intervention against religiously infused criticism of anesthesia . . . but must be understood as a discursive operation within medicine itself and concerning primarily its cultural status.

15. As Poovey (1987, 140) notes, Simpson’s etymological analysis is inaccurate.

16. The salutary aspect is further expressed in the biblical terms of Simpson’s article. In what appears on the first glance as a comical refutation of religious objections, Simpson argues that anesthesia is already biblical: “Those that urge . . . that an artificial and anaesthetic state of unconsciousness should not be induced . . . forget that we have the greatest of all examples set before us . . . that most singular description of the preliminaries and details of the first surgical operation ever performed on man, which is contained in Genesis ii. 21: ‘And the Lord caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam; and he slept; and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof.’ In this remarkable verse the whole process of a surgical operation is briefly detailed” (42). God emerges not only as first surgeon and anesthecist, opening and closing bodies, and sending them into anesthetized states to be operated on; moreover, in a peculiar reversal, the creation of the two sexes is narrated as a medical operation. By claiming thus quasi-divine authority for anesthesia in birth, Simpson poses medical science as analogous to the creation and workings of the divine precedent. Like the above-quoted explanation by Simpson that anesthesia merely eliminates the painful sensations of labor and thus ensures the unhindered natural efforts of the uterine muscles (*’atzebh*), the discursive superimposition of medicine and theology ultimately reflects new claims the life sciences in the nineteenth century laid to scientific subject and object: medicine not only reveals and objectively describes nature, but akin to the divine creator medical knowledge “makes” nature qua gender. Simpson’s argument in this way presents less an intervention against
religion, a “secularization of pain” (Caton 1985), than a superimposition of medical and theological discourses. The text thus instances what Braun/Stephan call the “biologization” of theological discourses, which contributed to the substitution of theological authority by scientific authority (2005, 11).

17. The easiness with which obstetricians described anesthetized births, however, could also be imagined as again perilous to the male physician. As Poovey has distilled from various articles of medical professionals at that time, anesthesia releases not only the natural labor of the uterus, but with it also the “natural” sexual energies of femininity. She cites W. T. Smith’s Manual of Obstetrics: “In ungravid women, rendered insensible for the performance of surgical operations, erotic gesticulations have occasionally been observed, and in one case . . . the woman went unconsciously through the movements attendant on the sexual orgasm, in the presence of numerous bystanders” (1987, 142). The general function of these “scenes of indelicate character” was to construct femininity as sexually pathologic and excessive, through which yet another sacrificial imaginary of the male scientist could be deployed: the risk of losing his chastity and sexual integrity for the profession. This imaginary, building on the notion of women’s uncontrollable (and therefore to be controlled) “reproductive instincts” (Stratmann 2003, 54), was also employed to excuse occurrences of rape under anesthesia, which had been a problem of the male accoucheur since the eighteenth century, as Poovey writes (128). The assemblage—sexual exploitation, the construction of the “uncontrollable sexual drive” of female patients, the sacrificial sacrifice of the male scientist—prefigures in important ways the vicious logistics of hysterical treatment in the second half of the nineteenth century, epitomized in Charcot’s Salpetrière (Didi-Huberman 2003).

18. For good bibliographies on the topic see, e.g., Briggs (2000), Birnbaum (1999), and Archimedes (2005).

19. The date marks the publication of Cuvier’s dissection report of “Saartje Baartman.” See Sander Gilman’s (1985) influential article on the images of black and white female sexuality in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which provides also an early example of the approach here taken, analyzing how race was articulated through gender (and vice versa) in the natural sciences of the nineteenth century.


21. On Sims’s experiments, and more connections between medical experimentation and slavery, see Kapsalis (2002), Savitt (1989), and Bankole (1998). Though the evidence is scarce, several sources indicate that Crawford Long, one of the co-inventors of ether anesthesia, since the early 1840s had also experimented on slaves to test the analgesic effects of the chemical, which had been in popular use for “ether frolics” but hadn’t been recognized in its anesthetic usability. Long, a medical doctor in Athens, Georgia, after 1846 issued several publications in order to prove himself as the inventor of ether anesthesia (there exists until today a major debate who the first employer of anesthesia was, the so-called ether controversy). These articles basically present various documents, letters, and certificates as evidence that Crawford Long was the first to use ether as anesthetic. In a more passing manner, one of these documents—undersigned by a certain J. F. Groves, M.D.—mentions several operations which Long conducted on young slaves, with and without ether: “The first case that came under his care where its use was applicable after my going into his office was
not till January 8, 1845, which was the case of a negro boy having two fingers to amputate, caused by neglected burn. I, as the only student still with the doctor, he had me to accompany him to see the operation, and assist in the administration of the ether. The first finger was removed while under the influence of ether, the little fellow evincing no pain; the second without ether, the child suffered extremely. This was done to prove that insensibility to pain was due to the agent used” (Buxton 1912). On another early instance of a racial body under anesthesia, see also Lewis (1931). On eighteenth and nineteenth-century medical practice and the problem of race see Byrd and Clayton’s book (2000) and Washington’s Medical Apartheid (2006).

22. See also Gilman (1985) and Saillant (1995).

23. The law classified as undesirable any individual from China who was coming to America to be a contract laborer, any Asian woman who would engage in prostitution, and all people considered to be convicts in their own country. In 1882 Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. As another significant event, in 1876 a federal California court decided in the first so called “prerequiste cases”—court cases in which the whiteness of immigrants was decided—on the racial status of Chinese people (see Haney-Lopez 2006).

24. “Positive eugenics” designates the politics of regulating the racial composition of populations through breeding, i.e., generating more offspring of one racial group. “Negative eugenics” describe all methods from immigration restriction to the prohibition of interracial marriages, forced sterilizations, and abortions that seek to limit the reproduction of one or several racialized groups (see also Lindquist Dorr 1999). As my reading of the ultimately eugenicist discourse on reproduction, civilization, and race indicates, eugenics is always a discourse dealing in the racialized tropes of “civilization” and “the primitive,” even when applying these also to class-differentiated groups. This decidedly contradicts Thomas Leonard’s statement that “eugenics does not require racism—biological superiority need not be premised on racial hierarchy. In fact, early eugenic research in the United States studied white families thought to have ‘degenerate’ attributes—criminality, pauperism, alcoholism, and prostitution were the chief worries” (2003, 691). Even these forms of abjection, via the terms heredity and civilization, carried racial undertones.

25. The notion of purity is traced by Harris (1995), who follows the informal aspects of racial segregation in the reconstruction South. Focusing on etiquette between the races, he argues, that (even indirect) contact between white women and African Americans (especially men) was construed in terms of becoming “dirty” or “unclean,” of course always connoting sexual contact: “The most important of all rules of purity involved sexual contact. As both the progenitors of whiteness and the special repositories of white purity, white women had to be protected from defilement through contact, however slight and indirect, whether from a plate, a touch, or a glance from ‘unclean' black men and women” (392).

26. I propose the term here in reference to Gabriele Dietze’s concept of the “patriarchal dividend,” which she diagnoses for socially marginalized men, who are able to claim cultural capital by subscribing to the norms of hegemonic patriarchal rule (2009, 35).

27. Lauren Berlant has coined (albeit in a different context) the term hygienic governmentality, which fits the assemblage of meanings implied in Woodhull’s “breeder”
metaphor: “a ruling bloc’s dramatic attempt to maintain its hegemony by asserting that an abject population threatens the common good and must be rigorously monitored and governed by all sectors of society” (1997, 175).

28. Gilman’s feminist classics The Yellow Wallpaper and especially Herland have in recent years been reinterpreted in the light of her political and frequently nationalist writings such as “A Suggestion on the Negro Problem” (Gilman 1908). Among the turn-of-the-century current that Nadkarni (2006) and others call “eugenic feminism” Gilman’s contribution to nativism is the best researched (see, e.g., Bederman 1995; Seitler 2003; Weinbaum 2001). Further accounts of the intersections between racist discourse and white feminism can be found in Newman (1999), and on eugenic feminism in the early twentieth century see also Ziegler (2008).

29. Prostitution, as Seitler notes, was one of the main targets of feminist social reform. While on the one hand prostitution denoted women's sexual exploitation, it became—in the eugenicist framework—associated with class and racial aspects. The before mentioned Page Act of 1875 was not only the first legislation regulating immigration, it also equated Asian women with prostitution, “lewd morality,” and therefore social (and “genetic”) undesirability. White feminists’ crusade against prostitution in the late nineteenth century is in this view complicit with racial discourses holding sway till well into the twentieth century. See also Ordover (2003) for this question, as well as for the repercussions of eugenic feminists for sexual minorities.

30. The imbrication of white feminism with racial discourse has been crucially argued in black feminism and intersectionality studies (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Collins 1999; Giddings 1984). See also the recent anthology edited by Taylor et al. (2011).

31. This is not to say that the abolition of the slave economy in the South did equate to scientific racism’s stopping its dehumanizing work. For critical arguments on the various transformations of “raciology’s” doctrines, methodologies, and technologies into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, see especially Paul Gilroy’s Between Camps, published in the United States as Against Race (2000; see also Kohn, 1995).

32. The interesting connection between anesthesia, humanitarian politics, and the treatment of criminals is also visible in a slightly obscure text of 1848 that discusses the use of chloroform in executions: “On the Use of Chloroform in Hanging” (Peck 1848).

33. Caton, whose book is primarily concerned with the medical history of anesthesia, here stresses primarily class distinctions, and misses the fundamentally racializing categories evoked by the association of “education,” “culture,” and “civilization” with degrees of sensitivity and thus sympathy.
2. Eugenicist Francis Galton also later articulated his theories on “racial heritage,” and its relation to criminality and intelligence through photographic “evidence.” Galton invented the method of *composite photography*, in which many pictures of “European” faces superimposed on each other resulted in the facial construction of a “racial archetype.” The composite method was famously used by *Time* magazine in 1993 to imagine the “new face of America,” a strategy of racializing visuality that Smith (1999, 222–26) and Berlant (1997, 175–220) have brilliantly discussed.


4. Historical scholarship has generally understood antislavery discourse of the antebellum period as “vigorously opposed” (Lowance 2000, xx) to the prescriptions of scientific racism of the same era. As Harriet Beecher Stowe's comment on the “Negro’s” nervous system demonstrates, biological notions of race pervaded discourses both of pro- and antislavery activists—articulations of the slave’s humanity did not necessarily imply equality in biological and evolutionary terms. Louis Agassiz also sympathized with abolitionist concerns, as Wallis maintains (1995, 54). Though most of his academic and scientific work in the United States was dedicated to the scientific defense of “natural” differences between races and their social meanings, Agassiz publicly supported the abolition of slavery, which for him (and many abolitionist) did not necessarily negate the evolutionary inferiority of African Americans.

5. These daguerreotypes today reside in the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. For the process leading to the Swiss ethnologist and botanist Agassiz working in the United States (he later founded the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology), and on the selection of persons to be photographed, see Wallis (1995). Wallis also reprints all fifteen daguerreotypes.

6. The taxonomic disciplines of racial science, however, were also associated with the “portrait,” prominently in white bourgeois practices of self-representation. Colbert’s exhaustive book on *Phrenology and the Fine Arts* (1997) suggests a pervasive knowledge of phrenology (the study of skull shape and its relation to intelligence, character, degree of civilization, and race) among artists, photographers, and their bourgeois customers. As he demonstrates, the phrenological portraits of white persons in the nineteenth century always were overdetermined with information on the subjects’ social and professional position, indicated by clothing, props, and posture—indeed, phrenology for white people was in this view a sub-criterion of a “good artistic” portrait. In their historical study on the daguerreotype, Barger and White argue that the doctrines of phrenology essentially belonged to the basic knowledge of early portrait photographers: “[Phrenology] was based on both visual and tactile information about head shapes and daguerreotypes provided records for specific ‘types’ that could be studied and reproduced in journals. The nearly simultaneous popularization of phrenology and the introduction of the daguerreotype wedded two professions together” (1991, 80).

7. The remnant of the portrait prompted historian Alan Trachtenberg to liken Agassiz’s pictures to the “dignity of Roman busts” (1982). For an extensive critique of his “dignifying reading” as an instance of compassionate “misrecognition,” see Mandy Reid’s article (2006).
8. First introduced by the French photographer A. A. Disdéri in 1854, cartes de visite appeared in the United States in the summer of 1859 and in one year had become a major fashion. Pocket-sized and mounted inexpensively, the carte de visite quickly became collectible; people not only had their own cartes made, but they purchased cartes of celebrities, notable Americans (statesmen and military leaders), and so-called oddities (Siamese twins, thin men, dwarfs) as “cartomania” spread. Prices ranged from $1.50 to three dollars per dozen, the average price being less than twenty cents per carte. Its popularity and accessibility caused the carte de visite to be hailed as the democratization of photography in the United States, an inexpensive form of studio portraiture used by citizens and celebrities alike. They quickly became a widespread means of advertising for authors, politicians, actors, and lecturers. Also, as Reid explains, cartes functioned as a means of “providing and cataloging visual information” (2006, 297). Pictures of political events, such as the government’s vote on abolition or the Civil War, were widely distributed and collected by large parts of the middle-class population.

9. In order to provide some means of a brief survey, I reference the scarce scholarly literature that exists on these photographs: Kathleen Collins (1985a; 1985b) was the first to remark both on The Scourged Back and the Emancipated Slaves series; however, she did so in a largely uncritical manner that merely established the provenance and (occasionally incorrect) historical background of the pictures, primarily for art historians. Brian Wallis (1995) is singular in his differentiated treatment and contextualization of Agassiz’s 1850 daguerreotypes. Reid (2006) aligns Sojourner Truth’s auto-portraits with Agassiz and The Scourged Back. On the “slave children” pictures, Mary Niall Mitchell has written concisely (2002). Despite her focus on a photographically augmented “runaway slave notice,” Rachel Hall’s article is the most contextualizing (2006) for the “slave children” series and The Scourged Back. Connor and Rhode have done pioneering research of the medical photographs of white soldiers (2003). The two books by cultural historian Shawn Michelle Smith (1999; 2004) extensively deal with late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century photographs and their investments in race, gender, and class representation. While these books offer few close readings of photographs, Smith’s arguments provide crucial contexts to my readings.


11. On the historical contexts of miscegenation, see the monographs by Hodes (1999), Lemire (2002), and Rothman (2003).

12. Abolitionism’s “visual turn”—marked by the commercial circulation of The Scourged Back in 1863—did not produce a vast archive of pictures of suffering black bodies. Indeed, judged against the plethora of abolitionist literature that sought to humanize different enslaved bodies by investing them with difference, suffering, and (potential for) redemption, the photographic memory of slavery as a system of injury to black bodies is small—the pictures presented in this chapter, centered around the Scourged Back, are almost all of the photographic depictions of suffering black bodies that can be found. Photography’s failure to substantially supplement textual abolitionism, and its late entry into antislavery discourse, suggests a mutually exclusive relation of the two media. As Mitchell observes, the slave narrative
virtually disappeared during the Civil War, a circumstance that he relates essentially to the factual breakdown and abolition of the plantation system: “The slave narrative proper could no longer exist after slavery was abolished. The value of the slave narrative seemed to depend on the real existence of chattel slavery, as if a gold reserve of ‘real wealth’ in human suffering had to back up the paper currency of the writings on slavery” (1994b, 197). The relatively sudden disappearance of the slave narrative can also be understood as a consequence of emerging photographs of suffering; the picture of black suffering succeeds the “gold standard” of slavery and devalues the freed slave’s written testimony to it. Abolitionist photography amalgamated the rhetorics of objectivity, evidence, and the black body “speaking its own difference/oppression,” and in this view led to the cultural neglect of the testimony of black voices.

13. The Schomburg Center’s database has catalogued the photograph under the name “Escaped slave displays wounds from torture” (Record ID 298932; Digital ID 487461).

14. Since one of my arguments is the instability of this naming, I’ll give the alleged names in SMALL CAPS. This spares “distancing” quotation marks, while also acknowledging the dilemma of having to produce and reproduce names for persons where there are at once none and too many. The name GORDON seems to have originated from the Harper’s Weekly article, which was uncritically taken up by Collins’s first art-historical appreciation of the image (1985a). Scholars vary between citing the more allegorical title and naming the person they assume to be depicted: “The Scourged Back” (Reid 2006; Mitchell 2002; Wallis 1995), “C. Seaver Jr.’s photograph of Gordon” (Masur 1998), or simply “Gordon” (Wood 2000).

15. Only one source (Fusco and Wallis 2003) has acknowledged this image, while Hall reproduces it erroneously under the name The Scourged Back (see, e.g., Hall 2006). As my research indicates, the image has never been discussed, reproduced, or acknowledged under the name Peter yet, and the image’s history also never has been registered in a scholarly fashion, or any fashion at all.

16. The photograph is kept at the National Archive at College Park, in the collection “Photographic Prints in John Taylor Album, compiled ca. 1861–1865.” The Web address is http://arcweb.archives.org; the image’s Inventory ID: 165-JT-230.

17. I am not engaging in a critique of Barthes’s concepts here, but his later work on photography significantly revises the structuralist approach. In what may be a slight reversal of theorization, he later wrote in Camera Lucida describing the photograph of a former slave made by Richard Avedon: “Since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), Photography cannot signify except by assuming a mask” (2000, 34). In Barthes’s view, the photograph—traumatic or not—always evades meaning by endlessly producing readabilities.

18. Stowe herself, as the epigraph heading this subsection indicates, knew about the critical difference between visual and literary representation. In her Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin, she commented the representational problem of slavery as this: “Slavery, in some of its workings, is too dreadful for the purposes of art. A work which should represent it strictly as it is, would be a work which could not be read” (quoted in Sanchez-Eppler 1997, 26). While Stowe probably did not imply photography here, which in the nineteenth century was not considered as “art,” the
trope of “unreadability”—i.e., direct representation “strictly as it is”—structures many of the visual documents of antislavery discourse.

19. On the problem of ekphrasis, the other, and the unrepresentability of slavery, see also WJT Mitchell’s argument in *Picture Theory* (1994b, 151–212). My following analysis owes much to Mitchell’s brilliant discussion.

20. Collins’s article does not reproduce the verso, wherefore the inscriptions on the back of the picture could not be verified. Also, the alleged title *The Scourged Back* is not truly confirmed. Though many scholars have used it to refer to the picture, it is not printed below the picture (as was common in cards). Collins’s article is the first registration of the photograph in an art history context.

21. Wood refers to the carte he consults as a “British print” (2000, 268).

22. The *Harper’s Weekly* text reads as follows: “A Typical Negro. We publish herewith three portraits, from photographs by M’Pherson and Oliver, of the Negro Gordon, who escaped from his master in Mississippi, and came into our lines at Baton Rouge in March last. One of these portraits represents the man as he entered our lines, with clothes torn and covered with mud and dirt from his long race through the swamps and bayous, chased as he had been for days and nights by his master with several neighbors and a pack of blood-hounds; another shows him as he underwent surgical examination previous to being mustered into service—his back furrowed and scarred with the traces of a whipping administered on Christmas-day last; and the third represents him in United States uniform, bearing the musket and prepared for duty.” After this brief passage the text quotes a letter with descriptions of slaveholder brutality (see anonymous 1863, 429).

23. Nineteenth-century photographers often named their depictions of “atrocities of war” in allusion to biblical motifs, e.g., Roger Fenton’s famous photograph “The Valley of the Shadow of Death” (1855), or Timothy O’Sullivan’s “Harvest of Death” (1863) (see also Faust 2009), both recalling biblical themes. *The Scourged Back* retains this aspect from the *Harper’s Weekly* article, and interpolates Gordon into a Christian martyr, substituting the body’s individuation for allegorical saturation.

24. The interpretation of “display,” and thus the image as an intentional and political act carried out by Gordon, is also suggested in the heading under which the Schomburg Center has archived the carte de visite. Here, it is called: “Escaped slave displays wounds from torture.”

25. The motion picture *Glory* (Edward Zwick 1989) plays out this connection of scars, the psychological fitness of freed slaves for (white) America, and the military. The generic portrayal of the 54th Massachusetts African American regiment stars Denzel Washington as a troublemaker in the newly formed battalion during the Civil War. In a climactic scene, he is whipped by order of Colonel Robert Shaw (Matthew Broderick) for desertion. As he is undressed for the punishment, he—in a reference to *The Scourged Back*—reveals extensive scarring on his back, obviously from a past whipping. The film links Washington’s scars from slavery to his present status as the distrustful and disrespectful black man, who threatens the integrational and disciplinary success of the military campaign, and national redemption. In the film’s final battle for Fort Wagner, Washington overcomes his traumatic relation to America as he seizes the regiment’s flag, which he had before refused to do. He is
instantly shot, and dies in a heroic pose. My thanks to Nezam al Jaru for bringing the movie to my attention.

26. My thanks to Holly Reed from the National Archives at College Park, who kindly provided me with crucial information and scans of the images.

27. See also Spillers (1987) for a reflection on how gendered subjectivity is complicated by the slave’s prohibition from relations of kinship and relations to the self. Mitchell makes the point that the memory of one’s own birthday usually is a knowledge passed on by relatives, especially the mother (see 1994b, 187–95). This is interesting as the children’s status of “slave” in the plantation system was “inherited” from the mother, i.e., all children born from female slaves were slaves themselves. Slavery thus achieved the multiplication of slave-property by matrilinearity, while at the same time shattering kinship structures and the channels of knowledge implicit in them.

28. During my research of photographic representations of the injuries black bodies received in slavery, I could not evade the impression that the black body becomes a “representational sign for the democratizing process” (see King 2008; Wiegman 1991; my italics) primarily as the “back,” i.e., the backside of this body. Gordon and Peter evidence that black subjectivity is recognized in white looking-regimes from behind. The adequate white representational sign of democratic advancement, on the other hand, seems to be the “face,” as a popular photographic print of 1865 documenting the congressional decision to outlaw slavery suggests. The image is titled “Photographs of Representatives who voted ‘Aye’ on the resolution submitting to the legislatures of the several states a proposition to amend the Constitution of the United States as to prohibit slavery.” The montage was widely distributed after the war, and shows an overwhelming mass of white faces—evidencing the compassionate agency and politically righteous resolve of white male America to remove its regime of enslavement. “Black back” and “white face” seem to supplement each other in a racial aesthetics of bodies. In the light of this racial blazon I suggest a further investigation of the racial and gendered ideology of the “back” and the “face,” or, as Deleuze and Guattari call it, “faciality” (1987). See also Bernadette Wegenstein’s highly inspiring consideration of the posthuman body in terms of its loss of “faciality” in her article “Getting Under the Skin, or, How Faces Have Become Obsolete” (2003).

29. I here use the verb “to present” both in the sense of “display,” and “actualization,” i.e., to draw something into the present tense. While for the black subject, slavery is always past and escaped from, the white subject can point to the ‘presentness’ of slavery. The photograph’s specific relation to temporality capitalizes on this structure: showing an always past thing, it actualizes or “re‑presents” it.

30. The radical temporal alterity of black liberated subject and white compassionate viewer resonates with a point Paul Gilroy has raised about the “extreme patterns of communication defined by the institution of plantation slavery.” As he claims, black slaves and white slaveholders inhabited different systems of communication, making impossible most linguistic relations: “There may, after all, be no reciprocity on the plantation outside of the possibilities of rebellion and suicide, flight and silent mourning, and there is certainly no grammatical unity of speech
to mediate communicative reason. In many respects, the plantation inhabitants live non-synchronously” (1993, 57). This communicative, even linguistic nonsynchronicity of slavery in a way is transformed into the different temporal strata black and white subjectivities inhabit in these pictures, a visual and temporal nonsynchronicity characterizing post-slavery race relations. Also, with relation to Gilroy’s thoughts on the master/slave dialectic, I want to note that this memorialization of the male slave body is the very opposite of what Gilroy describes as “the consciousness of the slave as . . . an extended act of mourning” (63), which is for him present in Douglass’s heroic embrace of the possibility of death and thus his advance to the position of “man.” The photographs I discuss here rather remove the site of mourning slavery from black consciousness to the “backside” of the black body.

31. On the implicit, Foucauldian differentiation between spectacular orders of punishment and a catalogue of wounding and hurt (1979; see also Lingis 1994, 53–77), here equating a distinction between North and South, see Wiegman’s remarks on the plantation’s simultaneous articulation of panoptic and sovereign principles (1995, 30–42).

32. Emmett Till’s mother publicly exhibited the photograph of her son’s mutilated corpse in 1955, which may provide a counterexample to what Debra King calls the commodified “everyday sign of suffering.” In Susann Neuenfeldt’s (2011) inspiring reading, the photograph provides an irreconcilable challenge to white compassion, in that it exhibits “the wound that never closes.” In seizing on bourgeois traditions of mourning photography and a reversal of lynching photography’s politics, Emmett Till’s mother was able to disrupt white viewing conventions and rites of “unspeakability”—and inserted both the abyss of white racial terror and a black politics of mourning into the regimes of visual representation.

33. An early example of the circulation of a mediating white pain in antebellum discourse is the daguerreotype Walker’s Branded Hand. Made only six years after the birth of photography in 1839 (see Orvell 2003), the image depicts the right hand of white sea captain Jonathan Walker, the letters “SS” branded into the palm, displayed against a black background. Walker, moving from Florida to the Northern states in 1844, had taken with him several African American slaves, wherefore he was arrested, fined, incarcerated for eleven months and after a court ruling branded with the initials “SS,” denoting “Slave Stealer.” After that, as Marcus Wood notes, “the white hand of Walker became a fragmentary monument to the cause of abolition and the suffering of the slave” (2000, 246), and Walker himself pursued a lively career as popular speaker and living reliquary at abolitionist rallies. The picture was in 1846 mass-reproduced as a broadside woodcut, accompanied with an elaborate poem by John Greenleaf Whittier that associated Walker’s hand with the iconography of religious martyrology. Remarkably, the image and poem provided American audiences with the earliest photographic evidence for the injurious effects of slavery, albeit inscribed on a white body. The picture and poem not only displayed Southern slaveholder violence and corruption, but further misread the white branded hand as a universal (white) cipher for “Slave Salvation.” Consequently, the mise en scène of the hand—starkly lit from above—makes the dark-seeming hand appear to belong to a black body, thus investing the white subject position with black corporeality. Racially ambiguous, the hand hovers between expressing racial victim-
hood and political heroism. *Walker’s Branded Hand* thus referenced a white painful sacrifice and implicitly articulated the white body as capable of incorporating the black experience of enslavement. Saidiya Hartman has commented critically on this generalizing function of the “white body suffering for the black body”: “The effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. . . . [I]t becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration” (1997, 19). This sentimental model of mimicry or “displacing mediation” of black suffering through white bodies ceased to work during the Civil War. The rupture to “romantic racialism” occurred partly because an image like *The Scourged Back* provided an incommensurable and visible equation of blackness and trauma, which as a supplement to white compassion was in no need of moderation, as the viewer could feel/see “viscerally” for him/herself.

34. Faust’s book focuses primarily on the issue of death and its connections to national American discourse. She points to various national practices of white memory and care fertilized by the mass production of dead bodies, such as the rise of the embalming industry, the pension system, and burial practices (Faust 2009).

35. The image is reprinted in Davis et al. 2007, 194.

36. I thank Dorothea Löbbermann for bringing this collection of medical photographs to my attention.

37. There is only one visual display of female woundings from enslavement—in the vein of Gordon and Peter—which appears as an afterthought to the Civil War era. On July 28, 1866, *Harper’s Weekly* published an image entitled *Marks of Punishment Inflicted upon a Colored Servant in Richmond, Virginia*, a wood engraving after a photograph that probably was kept by abolitionist Wendell Phillips. The image displays the highlighted scars on the back, arms, and head of an African American person, the white garment rolled down, leaning easily on a cushioned chair with an obviously bandaged hand. The attendant article, “A Cruel Punishment,” narrates the backstory given by the person who had sent the image to the paper, and involves a young female “servant” and her cruel mistress: “I send you a photograph showing in part the effect of a punishment by a hot iron on the back of a negro girl about 18 years of age, inflicted by a mistress the name of Mrs A—, living in King Williams Country in this state, a few weeks ago. . . . The girl was locked up in a private room, for some trivial offense, and kept in there over a week, during which time the burning was inflicted upon her. Her screams were frequently heard by the servants. Live irons were pressed upon her back and the back of her head, and the flesh on her back and head was burned . . . hard.” The narration situates the anonymous woman’s body as an afterthought to slavery, for it links the punishment to the fate of the several African Americans who were subjected to the mistress’s cruelties “while they were her slaves and until they were liberated.” The article trivializes the corporeal injury as relating to the irrational cruelty of the white woman, and not the systematic dehumanization of the plantation system in which it occurred. This abnegation of systemic violence is further amplified by placing black female pain firmly within the domestic realm. The picture visualizes a narration of slavery that equated racialized violence with personal irrationality and
femininity, thus collapsing the structural violence between slave and slaveholder into a quarrel between white and black women—"cruel mistress" and "silent servant." Black female pain—narrated after the "official" Americanization of male black bodies such as Gordon—thus signified not only a singular, domestic incident without context; moreover, its averted eroticization simultaneously alluded to and concealed the sexual violence of the plantation system. This process of disarticulating sexual violation was reflected and further displaced in the article's opening commentary by the magazine's editors: "The time is now gone when things of this nature are to be hidden from the public" (my italics).

38. For a historically exacting account of the incidents and various sources, see Reinhardt (2003) and Yanuck (1953). Much of the controversy and historical interest lies in the juridical fate of Garner, for it served as a controversial example of the Fugitive Slave Law that was passed to prevent escaped slaves from becoming free by entering "free soil." See both texts by Reinhardt on this context. Since the Garner case has been subject to extensive historical and feminist research—especially after Toni Morrison's novelization of her story in Beloved—I will only briefly analyze the discourse surrounding her to introduce some themes that influence how black femininity (and/as motherhood) is connected to narrations of pain and slave emancipation, and thus inserted into the sentimental framework of the nation after the war. On Garner see, e.g., Gilroy (1993, 41–72), Reinhardt (2002, 2003), Reyes (1990), and Wolff (1991). On Beloved, see Sengupta (2006), and particularly Barbara Christian's critical commentary on the reception of the novel in Abel et al. (1997). Morrison fuses the iconic figures of The Scourged Back and Garner into protagonist Sethe, who both shares Garner's story and carries the "chokecherry tree" on her body. None of the articles consulted has yet elaborated or problematized Morrison's amalgamation of black male and mixed-race female icons to slavery into a black female character, or the meaning of this subsuming move concerning African American pain.

39. Looking to both stories of slave suicide and white (Southern) formulas of "independence or death," Castronovo elaborates that "the metaphor of death as freedom saturates nineteenth-century culture, recurring across a range of texts from African American narratives to the moonlit, magnolia settings of proslavery novels. With little connection to social or material life, an inert freedom fits the diverse agendas of black abolitionist, white antislavery activist, and slaveholder. Although divided by race, background, and education, free white citizen and black noncitizen adhere to a vocabulary whose abstruseness best suits the normative legal identity of white manhood" (2000, 123). Castronovo's observation that a vocabulary of freedom embedded within a teleology of death resonates profoundly with white masculinity is in critical dialogue with Paul Gilroy's earlier meditation on Douglass's and Garner's "necropolitics" in the Black Atlantic (1993, 63–71): Gilroy saw Douglass's willingness to die as a decidedly African American reversal of the master/slave dialectic. See also Mbembe (2003).

40. The painting is further discussed in Furth (1998) and Morgan (2007).

41. The scene's historical descriptions are characterized by representational extremes: Lucy Stone's sentimental explication that "one child of hers was safe with the angels" (quoted in Reinhardt 2002, 103) is met by sensationalist representations of the scene: "Margaret Garner seized a butcher knife and turned upon her three
year-old daughter. With swift and terrible force she hacked at the child's throat. Again and again she struck until the child was almost decapitated" (see Yanuck 1953). The image seems to subscribe to the former genre.

42. My usage of the term here might be controversial, since Mbembe devises the term explicitly to describe the lethal underside of Western knowledge production on “legitimate forms of life” (i.e., biopolitics): the mass production of what Orlando Patterson calls “social death” in the regimes of slavery and colonialism. The regimes of slave- and colonial subjection are biopolitically infused in that they enact and enforce biopolitical differentiation through racism, but to produce forms of “death-in-life,” as Mbembe calls it: “Slavery . . . could be considered one of the first instances of biopolitical experimentation . . . in the context of the plantation, the humanity of the slave appears as the perfect figure of a shadow. Indeed, the slave condition results from a triple loss: loss of a ‘home,’ loss of rights over his or her body, and loss of political status. This triple loss is identical with absolute domination, natal alienation, and social death (expulsion from humanity altogether). . . . As an instrument of labor, the slave has a price. As a property, he or she has a value. His or her labor is needed and used. The slave is therefore kept alive but in a state of injury. . . . Slave life, in many ways, is a form of death-in-life” (2003, 21). In this view, slavery itself is characterized by necropolitics as it produces only further forms of “death-in-life,” even through biopolitical technologies such as the “breeding” of slaves. The representation of Garner’s actions, however, invests her with a sort of personalized necropolitics that disrupts slavery precisely at the junction of biopolitical and necropolitical mechanisms; at the moment of coercion to reproduce slave bodies, Garner produces “life-for-death.” This seeming investment of Garner by abolitionists (white and black) with a certain amount of sovereignty is fundamentally ambivalent and needs to be viewed together with other representations of African American motherhood in relation to futurity.

43. Notably, Morrison’s novel fuses both topoi explicitly by her description of the “milk theft” Sethe endures—an act enfolding maternal, female, bodily, and sexual violation into one monstrous scene.

44. While this phrasing owes to Lauren Berlant’s discussion of Harriet Jacobs’s Incidents, her argument shows that the discourse in Jacobs, which foregrounds issues of sexual violation and “sexual citizenship,” is rather different (1997, 228–36). For an extensive critique of Berlant’s argument, see Foreman (2002). As I want to argue, the same aspects are contained in Garner’s case, but are visually disarticulated. See also Wolff’s comparative discussion of the figuration of the black mother in Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin and the Margaret Garner story (1991).

45. While an adequate discussion of Morrison’s novel, and Jonathan Demme’s film adaptation (1998), is beyond the historical scope of my project, I’d like to note that both texts devise Sethe as not of mixed-race origin. To my knowledge, the implications of this crucial deviation from the original Garner story have not yet been acknowledged in critical scholarship.

46. Mary Niall Mitchell’s article (2002) discusses the images and Beecher’s extensive touring with Fanny, and contends that not even the blackness of the girl can be confirmed, much less her status as a “former slave.” The most extensive collection of FANNY pictures can be found at the Library of Congress, Photographs and Prints Division.
47. Miscegenation was regarded as producing “racially inferior” children, as is reflected in a Georgia Supreme Court declaration from 1869: “[T]he amalgamation of the races is not only unnatural, but is always productive of deplorable results, the offspring of these unnatural connections are generally sickly and effeminate, and they are inferior in physical development and strength, to the full-blood of either race” (in Foreman 2002, 536). This view persisted well into the twentieth century.

48. As Foreman notes, almost all of the protagonists in the fiction penned by black women from Our Nig (1859) through Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) are light-skinned. According to her article, Lutie Johnson in The Street (1946) is the first dark-skinned protagonist in African American women’s novels (Foreman 2002, 535).

49. In certain ways, the pathology ascribed to African American families in the Moynihan Report of 1965 is prefigured by this. See Hortense Spillers’s crucial discussion on the report, which informs many of my arguments (1987).

50. In my view, several scholars have moved in the direction of understanding “pain” as a violent act of “deconstructing humanity” that does dehumanizing “work” within subjugating, enslaving, and colonizing regimes: see, e.g., Mbembe’s concept of “Necropolitics” (2003); Hartman’s work on subjection (1997); or Castronovo’s work on the politics of slave suicide (2000).

CHAPTER FIVE. LATE MODERN PAIN

1. Barack Obama’s affective politics were articulated in his widely received speech on race, A more perfect Union, during the 2008 presidential race. In his controversy with Jeremiah Wright, he accused the reverend of speaking about racial injury “as if our society was static, as if no progress had been made, as if this country . . . is still irrevably bound to a tragic past”—the unchanging pain and trauma of American slavery. Obama distinguished his politics from Wright’s by calling for a collective overcoming of America’s “racial pain”: a collective, sympathetic working-through, which articulated pain and compassion as sources of change, affirmation, and good politics. Barack Obama also has the most entries in the “Empathy Group’s” online database of political texts that talk about “empathy” (http://www.humanityquest.com/Projects/ProgressiveValues).

2. Braidotti made this statement in her keynote at the sixth European Gender Research Conference at the University of Lódz in 2006. Her underlying theoretical point about an “affirmative ethics” is elaborated in several articles (2006, 2009), which argue for a theory of ethics that takes pain as its central problem and regards it as always experienced in difference, in and through circumstances of social injustice and oppression. Her theory calls for an acknowledgment of marginal subject positions and their experiences of pain and trauma. Similar to feminist standpoint theory, Braidotti formulates the pain of dispossession, loss, and injustice as a privileged epistemological position. For her, ethics itself emerges by “working through” the painful experience of marginalization and loss: “Migrants, exiles, refugees have first-hand experience of the extent to which processes of disidentification from familiar identities is linked to the pain of loss and uprooting. Diasporic subjects of all kinds express the same sense of wound. . . . The qualitative leap through pain, across the mournful landscapes of nostalgic yearning, is the gesture of active
creation of affirmative ways of belonging” (2006, 243). Marginal subjects, in their “existential” need to transform loss and hurt into identities, are predestined to enact Braidotti’s affirmative ethics: “Paradoxically, it is those who have already cracked up a bit, those who have suffered pain and injury, who are better placed to take the lead in the process of ethical transformation. Their ‘better quality’ consists not in the fact of having been wounded, but of having gone through the pain” (2009, 53). Her idea of affirmation thus aims at a dynamization of “all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror, or mourning. Affirmative ethics put the motion back in e-motion and the active back into activism” (2006, 248). Braidotti’s sloganism here exhibits the primary distinction that the trope of pain enables her to establish: that between stasis and motion, negativity and affirmation. As long as one’s pain is not worked through and overcome, one remains, as Braidotti stresses, caught in the negativity of “a rigid, eternal present tense” and “the stultifying effects of passivity, brought about by pain” (2006, 248). Braidotti further identifies this negativity as the basis for most contemporary discourses on identity and subjectivity, which she sees as part of a concerted “politics of melancholia” (2009, 58) focusing primarily on the negativity of experience. To my mind, this affirmative ethics based on pain as a common denominator eradicates important differences in discrimination, experience, and politics in marginalized groups groups, Braidotti not only posits a common pain as motivation or indeed benchmark of being a member of these marginalized groups, but also constitutes the abandoning—“moving beyond”—of that (always specific, always personal) pain as the index of having become political. She thus formulates a homogenizing program of what it means to become ethical, and what critical identity politics and critical theory should do.

3. Legal scholar Lynne Hendersen for example has argued that the canonical minority decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court have decisively revolved around the question of pain. In her reading of Brown v Board of Education she finds frequent “narratives of the painful experience of being black in American society” (1987, 1596), which for her attests to the compassionate nature of the decision, an emotional jurisdiction: “Legality... has clashed with empathy, and empathy has transformed legality” (1594).

4. Since the proliferation of the neurosciences in the late twentieth century, a host of scientific publications have argued and popularized the gendered and racialized meanings of the brain. From studies such as Baron-Cohen’s research into the “empathy capacities” of male and female brains (2003), or the location of “evil” in neural terms (2011), to investigations into how regarding the pain of others effects pain sensations (thus sympathy) in the obverser’s brain (Freedberg and Gallese 2007), or research on how racial difference impacts on feeling of empathy (Avenanti et al. 2010; Eberhardt 2005), these scientific discourse recapitulate many of the objectifying and biologizing knowledge productions I have analyzed in my historical chapters on the nineteenth century.

5. My analysis of this mechanism of “deracialization” owes to Ellen Feder’s lucid article on the deployment of the trope of “family” in contemporary scientific research on violent behavior in inner city areas. Tracing how scientific discourse on the causes of violent behavior in the 1990s switches from sociological circumscriptions of the “black welfare mother” to biochemical research carried out in the field of
primatology, Feder argues that “the [scientific] investigation into the causes of violence has shifted the focus from behaviors with roots in the racist legacy of slavery that accordingly require social remedies [e.g., the Moynihan Report] to behaviors purportedly caused by such ‘natural’ factors as deficient levels of serotonin, genetic flaws, bad mothering, and other possible matters of ‘heritability.’ While ‘the mother’ remains a potent figure in this latter discourse, she is not the mother we find in the ‘Moynihan Report’” (2007, 73). This descriptive transformation enacts what Feder calls the “deracialization” of the racializing discourse on violence, which now elaborates on “the serotonin levels of monkeys [and] what kind of mothers they had and what their genetic heritage was” (67), while retaining the (now also biochemically) failing black motherhood as the “background-body” (67), on which the racial meanings and hereditary status of social deviance are inscribed.

6. Bush’s prescription of national trauma, as Donald Pease has consistently argued in his article “The Global Homeland State: Bush’s Biopolitical Settlement” (2003), enabled the symbolic transformation of U.S. mythologies such as Virgin Land (never attacked before) into the military and political states of exception denoted by the Homeland, in need of state protection. These national topoi are, in presidential rhetoric and politics, saturated with racialized and biopolitical meanings, as Pease argues.

7. Obama’s effort to understand the phenomenon of terrorism in late capitalism as a product of poverty, lack of education, and thus as a suitable object for American compassion and empathy, recalls nineteenth-century discourses about the insensitivity of underclass bodies, which medical historian Donald Caton has described: “Ignorance, hard physical labor, and bad living conditions, on the other hand, made people less sensitive to their own pain and less sympathetic to the pain of others” (1999, 118–19). As chapter 3 argued, this exclusion of lower-class bodies from sympathy and compassion was fundamentally complicit with biologizing and racializing discourses that funneled into the eugenics movement, by which America organized the nation’s biopolitical definition in the light of abolition, immigration, industrialization, and the threat of racial mixing. In this view, Obama’s statement that the particular lack of feeling in terrorist bodies cannot be traced back to ethnic or cultural differences proves at least historically wrong, as bodily sensitivity and sympathetic authority crucially served American culture to produce racially significant bodies.

8. Notably, Mbembe reflects here on the logistics of the suicide bombings in Palestine which for him, as he stresses, exemplify a reaction to colonized/occupied existence: “To live under late modern occupation is to experience a permanent condition of ‘being in pain’” (2003, 38). Whether his analysis is transposable to the context of the 9/11 attacks on America is a question beyond the scope and intention of my argument.

9. “Madness” also recurs in Mbembe’s argument, however, to describe the conditions of living under colonial rule (39). The term in Obama’s usage denotes a collapse of rational politics, an unassimilable instance of politicized performance. “Madness” also prominently figured in the spectacular dramatization of Western heroic sacrifice, Zack Snyder’s feature film 300 (2006), which represented the Greek armies withstanding Xerxes I’s invasion of Greece at the historic battle of
Thermopylae (480 BC). The film’s strangely exposed political metaphor for the war on terror however trumps the “madness” of American heroic sacrifice in the face of overwhelming “Persian armies” assailing Western civilization by exchanging loss of rationality with an assertion of national/militaristic/racial identity. King Leonidas of Sparta’s (Gerard Butler) most recognizable and most popularized line is: “This is madness? THIS IS SPARTA!” The phrase has since then become a popular cultural marker for masculinist resolve beyond the terms of political correctness; a search for “This is Sparta” on YouTube returns no fewer than 12,000 videos, associating the phrase with everything from hitting children to George W. Bush or soccer star Zinedine Zidane’s infamous headbutt.

10. Not at all surprisingly, this preoccupation with the “inhuman” and the “invulnerable” has also inspired a resurgence of zombie films and novels (from the various remakes and retakes of George Romero’s of the Dead series to Zombieland (2009), or Max Brooks’s highly successful novel World War Z) and—on a more highbrow note—inspired such masculinist meditations on existentialism and human cruelty/dignity as The Road (2010), The Book of Eli (2010), and the Oscar-decorated No Country for Old Men (2007). Mark Seltzer diagnoses a similar obsession of sentimental society with the inhuman in his book on serial killers, which emerge in what he calls American “wound culture” (Seltzer 1998).

11. As an index of the proliferation of cultural texts dealing with torture, a look at the cinematic productions of the past decade may suffice: the Internet Movie Database lists more than one thousand movies and TV productions of the last ten years that are tagged with the plot-keyword torture.

12. Arguably, Mel Gibson’s The Passion of the Christ (2004) should be included in this category, because physical torture is its primary means of narration. On the rise of the torture drama in mainstream cinema, see also the recent dissertation by Maja Bächler (2011). See also McClintock’s discussion of “torture porn” in the context of the Abu Ghraib pictures (McClintock 2009).

13. The Saw series and the figure of the Joker in Dark Knight are prime examples: both villains excel in concocting scenarios in which the sentimental principles of democracy are challenged, e.g., by prompting people the choice of either killing or being killed.

14. For a review of this controversially discussed movie, see Alford (2010). Critics are generally divided over the film’s quality or political effectiveness, but it won the 2010 Direct-to-DVD Award for Best Film. That the movie never reached cinematic distribution may be attributed to the overly “controversial” intention of negotiating the sensitive issue of torture, but there has been no statement by the production team on this.

15. Mohammed/Younger’s demands to the American government are a liberal patriot’s dream, since his message essentially consists in a revision of American foreign policies: to stop financial support for “puppet regimes” across the globe and to withdraw all American troops from Muslim countries. Mohammed/Younger: “I know you want to bring our men and women home to the nation we love. Thank you. And may Allah bless America.” I will not extend on the quagmire of political intentions or implications assembled in Unthinkable.
16. This ending, which evokes the presence of a fourth bomb and thus imminent catastrophe, was cut from the DVD version of *Unthinkable*, which concludes with the image of Brody and terrorist’s children. The bomb scene, however, is present in the “leaked” version of the film, which appeared on the Internet several months before its release.

17. Notably, H is presented as an “unfree” character throughout the movie: his obviously long career as torture specialist and the American military’s “secret weapon” has earned him a life of constant protection and surveillance. In this view, the black subject by virtue of its expertise in pain and dehumanization, remains connected to slavery not only in its terms of its never fully achieved affective humanity (in need of white protection), but also through the restrictive measures white society has to employ to protect itself from its ethical vacuity.

18. Crucially, the figure of the “inhuman black man” serves in the movie to fictionally racialize and legitimize a “limitlessness” of torture that seems to be standard military procedure. Anne McClintock cites the memories of American torturer Tony Lagouranis who was stationed in Iraq: “The prisoner will not break unless he believes the potential for escalation is endless and the only way to convince him of that is to be the embodiment of evil. For a truly evil person, the rules of civilization do not apply, and any course of action is possible. The prisoner who faces an evil captor is transported to a totally alien world that makes no sense and that he finds impossible to fathom. This is where true terror and panic set in” (2009, 72–73).


20. Brody is also presented as a “career woman,” which H amusingly points out as he peruses her file: “I see why they picked you. . . . No boyfriends, no children. [Reads] ‘Chose a career over family.’ You watch that, they might think you’re a lesbian.” Brody’s “overethical” stance therefore is also linked, very much like the nineteenth-century verdict of “overcivilization,” to improper sexual and reproductive behavior. I will not expand on the issue of sexuality; it may suffice to say that the film’s ending finally transports the homosexualized career woman toward motherhood, as Brody symbolically adopts the white terrorist’s kids.

21. H and Rena in this view constitute a further iteration of the pathological “black’ family incapable of racial integrity,” the analysis found in the last chapter (see also Feder 2007, 72). In a similar vein, Rena’s trauma legitimizes H’s violence as Mohammed/Younger’s fundamentalist fanaticism is outsourced to his Arab wife Jehan.

22. In this respect, *Unthinkable’s* claim to the figuration of the terrorist is crucially different from Mbembe’s above-cited description of the suicide bomber, who negates the body’s value in order to transpire death. Mohammed/Younger, though enabled by the popular association of terrorist subjectivity with inhumanity and invulnerability, is precisely the most valuable body, because its sacrificial heroism reinstates the sentimental and racial order of the nation.

23. I subscribe to Elaine Scarry’s discussion, wherein torture’s effects are the precise opposite of humanization (1985, ch. 1).

24. This phrasing owes to a rather problematic (and rarely quoted) passage by Agamben on the writings of the Marquis de Sade. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben considers “bare life” in sexualized terms and devises a political conceptualization of
sexual practice: “The growing importance of Sadomasochism in modernity has its roots in the exchange of political life with bare life. Sadomasochism is precisely the technique of sexuality by which the bare life of a sexual partner is brought to light” (1998, 134). While Agamben’s notion seems to me fully inappropriate as a description of S/M—see, e.g., Taylor and Ussher’s (2001) qualitative research about whether people actually experience themselves or each other as “bios/bare life/homo sacer” in “sadomasochist” practice—his problematic equation of sadomasochism and torture resonates with many cultural critics that have commented on the atrocious practices that have visually surfaced from the Abu Ghraib Prison. As Anne McClintock critically summarizes, numerous critics have analyzed the pictures of torture as being inspired by a pervasive and dangerous culture of “S&M pornography,” which has undermined American culture: “Pornography, S/M, gays, women in the military, feminists, dominatrices, and drugs were all named as culprits . . . tragically complicit in this regard, however, were critics in the liberal middle—Slavoj Zizek, Arthur Danto, Katherine Viner, Rochelle Gurstein, Maureen Dowd, and even Susan Sontag, to mention only a few—who likewise argued that it was pornography and the culture of S/M that made the guards do it. Even as sophisticated a reader of images as Sontag, for one, saw the relation between porn and torture as one of explicit causality and mimetic iteration. . . . Zizek argued that the abuses were incited by a culture of gay S/M going back to Mapplethorpe” (McClintock 2009, 61). The frequent intermixing of discourses on terrorism with homophobic, anti-queer, and heteronormative arguments is also argued by Puar and Rai (2002).

These simplifying and moralizing abjections of torture implicitly reiterate the crucial function of race and gender within any politics of pain. Rather than revealing the “bare life” and “true humanity” of the victim, or the “moral barbarity” and “sexual deviancy” of the torturer, a politics of pain always works through race and gender and affirms the corporeal reach of these categories. On the topic of the torture pictures of Abu Ghraib, the various feminist contributors to McKelvey’s important anthology One of the Guys: Women as Aggressors and Torturers (2007) agree that violence, torture, and pain are always already racialized, gendered, and sexualized, i.e., torture is a material performance of these categories.

25. See also Lauren Berlant’s discussion of “infantile citizenship,” where she argues that within American popular culture there is “a strong and enduring belief that the best of U.S. national subjectivity can be read in its childlike manifestations” (1997, 25–51).

26. One could argue that the deployment of a white male Muslim also demonstrates a “deracializing” intention of the film.


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American Dolorologies presents a theoretically sophisticated intervention into contemporary equations of subjectivity with trauma. Simon Strick argues against a universalism of pain and instead foregrounds the intimate relations of bodily affect with racial and gender politics. In concise and original readings of medical debates, abolitionist photography, Enlightenment philosophy, and contemporary representations of torture, Strick shows the crucial function that evocations of “bodies in pain” serve in the politicization of differences. This book provides a historical contextualization of contemporary ideas of suffering, sympathy, and compassion, thus establishing an embodied genealogy of the pain that is at the heart of American democratic sentiment.

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