

The Polish Journal  
of Aesthetics



# The Polish Journal of Aesthetics

51 (4/2018)  
Jagiellonian University in Kraków

# The Polish Journal of Aesthetics

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## Published by:

Institute of Philosophy, Jagiellonian University  
52 Grodzka Street, 31-004 Kraków

## Co-publisher:

Wydawnictwo Nowa Strona – Marcin Lubecki  
22/43 Podgórze Street, 43-300 Bielsko-Biała

## Editorial Layout and Typesetting:

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## Cover Design:

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## Cover Artwork:

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## First Edition

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e-ISSN 2544-8242



An anatomical drawing of a human torso, showing the internal organs and muscles. The drawing is overlaid with a semi-transparent red band. The title is written in white text on this band. There are numbered labels (22, 23, 24, 8, 9, 10) on the left and right sides of the drawing, connected by thin lines to specific anatomical features.

# The Affective Aesthetics of the Body in Pain

Edited by  
Luz Mar González-Arias  
and Monika Glosowicz



*To Pili and Weronika,  
our amazing mothers*



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# Part I

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# Introduction





**Luz Mar González-Arias\***  
**and Monika Glosowicz\*\***

## **Pain and the Affects: The Witness. The Cure. The Healing**

Physical pain—in all its degrees of intensity and frequency—is a constant presence in life. From an almost imperceptible discomfort at skin level to the prolonged states of unbearable bodily distress that characterise some chronic medical conditions, pain is an inescapable reality of human and non-human existence. However, and as Virginia Woolf contended in her celebrated essay “On Being Ill”, bearing in mind “how common illness is, how tremendous the spiritual change it brings, [...] it becomes strange indeed that [it] has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature” (2012 [1926], 3–4), an argument we could extend to scholarly writing too. Examples of physical distress and the experience of illness have, though, been present in the literatures of all times—albeit significantly more scant than instances of emotional suffering—but it is not until the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries that they have started to attract sustained critical and artistic attention across geographies and cultures.

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But... why has the body in pain been absent from the systems of representation for so long? Certainly, there is many a potential answer for this question. If visible at surface level—i.e., when pain and illness are manifested in a rash or scabs, or by means of external bodily fluids like urine or vomit, excrement, blood, or by hair falling out—the corporeal is generally considered as abject cultural materiality, as that which we do not desire to see or touch, except in medical contexts, where it is perceived, principally, as an object to be analysed, dissected and/or altered. The body is, after all, a multiple signifier upon which different scales of value are applied in order to construct its manifold meanings. And so, a lock of hair from the beloved is kept as a potent reminder of romantic love, but the fallen hair of a chemotherapy patient is a different symbol altogether, and triggers divergent emotional responses too. If we turn to language, though, the most extended explanation for this absence of pain in representation is summarised, once again, in Woolf's essay: "[L]anguage", she wrote, "at once runs dry" if we wish to describe a simple headache (2012 [1926], 7). Her argument about the inaccuracy of language to deal with pain is persuasive and difficult to disagree with—although some cultural contextualisation is called for, as English is not necessarily the same as Spanish, Italian, Polish or French when it comes to metaphorisation and simile, two of the strategies used to talk about pain by patients, poets and artists alike. Elaine Scarry's philosophical treatise *The Body in Pain* also resorts to the linguistic "unsharability" of physical pain, i.e., to its "resistance to language" (1985, 4), as a plausible explanation for its generalised absence from socio-cultural representations. According to Scarry, physical pain resists articulation through language and even "actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). This would account for the scant presence of physical pain in textual discourse—except in medical case histories or reports by Amnesty International (9)—and also for the gap that separates the body in pain from other members of their community, since they are unable to connect to that person's physical distress due to its stated unsharable nature (4).

Scarry's has become a text of reference when critically approaching pain and is, probably, the one most often quoted in this special issue. Although her theories about linguistic unsharability have been nuanced since the publication of *The Body in Pain*—particularly by the counterargument that there is a cultural language of pain, and by literature about care and empathy—her discussion of the imprecision, inaccuracy, even impossibility

of language to talk about pain is still a vibrant one. The motivation and rationale behind this special issue on “The Affective Aesthetics of the Body in Pain” stems from the belief that suffering *does* have a language, particularly in the realms of artistic and literary practice, but also in the genres associated with life-writing, namely personal essays and memoirs. The works presented in this volume find words (academic, creative, autobiographical) where there seemed to be none and act as a witness to realities traditionally silenced and/or marginalised from the socio-cultural agenda, often in order to call for an active interaction between that which is being represented and the readership/audience being addressed, which led us to the second question that has guided our editorial work: How do the affects interact with the bodily painful and what role do they play in the representation of hurt?

The pivotal category of *affective aesthetics* allows for analyses of literary texts and visual art conjoined with an important set of questions about the national, social, familial and sexual dimensions of embodiment. Affects—through artworks—function as forces which enable subjects to move and to be moved and, therefore, they have the capacity to transform both individual and collective subjectivities and to shape their imaginaries. Their interaction with pain resists the mere aesthetic contemplation of the object of the artwork (i.e., the body in pain or the experience of illness) and instead inspires empathic and ethical engagements as well as social interventions.

The sources of the affective aesthetics project can be traced back to a number of essays of the already mentioned Virginia Woolf, most importantly “How Should One Read a Book” (1925) and “On Re-reading Novels” (1922) (Woolf 1994), and to the pragmatist aesthetics of John Dewey (1987), variously expanded upon by Simon O’Sullivan (2001) and Charles Altieri (2003), and further developed by female feminist theorists like Sara Ahmed, Silvia Federici, Selma James, Anu Koivunen and Susanna Paasonen, among others. This interesting theoretical avenue—it being a comprehensive endeavour marrying ontology, epistemology and politics, along with, key to the affective turn, ethics—ventures to re-define notions that are fundamental for the field of aesthetics and encompasses a reflection on the arts as active agents in the production of culture. And so, Charles Altieri expressed his hope that affective aesthetics would offer a fresh angle on the arts which would serve social interest, meaning that literature would not only deal with socially relevant issues, but would also produce subjectivities and change their way of perceiving the world. The arts would then be treated as serious social practice, therefore the analysis of the role of the affects in literature is an action that defines and meets the need to care about

oneself and the surrounding world (Altieri 2003, 33). Feminist philosophers, on their part, univocally emphasise the indivisibility of the affective and ethical components of subjectivity, pointing to irrational and non-cognitive elements as causal factors in the process of building relations with others.

However, if we were to consider affective aesthetics as a kind of cohesive, consistent research-artistic group, we would be surprised by what variegated voices sing in this choir. Affective theorists refer to separate, often even irreconcilable traditions, and, what is more, stress their conflicting perspectives. For this reason, our point of departure for this special issue is rather conspicuously targeted at reflection on the aesthetics of the body experiencing pain, i.e., the body that is located somewhere in the interactions of multiple systems of oppression or discrimination and that is marked by categories of gender, race, age, social class and the species divide.

One of the most important questions for this project is related to the role played by the above-mentioned markers in the forming of concepts and aesthetic values (Korsmeyer 2004). While many twentieth-century theorists and philosophers pointed to the need for a new and broader notion of aesthetics, one which would accentuate the processual, affective and corporeal-sensual dimension of experience (Rejniak-Majewska 2014, 11), at a certain level in their generalisations these writers expunged the notion of gender and sex, species, race, and ethnic differences. A rather contrasting gesture is characteristic of feminist reflection, where the notion of affect is very often presented as “a cosmic force that transcends the confines of human existence, individual body, and human subjectivity” (Mortensen 2017, 7). In our critical assessment of the potential of a feminist aesthetics, neither the gendered body nor the affects are “cosmically” dispersed; they are considered of paramount importance but cannot be perceived as universal and abstract.

The common denominator in all the theories referenced above is a belief in the non-individual character of the aesthetic experience. Obviously, this does not suggest the blurring of the individual, subjective “self”—one that feels and acts—but rather the unveiling of mechanisms which enable the arts to have an impact on their communities. We would like to view the arts as tools that enable us to observe the world in a way that goes beyond our ascribed vantage points as determined by corporeal, sexual, gender, and social-class categories. Affective aesthetics are here understood as a set of tools to assess the different ways of perceiving and distributing the real and/or imaginary spaces shared by a given community, with the aim of destabilising elements that reinforce the divisions. So instead of romanticising the notion of affective agency—supposedly intended to transform the

world—we would like to ponder the question of how social and political structures manage the division and distribution of affects, and how to de-regulate those hierarchical systems of attribution that dictate that particular bodies in pain are more visible and more audible than others.

The works presented in this special issue of *The Polish Journal of Aesthetics* explore—from different perspectives, as well as cultural and historical contexts—the ways in which artistic projects shape distinct affective states of experiencing pain and illness. The concept of pain is here extended beyond physical distress to also embrace illnesses that may not have an associated sensation of bodily discomfort. Far from considering “the body in pain” as a unified category, these essays and poems illustrate the idea that each illness, each pathology and each painful body part is the result of individual experience as much as of socially constructed notions of what it means to be in pain or to experience illness. Hence, the collective and political potential of pain is as present here as its phenomenology as a personal and individual experience. In the pages that follow, the turn to illness and the turn to the affects cross-fertilise each other to produce suggestive work on the affective aesthetics of embodiments that hurt and that need to be healed. All the essays share an interest in the perspective of the sufferer, who on many occasions is a real patient. In this way, these articles complement—but are not incompatible with—the medical perspective on the same diseases, which is necessarily more dehumanised and supposedly less subjective.

So, what languages and modes of expression can we utilise to deal with pain and the affects such pain can potentially trigger? This special issue offers some answers in the artistic vocabulary proffered by poetry, performance art, photography, experimental film, narrative, and the genre of the so-called personal essay. We can contend that there is now a solid body of work on medical poetry, i.e., poetry that deals with medical issues. Anthologies like *The Poetry Cure* (2004), edited by Julia Darling and Cynthia Fuller, *Signs and Humours: The Poetry of Medicine* (2007), edited by Lavinia Greenlaw, *Poetry in Medicine: An Anthology of Poems about Doctors, Patients, Illness and Healing* (2015), edited by Michael Salcman, and *Illness as Inspiration: The Poetry of Medicine and Disease* (2019), edited by Theodore Dalrymple, to mention but a few, prove that poetry is particularly apt to compensate for the inability of literal language to deal with pain.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, the “Hippocrates Initiative for Poetry and Medicine”—co-funded by poet Michael Hulse and clinical pharmacologist Donald Singer—has promoted the special connec-

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<sup>1</sup> These anthologies are all relatively recent, but the poems included span several centuries and showcase the socio-cultural dimension of pathologies across time.

tion between poetic forms and medical conditions and experiences at its annual conferences, which also include the ceremony of the Hippocrates Awards for Poetry and Medicine, arguably the most reputed international poetry prize for poetry on illness-related issues.<sup>2</sup> All in all, poetry is now generally perceived as a vehicle to express pain and to connect us to the experience of illness by means of its figurative language and conceptual strategies. However, and in spite of growing initiatives to incorporate poetry as a therapeutic tool in different medical areas, comparatively little research has been done on the curative and/or healing power of poetry for patients in a clinical context. Shadia-Abdel-Rahman Téllez's essay included in this special issue ("The Poetics of the Body in Pain") contributes to redressing this void through her exploration of chronic pain in both medical and everyday social settings. The poems utilised in her analysis are taken from the 2018 project *Translating Chronic Pain* conducted by Sara Patricia Wasson at Lancaster University, and all were written by amateur writers who have been experiencing chronic pain for some time. As the author explains, "[t]he primary goal of any type of expression of the pain experience is seeking the acknowledgment of suffering by readers who probably will never experience that type of pain. Sufferers seek to be heard". And in the affective exchange that happens between the writing of this kind of poetry (by the sufferers) and the hearing/reading of those same poems (by the community), the writers-patients find a therapeutic tool of sorts, and their audience can experience some degree of empathic connection.

This volume also includes three previously unpublished poems by American-born poet Kelley Swain, and translations (by Lynn Suh) from Polish into English of three poems by Anna Adamowicz. Both Swain and Adamowicz have often found inspiration in the worlds of science, Medicine and non-normative corporealities, and they are both representatives of what we might describe, internationally, as the turn to pain in twenty-first century poetry. Their work is a perfect illustration of the cross-fertilisation that is gradually taking place between the world of Humanities and the world of Sciences, two areas traditionally kept radically apart, to the extent of being called "the two cultures", to use the phraseology of C. P. Snow (1959). The six poems published here inscribe historical figures (like Helen Duncan in the case of Swain, and Jean-Michel Basquiat in Adamowicz's work), as well as the deformed, distorted and maimed bodies of real and legendary characters, traditionally considered as medical oddities but here given the dignity

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<sup>2</sup> The Hippocrates Initiative started in 2009 and its most recent annual conference was held at the University of Newcastle on 17th May 2019.

and visibility that is due to subjects-objects of art. The poems ultimately demand an affective response on the part of the reader/audience, who are implicitly asked to acknowledge the existence of those marginalised in the official records of history.

Máximo Aláez Corral's essay ("I Never Want to Avoid Pain") and Kate Antosik-Parsons' ("Split Asunder") explore the potential of photography and performance art to inscribe and generate affective responses in their articulation of physical and emotional pain. Aláez Corral examines the visual strategies of American photographer Nan Goldin in assessing the representation of hurt, the constructed nature of pain and, as the author explains, "the power of photography [...] to communicate with the portrayed person's suffering". Goldin's photographs record the experiences of violence, illness and addictions in the drag and underground artistic communities of Boston and New York in the 1970s and, in that sense, have become witnesses to what might otherwise have been falsified under the rubric of more conventional forms of art. The people represented in her photos are posing, and therefore, part of the construction of an art piece, but also immersed in their daily routines without much artifice. Goldin's work ultimately invites the viewer to enter her world from its margins and to be necessarily affected by this journey.

Antosik-Parsons, in her turn, deals with obstetric violence in the context of Ireland and uses as her primary source Máiréad Delaney's performance *At What Point it Breaks* (2017). In a country that has historically silenced the bodies of women, culturally as well as politically, Antosik-Parsons chooses for her analysis an art form that is unquestionably incarnated and embodied. Performance practice takes place in a liminal space, somewhere between the artistic, that is, constructed, and what we consider reality, that is, the most immediate and ephemeral here and now. And it is precisely in that unstable space that artist and audience meet by means of bodily empathy. Antosik-Parsons' essay is experiential, in that the author dwells on her own bodily and affective reactions to the live performance that was happening before her eyes. Different from its recorded traces in the form of photography or video, a live performance is always a lived experience, and hence a perfect vehicle to facilitate the circulation of affects and emotions among those present.

The Era of the Anthropocene has generated a lot of academic and political debates. This new phase we are entering, or have indeed already entered, places humans at the very centre of existence. However, American biologist E. O. Wilson prefers to call this new period the Eremocene, or "the Age

of Loneliness" (Wilson 2013). As has been contended elsewhere (González-Arias 2015, 119), the phrase, poetic as it may sound, intimates the radical solitude humans will be doomed to if we do not put an end to the continuous destruction of ecosystems and our negative interactions with the non-human world. The Age of Loneliness acknowledges the painful reality of a world where the sounds of birds and the richness of forest life will be silenced by human irresponsibility. If in the past artists and scholars looked at the natural world in a contemplative manner and marvelled at the sublime aspects of oceans and mountains, the nature writing of the present problematises the Anthropocene and is characterised by a deep sense of ecological grief. This special issue also echoes this pain at the loss and damage of flora and fauna. In her essay "Vulnerability, Mourning and Religious Compassion: A Cross-Species Perspective", Alina Mitek-Dziemba takes Judith Butler's theories of human vulnerability and suffering and applies them to animal bodily existence. By confronting human and non-human vulnerability, the author seeks to acknowledge a cross-species community of affects. Mitek-Dziemba pays special attention to death and rituals of mourning, traditionally used to remark human exceptionality. Animals are now recognised in their grievable dimension and their deaths endowed with the dignity and recognition canonically reserved for humans. This acknowledgement is not to be underestimated in its socio-political possibilities since, as the author maintains, it invites activist responses on the part of the community.

In her turn, Justyna Stępień's piece, entitled "Affective Entanglements of Posthuman Bodies in Pain in Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9*" examines Barney's experimental film to bring into focus the interactions, interconnections and existential entanglements of the human, the non-human and the technological, so as to produce a mode of existence characterised by fluid multiplicities. Far from locating the human at the centre of the Anthropocene era, Stępień's essay is reminiscent of the old saying that we contain multitudes. As Donna Haraway highlighted in *When Species Meet*, our bodies are formed by numerous microorganisms that are constantly interacting, so that to be one necessarily means to be many (2008, 4). Stępień relies on Deleuze and Guattari to assess the ways in which Barney's experimental work reveals the interconnections and intra-connections of different materialities to produce new possibilities of embodiment. As these two essays show, humans are not alone on the planet, nor can we be deluded into considering ourselves exceptional. Our pain is essentially dialogical, multi-layered, and crosses the species divide.



In her essay "Torture and Objectification of Pain in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*", Dilek Mentese Kiryaman focuses on the living conditions of nineteenth-century factory workers to denounce the social inequalities and enforced bodily resilience as portrayed in Elizabeth Gaskell's novel. Although this is the only piece in the special issue devoted to the past, its analysis and conclusions are still relevant in our contemporary world, characterised as it is by deeply-rooted hierarchies of value based on the categories of gender, social status, race, or ethnicity. The author compares the physical suffering of the working class in the industrial society of Victorian England with forms of torture. As Mentese Kiryaman notes, "torture is defined as an act of physical torment with the aim of forcing the tortured person to act in a certain way or to give specific information". Her essay does not, though, "generalise about the concept of torture by applying it to the working class" but rather uses the term metaphorically to denounce power-relations. The ethical difficulties of such a metaphor are bypassed eloquently in an essay that moves the reader to empathy and identification with the physical and emotional pain of the exploited workers of nineteenth-century England.

This special issue also includes a personal essay. There has been an exponential rise in interest in this genre in recent years, particularly when it comes to reflecting on the issues of pain, illness and care. If the academic essay emphasises the work of previous thinkers, writers and scientist in the building up of new knowledge, in the personal essay the subjective and distinctive voice of the author's "I" is paramount, leaving references and sources aside or reduced to a minimum. The personal essay is frequently (but not exclusively) written by a writer, artist or scholar who is also a patient, and hence privileges the point of view of the sufferer over that of the scientific, medical establishment. *Constellations: Reflections from Life*, by Sinéad Gleeson (2019), *Notes to Self: Essays*, by Emilie Pine (2018), and *I Am, I Am, I Am: Seventeen Brushes with Death* (2017), by Maggie O'Farrell are among the recent examples of successful compilations of personal essays by fiction writers and scholars who have decided to move from the purely creative or the strictly academic to let their individual self conquer the page to deal with illness, disability, death, blood and bones.

"Riding the Sea Word" is Isabel Alonso-Breto's personal essay on her experience of breast cancer, from the moment of diagnosis to the present, when she can consider herself a survivor. Her piece is honest and blunt, unsentimental in tone but not devoid of dramatic tension. Alonso-Breto invites us into the familial, psychological and social dimensions of cancer. She

touches upon common scenarios related to illness and hospital appointments: dissociation of body and self in traumatic situations (“Sometimes I felt that my body was foreign, a distant thing, like somebody outside of myself”), coping with the shock of bad news, telling friends and family about the diagnosis, grieving the loss of a body part, fear. The essay does not avoid the word “cancer” but its title refers to this pathology by means of the fluid metaphor of the sea and its potential for healing. Alonso-Breto’s essay also functions as a guide to successfully communicate with those going through the experience of cancer and, in that sense, it is reminiscent of Julia Darling’s celebrated poem “How to Behave with the Ill”, where the British poet advises: “Don’t say, ‘I heard that you were very ill’. / This makes the poorly paranoid. / Be direct, say ‘How’s your cancer?’ / Try not to say how well we look / compared to when we met in Safeways” (Robinson 2015, 63). Darling’s final lines ask for a collective awareness, even celebration, of life, which is also in part the effect that personal essays on illness have on the reader: “Remember that it is a miracle that any of us / stands up, breathes, behaves at all” (Ibid.).

This special issue on the affective aesthetics of the body in pain is organised in five distinct sections that correspond to the themes and theories indicated above: one on literary representations, one on performance and the visual arts, one on non-human affects and, finally, the confessional essay and the poems. However, readers will notice significant overlap between sections as ultimately all of these pieces dwell on the witnessing of pain, on the affective exchanges it triggers, and on the possibilities of art to cure or, at least, to contribute to the healing.

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## Part II

# Literature



**Shadia Abdel-Rahman Téllez\***

## **The Poetics of the Body in Pain: Wordlessness, Figurative Language and the Chronic Pain Experience**

### **Abstract**

Pre-linguistic expressions and literal language are inadequate to describe pain. The former only informs of the presence of bodily pain, while the latter cannot explain purely physical phenomena. Figurative language is thus the alternative to communicate and describe the pain experience. The analysis of texts written by real-life chronic pain sufferers sheds light on the cultural component of metaphors and the conceptual strategies used in the symbolic construction of the pain experience.

### **Keywords**

Chronic Pain, Figurative, Language, Art, Body

### **Introduction**

“How does it hurt?” is the most common question in the clinical context, yet the most difficult to answer. Silence interrupted by screams and moans becomes the discourse of the pain sufferer and constant complaints become the main social barrier between them and other subjects. Pain seems to resist language, for there is not a literal correspondence between word and bodily feeling. This linguistic conflict is intensified when acute pain persists beyond the expected time of recovery and becomes chronic pain. Isolated

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from the world and anchored to their aching bodies, sufferers try to find alternative verbal and non-verbal strategies to express their pain experience and achieve social and medical legitimation. Figurative language (particularly similes, metaphors and analogies) proves to be this alternative. Sufferers disarticulate everyday language by establishing non-literal associations between a purely bodily experience that resists verbal expression and an object, feeling or sensation that exists in their everyday world. In this regard, figurative speech has two functions in the pain experience: a communicative function and a semantic function. On the one hand, figures of speech transform the utterly private, unshared experience of pain into a public one, and on the other, they help understand and give meaning to a chaotic invisible experience by transferring it to the realm of the familiar and concrete. Despite its elusiveness, those suffering with chronic pain reinvent language to escape the world of pain and to *qualify* their pain experience. There is, consequently, a transition from wordlessness to linguistic creativity and this paper analyses this transition. The first section presents a theoretical discussion about the paradoxical relationship between chronic pain and language. Written and visual texts are the main object of study, as they are the most suitable contexts where metaphors, similes and analogies can be spontaneously created and sufferers can freely experiment with language and other forms of expression. Then in the second part of this article, five texts created by real-life chronic pain sufferers as part of the project *Translating Chronic Pain: A Critical and Creative Research Network*, conducted in Lancaster University, are analysed in order to account for the underlying cultural components inscribed in figurative language and the strategies employed to transform the abstractness of pain into a concrete object and shared concept.

### Language and Chronic Pain

Virginia Woolf, in her essay "On Being Ill", poetically described the hardship pain sufferers endure to communicate their agony: "The merest schoolgirl when she falls in love has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry" (1947, 15). Love and positive affect imply linguistic creativity, whereas language proves to be "poor" to capture the subject's "daily drama" (15). Nearly sixty years later, Elaine Scarry reinforced this idea, arguing that pain is "language-destroying": "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to



a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (1985, 4). Pain, according to Scarry, un-makes language, triggering a regression process that transforms speech into its most primitive form: screams and groans, not too different from the expressions of physical pain in the animal kingdom. Although Scarry's conception of pain as a language-destroying force was inspired by Woolf's premise, these two authors describe two opposing views regarding language and pain. On the one hand, Woolf's statement is based on the presupposition that "language is at fault and does not provide enough words for what would otherwise be expressible since pain is inimical to language"; on the other, Scarry refers to how "the experience of pain breaks down the ability to find the right words" (Bending 2000, 88). For Woolf, then, the subject in pain is eager to express their suffering, but the English language is not an adequate system to express private experiences. Scarry, in contrast, argues that pain dispossesses subjects from their ability to use language, i.e., the painful subject cannot utter a word. In both cases, however, subjects experience a personal and social crisis.

Language can reflect the different levels at which physical suffering operates. Cries and groans that express suffering are the result not of pain itself but of nociception, i.e., the sensation of noxious stimuli, an experience that is peripheral to subjectivity. The pre-language of screams and groans is not the language of pain, but the primitive and unconscious reaction of the sensory receptors to a painful stimulus. Nonetheless, restricting the relationship between pain and language to their mutual incompatibility implies the denial of the cultural component of this experience. David Morris, in this respect, claims that there is actually a "culture of pain", since physical suffering, despite its intimate and private nature, is a shared concept and the linguistic poverty encountered by subjects in pain is "a common but not devastating experience", as there are still linguistic expressions like interjections ("ay!" in Spanish or "ow!" in English) that are shared and learnt by members of particular cultural groups (1993, 73). Putting pain into words indicates that the noxious sensation has penetrated consciousness, because speaking about one's pain is an introspective exercise. Subjectivity and language are intrinsic to the pain experience as both a shared and a private experience. Pain, in contrast to nociception, is in fact what differentiates humans from animals.

At this point, the difference between ordinary acute pain and chronic pain should be integrated in this theoretical discussion about the relationship between physical suffering and pain. Acute pain sufferers, in spite of

the linguistic resistance, can put their experience into intelligible words, as Ronald Melzack, Patrick Wall and Warren S. Torgerson proved in the McGill Pain Questionnaire (2005). Although the linguistic expressivity of acute pain sufferers is limited, it succeeds in communicating this private experience to a sufficient extent that a diagnosis can be obtained and a cure sought. Chronic pain, by contrast, resists linguistic expression more radically than acute pain. Morris argues that chronic pain “constitutes a radical assault on language and human communication. There is simply nothing that can be said” (1993, 73). Although the McGill Pain Questionnaire supplies sufferers with clear and unambiguous terms that can be interpreted straightforwardly by physicians, these adjectives are just isolated descriptive words, which are not sufficiently expressive and precise for a chronic pain sufferer. In consultation rooms and other social situations chronic pain sufferers “not only have to express their pain but above all intentionally to *communicate* their pain experience”, specifying “*where* the pain is located, *when* they feel the pain and *how* it feels” (Hydén and Peolsson 2002, 326; emphasis in the original). Anna Gotlib notes that the singularity of chronic pain derives from the impossibility of expressing its world-destroying nature in order to achieve social and medical legitimization:

While acute pain calls us to a linguistic expression of something unwelcome and unexpected—in fact, acute pain is often recognized by others through, among other things, a verbal exclamation by the sufferer—chronic pain is often accompanied by complaints that, over time, begin to sound to others less like an alarm, and more like malingerling, or, tragically, like a flaw in the patient’s character (2013, 41).

Chronic pain cannot be silenced with sedatives and, due to its long-term, cyclical and intermittent nature, the pre-language of screams and groans is no longer suitable to express and communicate suffering. The “natural” pre-linguistic response to pain is thus “*unlearned and relearned*” in chronic pain by incorporating “carefully calibrated understandings about how much crying is permitted, about when and where you can cry, about who can cry and for what reasons” (Morris 1993, 72; emphasis in the original). Scarry herself noted that “to be present when a person moves up out of that pre-language and projects the facts of sentience into speech is almost to have been permitted to be present at the birth of language itself” (1985, 6). Sufferers’ efforts to transform pain into speech show that, even though ordinary or literal language is not a perfect system of expression of purely bodily events, humans have the “capacity for word-making” (6). Thus, in contrast to acute pain suf-

ferers, subjects with chronic pain try to “articulate” their pain experience in a narrative, because “chronic pain does not seem to fracture language and can certainly generate it” (Stoddard Holmes and Chambers 2005, 132).

As Jean Jackson argues, the linguistic problem of pain is rooted in the Cartesian culture, which depicts language as belonging to mind, and pre-language as belonging to the body: “actual pain will resist verbal description because we see it to be of the body and therefore pre-linguistic—like such other sensations as odors, music, or inner states such as hunger or sexual arousal” (Jackson 1994, 213). In addition, Jackson emphasises that some chronic pain sufferers feel betrayed by language since it has become “the handmaiden of the medical establishment” (2000, 165), as happens with the McGill Pain Questionnaire, which appropriates the sufferer’s voice. Pain sufferers, therefore, have a paradoxical relationship with language and wordlessness. Despite the failure to verbally represent the embodied experience of pain and the inherent semantic and communication problems this carries, sufferers do not reject language, as they resort to it to “escape that experience, that world” (Jackson 2000, 167). Language can connect the subjective and public spheres and allows sufferers to express and describe pain in order to achieve legitimization.

### **The Poetics of Pain**

Pain triggers the destruction of language, but it also fuels linguistic creativity. Although pain resists entering the symbolic realm (Kleinman *et al.* 1994, 7–8), figurative language can bridge the linguistic and conceptual voids in the sufferer’s vocabulary and cognition. As Lucy Bending claims, “[w]ords alone cannot come close to a literal description of such pain, and the only language available to the writer is that of analogy” (2000, 107). In this sense, language is only suitable and “eloquent” when pain can be metaphorised (Jackson 2000, 163). According to Mani Jackson, because there is not a proper “language of pain”, sufferers “must recruit metaphors or similes: knifelike, killing, burning” to describe their pain experience (2003, 2). Figurative speech is thus the result of the disarticulation of language and meanings to express non-everyday experiences, like chronic pain. Pain is undoubtedly language-destroying, but not in the sense put forward by Scarry, rather it forces sufferers to un-make and re-make language in creative and even poetic ways.

The sufferer needs to step out of literal language and establish a referential connection between the meaning of their pain and the surrounding world. In this respect, pain sufferers need to transform their experience and

even distort it in order to be able to share it with other subjects. Rhetorical figures of speech are linguistic “crutches”, as Joanna Bourke calls them (2013, 55). They are essential not only to describe pain, but also to shape one’s perception, identity and experience, “going beyond the original association by evoking a host of multiple meanings” (Lupton 2012, 57). Scarry herself notes that pain sufferers generate their pain discourse necessarily as an “as if” construction (“it feels as if...”, “it is as though...”) (1985, 15). The experience of pain cannot be defined without establishing this “as if” relationship between the sufferer’s introspective states and the external world and, although this relationship is only partial and may not express the “real” experience of pain, figurative language provides a suitable approximation and reveals not only the somatic dimension of the experience, but also its emotional, social and affective components. In order to illustrate the relationship between figurative language and pain, it is necessary to examine the linguistic resources and strategies used by chronic pain sufferers. Although several authors and researchers have already dealt with the use of metaphoric language by chronic and acute pain sufferers from a clinical and literary perspective, there are very few studies about the generation of figures of speech to express pain by non-professional writers and artists in non-clinical and informal contexts. In this regard, this paper explores three aspects of the use of non-literal language: (1) the value of artistic expression for chronically ill subjects; (2) the nature of the conceptual associations used to qualify and define the particular type of pain the sufferer is experiencing; and (3) the cultural and historical influence in the creation of associations and comparisons.

The main source for this analysis is the anthology of poems and artistic works collected in the project *Translating Chronic Pain: A Critical and Creative Research Network* conducted by Sara Patricia Wasson at Lancaster University (2018).<sup>1</sup> Its main objective was to conceive artistic expression as an alternative language with which to share the chronic pain experience, since traditional narrative and linguistic approaches seem to pose obstacles

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<sup>1</sup> *Translating Chronic Pain: A Critical and Creative Research Network* was a project carried out during 2018 that encouraged chronic pain patients to submit short-form creative work. The conditions of submission are explained in the “Creative Manifesto” formulated by Wasson, who called for creative work on the invisibility of pain, social delegitimation, isolation, linguistic inexpressibility or any other dimension of life with chronic pain. One of the results of this project was an *Anthology of Moments* publicly available online and usable for pain charities, medical trainers and the general public. For more on the project and online anthology, see [wp.lancs.ac.uk/translatingpain](http://wp.lancs.ac.uk/translatingpain).

in the communication and legitimation of the illness experience. What makes this project different from others is that the participants' linguistic production in episodic, fragmented or "flash" creative writing was not collected solely for clinical purposes, but to bring visibility to a frequently misdiagnosed and socially silenced condition. The texts selected for this paper were created by amateur writers and artists who are experiencing or have experienced chronic pain. The volunteers captured *moments* of their pain experience. Although the poems and works collected have to be understood as part of a larger self-narrative, they contextualise themselves as moments of suffering. In other words, the poems are a sort of pause in the self-narrative of sufferers, in which they reflect on one specific aspect of their experience, rather than create a lineal narrative to simply recount the story of their pain. This reflection transforms the lived chaos of the pain experience into intelligible verbal and visual texts. In addition, the verbalisation and illustration of these experiences is not oriented solely to explain how the writers' bodies hurt. The primary goal of any type of expression of the pain experience is seeking the acknowledgment of suffering by readers who probably will never experience that type of pain. Sufferers seek to be heard. However, in order to be heard and share their experience, they have to resort to different linguistic and creative strategies to transform an intangible and private phenomenon into a shared concept. In this respect, one of the linguistic conflicts most participants try to solve by turning to figurative language is the objectless nature of pain. As Scarry noted, pain lacks referential content in the outside world: "It is not *of* or *for* anything" (1985, 5; emphasis in the original). D. M. Armstrong—who mistakenly defined physical suffering as a sensation rather than an experience—had already argued that language points out the lack of referentiality of pain, which he categorised as an "intransitive" bodily event (1962, 1–3). This linguistic and experiential intransitivity is compensated for with the use of metaphors, comparisons and analogies which allow sufferers to transform the abstract nature of pain into something concrete, linked to the external and tangible world.

The most common type of associations made by sufferers is connected to the semantic field of war and military violence. From a historical perspective, Bourke analyses the evolution of metaphors in Western cultures and accounts for the "shifts in the way people *sensed* their world and *made sense* of it" (2013, 60; emphasis in the original). Warlike and military expressions were a rich resource for sufferers, especially when pain was conceived as an enemy or invader, reflecting the "increased militarization of British and American societies" in the twentieth century (74–75). Indeed, the term

“painkiller”, used to refer to pain relieving products, is the result of the militarisation of the figurative language of pain (75). These examples show the active role of the sufferer in “defeating” their enemy, especially in an era when treatments for chronic and acute pain were still rudimentary. Metaphors that involve an agent, therefore, frequently imply violence. These types of allegories have survived and become part of the contemporary culture of pain, as Sophie Powell expresses in her prose poem “An Everyday Battle” (2018). This chronic pain sufferer depicts the pain experience using violent images: “It’s a searing pain, stabs straight through the joint like a missile and there’s a battle taking place in there. [...] Good little soldier, that knee. [...] We walk on, the debris of dead bone—dead men—in that ordinary-looking joint waging war silently beneath my skin”. The martial metaphor used by the author pictures pain as an enemy that invades and attacks her body, which tries to resist but cannot counter-attack. By imagining a battle, Powell departs from other common metaphors that envision the body in pain as the actual enemy of the sufferer, i.e., as the producer of pain. In her poem, the embodied sufferer is a passive observer/sufferer of the battle that is taking place inside her.

In pain descriptions, sufferers often resort to external objects to describe pain and more particularly to a weapon, especially when physical suffering does not have a tangible or objective cause, as Scarry observed (e.g. “It feels as though a hammer is coming down on my spine”) (1985, 15). In the case of the poem cited above, the objects that cause pain are missiles launched at the sufferer’s knee. However, it is important to note that the image of the missiles only reflects the damage caused by pain, rather than the metaphorical weapon that provokes it, proving that some associations are more symbolic than others. Garry Coulthard’s poem “Occam’s Hammer” (2018) illustrates this point. Coulthard uses two weapons to describe pain in universal terms: a razor and a hammer. He tries to explain the problem of legitimization undergone by pain victims: “‘Of an event occurring, it is most likely that the simplest one is the correct one’ / ‘Of an inevitability occurring, the one that hurts the most is the correct one’”. Despite being scientifically inaccurate, Occam’s razor principle, which is the philosophical theorem that states that the simplest answer is necessarily the correct one, is often used covertly in the clinical context to diagnose chronic pain patients, providing an incorrect or superficial solution, since it is not always the case that the simplest answer explains the cause of pain. Occam’s hammer, on the other hand, reflects the sufferer’s subjective certainty, i.e., the sufferer is certain that he is in pain, despite the lack of tangible cause. The hammer is materi-

alised and transformed into the symbolic weapon that provokes pain: "When Occam's hammer falls, / it's not a matter of when or where it lands, / it's simply a matter of how hard it hits, / and if this time you choose to scream". Coulthard deals brilliantly with the problems of communication and the separation between the private world of the sufferer and the external world, where the social and medical discourses often delegitimise chronic pain.

Bourke also notes that other violent metaphors use imagery of objects related to the modern world, more specifically to engineering (especially machines like railways or cars) and electricity (as in the use of the term "lightening" to refer to a sudden pain) (2013, 78–79). This kind of figure of speech related to objects created by human beings has flourished and become an integral part of the language used to describe pain, replacing the tradition of pre-industrial figurative language that "drew on nature and rural life" (80–83). Doug Sharp in "Central Pain Syndrome: Naming the Beast" (2018) combines these two realms, alternating images of fauna and man-made objects:

rats gnaw at the base of psyche,  
lick rusty razor blade,  
electric flame slice belly,  
fiery metal spears dangle from gut,  
The great beast paws idly at my entrails,  
sparkling shark teeth chew slowly up leg,  
thrust scorching metal skewers slowly down meat of thighs,  
pack burning steel wool into hollow shrieking calves,  
porcupine worms writhe inside veins forever chewing out of meat and skin,  
skate barefoot across field of burning blades,  
walk face first into blazing buzz saw,  
again,  
again,  
again,  
I can feel the flames  
but I can't see the light.

Sharp here pictures abject and monstrous creatures consuming and invading his body. Small animals (rats and porcupine worms) are harming both his body and mind, but there is a more ferocious intruder: a beast. This monster embodies his illness, Central Pain Syndrome, and represents the importance of naming for chronic pain patients. There are two forms of objectification of pain in this poem. On the one hand, naming can be defined

as a strategy to objectify pain. In being referred to as Central Pain Syndrome, pain is materialised with a diagnostic label and is no longer an invisible condition. On the other hand, by being described as a beast, pain is symbolically objectified to help the sufferer share this private experience and explain his daily bodily horror.

It is interesting to note that Sharp describes the viciousness of the monster's attack picturing sharp metallic objects tearing his flesh to shreds. Like Bourke, Morris also contended that the contraposition between the natural and mechanical reflects the influence of culture in the reinvention of the pain experience in urban societies. Historically speaking, there has been a cultural evolution of metaphors as technology started invading everyday life:

Pain [in rural areas] is described primarily through sounds from the natural world of birds and animals, while headache sufferers in the industrial world typically describe their pain through images of jackhammers and chain saws. The difference is not merely in description but in experience. A jackhammer headache no longer inhabits the natural world but belongs to an urbanized realm where people feel increasingly powerless, stressed out, and under assault-feelings that play back into the experience of pain (Morris 2000, 123).

The image of tissue damage provoked by metallic objects, rather than by animal attacks, pervaded the collective imagination in post-industrial societies and became the core metaphor in modern western cultures of pain. Electricity, razors, spears, skewers, blades and saws reflect how modern urban lifestyle has shaped the conception of pain. In addition, those fictional wounds that accompany the pain in the sufferer's body are another type of metaphor noted by Scarry (1985, 15). The imagined tissue damage is also a strategy to objectify pain, since it transforms a private and abstract experience into a concrete visual description of how the sufferer feels his/her pain. As regards the sensuous symbolism, the ideas of fire and burning are recurrent in the poem, a sensation that characterises Central Pain Syndrome.

The negativity of the experience is another key element in Sharp's work. From a political point of view, metaphors are never neutral. The McGill Pain Questionnaire proves this point. Commonly used metaphors were collected in this questionnaire in order to create a corpus of pain descriptors which includes terms that "evoke a malevolent animate agent whose actions may cause physical damage (punishing, cruel, vicious, torturing, gnawing, killing)" (Semino 2010, 210). Susan Sontag, in her seminal work *Illness as Metaphor*, points out the impact of metaphors in shaping the illness experience, especially when these analogies carry negative connotations: "it is



hardly possible to take up one's residence in the kingdom of the ill unprejudiced by the lurid metaphors with which it has been landscaped" (1978, 3–4). Bourke also notes that the negative representation of pain is related to the decline of religious metaphors, which described pain as "an end, a journey, or a test" or a "punishment, intended to teach people valuable lessons" (2014, 83). Sharp tries to reflect the negativity of the pain experience in the imagined fauna. The monstrosity of the beast mirrors the monstrosity of the sufferer's pain experience and the abject animals evoked reflect the social stigmatisation of chronic pain. The poem concludes with the idea of darkness and the seclusion experienced by the sufferer, who is trapped in his own body with the beast of pain.

The idea of isolation is also illustrated by another chronic pain sufferer, Wayne Roberts, in the poem "Nobody" (2018). The author contrasts the silence of solitude and the never-ending bodily noise provoked by pain. Roberts objectifies his pain as an external entity he refers to as "you": "Except you, / You're never silent, / The voice that never stops, / The endless alarm that disturbs my slumber, / You rattle round my brain in whispers and shouts until I scream". The symbol of the alarm, which reinforces the dualism between mind and body, has been recurrent in the cultural history of pain. Physical suffering has been traditionally conceived as a sign and survival mechanism that informs the subject about localised tissue damage or disease. Chronic pain, however, due to its deviation from "normal" acute pain is seen as a broken or defective alarm, for it does not necessarily point to any physical injury. Thus, unlike acute pain, chronic pain is biologically meaningless. Trapped in the prison of his body, the author tries to break the silence and express his suffering, but he encounters several obstacles: "Outside of this cell walls have ears who swallow my words, / And even photographs in frames refuse to listen, / Because I have no voice". The alarm of chronic pain absorbs the sufferer's voice in two senses. On the one hand, as has been argued in the first part of this essay, the relationship between language and pain is rather problematic. The sufferer cannot find the words to describe his/her pain and can only express suffering with pre-linguistic expressions. On the other, pain cancels the sufferer's voice at a social level, especially in cultures where the abuse of screams and groans is not acceptable, leading to the social, and even clinical, delegitimation of the pain experience. As Morris also metaphorised, chronic pain "seems to build up walls of separation", placing sufferers in "utterly different worlds of feeling" and surrounding "them with silence" (1993, 73).

Other participants in *Translating Chronic Pain* decided to discard verbal language and experiment with visual arts. As photographic artist Deborah Padfield reveals in her work with chronic pain patients, visual metaphors can help sufferers describe pain subjectively in clinical contexts. Black-background pictures display objects like stripped wires with a stream of sparks, a red-hot, twisted iron bar or a knife stuck into a “bleeding” strawberry (Padfield *et al.* 2015, 124). These examples show that the painful experience can be transformed into “an expressive feature, re-linking our bodies to the world” (Inahara 2012, 193). Padfield’s visual and metaphorical representations of chronic pain prove that her pictures can express “more directly than any verbal description the sensations experienced by sufferers” and the autobiographical captions included in her collection of photographs “disambiguate the images and additionally supply narrative accounts of the changing, cyclical nature of the pain” (Deignan *et al.* 2013, 291). One outstanding example of the use of graphic pain metaphors in the *Translating Chronic Pain* project is Paula Knight’s visual work “Wings” (2018), an illustration apparently taken from the author’s diary.

Under the heading “Bedridden since Tues — 4 days. Drawn in bed” there is a minimalist drawing of a winged woman in a prone position. Below, there is another drawing of the same woman, without her wings and bleeding, and the caption “It feels as if my wings have been torn off”. The bright-red colour dominates the sketch, as the blood drips leave traces that reach a real black feather attached to the paper sheet with tape. In an explanatory note, the author—a patient of myalgic encephalomyelitis (also known as chronic fatigue syndrome) and fibromyalgia—explains that her drawing represents the location of her pain and its rawness, and the use of symbolic violence reflects its intensity:

The image also embodies my sense of feeling trapped as a result of my disability, and of having my potential and freedom thwarted. I had the feather to hand because my husband brings me items from outside: The use of a found object is symbolic of my being housebound and detached from the natural world. It also represents a disconnect from the life I’d rather be leading if I were well enough. The image is visceral and disturbing, and it reflects the distressing and very physical symptoms I can experience.

Blood objectifies pain and symbolically links private suffering to the real external world represented by the feather. This artwork shows that visual language is more flexible than verbal language, as it allows sufferers to trespass the boundaries of conventional language and explore a new terrain full

of images and objects that can capture the chronic pain experience in all its dimensions. Visual metaphors, therefore, seem to be more powerful than linguistic metaphors, since patients seem to break down pre-existing conceptions of physical pain and create new ones, which are more suggestive for the reader or viewer. Nonetheless, this also implies that those images will be more difficult to understand when they are not complemented with a verbal text, as in the case of Knight's work.

## **Conclusions**

The literary analysis of the artistic representations of chronic pain selected for this essay reveals the strategies used by sufferers in the figurative construction of their experience. Pain is both word- and world-destroying. Metaphors, similes and analogies create new meanings and reconstruct what is destroyed by pain, that is, they are world-(re)making (Biro 2011, 68). Symbolic language helps sufferers create new worlds with new associations. It is important to note, however, that the associations between the experience of pain and the imagined object are only partial, since sufferers are not actually burning, consumed nor being torn. Metaphors seem to refer only to the spatio-temporal and subjective properties of the pain experienced (Bourke 2013, 57). Figures of speech, therefore, help reinforce or emphasise one aspect or moment of the pain experience, as seen in the poems analysed. Some authors focused on their isolation and solitude, others on the impossibility of escaping their bodies or sharing their experience. Figurative language, in this sense, has two main functions. Its allegorical function helps sufferers overcome the obstacles of literal language to describe pure bodily feelings. Non-literal language also has a therapeutic function, as it prevents medical discourse from absorbing the sufferers' voices and allows them to take an active role in the creative process of linguistic and conceptual construction. Although linguistic creativity is culturally bounded, since many of the figures of speech and images analysed have been inherited from the Western culture of pain, the authors of the works selected have appropriated those associations in order to qualify the particular and unique type of pain they were experiencing at the moment of writing and to express their own existential horror. These metaphors do not only help pain victims share and communicate their experiences; they also transform the way pain itself is experienced. Sufferers, despite pain, helplessness and despair, have power, the power to move from wordlessness to linguistic creativity.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Dr. Sara Patricia Wasson from Lancaster University for allowing me to use the anthology of poems from her project *Translating Chronic Pain: A Critical and Creative Research Network*.

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**Dilek Menteşe Kıryaman\***

## **Torture and Objectification of Pain in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South***

### **Abstract**

Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855) portrays the "Condition-of-England-Question". As an industrial novel, *North and South* demonstrates the problems in Victorian society caused by industrialism, and offers solutions, in order to educate the middle-class reader about the conditions of the poor. As such, the novel employs characters who represent their social classes. Bessy Higgins, for example, can be considered as a spokesperson for the working class, and her status is illustrated by her pain and suffering body, the result of the disease she has developed while working in unhealthy conditions in the factory owned by Hamper. Within this framework, her illness becomes the signifier of industrialism. Her pain and bodily suffering might be regarded as "torture" since she had no other option than to work in terrible conditions. Even though torture is marked by corporeal or psychological suffering, I am also considering it metaphorically to understand Bessy's status. In other words, she is not tortured directly and literally with the aim of torment, still, she is in pain and becomes a manifestation of it. Thus the torturer becomes the factory owner, who stands for the capitalist system, and the tortured is Bessy, whose objectified pain is denied as pain, thereby revealing the power of the torturer. As a result of this objectification, while Bessy's tortured body becomes more apparent, her "self" becomes more and more absent. In this respect, the aim of this paper is to analyse the pain of the working-class characters, especially Bessy, in *North and South* to explore their objectification through the "torture" that becomes a symbol of the power of the industrial system, and highlights the disruption of their "selves".

### **Keywords**

Working Class, Industrial Novel, Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, Torture

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Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, which was published from September 1854 to January 1855 in *Household Words*, narrates the effects of industrialisation by portraying the conflict between the working-class and middle-class factory owners. That *North and South* is an industrial novel<sup>1</sup> foregrounds its didactic characteristics and Gaskell's objective of representing the problems of industrialism. Kathleen Tillotson argues that industrial novels "were intended to open people's eyes to certain evils of the time. The ignorance they enlightened was indeed widespread in the novel-reading public" (1965, 78). It is true that the industrial novel has a specific aim, to educate the middle class about social and economic problems, since the gap between the working class and middle class had grown wider in nineteenth century Britain. Such novels drew much attention for they were perceived as "records" of real industrial events and "novelists found an audience interested in learning more about the plight of the working classes, and the novel became a method of teaching the middle and upper classes about the 'real' condition of England" (Simmons 2002, 336). In industrial novels like *North and South*, problematic industrial issues are fictionalised under the main theme of the "Condition-of-England Question", an expression coined by Thomas Carlyle.<sup>2</sup> The representation of social, economic, and political problems is not, however, the only objective of these novels. By portraying such problems, they also provide solutions. Josephine M. Guy indicates that the industrial novel "shows us a group of writers using the resources of literary representation in order to try to resolve some large-scale problems in their society" (2001, 11).

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<sup>1</sup> Industrial novels deal directly with social and political issues by focusing on social class, labour relations, social unrest, and the gap between rich and poor. As Josephine M. Guy states in *The Victorian Social-Problem Novel*, the social and economic problems of Victorian society is the subject matter problematised in these novels: "The terms 'social-problem' or 'industrial' novel are generally used to refer to a body of English fiction written in the late 1840s and 1850s which allegedly takes as its subject-matter large-scale problems in contemporary British society, problems which in turn were the product of changing demographic patterns and changes in work practices associated with the accelerating industrialization of the British economy" (1996, 3).

<sup>2</sup> In *Chartism*, within the concept of the "Condition-of-England Question", Carlyle describes the conditions of the poor and their problematic relationship with the middle class, both of which are the result of industrialisation. In this sense he criticises certain economic theories. Carlyle explains that "utilitarianism" and "laissez-faire" are the causes of the "Condition-of-England", and adds that money had become "the sole nexus between man and man" (1885, 52). Thus, according to Carlyle, the condition of the working class is the result of the capitalist economy.



In *North and South* Gaskell dramatises the lack of communication and tensions between workers and factory owners, as well as the former's poor working conditions. One of the critical issues employed in the novel is the "factory question", which refers to the discussions about the working conditions in factories which were common in the nineteenth century. It is significant that industrial novels emphasise the representation of certain social classes rather than character development since "the primary function of these scenes is [...] to exhibit the constancy and universality of human nature, for it is only from such a redescribed human nature (and not from individual difference) that a new form of social life will be possible" (Guy 2001, 121). Gaskell's principal purpose in her novels was to "defamiliarize otherness through stressing that sameness of human suffering and emotions was the most important factor in harmonizing class relations" (qtd. in Foster 2002, 37). Thus, as an industrial novel, *North and South* illustrates characters that reflect their social class, like Higgins and his daughter Bessy, who are the principal working-class characters, and Mr. Thornton, who stands for the middle class. Gaskell's work also elucidates the conflict between the industrial North represented by mill owners and workers, and the pastoral South represented by the protagonist, Margaret Hale.<sup>3</sup>

Much research has been done on the main characters and events such as the conflict between Higgins and Mr. Thornton, and the relationship between Margaret Hale and Mr. Thornton. Dorice Williams Elliott, for instance, emphasises Margaret's role as a mediator by stating that Gaskell employs the marriage metaphor<sup>4</sup> as a solution to these conflicts. Elliott points out the

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Hale and her family move from Helstone, a southern village, to the industrial town of Milton due to a change in her father's work status. Whereas Helstone represents the nostalgic and pastoral South, Milton stands for the industrial North. The contrast between Helstone and Milton provides the basis for the criticism of industrialisation and urbanisation in the novel.

<sup>4</sup> *North and South* revolves around the relationship between Margaret Hale, the main character, and Mr. Thornton, a factory owner. The conflict between these two characters reflects the clash between the industrial North and the old aristocratic South. Furthermore, their disagreements about the working conditions in the factory reveal the oppression of the working class. The reason for this is that both Margaret and the lower class are oppressed by the patriarchal and capitalist society. While Margaret, as a woman and a southerner, is excluded from this patriarchal society, the lower class is economically and socially oppressed. As Margaret Hale acts as a mediator between Thornton and the workers, her possible marriage with Thornton implies the reconciliation between the workers and factory owners, and the unity between the "new" North and the "old" South.

connection between the workers and female characters by suggesting that “like women, the working classes were represented as unruly, ignorant [...] and sexual” (1994, 45). Also, Kate Flint exposes Margaret Hale’s critical role, asserting that she is the “notably active heroine” given that the reconciliation of the workers and Mr. Thornton is the result of her actions (1995, 40). Flint adds that the novel exhibits a kind of “social maternalism” as Margaret steps outside the domestic sphere and takes actions in the public sphere of patriarchy (1995, 42). Similarly, Patricia Ingham specifies Margaret’s power stating that “by stepping out of her class to defend the workers and then Thornton, she has stepped out of her gender” (2003, 67). Apart from discussions of Margaret Hale’s role as a mediator, the significance of her and Mr. Thornton’s relationship is also addressed by certain critics such as Catherine Gallagher and Eleanor Reeds. Gallagher analyses the family-society relationship to claim that the novel connects public and private spheres metonymically by focusing on Margaret Hale and Mr. Thornton’s personal relationship and its social implications (1985, 168). In addition, she compares Margaret and Thornton’s relationship to that of the industrial north and aristocratic south, and argues that their marriage reveals the new unity of the north and south (1985, 177). Reeds, on the other hand, underlines Margaret’s investment of capital in Thornton’s business<sup>5</sup> in order to manifest Gaskell’s social critique (2004, 55). Even though the main characters have a significant function in terms of the representation of the “Condition-of-England Question”, it is possible to further improve the discussion of industrialism through one of the minor characters, Bessy Higgins, whose position in the novel has not to date been much discussed in relation to industrialism, pain, and torture.

Based on the notions of pain and torture, this study analyses Bessy’s physical pain and discusses the notion that her pain is the signifier of industrialism. It is significant to note that although torture is defined as an act of physical torment with the aim of forcing the tortured person to act in a certain way or to give specific information, this study employs the term “torture” metaphorically to analyse the suffering of Bessy and the working-class characters in Gaskell’s novel. In this sense, it is not my intention to generalise about the concept of torture by applying it to the working class but rather to read the term as a means of analysing power relations between the Victorian factory owners and the lower-class characters in the novel. Despite the fact

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<sup>5</sup> Towards the end of the novel Mr. Thornton is on the edge of bankruptcy as a result of the strike of the factory workers. Margaret invests in Thornton’s business in order to save him from bankruptcy.

that she is a minor character, Bessy's pain, which is described in such dramatic terms, haunts the novel. As Patricia Johnson states, in industrial novels "there is a struggle to come to terms with her [the factory girl], to write her out of the novel or to rewrite her, but her story remains a stubborn shadow that haunts and disrupts their resolutions" (2001, 35). Bessy's pain haunts the novel, for it represents the huge gap between the conditions of the workers and the middle class. Athena Vrettos argues that stories of illness told by Victorians represent cultural patterns and thoughts in the period since they "served to inscribe cultural values on the most basic physiological level. They addressed the human need to transform the abstract into concrete" (1995, 4). This essay also pins down how Bessy's abstract pain is transformed into a concrete aspect as a result of the narration of her suffering. As Javier Moscoso asserts, "pain mobilizes all the elements of theatrical representation. The experience of harm has its actors, plot, stage, costumes, props, scenography, and, of course, its audience" (qtd. in Ablow 2017, 21). In this sense, the middle class characters and readers become the audience of Bessy's pain.

Although Bessy's condition can be described more as suffering rather than an instant physical pain, it can be claimed that suffering is also a part of torture. Paul Kenny remarks that while it cannot be argued that each suffering person is tortured, suffering can be regarded as an outcome or element of torture, and he also adds that suffering means the experience of something unpleasant; thus, it may be caused by either physical or by psychological aspects (2010, 148-150). Bessy's suffering is the symbol of industrialism as it is principally the result of her working conditions in the factory. At the same time, it can be read that the mill owners such as Mr. Thornton and Hamper, the owner of the factory where Bessy has worked, are the torturers who inflict pain on workers such as Bessy. Within this framework, Bessy's pain will be discussed with regards to the elements of torture in order to argue that her "self" becomes disrupted because her pain becomes objectified and, consequently, symbolises the industrial system.

Prior to the analysis of Bessy's pain in relation to the concept of torture, it is critical to explain the notion of pain. The British Pain Society defines pain very radically: "Pain is what the person feeling it says it is" (qtd. in Norridge 2011, 209). Zoë Norridge highlights that this description "foregrounds both the alterity and subjectivity of the person who suffers and asserts his or her right to self-representation" (2011, 209). Regarding the representation of pain, Elaine Scarry articulates that the most important factor of physical pain is that it is "unsharable" since the person who is told about the pain has

no “certainty” of the pain as it is endured by the teller experiencing the pain (1985, 4). Susannah Mintz criticises Scarry’s notion that pain cannot be described through language, claiming that it *can*, however, be expressed (2013, 4). Mintz states that rather than the exact naming of pain or the “language-destroying” aspect Scarry discusses, a deeper relationship between pain and language should be highlighted. In this sense, Mintz refers to Arthur W. Frank’s thoughts that literature about pain or illness can be considered as a counter-discourse which challenges the authority of medicine. The reason for this is that as a result of the narration of pain the individual becomes the narrator of their own pain rather than an object in a medical pain-chart (2013, 5). Thus Mintz elucidates the critical function of patient stories of pain with the aim of exposing the idea that pain can be defined.

As to the pain-language relationship, Ann Jurecic asks: “[W]hy, if there is a significant body of writing about pain, have critics been so convinced that it is beyond language?” (2012, 43-44). For Jurecic, the first reason behind the idea that the expression of pain is impossible is that it is subjective and one cannot know the inner life of another person, and the second, which has affected the perception of physical suffering among the critical community, is Scarry’s theory that pain is unspeakable (Jurecic 2012, 44). Jurecic, though, differentiates between “naming” and “narrating” pain by referring to research with pain patients and while critics such as Scarry try to “name” pain, Jurecic highlights the narration of pain by emphasising the “narrative of a life in pain” (Jurecic 2012, 53). Considering the link between pain and language, Veena Das discusses how the world is first unmade by pain and then remade by focusing on how definitions of pain move from the body into language. She states that when someone says “I am in pain”, this does not mean that the person is understood but rather that the pain is acknowledged: “Pain, in this rendering, is not that inexpressible something that destroys communication or marks an exit from one’s existence in language. Instead, it makes a claim asking for acknowledgment” (1996, 70). According to Das, this acknowledgement can be represented in literature since “some realities need to be fictionalized before they can be apprehended” (1996, 69). Briefly, while Scarry claims that pain can only be partially expressed through language; Mintz, Jurecic, and Das contend it *can* be displayed by means of language.

As for the definition of torture, there are many discussions which try to clarify the concept. According to Scarry, the difference between pain as a result of torture and pain as a result of other incidents, such as old age or attempts to improve health, is that torture is a repeated act, it is not the will

of the tortured person and it has no benign aim (1985, 34). Scarry implies that torture is not perceived as a whole act but as a deed which should be analysed step by step and categorises torture into three phases. First, pain is inflicted, which means that pain is imposed on the body of the person. Then, it is objectified through the destruction of language, which makes it visible to the audience. Finally, objectified pain is rejected as pain and read as the power of the torturer (Scarry 1985, 50). Richardson argues that Scarry's description of torture and pain is limited. He emphasises the fluid relationship between language and pain by challenging Scarry's idea that pain caused by torture is inexpressible and isolating. Despite Scarry's perception of the incommunicable aspect of torture as a tragic effect, Richardson asserts that the indefinable nature of pain reflects the unsteady relationship between language and pain (2016, 54). Moreover, he renders that the pain experienced by victims is not always world-destroying and isolating, as it is "relational" in certain situations. Torture generates a connection to other bodies since "pain can call us to attend to our bodies, to their surfaces and contact zones with others. Pain is thus relational, contingent on the other and upon the world in which it occurs" (Richardson 2016, 55).

In an attempt to define torture, Paul Kenny focuses on three other elements of torture: the features of the torturer, the purpose of torture, and its instrumentality. In relation to the identity of the torturer, despite the much accepted belief that torture is only carried out by agents of the state, Kenny suggests that certain non-state organisations such as the Irish Republican Army also engaged in punishments that can be defined as torture (2010, 136–138). Therefore, it can be argued that he objects to Darius Rejali's description, which refers to the physical and institutional aspects of torture: "the systematic infliction of physical torment on detained individuals by state officials for police purposes, for confession, information, or intimidation" (2009, 35). Kenny goes on to state that identifying torture through considering only the aim of the action leads to certain difficulties. Kenny denounces critics who suggest that torture's aim is only to make the subject confess, stating that "if torture was limited to this purpose alone, it would exclude cases in which pain was inflicted in order to deter undesired behavior, to extort money or services, or to obtain a subject's conversion" (2010, 139). He concludes that while, clearly, the purpose of torture should be included in its definition, it should not be the main or only focus of the description of the term (Kenny 2010, 140). In order to explain the significance of the final element of torture, its "instrumentality", he asserts that the infliction of pain is not the goal of torture; on the contrary, pain is used as a means to

achieve a certain end (Kenny 2010, 142). Control over one's body is another issue that Kenny feels should be discussed in relation to torture. When a victim is unable to fight back, and does not have the freedom to leave or to shield themselves, this can be categorised as torture. Indeed, he considers that this feature is what separates torture from domestic and other kinds of violence (Kenny 2010, 153). After a detailed discussion of how to define torture, Kenny comes to the conclusion that "torture is the systematic and deliberate infliction of severe pain or suffering on a person over whom the actor has physical control, in order to induce a behavioural response from that person" (2010, 154).

Following Kenny, Bessy's working conditions and the industrial system per se can be interpreted as the "actor" or torturer that is behind her pain and suffering. Bessy herself acknowledges that she suffers, saying that she was born to "sicken i' this dree place, wi' them mill-noises in my ears for ever, until I could scream out for them to stop, and let me have a little piece o' quiet—and wi' the fluff filling my lungs, until I thirst to death for one long deep breath o' the clear air [...]" (Gaskell 1994, 118). From the beginning of the novel she is described as extremely ill, weak, and dying from the tuberculosis, or "consumption", she has developed as a result of working (Gaskell 1994, 186). Although Bessy's illness is referred to as "consumption" in the novel, critics such as Louise Penner identify her disease as "brown ling" (Penner 2013, 223). Brown lung disease or byssinosis is defined as "an occupational respiratory disease associated with inhalation of cotton, flax, or hemp dust and characterised initially by chest tightness, shortness of breath, and cough and eventually by irreversible lung disease" (*Merriam-Webster*). Mary Lee Gosney explains that even though brown lung disease was first documented in 1700, it was only in the nineteenth century that the disease was understood to be respiratory in nature and a result of working in cotton mills (1979, 104). Gosney goes on to explain that it was very difficult to diagnose brown lung disease, even into the mid-twentieth century; "[T]hirty years ago, it was thought that brown lung was actually a form of asthma [...]" Byssinosis has also been strongly linked to chronic bronchitis and emphysema" (Gosney 1979, 105). Significantly, in relation to Bessy's "diagnosis" in the novel, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* states that the term byssinosis was first used in 1881. Thus, although brown lung disease was documented before the publication of *North and South*, it is clear that it was confused with other lung diseases such as tuberculosis, which was also not fully understood at the time. This allows the conclusion that Bessy's symptoms and working conditions suggest she in fact has brown lung disease, even though it is not clearly identified.

Bessy's illness symbolises the harsh industrial system and the exploitation of the working class. In this sense, Byrne asserts that "tuberculosis functions as a signifier for capitalism in *North and South*" (Byrne 2011, 63). As Athena Vrettos suggests, "in the process of exploring this instability [the potential instability of human identity] through medical and literary narratives, Victorian culture confronted the otherness of disease and its capacity to reconfigure conceptions of the self" (1995, 4). As a result of her illness, Bessy's character is positioned outside the boundaries of both the working-class environment and the public sphere; consequently Bessy becomes an observer of industrial life rather than a partaker. Though Bessy's pain diminishes her status as she becomes a passive person, she constructs a realistic portrayal of the condition of the workers for the middle-class reader through the reflection of her pain. As Norridge argues, "literary texts are uniquely placed to represent pain because they excel in the creation of new systems of meaning—vocabularies, grammars and image libraries of emotion—which render intelligible multifaceted and deeply personal beliefs and sensations" (2011, 221). In this vein, Bessy's attempt to narrate both her own pain and the suffering of the working class as having parallels can be considered (an element of) Gaskell's method of demonstrating the miseries of industrialism.

The paradox of the inability to tell and demonstrate one's physical pain discussed earlier here can be traced in Bessy's pain. To explain this paradox, it is crucial to go back to the relationship between language and pain one more time. For Scarry, what characterises pain is that it has no referential object attached to it, so it cannot be expressed through language (1985, 162). In order to express pain or to "share" it with the outsiders, it needs to be connected or related to an object since only then can it be perceived in the outer world (1985, 15–16). Bessy explains her indescribable pain by attaching it to certain objects that signify industrialism. She describes the fatigue caused by her illness by stating that "I used to think once that if I could have a day of doing nothing, to rest me [...] But now I've had many days o' idleness, and I'm just as weary o' them as I was o' my work. Sometimes I'm so tired out I think I cannot enjoy heaven without a piece of rest first" (Gaskell 1994, 117). In this way Bessy expresses her fatigue and pain in relation to the long working hours that wore her out, although, interestingly, her desire to rest clashes with her current resting state which, in itself, continues to exhaust her. Thus, while her bodily pain is expressed through industrial objects, it is implied that her body is a reminder of her inability to escape the effects of industrialism.

Returning to Mintz's idea that pain can be expressed through patient stories (2013, 4), it can be discussed that Bessy narrates her pain and suffering rather than naming it, which can also be explained in Jurecic's views, as seen above (2012, 53). Indeed, Bessy's disease is in fact only "named" once in the novel as "consumption" (Gaskell 1994, 186), which demonstrates that the naming of the disease is less important than its narration. In this sense, Bessy's pain, which she relates to her desire for fresh air and her inability to breathe properly because of her illness, is made "sharable" through her "stories". To illustrate this, when Margaret tells her about the peaceful and fresh atmosphere of the country village, Helstone, where she spent her childhood, Bessy displays her pain by narrating it in detail: "I've always wanted to [...] take a deep breath o' fullness in that air [...] I think the sound yo' speak of among the trees, going on for ever and ever, would send me dazed; it's that made my head ache so in the mill" (Gaskell 1994, 117). Her unspeakable experience is thus externalised through her stories, which portray her thoughts that she cannot imagine a quiet place and that she will never rest again. As such, in line with Mintz's argument that the literature of pain and illness challenges the idea that pain is simply a point on a chart by making the individual the narrator of his/her pain (2013, 5), Bessy here can be seen to become the narrator of her illness despite the fact that her body has become a commodity of industrialism and capitalism.

Bessy's pain can also be discussed within the context of torture in terms of Scarry's classification of the elements of torture and Kenny's definition. Scarry, as mentioned earlier, sees torture as a forced act (1985, 34); thus, we can interpret that it is not Bessy's will to work in the factory, but rather that she had no other choice than working in those terrible circumstances. She herself clarifies her reasons for working in the factory by stating that, "Mary's [Bessy's sister's] schooling were to be kept up, mother said, and father he were always liking to buy books [...] all which took money—so I just worked on till I shall ne'er get the whirr out o' my ears, or the fluff out o' my throat i' this world" (Gaskell 1994, 119). Torture, Scarry also asserts, is a repeated act (1985, 34); thus, the continual long working hours when Bessy is repeatedly exposed to the circumstances that renew her pain imply that her experience can be named as industrial torture. In addition, Kenny's thought that the deliberate infliction of pain is a major aspect of torture (2010, 154) supports the interpretation that Bessy is tortured deliberately by the mill owners since they do not accept responsibility for taking actions to improve working conditions. For Kenny, torture also includes a victim who is unable to shield themselves and fight back (2010, 154), which can



also be seen in Bessy's case. Finally, torture has no benign aim according to Scarry, and Kenny proposes that torture seeks a behavioural response (1985, 34; 2010, 154). In this respect, the only aim of the mill owners is to gain money at the expense of the working class; in other words, the production of capital is the behavioural response the employers expect.

The "weapon" of torture is also a significant factor that makes Bessy's illness a signifier of industrialism. During torture, the real aim of objects that cause pain is not emphasised since they are de-objectified and perceived as weapons (Scarry 1985, 41). In Bessy's case, the industrial objects that cause her pain are represented not as machines making products to create a profit but as the weapons used to torture her. For instance, when Mr. Thornton's difficult economic conditions are narrated, it is stated that "a good deal of his capital was locked up in new and expensive machinery" (Gaskell 1994, 378). On the other hand, this machinery that spins cotton into thread is de-objectified by Bessy and delineated as a weapon that tortures her:

"Fluff", repeated Bessy. "Little bits, as fly off fro' the cotton, when they're carding it, and fill the air till it looks all fine white dust. They say it winds round the lungs, and tightens them up. Anyhow, there's many a one as works in a carding-room, that falls into a waste, coughing and spitting blood, because they're just poisoned by the fluff" (Gaskell 1994, 118).

While the machinery in the industrial system functions as weapon, the factory owners or the leaders of the capitalist system appear to be the torturers. Scarry puts forth that the torturer can endure the pain of the tortured, and is not able to identify with their pain since "however near the prisoner the torturer stands, the distance between their physical realities is colossal, for the prisoner is in overwhelming physical pain while the torturer is utterly without pain; he is free of any pain originating in his own body; he is also free of the pain originating in the agonized body" (1985, 36). In this case, the torturing mill owners ignore the circumstances that cause the physical pain of the workers, to the extent that although they work in the same place, they are themselves free of pain as they cannot identify with the suffering of their workers. This fits with Kenny's definition of torture not being carried out only by state agents (2010, 154), and the consciousness of the mill owners actions can be seen in the fact that the workers' pain can be relieved by buying a wheel that carries off the dust;<sup>6</sup> however, as Bessy

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<sup>6</sup> The air in the factory is choked with dust and fluff as a result of the lack of ventilation. The wheel serves as a ventilator that blows away the dust in the air so that the workers may inhale less fluff during their working hours.

states, “that wheel costs a deal of money—five or six hundred pound, maybe, and brings in no profit”, and she adds, “I’ve heard tell o’ men who didn’t like working in places where there was a wheel, because they said as how it made ‘em hungry, at after they’d been long used to swallowing fluff” (Gaskell 1994, 119). This illustrates the ways in which the wheel is a symbol of the mill owners’ lack of empathy. In Scarry’s words, for the torturer, in this case the mill owners, “voice, world, and self are overwhelmingly present” and for the tortured—Bessy and the workers—“the body and its pain are overwhelmingly present” (1985, 46). While her suffering body identifies Bessy, industrialism, profit and production are present for the mill owners. In short, by de-objectifying industrial tools and implying them as the weapons of factory owners, Bessy underlines the effect of industrialism on her physical pain.

The final phase of torture is that the body in pain begins to represent the power of the torturer, which reveals that Bessy’s body becomes the symbol of the industrial system. For Scarry, the pain the tortured person endures is not perceived as pain anymore, because “the objectified pain is denied as pain and read as power” (1985, 45). In this sense, Bessy’s pain transmutes into the symbol of the power of industrialism and capitalism. Also, by representing pain as the power of the torturer, torture disrupts the “self” of the tortured because “the goal of the torturer is to make the one, the body, emphatically and crushingly *present* by destroying it, and to make the other, the voice, *absent* by destroying it” (Scarry 1985, 49; emphasis in the original). Thus, the “I” of the tortured person is fragmented and destroyed, and the body is foregrounded. In *North and South*, Bessy and the other working-class characters are not regarded as individuals since only their suffering “bodies” are present for the capitalist mind. Mr. Thornton, for instance, refers to them as “hands” and he thinks that “the time is not come for the hands to have any independent action during business hours” (Gaskell 1994, 142). For Mr. Thornton, workers are only a part of a body—“hands”—which represents the absence of their “selves” and the presence of their bodies. To exemplify, the hunger of Boucher, one of the workers, is highlighted throughout the novel. His desire to feed himself, his children, and his sickly wife is not seen by the factory owners; therefore, he remains as yet another starving body that desires more wages. Although torture turns individuals into bodies for Scarry, it is crucial to note that pain as a result of torture connects the tortured body to other bodies. In the same way as Jurecic suggests that the language of pain connects others and the world outside pain (2012, 69), the tortured body of Bessy connects her to the middle-class world of Margaret Hale where she can tell her story and make it heard. Richardson also makes

the point that pain resulting from torture is relational because it connects the victim to other bodies (2016, 55). In this framework, the tortured bodies of the workers are connected to each other, which clearly leads to the formation of the union and the strike. During the strike, when the angry mob wants to confront Mr. Thornton, the situation is described as “an increasing din of angry voices raged behind the wooden barrier, which shook as if the unseen maddened crowd made battering rams of their bodies” (Gaskell 1994, 206). As a result of the disruption of their “selves”, their human voice cannot be heard from the middle-class point of view. Thus, diminished into “hands”, their voice can only be heard through their bodies. On the other hand, their suffering does not isolate them from the outer world as Scarry would suggest, but instead, it makes them relate to the outer world through the connection of their bodies as stated by Richardson.

*North and South* not only narrates the physical pain of the characters but also offers a solution to the tension between the workers and their employers, which, interestingly, is related to the “making” of the disrupted “self”. The “man to man” relationship proposed by Margaret as a solution for the unrest<sup>7</sup> (Gaskell 1994, 367) is reached in the end. Gallagher states that the parent-child metaphor in *North and South* makes “the masters more responsible for the well-being of their workpeople, but the comparison also degrades the workers and could justify arbitrary authority” (1985, 168). Therefore, unlike other industrial novels, Gaskell’s novel does not propose the parent-child relationship as a solution for the problems between the workers and employers. Arthur Helps, in *Claims of Labor*, offers the “family model” to call for the reconciliation between the employers and the labourers. He argues that the relationship between the worker and the employer should be like that of a parent and a child. He suggests that the employer should be like a loving but ruling father. On the other hand, the labourer is regarded as a dependent child (qtd. in Gallagher 1985, 11). Industrial novels, such as Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), offer a parent-child relationship between the labourers and employers. Notwithstanding, “by demolishing the parent-child metaphor, *North and South* argues for adult-to-adult interactions on common ground” (Elliott 1994, 44).

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<sup>7</sup> Rather than the criticised relationship between the workers and the factory owners, which is perceived as the interaction between masters and “inferiors”, Margaret suggests Mr. Thornton to communicate with the workers as fellow human beings. Therefore, the “man to man” relationship implies that the employers and the workers would form a relationship beyond the cash nexus. This also suggests that they will solve their problems only when they communicate outside the money relations reinforced by capitalism.

In order to solve the lack of communication between the working class and the factory owners or, in other words, to lessen the problems of industrialisation, Gaskell seems to change certain signifiers. To clarify, at the end of the novel, Mr. Thornton and Higgins begin to communicate and understand each other. Mr. Thornton builds a dining-room for the workers where they can have their lunch, and Thornton begins to eat with them sometimes (Gaskell 1994, 431). Following the start of his communication with Higgins, Mr. Thornton, who used to refer to the workers as only “hands”, begins to call them “men”. After the workers and Mr. Thornton form a stronger relationship during their dinner times, he begins to refer to Higgins as his “friend” (Gaskell 1994, 432). In this regard, while “food” signifies the hunger of the workers in the beginning of the novel, as in the case of Boucher and his family, it comes to signify the reconciliation between the workers and the employers towards the end. Food does not represent the absence of the “self” anymore, but rather it displays the presence of the “self”. Thus, the goal of torture, which is to make the body present and the “self” absent, is reversed and, as a result, the “self” is solidified. The workers are regarded as individuals at the end of the novel:

He and they had parallel lives—very close, but never touching—till the accident (or so it seemed) of his acquaintance with Higgins. Once brought face to face, man to man, with an individual of the masses around him, and (take notice) out of the character of master and workman, in the first instance, they had each begun to recognise that “we have all of us one human heart” (Gaskell 1994, 500).

Although all the factory owners are reflected as selfish capitalists, Mr. Thornton is portrayed as more likely to improve because, as Higgins states: “He’s worth fighting wi’, is John Thornton. As for Slickson, I take it, some o’ these days he’ll wheedle his men back wi’ fair promises; that they’ll just get cheated out of as soon as they’re in his power again” (Gaskell 1994, 159). Therefore, Thornton is the only mill owner in the novel who manages to form a relationship with the workers that exceeds that of the cash-nexus.<sup>8</sup> He gets rid of his harsh capitalistic point of view including utilitarianism<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In *Chartism*, Thomas Carlyle states the problem of the “sole nexus” indicating that labour relations became the only connection between workers and employers. He criticises the idea of “Cash Payment as the sole nexus between man and man” (1885, 52).

<sup>9</sup> The notion of “utilitarianism” was first used by Jeremy Bentham and later developed by John Stuart Mill. The purpose of “utilitarianism” according to Bentham “was to ensure a right or ‘good’ society where ‘good’ was defined in terms of the principle of utility or ‘the greatest happiness of the greatest number’” (Guy 2001, 16). Bentham

and laissez-faire.<sup>10</sup> Veena Das asserts that the world is first unmade by pain but then remade after pain moves from the body into language (1996, 70). In other words, pain does not destroy communication, instead, it calls for acknowledgement: "Unlike Scarry, however, Das emphasises that the construction of pain in language—the remaking of the world—involves attending to the pain of others in ways that take into account its full historical and social complexity" (Jurecic 2012, 65). In this sense, the suffering and the pain of the workers in relation to their working and living conditions is acknowledged in the end as a result of the narration of their pain. Consequently, not the body but the "self" of the worker becomes apparent. While the objectified pain of Bessy represents industrialism, the de-objectified pain of the workers represents hope for the solution of industrial problems.

In conclusion, *North and South* portrays the results of industrialisation through Bessy's physical pain and torture. The fact that Bessy is positioned outside the public sphere because of her illness is what enables her to narrate the "tortures" of industrialism. Bessy's narration is very convincing since she speaks outside the boundaries of both the working class and the middle class. Sontag explains that "narratives can make us understand" illness (2003, 89). Although she denotes that outsiders cannot imagine or know the pain experienced by others, she indicates that stories can make us see the subject from a new perspective (Sontag 2003, 126). As a result, Bessy does not come across as merely a suffering body, she gains an identity through the narration of her pain, and the workers are also identified as individuals rather than "hands" as a consequence of the narration of their sufferings. By narrating Bessy's pain dramatically, Gaskell achieves her aim of educating the middle-class reader about the conditions of the working class. Although Bessy dies in the middle of the novel, her narration of industrial torture haunts Margaret and Nicholas Higgins, who signal the hope for a solution to the suffering of the workers. Admittedly, Gaskell reverses the process of torture to offer a solution to the problems between the workers

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supports the idea that each human being seeks pleasure, which leads to his/her happiness. Additionally, Mill emphasises that actions are right when they result in happiness. "What use is it?" is the basic question of this philosophy; in other words, it includes the idea of making decisions by considering the profits (Mill 2001, 41).

<sup>10</sup> "Laissez-faire," which means "let them do," was an expression coined by Adam Smith in *Wealth of Nations* and signifies the idea that the market is self-regulating. Smith suggests the idea of minimal government involvement stating that freedom of trade will always supply the country with goods (2005, 346). Self-reliance and a free market were the main tenets of the "laissez-faire" approach. The middle class used the theory of minimal government involvement in their economic affairs against their own workers.

and factory owners at the end of the novel. The “self” of the worker is re-made in the end by the transformation of the signifier of food and by reaching a state of acknowledgement of his/her pain. To be specific, the goal of torture, which is to make the body present and the “self” absent, is reversed in order to make the “self” of the labourer present. By reflecting the de-objectification of the pain the working class endures, Gaskell’s fiction strives for a sense of hope regarding industrial problems.

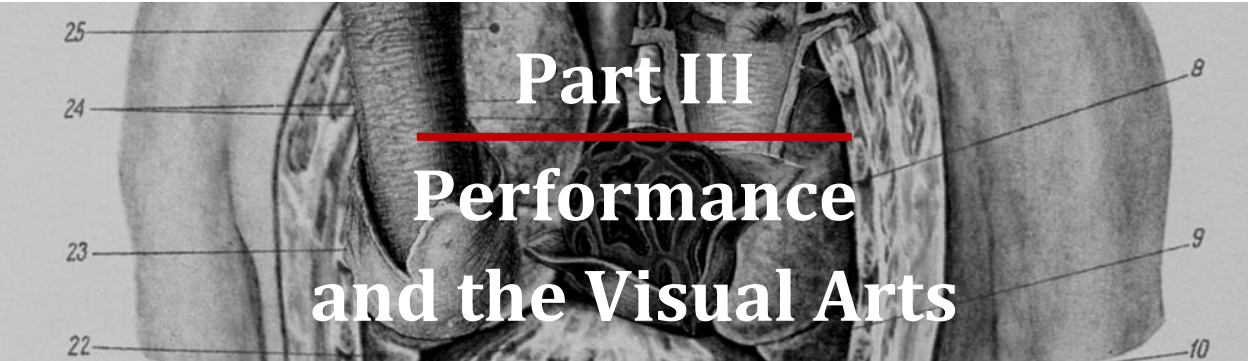
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# Part III

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## Performance and the Visual Arts



**Máximo Aláez Corral\***

## **“I Never Want to Avoid Pain”: The Hurt Body and the Construction of Pain in Nan Goldin’s Photography**

### Abstract

In this article I will analyse the ways in which American photographer Nan Goldin deals with the representation of pain in her work. Using an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, I will dissect some of her photographs to illustrate how the visual rendering of hurt bodies can be used to reveal the constructed nature of pain: how pain is sublimated by means of aesthetics and narration, and how Goldin can be identified as both a suffering individual and a watcher of other people’s pain.

### Keywords

Nan Goldin, Photography, Pain, Violence

I never want to avoid pain. And the only way I’ve gotten through my life is to walk through the most scary, and the most painful, events.

Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*

Physical pain may not only “resist language but actively destroy it”, as Elaine Scarry has observed (1985, 4), yet throughout art history there have been many examples of artists struggling to capture and narrate that ineffable instant when the body is hurt and the awareness of pain on the part of the

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suffering subject is revealed. Beheadings, acts of torture, mutilations, killings, as well as bodies injured, hurt, ill, emaciated, deteriorated, consumed and ultimately annihilated... these have all had some representation or other in the history of western art. All are, however, representations, constructions that resonate within a conventional idea of pain but do not come close to the actual experience of pain. The fact that, in most cases, these renderings of pain and suffering are paintings, drawings or sculptures also contributes to increasing the distance between the representation and the viewer. The emergence of photography in the twentieth century questioned this distance and, at the same time, stressed the artificial quality of pictorial representation. Photography, as Roland Barthes argued (1981, 76–77), references reality instead of feigning it (as a painting does). This simple fact turns the representation of pain (both as an event and as a situation, as we shall see) into an altogether different phenomenon: we are no longer watching the (re)creation of a given reality, but rather a residue of that reality itself, as encapsulated in the imprint that a given “real” situation has left on the photographic support.

The fact that photography has become one of the most prominent media in contemporary art, and is used profusely with diverse goals and intentions, however, problematises its status as a tool to register unmediated reality. The feeling of suspicion and disbelief with regard to the photographic image grows exponentially in the case of digital photography: can we really be sure that what we see is what actually happened, or has the image been manipulated to the extent of purposefully deleting a part of that reality or, conversely, adding something that was not originally there? The more a photograph is manipulated, edited and transformed, the more it becomes akin to painting, thus increasing the distance between image and viewer.

What I would like to focus on in this essay is the different ways in which pain appears in Nan Goldin’s photography. The main fields I intend to discuss are the representation of pain and violence, the representation of pain and ritual, and the representation of pain and illness/death. In order to do so, I will analyse a number of significant works from Goldin’s artistic career, mostly (but not exclusively) taken from some of her best known collections, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1996), *The Devil’s Playground* (2003), and *The Beautiful Smile* (2007). My analysis seeks to provide insight into the artist’s handling of pain within the photographic image, as well as into the power of photography as a tool to communicate with the portrayed person’s suffering.

## The Aesthetics of Pain and Its Construction

Nan Goldin is best known for the snapshot aesthetics of her photos, as well as for portraying her "family" of friends and lovers over the years in countless daily situations (including sexual acts, taking drugs, suffering from acute physical and emotional pain, or being ill). She started taking shots of the drag community in Boston, in 1972–73, and a few years later she moved to the East Village community of underground artists in New York, where she still lives, though she also frequently travels around the world and stays with friends in places as diverse as Berlin, Tokyo, London, Venice, Bangkok, and Egypt. Taking photographs became, from her early experiences in Boston, a vital activity, to the extent of her considering the camera to be an extension of her arm: "The camera is as much a part of my everyday life as talking or eating or sex" (Goldin 1996a, 6).

From the aesthetic point of view, therefore, Goldin's *oeuvre* bears a strong resemblance to the kind of family snapshots any amateur photographer may have taken of any private celebration, special event or holiday. The artist herself has noted the similarity with the snapshot aesthetics: "Snapshots are taken out of love and to remember people, places, and shared times. They are about creating a history by recording a history" (Goldin 1998, 19). However, this resemblance is only at a superficial level, because a careful analysis of her photos will reveal that the clumsiness or sloppiness so typical of snapshot photography is intentional rather than accidental in many of Goldin's works; in short, it is a means to create (or otherwise strengthen) emotional impact, and not a result of technical incompetence. Her lack of inhibition in the portrayal of the dark, dirty, or abject side of the human condition seems to be at odds with the celebratory/festive quality that usually permeates amateur photography.

Another significant difference to "real" snapshot photography is the way Goldin's authorial presence vanishes from her photographs—even when she herself is portrayed in them. The often relaxed, inadvertent or occasionally knowing demeanour her subjects display suggests that there is no intrusion in the world she is capturing (Prosser 2002, 345). In snapshot photography, on the other hand, the subject is usually aware of the photographer's presence: he/she *poses* intentionally and specifically before the camera, and in an attempt to look his/her best, because the photograph is intended to become a memorable recording of his/her best self. Goldin, however, never tries to show her subjects' (or her own) best self, although in many cases they are aware of her camera and look right into the lens. In this respect,

we can claim that their pain does not seem to be constructed through a conscious staging but through a collective narrative: by sequencing images in order to create a storyline of both joy and suffering, a celebration of a life rooted in extreme sensations. As Goldin herself has often remarked, her images constitute a “visual diary” (1996a, 6), and writers of diaries usually strive to describe life as they experienced it, often providing minute details, rather than as they wanted it to be. If an event is acutely painful a person writing a diary always has the choice of either confronting that event in their narration or suppressing it. However, if they choose to confront it they will most likely try to describe it as faithfully as possible—even though, as Prosser indicates, it is one thing to write about trauma, and something very different to publish or exhibit such writing (2002, 345).

In one of her most renowned images, *Nan after being battered, 1984* (1996a, 83), Goldin captures her self-portrait after her then-boyfriend, Brian, beat her up to the extent of nearly blinding her. This is a prime example of the aesthetics of pain in relation to violence. Here we witness Goldin building up the aftermath of violence, and focusing on the results and effects of violence on the body. We see Goldin’s hurt body, but the body in pain must be constructed (i.e. imagined and interpreted) by confronting the bruises, the cuts, the blood-shot eye. The representation of pain is, therefore, validated only by assumptions and preconceptions arising from our personal experience of pain, and what pain “should feel like”. An altogether different question is whether we understand a photograph as a sample of truth or as artifice, a product of human art and creation. For Goldin, photography is all about recording truth, not faking it, and she has expressed her regret that this status may be progressively waning in our contemporary world: “The belief that a photograph can be true has become almost obsolete” (1996a, 146). In relation to this reflection—and because of the complex status of photography as regards truth and artifice—we may question the “real” status of pain in her photographs; in other words, whether the representation of pain reflects a genuine sensation or a construction. Again, the artist has shown surprise and shock at the fact that her traumatic experience might even be questioned: “There are people who have said that I pretended to be battered for the photograph. Some of my friends heard the beating and ignored it while others, all men, subsequently told me it was a sign of his love” (1996a, 146).

At this point, we can introduce a difference between pain and violence. As Ariel Glucklich has observed, “violence is a semiotic event, while pain is a subjective sensation” (2001, 133). In this respect, the violent act, inflicted

upon the body by means of aggression, torture, or simply accident, has a cultural meaning that is hard to find in pain alone—understood as a physical sensation. Here I think it may be useful to remember Scarry's observation that physical pain does not have "an object in the external world" (161). Pain is a perception that only requires a subject, and, precisely because it cannot be objectified, it is difficult to effectively express in language (162). If we move on to visual representation, the situation changes slightly, but the "objectlessness" of pain remains. Indeed, the image—the photographic image in particular—is more direct and immediate than any product of verbal language, yet the visual experience of contemplating a painful event communicates not pain, but the effects of pain on the body. In other words, we may understand the meaning of violence by contemplating an image where a person is being tortured, but in terms of visual experience all we can grasp is the injured body and its symbolism, which compels us to fill in the gaps regarding the actual understanding of pain with our own experience of painful events.

It is, therefore, the violent act—or, rather, the violent content coating the representation of a painful situation—that provokes a reaction in the viewer, a response to imagine pain and build it up from the image, the viewer's personal experience, and culturally acquired meanings in relation to pain. Similarly, we may differentiate between pain as a fact and pain as experience: the former refers to a phenomenon taking place at a given time, while the latter refers to knowledge of pain (Schleifer 2014, 5). This difference can be rephrased in terms of a division between *pain*, a physiological condition, and *suffering*, a psychological condition that, as Schleifer points out, "is the meaning and significance of the experience of pain as it affects the individual" (3–4). It should nevertheless be noted that pain does not exist outside of the individual's brain processes, and as such always retains a subjective quality.

Two other shots from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, *Heart-shaped bruise*, NYC 1984 and *Ectopic pregnancy scar*, NYC 1980 (1996a, 85 and 86), also establish a direct dialogue with pain, violence and its representation. Both images show the hurt body—in the first case, as a symbol which integrates love and violence,<sup>1</sup> and in the second, as a symbol of medical intrusion and intervention upon the female body. Here Scarry's assertion that pain

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<sup>1</sup> According to Louis Kaplan, we may interpret the bruise as an "uncanny marker on the surface of her body that symbolises these matters of the heart [...] somewhere in the vicinity between touch and wound" (2001, 10–11).

destroys language seems to be at once both confirmed and refuted. The titles themselves are self-explanatory; without the help of the images, the text, on its own, forces us not only to visualise the injured body but also to recreate the feeling of pain deriving from the injury. We may describe the experience of looking at these scarred/bruised bodies (as well as the feelings such contemplation stirs), but do the images really transmit the pain the individuals felt at the time of the aggression, or even at the time the photographs were taken? We may presume that the woman with the scar probably was anaesthetised, which means she felt no pain during the surgery; and as we will see in a moment, pain must be recalled in order to exist. We can only imagine pain: even though the images may reflect an unmediated painful situation it is our perception (and imagination) of the hurt body that completes their meaning.

Another couple of images, this time taken from *The Devil's Playground* (Goldin 2003), can illustrate how Goldin's aesthetics contribute to the imagining of pain in the hurt body. In *My wrist after accident, Zurich 2000*, and *Stigmata wound, Zurich 2000* (2003, 216–217 and 219) we confront close-ups of Goldin's arm. The arm is broken at the level of the wrist, in such a severe way that the flesh has been cut open and a white section of bone can be seen protruding out of the injury. Even though the first image, which was taken shortly after the accident, may be (perhaps intentionally) blurry and unfocused, we see enough to recreate the meaning of pain in our imagination, as well as the experience of the suffering Goldin must have gone through, for it is her suffering, not her physical pain, that the images compel us to imagine. Once more, the difference between pain as a physical state and as a psychological condition (suffering) becomes crucial if we want to fully understand the reaction Goldin's images provoke in us. This difference can also be envisioned as the artist's strategy to engender empathy as regards the suffering subject, in a way other depictions of extreme painful states or severely hurt bodies cannot attain (for instance, Caravaggio's or Gentileschi's paintings of beheadings). Not only can we "read" the meaning of pain in Goldin's images, but we also become attached to the portrayed subjects' suffering (even if we do not identify ourselves with their lifestyles).

It has been claimed that Goldin's photographic activity is rooted in an intimate conversation between photographer and subject, a "caress" or an act of love (Kaplan 2001, 11), and is thus, in this sense, very much the opposite of a painful experience. From my point of view, this idea of photography as a way of communing with the portrayed subject betrays a willingness to sublimate the pain and/or the violence the artist experienced on her own



body or saw inflicted upon other bodies. Goldin has declared that her use of photography is a "soothing" or "survival" mechanism when confronting fear (1996b, 451). Viewed under this light, we might even claim that her images contain a direct representation of painful experiences while at the same time providing the aesthetics to reduce the emotional upheaval caused by the confrontation of such experiences. Additionally, we might glimpse a sign of bravery in Goldin, confronting her abuser and portraying him repeatedly, in a variety of contexts. By means of recreating a narrative of her relationship with Brian and the eventual violent episode, she seems to present him as a menace—a potential source of pain and abuse. *Nan after being battered*, thus, becomes the climax and sad corollary of her narration. In these images of hurt and beaten bodies—as in many other photographs Goldin has captured over the years—it would seem that she wants to protect herself from the memory of pain by trapping or imprisoning it within the confines of the image. Or, as Ruddy suggests, by giving "image to loss while acting as a prophylactic against that loss" (2009, 354).

There is occasionally a link between pain and ritual in Goldin's works, especially in *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, but also in later works such as *The Other Side* (1993), *Couples and Loneliness* (1998), and *The Devil's Playground* (2003). Her pictures of transgender people and of "queer", marginalised or non-normative individuals communicate a sense of underlying suffering, a subdued pain that lurks beneath the apparently liberated gender/lifestyle choices. The rites of passage these people go through in order to become what they want to be are, in many cases, of a predominantly visual nature, which somehow reveals a trivialisation or even emptiness of identity. Goldin shows us the results of the ritual, just as she showed us the cut and the bruise on her hurt body after the violent event: the tattoos, the piercing of the flesh, the mutilation/addition that allows the individual to model his/her body in order to accept him/herself. However, for all the endurance, and all the painful experiences we presume they must have gone through, the feeling of emptiness and disconnection from consciousness remains. This loss of identity often appears in scenes of intense emotional pain in Goldin's *oeuvre*. For instance, the number of shots that depict people (usually women) crying or going through emotional distress is striking. *Amanda crying on my bed, Berlin 1992* (Goldin 2007, 15), *Suzanne crying, NYC 1985*, *David with Butch crying at Tin Pan Alley, NYC 1981*, and *April crying at 7<sup>th</sup> and B, NYC 1985* (Goldin 1996a, 87, 124, and 84) are but a few examples. These photographs reveal, as I have already mentioned, how far Goldin is from the trivialisation of pain (or from indifference to other

people's pain). The individual may show an empty or conflicted identity, but the artist is never indifferent to pain: she cares for the hurt body in a way many other photographers do not. Diane Arbus' depiction of queer/non-normative individuals, for example, reveals a distance, an alienation that contaminates the viewer's perception of that reality. This is never the case in Goldin's works. She manages to capture emotional pain as a "single complex state" involving many different physiological and psychological processes (Glücklich 2001, 137), but her images always transmit strong caring—never distance or alienation—for the human reality she captures.

The difference between emotional pain and physical pain can indeed be useful to better assess the complexity of Goldin's representations of pain. Emotional pain may be understood as a type of pain coming from non-physical and psychological painful experiences—such as the loss of a loved person (Smith 2006, 225). It is usually easier to represent emotional pain than physical pain, mainly because in the former the source of pain can be specified and imagined: there is an external object towards which the feeling of pain is addressed. Pain as a sensation or physiological phenomenon, however, starts and ends within the subject; thus, it is difficult to commune with the pain that a given subject is experiencing, though it may be easier to commune with his/her suffering (through our own acquired knowledge of what that person might be feeling).

In a similar way, Nan Goldin forces us to imagine the experience of pain, and in the process a visceral response is awakened, albeit that in her photography a sense of closeness as regards the person who is suffering is also aroused. Whereas in Caravaggio's painting the visceral response, at least in the first instance, overpowers almost any other reaction in the viewer, Goldin's photographs also prompt empathy with the portrayed person's suffering. One might be tempted to assert, in line with Susan Sontag's reasoning, that we relish "the satisfaction of being able to look at the image without flinching" (2003, 41). This sense of empathy may also be found in other photographic depictions of hurt and/or tortured bodies, but the fact that Goldin was, herself, a member of the community she photographed (living, experiencing, and sharing not only pain but other intense sensations and emotions) makes her work unique.

Contrasting vividly with the empathy that her photographs distil, we can mention a radically different illustration of pain and suffering: the photographs of prisoners taken during the Khmer Rouge Cambodian genocide (1975–1979). These photographs were taken, in almost all cases, by Nhem En, a young photographer employed by Pol Pot's regime to visually docu-

ment each and every individual that entered the Tuol Sleng school in Phnom Penh—a school which the Khmer Rouge leaders turned into a prison with the code-name “S-21” (Chandler, 1999). Interestingly, part of this execrable visual material—mug shots of about a hundred prisoners—was exhibited decades later, in 1997, at the *Rencontres photographiques d’Arles* photo festival in France. The exhibition was based on a number of negatives restored in 1994 by Chris Riley and Douglas Niven, two American photojournalists, and aimed to show the horrors of the Cambodian genocide.<sup>2</sup>

The re-contextualization of these images of hurt and tortured bodies within a cultural/artistic event brings to the fore an ethical issue. Assigning the status of “artist” to someone who collaborated with a regime that massacred dozens (and occasionally hundreds) of people on a daily basis, and thus contributed to maintaining the regime, may indeed be revolting in moral terms, but the position of the exhibition’s curator, Christian Caujolle, may be no less disturbing. He may not have been the “author” of the images himself, but he was responsible for the selection, arrangement and installation of the images, as well as for the meaning deriving from the exhibition (De Duve 2008, 5). Thus, an image that was not originally intended to be a work of art (although it seems undeniable that Nhem En did indeed use some aesthetic parameters as regards composition, lighting, and other technical details in his mug shots) becomes the presumed moral/political evidence of horror within the framework of an artistic event. Here we witness, as I view it, the staging of the photographs of pain and hurt bodies as simulacrum. This staging works on several levels: from the creation of a visual image out of “real” pain (as the result of a merely instrumental function of the camera), to its re-contextualization as the result of an informative function, to an altogether new status for the image, governed by an aesthetic function. In the end, Nhem En’s photographs can be reduced to mere images: visual objects that can, in turn, be analysed in purely aesthetic or artistic terms, no matter how abject or revolting the content or the meaning of the image may be. But this loss of original meaning would probably also take place if we saw the images outside of the art event, in a different context (a book, a TV documentary, an installation in an official building, etc.). However, if we were a relative of the person in the photograph, or had ourselves survived the Cambodian genocide, the works would evoke in us a far more accurate sense of pain—at least closer to what the people in the photographs may

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<sup>2</sup> The negatives had been previously published in 1996 in the book *The Killing Fields* (De Duve 2008, 3-4).

have felt. In short, the more direct the personal experience of the viewer as regards the event depicted in the photograph, the closer their imagining of pain in such an event will be.

Goldin's photographs reflect emotional states that resonate with the viewer by means of repetition and sequencing. Through repetition the rite of passage is revealed. Sometimes she shows us the ritual of endurance as it is being performed—for example, in *Mark tattooing Mark, Boston 1978* (1996a, 77)—but more often she captures the results of the process, the aftermath of the ritual, and the moment where the individual belongs effectively to the community. *Mark and Mark, Boston 1978*, and *Kenny with tattoo, NYC 1980* (1996a, 61 and 71) are good examples of members of the community that have endured pain and proudly brandish their tattoos—the symbols of their shallow identity—as symbols of power.

As I mentioned earlier, emotional pain has a meaning (an object) that physical pain lacks. This meaning comes to the fore in the representation of pain in connection with illness and death. The loss of a loved one, a friend, a relative, etc. can, in this way, be expressed (and verbalised) more easily than physical pain (Smith 2006, 225–226). However, Goldin's photographs of her ill friends, as well as her photographs of dead or dying people, seem to be intended as an homage to the decayed body as much as a strategy to sublimate pain. Some of her most iconic images depict terminally ill or dead friends: *Gotscho kissing Gilles, Paris 1993*, *Gilles's arm, Paris 1993*, and *Cookie at Vittorio's casket, Sept. 16, NYC 1989* (Goldin 2007, 142, 143 and 144) are amongst Goldin's most poignant renderings of emotional pain. In all these images, we get not only "someone else's pain" but also the artist's sharing of the subjects' suffering, as well as her realisation that pain and loss are unavoidably intertwined within the photographic image:

Photography doesn't preserve memory as effectively as I had thought it would [...] I always thought that if I photographed anyone or anything long enough, I would never lose the person, I would never lose the memory, I would never lose the place. But the pictures show me how much I have lost (Goldin 1996a, 145).

In a similar way, when she photographs her own attempts at detoxing from her drug addiction, she also appears to seek to confront pain by depicting herself at the peak of her suffering, as if this would help her be re-born clean or start anew (Goldin 2003, 440). We find this aesthetics of pain in shots such as *Self-portrait in delirium, The Priory, London 2002*, and *Relapse/Detox Grid #2, 1998–2000/2001*, both published in *The Devil's Play-*

*ground* (2003, 411 and 82–83). Overcoming pain deriving from addiction had a lot to do with Goldin discovering natural light as a means to capture the world from a different perspective. The shift from the nightlife and artificial light to daylight and natural spaces also provoked “a shift of presence” where before was absence and disappearance, death and decay (Ruddy 2009, 376).

We may infer from our analysis so far that the aesthetics of pain may lead in a relatively easy way to understanding representation as a spectacle. In other words, an image that originally depicted the pain of an individual may turn into a source of pleasure for the viewer. The ease with which the aesthetic dimension overtakes the representation of pain does not escape Goldin. However, as I have already argued, her trivialization of pain, illness or suffering is in fact only on the surface. Any in-depth analysis of her photographs will reveal the layers of affection, closeness and empathy she feels for the individuals portrayed that lie behind the seemingly superficial handling of the visual material<sup>3</sup>. There can be no denying, though, that by making them public Goldin turns both the images and their content (pain-related or otherwise) into some sort of spectacle the viewer ultimately engages with as a pleasurable experience.

One final aspect to mention in helping us understand the aesthetics of pain is the way the objectless quality of pain can spread to other sensations (for example, hunger or pleasure). The less identifiable the object of a state of consciousness is, the closer it gets to pain; and, conversely, the stronger the object is, the further the state is from pain (Scarry 1985, 165–166). Scarry uses as an example how being hungry without a desire for a specific food can turn hunger into an objectless state, thus bringing it closer to the boundaries of pain (the extreme objectless state). Similarly, a lack of definition in feelings of love—the lack of a specific individual to whom to address those feelings—may turn desire into angst and despair, again moving closer to the experience of pain. Precisely to prevent this kind of extreme situations, imagination stands as an emergency measure, providing an object where, in fact, there is none. In this respect, Scarry argues, imagining an object works in the direction of eliminating a given acute state of consciousness; for example, imagining a glass of water in order to eliminate the feeling of thirst (166–167).

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, essays by Louis Kaplan, Jay Prosser, and Sarah Ruddy (all referenced in the bibliography).

While Scarry's explanation seems strong and plausible when applied to certain sensations, it is less convincing when applied to senses like sight (it would be hard to defend the idea that seeing a tortured or hurt body actually "eliminates" our need to watch images of the body in pain). However, we might accept that a similar mechanism, in terms of providing an object in objectless situations, is at work in the world of visual art. If we look at Nhem En's photographs of tortured, hurt or maimed prisoners, or Goldin's photos of herself after being battered or of scarred and injured bodies, we will be in a situation where we must necessarily confront a representation of pain (or suffering). Furthermore, we will also have to face the somatic and occasionally physical responses that such contemplation may provoke in us. Even in such a situation, though, viewers can use the getaway of aesthetics; by turning the image into a purely aesthetic experience, or by focusing on its formal qualities, we might be able to at least diminish the impact of the emotional response that the image might provoke in us. When confronting an extreme depiction of pain, at the very least we can choose "not to see"—by turning our eyes away from the unsettling source, or by closing them—and then allowing our imagination to provide a more pleasurable or satisfying visual object (be it a blank void, the image of a flower, a completely abstract image, etc.). Nevertheless, not even Goldin's hardest images are as extreme as to provoke such a visceral reaction, the more so because what gives meaning to her images is, in most cases, the above-mentioned experience of overcoming pain by sharing the subject's suffering instead of merely registering the painful event.

This reliance on meaning rather than on fact leads back to the division I mentioned earlier: if pain is, essentially, a physical event, suffering is a conglomerate of remembered experiences. This assertion clashes, as Schleifer suggests, with the fact that pain needs to become a remembered experience to be complete (6–7); in other words, there can be no pain (and, consequently, no suffering), without consciousness. Memories of pain—or painful memories—are the raw material of many of Nan Goldin's photographs. The author herself has declared that her photographic activity sprang out of a need to have a vivid and accurate memory of her loved ones: "Memory allows for an endless flow of connections. Stories can be rewritten, memory can't. If each picture is a story, then the accumulation of these pictures comes closer to the experience of memory, a story without end" (Goldin 1996a, 6). The photographic image preserves, therefore, what once was but no longer is. It helps us remember, although, because it is inevitably incomplete, it cannot recreate any experience in its entirety, only a fragment of what hap-

pened. This incompleteness applies to capturing the painful event as well, which is why we have to fill in the gaps in the depiction of pain with our own imagination (and our own memories of the experience of pain), in order to complete its meaning.

Because "by definition pain is conscious" (Schleifer 2014, 10), and because it seems to destroy any possibility of discourse, any account of pain (either verbal or visual) can only take place once pain has subsided, working from the memories of either the physical sensation or the psychological condition it provoked. The immediacy of the photographic medium brings the experience of witnessing pain close to the painful event as it was experienced by the subject, but there always remains a distance between the viewer and the depiction of the subject who suffers, just as there is a separation between the reader and the literary description of pain. It is the dexterity of writers/artists that allows them to develop a description vivid enough for us to be moved or even shocked by the imagined pain.

To wrap up my analysis, I would like to go back to the idea of sequencing and repetition in the creation of a sense of community. Sequencing also contributes to strengthening narration, and it is, ultimately, a narrative of pain that Goldin offers us through her dissolving of the individual's specific pain into a flow of images (either in her published books or, more pervasively, in her early slideshows). Since Goldin envisions both her art and her life as a connected sequence of events, her sense of community as a family—wherein every member plays an instrumental role subjected to the whole—turns the construction of individual pain into a narrative of collective pain. By means of a unique aesthetics and the dexterous sequencing of similar painful events and experiences, Goldin constructs her own narration of pain, one where she does not deny the effects of pain but uses them to overcome loss, sorrow and suffering. In a way, we might see in this manipulation of other people's pain, a selfish act, even though that act might be prompted by genuine love and affection.

## **Conclusions**

As we have seen, several strategies can be used to represent pain. My main concern in this essay has been to reflect upon the ways in which Nan Goldin uses aesthetics and narration to expose the painful event without exploiting or alienating the suffering subject. Sometimes the subject is herself, sometimes it is a member of her community; in either case, she confronts pain and its effects on the hurt body and, eventually, communicates her own reading by creating a meaning where there was emptiness.

While it may be true that in our contemporary western culture both pain and suffering are considered negative or inconvenient aspects of life that should be avoided (Schleifer 2014, 3–4), Nan Goldin’s representations of pain seem to work in the opposite direction. She does not shy away from pain but confronts it, embraces it, and eventually defuses its socially constructed negativity by turning it into an artistic material. We do not get “the real thing” (a raw depiction of pain), but, rather, Goldin’s interpretation of it, a representation coated with love and affection for the suffering subjects. The artist herself is also in pain, very much like the other members of her community; nevertheless, by turning her photographic practice into a sort of addiction/ritual, she manages to escape the doom of the “real” drug addict (death by overdose, or suffering from AIDS).

Narration, in sum, turns pain into something else, and this “something else” instils a feeling of pleasurable melancholy in the viewer (in contrast to what we might experience in the case of Nhem En’s mug shots of Cambodian prisoners), even though the viewer may be distanced from the underground world of bohemian artists, transgender people or drug addicts that is portrayed. Goldin narrates pain as an expression of affection, closeness and compassion for the subject in pain, and in this way she creates beauty where formerly there was only bleakness and suffering.

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**Kate Antosik-Parsons\***

**Split Asunder:  
Obstetric Violence and Pain in Máiréad Delaney's  
*At What Point It Breaks* (2017)**

**Abstract**

This article examines the embodiment of pain in artist Máiréad Delaney's performance *At What Point It Breaks* (2017). Drawing upon the gender-based violence of symphysiotomy and its resulting pain, Delaney's work employs an affective aesthetics and negotiates a breach in representation, thus facilitating viewer engagement with the performance as a means of critiquing the insidious control of women's bodies and the resulting reproductive injustices in Irish society.

**Keywords**

Performance Art, Pain, Gendered Violence, Ireland, Childbirth

**Introduction**

Máiréad Delaney is an Irish-American artist whose performance works are highly engaging in their nuanced and exquisitely raw focus on gendered violence. Over the last number of years, Delaney's practice has centred on the highly controversial surgical procedure of symphysiotomy, performed on the bodies of birthing women from 1944 to 1987 in Ireland. Delaney's performances are not a retelling of survivor experiences, there are no testimonies that unfold in front of the viewer. The artist does not narrativise pain, nor does she employ tactics of violent spectacle or gratuitous pain for

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the purpose of shock value. Instead, Delaney's performances engage an affective aesthetics of violence and pain as a way of provoking awareness and prompting the interrogation of insidious patriarchal power and reproductive injustices in Irish society. In *The Body in Pain* (1985), Elaine Scarry states that "[w]hatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (4). Trauma, similar to pain, resists language and in its unknowability, it generates a tension between "'the impossibility of telling' and the 'impossible silence'" (Reason 2017, 92). According to Matthew Reason, aesthetic representations of traumatic experiences from art, theatre and dance insert themselves into this in-between space "precisely because as an aesthetic representation [they are] abstracted, stylised, potentially beautiful" (Ibid.). The embodiment offered by performance art enables the audience to view the body in pain or the traumatised body in new ways, particularly when the performance asserts the corporeal as a site of resistance (Oliver 2010, 128).

What of the affective response when one is confronted with a representation of a body in pain? For the purposes of this essay, affect is defined as an automatic, non-conscious experience of intensity. According to Massumi, whose conceptualisation of affect is indebted to the work of Spinoza and Deleuze, affect is a "prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another" (1987, xvi). Teasing out Massumi's ideas on affect, Shouse describes that the transmission of affect is essentially how bodies affect one another: "When your body infolds a context and another body (real or virtual) is expressing intensity in that context, one intensity is infolded into another" (2005). Art that engages pain or trauma through embodiment generates an affective aesthetics, one that is not purely intellectual or solely centres on emotional visual interpretation, but instead relies on the activation of the bodily, sensuous and tactile faculties in a creative encounter that extends beyond the subjective (Golańska 2015, 785). Jill Bennett's work on affect, trauma and contemporary art is particularly useful here for thinking about an affective aesthetics which, building upon the intensity of affect produced by a work of art, thrusts the viewer involuntarily into a mode of critical enquiry (2005, 11). One purpose of art, as explained by Simon O'Sullivan, is

to switch our intensive register, to reconnect us with the world. Art opens us up to the non-human universe that we are part of. Indeed, art might well have a representational function (after all, art objects, like everything else, can be read) but art also operates as a *fissure* in representation (2001, 128; emphasis in the original).

A fissure can be understood as a breach, a space in-between where there is the possibility, as O'Sullivan suggests, for a transformation or refiguring of our sense of self—if only for a moment. This potential for recalibration is particularly apt with regards to how performance art operates, given the responsibility it demands from the viewer. Furthermore, as this article will demonstrate, art that engages affective aesthetics opens up a space where one can move beyond the intensities of affect to encourage critical reflection on what is being represented. Arguably, Delaney's performances embody pain and employ affective aesthetics to produce fissures, breakages and breaches in representation, prompting a critical examination of the ongoing reproductive injustices in Ireland.

In response to engaging with women who have experienced gender-based violence, Delaney says: "Many times I have returned to hearing these stories told [...] An imaging occurs in the telling. The stories open the same way flesh does, it's a dehiscence, they open a wound, freshly splitting and then yawning warm tissue. Raw. Hemorrhaging".<sup>1</sup> This article analyses Delaney's recent performance *At What Point It Breaks* (2017), considering the historical context of the "reintroduction" of symphysiotomy in Irish society, the definition of obstetric violence and its applicability to the practice of symphysiotomy. Detailing the bodily gestures utilised in the performance, this work considers the concept of a shared responsibility that makes the viewer complicit in the actions that occur. Furthermore, it investigates the aesthetics of affect that emerge from Delaney's work with particular reference to the affective encounter of the body in pain. This article also argues that Delaney's performance negotiates a fissure, or breach, in representation, a space in-between that facilitates viewer engagement with the performance as a means of critiquing the insidious control of women's bodies and the resulting reproductive injustices in Irish society.

### **Symphysiotomy in Ireland**

Symphysiotomy is a surgical procedure employed by obstetricians on birthing women during obstructed labour. It splits the symphysis ligaments, the joint at the junction of the two pubic bones that connects the two sides of the pelvis, in order to widen it by means of cutting with a scalpel or a small saw. It came into use in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in Europe but was only rarely performed in developed countries by the 20<sup>th</sup> century, by which time caesarian

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<sup>1</sup> Unpublished conversation between the artist and the author of this essay.

section was widely considered to be a safer method of delivery. By 1930 caesarian section had become accepted practice for difficult deliveries in Ireland (SoS 2014, 5), but it carried the risk of uterine rupture, which increased with each subsequent delivery, therefore limiting women to no more than three births. Doctors in Ireland adhering to Catholic moral doctrines opposed the caesarian delivery method because it led to contraception, sterilization and therapeutic abortion to prevent further pregnancies. In 1944 symphysiotomy was reintroduced at the National Maternity Hospital (NMH), Holles Street, a Catholic institution under the direction of the Master Dr. Alex Spain and his successor Dr. Arthur Barry (who became Master in 1948 and carried on the practice) and later at other Catholic institutions. From its foundation in 1922, the Irish State worked closely with the Catholic Church to regulate the reproductive bodies of Irish women, as demonstrated by the legislation prohibiting the distribution of publications with information about birth control (1929) and the sale and import of contraception (1935). Article 41.2 in Irish Constitution (1937), which states that women best served the nation by their duties in the home, symbolically constructed a vision of Irish women and their societal value as bound to their fecund bodies. Catholic Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, one of chief architects of the Irish Constitution and chairman of the board of the NMH during the reintroduction of symphysiotomy, asserted in no uncertain terms that birth prevention was a crime (Cooney 1999, 340).<sup>2</sup>

In a submission to the United Nations Committee Against Torture, the Survivors of Symphysiotomy (SoS), an organization supporting women who have directly experienced obstetric violence (SoS 2014), detailed the widespread ongoing physical pain and psychological damage suffered as a result of symphysiotomy. Often performed under only local anaesthesia and frequently in front of large groups of male medical students, these women were subjected to post-operative pain, incontinence, gait problems, significant physical disabilities, nightmares, flashbacks and an inability to bond with their newborn babies. Some instances resulted in permanent brain damage or infant death.<sup>3</sup> It was problematic not only for its risks but also due to the failure of the medical profession to gain patients' informed consent—"[n]ot one mother reported that her consent had been sought prior to surgery" (O'Connor 2011, 25). Historian Jacqueline Morrissey, who first uncovered the use of symphysiotomy in the course of her research into the

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<sup>2</sup> Symphysiotomy was exported by doctors trained in Ireland to countries in Africa where access to maternity hospitals is limited.

<sup>3</sup> The procedure had a 10% infant mortality rate (O'Connor 2011, 80).

influence of Catholic ethics on medicine in Ireland, broke the story in 1999. Many of the survivors, now in their late 70s and 80s, first learned that they had undergone symphysiotomy at that time, or even later when the RTÉ Prime Time documentary *Brutal Procedure: The Symphysiotomy Scandal* (2010) gave details of the nearly 1,500 women who had been subjected to the barbaric practice.

The State established a redress scheme for survivors with compensation ranging from €50,000 to €150,000. The justification for an ex-gratia scheme, no blame admitted, was “to ‘relieve’ the survivors of the burden of pursuing their case through the courts” (Russell 2014). 399 women have been compensated through the scheme, though a number of independent claims have been taken by individuals. The UN Human Rights Committee Report (2014) expressed concern at the State’s failure to initiate an independent investigation into symphysiotomy and to hold accountable perpetrators who performed the operation without obtaining patient consent. Furthermore, the report called for remedies to survivors for the resulting damage from the practice. The perpetrators of obstetric violence are essentially “held harmless”, their actions excused, while the pain and suffering of those whose bodies were violated continues. Delaney’s desire to focus on the gendered experiences of suffering in an Irish context places her practice within a dialogue with the work of other Irish performance artists concerned with these issues, for example Amanda Coogan’s *Medea* (2001), Aine Phillips’ *Redress* performances (2010–2012), Dominic Thorpe and Sandra Johnston’s *Due Process 2* (2011), Helena Walsh’s *796 Pages* (2014), Sinead Keogh and Pauline Cummins’ collaborative performance *Remembrance* (2015) and Léann Herlihy’s *A Glove is a Gift* (2017). These works, like Delaney’s performances, critique the Catholic-controlled institutional erasure and silencing of survivor experiences (Antosik-Parsons 2014). Symphysiotomy can be understood as part of a pervasive climate of control of women’s bodies that underscored Irish society over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly when one considers that women who were perceived as having transgressed strict, Catholic-inflected social mores were detained in carceral institutions like Magdalene Laundries, or sent to Mother and Baby Homes to birth their illegitimate babies in secret.

### **Affective Aesthetics in *At What Point It Breaks***

*At What Point It Breaks* (2017) was performed as part of the performance exhibition *Fertile Ground* (Fumbally Exchange, 9 April 2017) which featured four live artworks centring on women’s bodies as a site of control by Church

and State.<sup>4</sup> All four artists included in *Fertile Ground* are known for work that directly addresses issues surrounding female bodies in Irish society, including abortion, maternal subjectivity, interrogation of gender relations and violence against women. The fact that this exhibition was held the day after the International Women's Day "Strike for Repeal" action (March 8, 2017)—an abortion rights protest in which 10,000 people, myself included, stopped traffic in the centre of Dublin for over an hour, meant that the recent activist events advocating for women's bodily autonomy were still fresh in people's minds. Curator Ciara McKeon's statement set the context for these performances and detailed their aim of activating female bodies as sites of agency and sites of resistance to patriarchy. In addition, the statement provided specific information about *At What Point It Breaks*, defining the procedure of symphysiotomy and referencing the advocacy work of SoS. This ensured that audience members were informed prior to the commencement of the artistic actions, whilst the performances preceding Delaney's foregrounded the issue of reproductive bodies and their perceived responsibilities to the Catholic Church and, by extension, the Irish State. The 25-person audience, composed of both women and men, was instructed by McKeon to stand within a square-shaped area marked on the floor of the gallery. Delaney, barefoot and in a black dress, entered the gallery carrying a bundle of about 25 tree branches, stripped of leaves and twigs, approximately 4 and half to 5 feet in length and between half an inch to 2 inches in diameter. Hugging the skeletal forms against her body, the branches pressed into her flesh, establishing a connection between form and body. Walking the perimeter of the space, she silently made eye contact with each person as she handed out individual branches. Once distributed, she stood in the middle of the space slowly scanning the room as she turned in a circle. As she approached, I met her gaze unflinchingly. She extended her hand expectantly and I conceded, returning the branch to her. Repositioning herself in the middle of the space she pressed the branch lengthwise against her and enfolded her body around it. Then, with a swiftness that took me by surprise, she bent at the waist, using the full force of her body to snap

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<sup>4</sup> The other performances were Frances Mezetti's *Shift* (2017), Siobhan Clancy's *Constitutional* (2017) and EL Putnam's *Fertile Ground* (2017). For analysis on feminist-inflected Irish art that seeks to subvert women's bodies as sites of control, see Kate Antosik-Parsons (2019), "A Body Is a Body: The Embodied Politics of Women's Sexual and Reproductive Rights in Contemporary Irish Art and Culture", [in:] *Reproductive Justice and Sexual Rights: Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Tanya S. Bahkru, New York: Routledge, pp. 33–58.



the branch in half. With the sudden and unanticipated violence of this action, I exhaled breath I hadn't realised I was holding. A hollow sound resonated throughout the space as the two halves of the branch fell to the floor. A variant of this interaction between viewer and artist was repeated throughout the forty-minute performance. Audible throughout were the haunting cracks of splintering branches, the involuntary sounds of physical exertion, and when the struggle subsided, a radiating silence.



Fig. 1. Máiréad Delaney, *At What Point It Breaks* (2017), Fumbally Exchange, Dublin. Performance still. Photograph by the author.

Delaney's performances render visible the invisible experiences of violence and pain. Violence is an injurious physical force or action, an unjust or unwarranted exertion of force or power. In respect of symphysiotomy, the violence is an egregious action perpetrated against birthing women's bodies. Pain is physical suffering or distress from injury, mental or emotional suffering or torment. Violence is the cause and pain is the effect. The multiple types of pain associated with symphysiotomy are the result of this unjust exertion of power over and against women's bodies. Delaney's performance references a very specific figuration of violence, obstetric violence. The legal term "obstetric violence" was introduced with Venezuela's 2007 "Organic Law on the Right of Women to a Life Free of Violence", which defined it as "the appropriation of the body and reproductive processes of women by health personnel, which is expressed as dehumanised treatment, an abuse of medication, and to convert the natural processes into pathological ones, bringing with it loss of autonomy and the ability to decide freely about their bodies and sexuality, negatively impacting the quality of life of women" (Pérez D'Gregorio 2010, 201). A specific violation of women's rights, obstetric violence occurs at the intersection of institutional violence and violence against women in pregnancy, childbirth and the post-partum period in both public and private medical practices. However, sociologist Linda Connolly notes that the term has caused divisions, "ranging from positions that advocate the superiority of midwife-led care over modern obstetrics to those who uphold the principles of modern medicine as a necessary form of power over women's own agency and choice, in the best interests of safe childbirth" (Connolly 2018). Breaking or sawing a woman's pelvis during childbirth constitutes obstetric violence and breaches her right to bodily integrity. This violation of women's bodies, in addition to the withholding of post-operative care, undoubtedly further compounds women's postpartum vulnerability. In simultaneously embodying violence and vulnerability, *At What Point It Breaks* brought the pain manifested through Delaney's actions in close proximity with women's experiences of obstetric violence, and this encounter resonated within the body of the viewer.

That there are other chilling examples of obstetric violence in 20<sup>th</sup> century Ireland demonstrates that women's birthing bodies and their reproductive capabilities were a site of control. The obstetrician gynaecologist Dr. Michael Neary at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, carried out 129 peripartum hysterectomies over a 25-year period (from 1974 to 1998). Tom Inglis observes that "[t]he reality is that the experiences of the women [subjected to this] were personal and confidential and, consequently hidden

from each other and the general public. But what is most disconcerting is that the vast majority of those who participated in or witnessed the regular removal of wombs, said or did nothing” (2008, 203). Not only does this illustrate that obstetric violence was largely hidden or erased but, as Inglis rightly points out, it demonstrates that the existing structures of power and the culture of the maternity unit were part of a wider system of control in which consultants went unchallenged. This illustrates how the obstetric violence, coupled with the pervasive patriarchal Catholic ethos of medical institutions, enabled these practices to appear normative and to continue without question. On the subject of violence perpetrated against such women harmed in childbirth Delaney asserts: “When individual voices are silenced in this way, we are left with lived violence. This violence resonates on a collective level” (Delaney 2016). The obstetric violence of symphysiotomies and non-consensual peripartum hysterectomies can be understood as part of a wider systemic violation of the reproductive bodies of Irish women, located in injustices perpetuated by the carceral Magdalene Laundry institutions, the Mother and Baby homes and the subsequent involuntary adoptions of the children born there, as well as the insertion of the pro-life 8<sup>th</sup> amendment in the Irish Constitution (1983).

As with any visual art created in response to human suffering, there is an obligation to address potential ethical issues that might arise. The germination of Delaney’s body of work began when learning about this brutal chapter in Irish history lead her to contact SoS. Since 2011, Delaney has spent a considerable amount of time cultivating relationships and building trust with the advocacy group and its members. These women know of Delaney’s artistic practice and she is creating work collaboratively and in solidarity with their struggles for justice. Furthermore, the artist has met individually with survivors who expressed an interest in discussing their experiences with her. While Delaney’s embodied performances are informed by these conversations, they are not literal translations or direct testimonies of the violence and pain these women have endured. As Delaney stresses, “[s]urvivors experienced brutalisation and erasure. When explicit and graphic details are extracted from them for use in the courtroom or to be broadcast to the public they not only stand to be re-traumatised, they stand to be excoriated, and disbelieved again”.<sup>5</sup> The performances themselves cannot, and should not, be understood as a direct transmission of witnessing personal stories of violence and pain, and Delaney acknowledges the impos-

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<sup>5</sup> Unpublished conversation with the artist.

sibility of this. As with any art that deals with pain and violence, there is a process of mediation, of distilling ideas about power, violence and subjectivity into embodied actions. Delaney reflects on this when she states: "I came to performance as a practice of embodied speech acts, gestures which attempt a simultaneous holding-at-bay of crushing violence and an affective entrance into the structure of feeling".<sup>6</sup> This push and pull between violence and affect sets up an impossible bind, a pressure that builds throughout the performance that cannot be resolved.

Pain in Delaney's performance of *At What Point It Breaks* was multiple, enacted in different ways. In an earlier piece entitled *Hold Harmless* (2015), performed over a series of days outside the National Maternity Hospital and Four Courts, she struggled to walk with rose thorns embedded into her inner thighs. In a related action, also titled *Hold Harmless II* (2015), she bore the burden of a heavy sink split in half, strung on a wire round her neck. In *Breach* (2017), red hot sparks from an axel grinder cutting through a bathtub arced against her pelvis, and of course in *At What Point It Breaks* she used her body to break branches. Women who endured symphysiotomies, which were primarily performed during the "trial of labour", experienced two types of pain: the gendered pains of childbirth resulting from the contraction of the muscles of the uterus and by pressure on the cervix, and also the "unnatural pain" that resulted from the splitting of the pelvis. Historically, religious objections to pain relief during labour centred largely on the grounds that pain relief violated nature, that "the Old Testament demanded pain during childbirth as punishment for Eve's surrender to temptation in Genesis" (Skowronski 2015, 26). The pain associated with symphysiotomy is also an exclusively gendered pain resulting from obstetric violence. Survivor Mathilda Behan described the brute force of what she was subjected to: "I had a local anaesthetic, but I was awake through it. The pain? It was excruciating... I was just held down like I was just a cow. My whole person was violated, like as if I was raped" (Holland 2002, 3). Furthermore, survivors have detailed how they were forced to walk shortly after surgery and that their experiences of pain were dismissed by the doctors meant to provide care for them. Another survivor, describing the lasting effects of symphysiotomy, "thought this was her fault, along with her unbearable backache, frequent incontinence and sense of shame" (Ruane 2002, 14). That survivors blamed themselves for their maternal bodies not functioning as expected in childbirth, only to later learn some thirty to fifty years later of

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<sup>6</sup> Unpublished conversation.

the unauthorised surgery they were subjected to, contributes a massive psychological burden to the violation of trust. Contrary to the dismissals women faced when they voiced their experiences of their broken bodies, pain in Delaney's performances facilitates an affective experience that provokes a greater awareness of gendered violence in Irish society.

*At What Point It Breaks* engaged in a bodily and tactile affective aesthetics that manifested in the tension felt throughout the performance. A physical, corporeal tension was apparent when the artist held each branch along the length of her body in turn, adjusting it repeatedly before snapping it. It could be felt in the ways her body increasingly struggled with the branches; sometimes she had several attempts before she succeeded in making the break. Tarja Laine has described the interplay between the affective disposition of the viewer(s) and the performance itself suggesting that

[i]n an aesthetic experience, the spectator's intentional attitude gets entangled with the affective attitude that is embodied in the work of art. This entanglement enables an emotional response, which in turn facilitates philosophical reflection—although not necessarily in a linear fashion. This reflection is simultaneously a matter of feeling and thinking, of “thinking-feelingly” and “feeling-thoughtfully” (Laine 2015, 10).

This “entanglement” was certainly at play in *At What Point It Breaks* and resulted in the deeply uncomfortable psychological tension that built up throughout the performance, and was collectively manifested in the bodies of the viewers, such as in the ways people uncomfortably shifted their weight as they stood to watch, in the tightening of fists and the wringing of hands. It could be felt in the way gazes were diverted from Delaney's body to the floor, the wall and even the bodies of other viewers when bearing witness visually through eye contact with the artist seemed impossible. Fighting against the impulse to turn away, I clenched my jaw, swallowed to clear my throat and continued to focus on the performance before me.

Recoiling, wincing, grimacing, shifting with discomfort, these are all deeply affective embodied responses that can arise from such a performance of pain. What purpose do they serve in the context of performance? Jill Bennett envisages the “micro bodily reactions”, like squirming or recoiling, as a way of distancing oneself from the pain or violence of the action. It functions either as a pause or as a “regrouping of the self” and a “condition of continued participation”, in that it lets the viewer “feel the image, but also

maintain the distance between self and image" (Bennett 2005, 43). The intensity associated with this performance was a mutually constructed atmosphere that oscillated between the actions of the artist, the willingness (or reluctance) of the audience to continue to participate in the performance and the atmosphere that permeated the space after each breakage. The performance of pain in this context engenders an emotional reaction that counters the supposed "objective" detachment of the medical professionals who advocated the practice: the breaking of each branch collapsing the viewers' objective distance. Discussing the use of pain in Marina Abramović's *Lips of Thomas* (1975) Bennett says the body functions as a "ground of inscription, experienced as sustaining sensation", and that it promises to emerge as something other than the site of pain. However, the viewer cannot read the body as an object separate from the process of wounding, and therefore experiences the tension of the affective encounter, reading the artist's body as simultaneously a body in pain and an image of representation (Bennett 2005, 38). Though the viewers of *At What Point It Breaks* could not directly feel the artist's pain, one observed the strength required to break the branch, witnessed the embodied struggle against the upright force of the branch, and perhaps, most importantly, anticipated with some trepidation, the jarring sensations of the next break. And despite knowing what was to come—a sharp inhalation of breath, the exertion of the body, the crack of the branch, and the resulting pain after the break—the viewer's body still involuntarily flinched when it happened.

*At What Point It Breaks* also demonstrated there is no singular definition of pain, but that it is multiple, layered and nuanced. It pointedly dismissed pain as a universalising experience and yet each audience member was able to read the body in pain in front of them, suggesting that while we all had our own perceptions of what pain meant, we connected those perceptions and affective responses through the embodied gestures of the performance. It allowed us to think about the pain located at the pivot of a woman's body while watching her produce a jarring and terrifying crack from precisely this place. Affective responses to this encounter propelled the audience toward cognitive reflection. Although they could turn away from the sight of the performance, it was not possible to escape the reflection that intense pain had been inflicted on women's bodies in the name of religious authorities. Many of us witnessing that performance brought with us a prior awareness of the symphysiotomy cases, including the government's failure to admit wrong-doing in State-run hospitals. Given the lack of an independent enquiry and deliberate time-wasting tactics on behalf of the compensation

scheme, resulting in elderly women facing the possibility of not seeing justice done before they die, the performance provoked a palpable sense of outrage.<sup>7</sup>

At what point, though, does the viewer break? The notion of a breakage or a breach in terms of this performance can also be used to refer to the interactions and responses between viewer and artwork, and the potential for unexpected responses. In her book on the history of Irish symphysiotomy, O'Connor raises a relevant point: "these operations were often performed during labour under the gaze of large numbers of staff. Two generations of midwives and doctors [...] must have stood and watched as obstetricians sundered women's symphises or split their pubic bones" (2011, 25). As we stood round the artist, handing her branch after branch, I wondered to what extent we assumed responsibility for what continued to transpire before our eyes? Were we complicit in inflicting violence and pain? At a certain point in the performance I became aware that it was likely the artist's intention was to break every branch. I felt a certain crushing intensity in my own body with this revelation. Casting my eyes around the room I located the branch that seemed to be the thickest in diameter. Based on my perceptions of her body language and the direction of her gaze, it was obvious the person next to me had reached the same conclusion and our bodies turned slightly toward each other, for but a moment we were united in that feeling. In that instant, I shared an intense moment with a fellow audience member that was secondary to the immediacy of the performance. Perhaps it was fear, uncertainty or bewilderment, but that silent acknowledgement of an exchange between us profoundly shaped my understanding of this work.

According to Doris Kolesch, performance art collapses "the perceptual convention of aesthetic distance that is fundamental to conventional aesthetics" because the artist's body functions as both the medium and the subject matter (2011, 242). The audience are understood as participants and therefore bear a shared responsibility "for the events that occur, and for what they have heard and seen in each case, since no central perspective, no dominant version, and no authoritative interpretation is offered" (Ibid.). That artist and audience share responsibility for the events that occur suggests the potential for ethical dilemmas to arise in the course of the performance. The woman holding the thickest branch appeared to be somewhat appre-

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed discussion on the issues of time in relation to symphysiotomy survivors, see Máiréad Enright (2018), "No. I Won't Go Back": National Time, Trauma and Legacies of Symphysiotomy in Ireland", [in:] *Law and Time*, eds. Siân M. Benyon-Jones and Emily Grabham, Routledge: London, pp. 46–74.

hensive, she shifted her weight nervously from foot to foot and her grip tightened on the branch she held in her outstretched hand. As the performance continued and the artist struggled both physically and mentally with her endeavour, the woman holding the thickest branch made a decision. In what can be read as a gesture of compassion or empathy, she stepped back from the performance's perimeter, quietly propped her branch against a wall out of reach of the artist and quickly exited the gallery without a backwards glance. It appeared that the intensity of the embodied actions had pushed that particular viewer to her breaking point.



Fig. 2. Máiréad Delaney, *At What Point It Breaks* (2017), Fumbally Exchange, Dublin. Performance still. Photograph by the author.

How can the concept of a breakage, a fissure or a breach be used in performance to think through the obstetric violence and enduring pain inflicted upon women's birthing bodies? In the context of *At What Point It Breaks*, breakage encompasses a duality, since it was both the act of breaking and the state of being broken. It implied the physical violence perpetrated against mothers and the recurring and chronic physical and psychological pain resulting from that breakage in and on the body. Break and fix are



binary oppositions. However, in this performance the manner in which the branches were shattered suggested an inability to fix or rectify the damage done. Using her own body as the instrument of blunt force, Delaney mimicked the ways in which doctors violated the bodies of birthing women. Within the performance there was a split between the body that breaks and the body that is broken, and yet Delaney's body occupied both subject positions. Erin Hood argues that performance generates both embodied and subjective knowledge as a result of the emphasis on the body and contextual factors of representation: "By highlighting that embodiment and subjectivity work together, performance provides a way of recognising that there is a connection between pain and self and that the connection is complex, not casual" (2013, 77). If a breach or breakage provides a space for transformation, there is another subject position at stake in performance, particularly when pain pushes beyond the limits of representation. The lack of a "clean" break with the splintering of each branch suggested the potential for affective experiences triggered by pain and violence to collapse the boundaries between self and others. This illustrates that performance art has the capacity to move from the individual to the collective, and from the personal to the political.



Fig. 3. Máiréad Delaney, *At What Point It Breaks* (2017), Fumbally Exchange, Dublin. Performance still. Photograph by the author.

## Conclusion

The simultaneous violation and vulnerability of the embodied gestures in *At What Point It Breaks* were deeply felt. Though the audience cannot know the actual physical pain and psychological suffering of survivors, the brutal violence and pain of Delaney's performance produced intense affects that provoked responses to the silencing and erasure of obstetric violence in Irish society. As Máiréad Enright argues,

the women have a right to reparations, which must be proportionate to the violence done to them. Reparations ought to be satisfactory to the majority of survivors. They can also include a guarantee of non-repetition and appropriate law reform: for example, the Irish State might ensure that pregnant women will never again be subjected to invasive medical treatment against their will (2014, 14).

As Delaney's embodied performance suggested, although the State might intend to make nominal restitutions, there may never be a satisfactory redress of the violence and pain these women endured. Ultimately, nothing can "relieve" the burden of suffering. In analysing *At What Point It Breaks*, there were a number of important issues raised regarding how viewers experience embodied gestures and respond to the affective encounters with their own bodies. Additionally, Delaney's performance addressed the issues of shared responsibility and questioned how wider society might bear responsibility for the pain and suffering of these women. This article argued that Delaney's performance utilised the concept of a breach in representation as a means of critiquing insidious patriarchal power and reproductive injustices in Ireland.

## Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Gerry Kearns for his invaluable suggestions.

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## Part IV

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Other Affects:

Non-humans and Posthumans



**Justyna Stępień\***

**Affective Entanglements  
of Posthuman Bodies in Pain  
in Matthew Barney's *Drawing Restraint 9***

**Abstract**

This article analyses Mathew Barney's 2005 experimental film *Drawing Restraint 9* in the context of affective entanglements of the human body with biological, technological and geological processes. The artist's production, as the paper proposes, indicates the necessity to rework the heightened hierarchical relationships of humans with non-human worlds. The bodies in pain—both human and non-human—in his work undergo constant morphogenesis, becoming a complex multiplicity with multiple layers of reference far beyond the human-social paradigm. As the paper implies, by referring to the writings of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari and their new materialist theoretical reworkings, Barney's film reveals unfolds the sustainability of interconnections and intra-actions of different matters that produce forms of socio-cultural resistance, eventually opening up possibilities of bodily regeneration.

**Keywords**

Mathew Barney, Affective Encounters, Posthuman Bodies, More-than-representational Theory, Affirmative Aesthetics

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Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned.

Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain*

## **Introduction:**

### **The Body in Pain and More-than-representation Processes**

In her 1985 study devoted to the functions and possibilities of the conceptualisation of physical pain in social responses, Elaine Scarry highlights its inexpressibility in any linguistic or semiotic system. Physical pain erases any appropriation and representational processes, placing itself always at the primordial stage, beyond socio-cultural frameworks. As she subsequently argues, “[pain’s] resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but is essential to what it is” (1985, 5). Not surprisingly, questions as to how to render such pain, how to make it visible, have engaged artists working across different media for centuries. For artists who seek to capture, imagine and represent it without falling into the traps of generalisation, naturalisation, fictionalisation, sentimentalisation and—ultimately—indifference to the sheer weight of pain, Scarry’s theoretical contribution paves the way for reconfigurations of discursive and representational methods. These reworkings have established a new non-representational agenda, also known as “more-than-representational theory” (Lorimer 2005, 83), based on “embodied actions rather than talk or cognitive attitudes” (2005, 84).

What particularly interests me in this quotation is the return to the pre-linguistic level as a significant step in the socio-cultural recognition of the complexities of bodies in pain. Though enfleshed, pain becomes depersonalised as language structures cannot fully evoke its true nature. In other words, referring back to the introductory quotation, pain is expressed via unidentified sounds produced by inner struggles, states and passions that are not adequately expressible within linguistic and paralinguistic frameworks. As such, bodily processes previously analysed mainly through a discursive lens, by means of poststructural writings, are now reconfigured by performative practices that challenge forms of representation, activating the unknown, unwanted and deeply hidden meanings of pain. In the idiom of



Rosi Braidotti, this is the point at which bios-zoe power<sup>1</sup> is restored (2011, 302), which she defines as the non-human aspects of our lives embedded in our embodied entanglements. The shift from the linguistic approach to the dynamics of flows, intensities and passions brings us closer to our interrelations with both human and non-human forces that operate on the same affective level. From that perspective, the acknowledgement of pain can be associated with openness to others, understood—in Spinoza's sense—as affecting and being affected by others through mutually dependent correlations (Braidotti 2011, 304). Against the dominant rhetoric of advanced capitalism that continually reproduces the negative discourse of melancholia and suffering, pain, under this stance, no longer derives from negative connotations—often neutralised by language and semiotic material—but instead from bodily interactions with the environment that allow one to comprehend and sustain its complexity and affective relations with the non-human. This moment of the disposal of inner passivity, which stems from cultural conceptualisations of pain, and the subsequent realisation of constant modulation and interrelation with the non-human, drawing from Spinoza's ethics, is “the qualitative leap through pain, across the mournful landscapes of nostalgic yearning” (Braidotti 2011, 322). Also, as Braidotti asserts, in this manner, we can experiment with other relations as a way of producing an ethics of affirmation (2011, 320).

This theoretical line of thought brings me back to the recent shifts in artistic practices and performances which concentrate on doings and affective resonances rather than on representations to address bodies struggling with pain. Moreover, if we describe affect, following Simon O'Sullivan, as extra-discursive and extra-textual potential outside discourse and socio-cultural structures that is felt as differences in intensity (2001, 126–131), we may deduce that affect belongs to the “realm of non-representable” (Bal 2012, 134). Thus the performativity of the body plays a pivotal role in these artistic experiments due to its endless affective capacity for actions that often transcend the human, and restore relations with inanimate objects, living non-human matter, place, ephemeral phenomena and technologies (Vannini 2015, 5–6). In effect, through their regained agencies, images and multimodal practices can reveal the inexpressibility of the body in pain, which is always relational, and interconnected with the social, cultural and non-human.

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<sup>1</sup> To be more precise, for Braidotti “zoe” is associated with non-human life (2011, 99), whereas “bios” stands for the discursive, social sphere. Zoe decentres bios as the measure of all things, creating harmony between both.

To analyse the affective potential of images of bodies in pain, I propose to critically examine Matthew Barney's 2005 experimental film *Drawing Restraint*<sup>2</sup> (with music composed by Bjork, who appears, with Barney, in the production). It is the continuation of the artist's series of practices, initiated in the late eighties, centred on numerous tests of physical endurance and human transformation. As the title of this project indicates, it pries into the tension between resistance and creativity that also subverts the logic of the representational process. Since his earliest works, Barney has been challenging the physical constraints imposed by socio-cultural frameworks, showing that the body, when pushed to its limits in order to forge close interconnections with hostile environments, is "constructed as a productive system that strives for potential metamorphoses" (Zapperi 2014, 3). The artist produced a diagram<sup>3</sup> that illustrates the productive role of numerous constraints in the creative process. Divided into the stages of situation, condition and production, Barney's considerations on artistic practice emphasise that the body is the raw material—a living organism comparable to plants, animals and other living matters—with which he works through restrictive and often harsh conditions (Zapperi 2014, 5). While producing artistic forms, he challenges the borders of endurance to different kinds of matter, regardless of the pain he has to bear. While exercising his body to its limits, he blurs the line between being an athlete and an artist. Barney constructed body-building equipment for his projects so as to have more physical obstacles to overcome during the artistic process. This equipment enabled him to indicate that both artistic and physical acts are complicated, even harrowing, experiences.

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<sup>2</sup> The film is the result of extensive research into Japanese history and culture, which Barney fuses with his interests in the metamorphosis of the body in extreme states. Mathew Barney is a contemporary American artist who has been working with multimedia formats (sculptures, experimental films, drawings, photographs and performances) that are artistic reflections of bodily processes. His project *Cremaster Cycle*, produced between 1994 and 2002, consisted of five feature-length films that feature Barney in myriad roles. While dealing with the world of mythological symbolism, art history and taboo topics, Barney explores the potentials of bodily reactions in the cycle. However, it was the *Drawing Restraint* series, firstly initiated by Barney in 1987 and continued today, that brought the artist wider acclaim. Influenced by his earlier athletic experience, Barney's series indicates that art-making is like athletic training, as the body plays a central role in it. The series consists of 19 pieces of material, some of which are videos, sculptural installations, photographs or drawings that evoke ritualistic processes of creation.

<sup>3</sup> The diagram is available on Barney's website ([www.drawingrestraint.net](http://www.drawingrestraint.net)).

Interestingly, his earliest works from the *Drawing Restraint* series, which investigated the body exposed to considerable physical effort and pain, delve—with an almost surgical precision—into the transformation of its anatomical processes. These “tests” are particularly accentuated in his 1991 collage work *Hypertrophy*, whose title refers directly to the medical condition of growing and developing muscles through the enlargement of cells. This method of muscle expansion is common in bodybuilders, who practically torture their bodies to achieve what they see as the perfect physique. From that perspective, Barney’s work can be interpreted as the medical evaluation of his own physicality and, most importantly, as an artistic practice that can be perceived as a form of exercise during which the artist has to endure and resist. Moreover, as Barney explains, “the principle of resistance training is that you exhaust your muscles, effectively tearing them down, then resting for a period of time to allow those muscles to heal [...] I always imagined it as an ascending sine curve of growth and recovery” (Barney 2005, 87). These physical practices led Barney to consider “how [his body] might make a case for resistance as a prerequisite for creativity” (2005, 87). Barney’s works show that representations of the body sometimes require an act of self-creation in tandem with processes of self-destruction on the part of the artist.

While focusing on the reworkings of the species dichotomy *Drawing Restraint 9* examines the materiality of both human and non-human bodies and explores the complex alliances between human and non-human engagements, composing an affective “*mise en abyme* of posthuman<sup>4</sup> landscape” (Frichot 2015, 55). It is set in Japan’s Nagasaki Bay—to be more precise on a whaling factory ship, the Nisshin Maru. In this work, Barney performs the relationality of the human body with biological, technological and geological processes, indicating the necessity to rework the heightened hierarchical relations established by humans and also the violence inflicted upon non-human worlds. To indicate those disproportions, the posthuman bodies of Barney’s film perform to the level of exhaustion and experience pain as a direct result of their unequal relationships with the environment. Barney’s film activates a posthumanist environmental ethics<sup>5</sup> in which the artist’s

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<sup>4</sup> Posthuman landscape is understood here as the condition in which all lives—human, animal, vegetal—are equally related to one another. It illustrates the ethics of interaction between humans and non-human others.

<sup>5</sup> Posthuman ethics is far less concerned with defining the principles and rules that mark the human as an exceptional kind of being than it is with attending to ecological principles underscoring complex patterns of connectivity (Bignal, Hemming and Rigney, 466).

work transcends the model of the exhaustion of the body within the natural world of the Anthropocene. It allows for a more empathic understanding of the body as changing, changeable and transformable due to its intra-activity with the environment, understood here—following Karen Barad—“not as a static relationality but a doing, the enactment of boundaries, that always entails constitutive exclusions and therefore requisite questions of accountability” (2003, 803). In effect, this affective conceptualisation of life processes enables the artist to demand that humans should see themselves as co-agents of environmental processes.

### Barney's Affective Bodily Practices

For Brian Massumi, affect is an “intensity”, and not “semantically or semiotically ordered”, which is “embodied in purely autonomic reactions most directly manifested in the skin—at the surface of the body, at its interface with things” (2002, 24–25). In other words, what he attempts to convey is that these are sensations of vibration, resonance and movement that can affect bodies at a material, pre-subjective, signifying level. Affects are independent of consciousness and emotions but produce unexpected spaces of immersion which enhance, in the idiom of Massumi, the “shock to thought”.<sup>6</sup> This anxiety and uneasiness, which is a direct result of the application of performative methods, is significant in the experimental nature of Barney's work. In an interview conducted with Barney in the documentary film *Matthew Barney: No Restraint*, the artist emphasised that the stories of *Drawing Restraint 9*

are the removal of the arm from the field and the oval of the field is the body [...] It is about removing the resistance from the body and there being a potentiality for a sensuality or eroticism or something that then the project has not allowed itself to have before. So there is the sense that removing the restraint can allow for something emotionally positive, but that puts the body in a state of atrophy somehow (2008).

When analysed from this perspective, the film does not convey pre-determined meanings but instead acts against our expectations, continually challenging the idea of the static image and engaging viewers in an accumulation of variable forms that “circulate, mix with one another, solidify and dissolve in the formation of more or less enduring things” (Vannini 2015, 5). These intensities of different textures of unsettling imagery make Barney's

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<sup>6</sup> I am referring here to the title of the collection *A Shock to Thought. Expression after Deleuze and Guattari*, edited by Brian Massumi (2002, New York: Routledge).

production an insight into morphogenetic processes accelerated by embodied movements and affective intensities. To be more precise, *Drawing Restraint 9* is a feature-length work combining non-linear narratives on human and non-human worlds, large-scale sculptures, photographs, musical pieces and drawings that produce a mixed media work with multiple affective layers. Also, although the film focuses on Barney, latterly accompanied by Bjork, as a Western guest in Japan, with the two of them visiting a whaling ship and developing closer relations with crew members as well as the natural habitat—more attention is clearly paid to uncovering different materialities than to the development of the characters. The gradual corporeal transformation of the artists in fact occurs in tandem with the material processes triggered by the complex web of events that unfold on land and sea. Viewers may be left with the impression that, as Ron Broglio notes, “land and sea, fur-bearing humans and smooth-skinned ones develop a language of give and take, a pidgin language of hospitality and exchange” (2011, 128). However, going even further beyond the linguistic perspective, Barney’s world is full of rapture and fissures that produce new vectors, movements and intensities reactivated by affective encounters of materials, images and stories often not related with one another semantically or formally. For instance, scenes from highly industrialised areas are accompanied by shots taken during the celebrations for a new ship in the bay, underwater explorations, the tea ceremony below deck on the whaling ship and the geology museum. They all form an assemblage of human and non-human elements. As a result, we receive the aesthetics of potentialities that emerges from the formal and semantic combinations. As such, if we believe that “affect marks a body’s *belonging* to a world of encounters; a world’s belonging to a body of encounters” (Gregg and Seigworth 2010, 2; emphasis in the original), the constant exchange of matters in Barney’s images is always beyond the discursive, actualising for us the invisible and unknown universes in order to lead viewers to numerous material engagements. The different methods and techniques of conceptualisation applied by Barney thus unfold the dynamism of biological matter and various material forces, emphasising that “affect is not the passage from one lived state to another but man’s non-human becoming” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, 173). And as Deleuze and Guattari explain, affect is “a zone of indetermination, of indiscernibility, as if things, beasts, and persons endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation” (173). Barney’s production thus accelerates the affective processes that trigger potentialities which are often hidden within the world’s complexities.

### Geological Bodying and Sustainability in *Drawing Restraint 9*

The initial scenes of the film introduce us to the territory of human and non-human affects through sequences showing a woman carefully wrapping two halves of a fossilised shell and Barney wearing an animal skin standing on the deck of the whaling ship, observing the industrialised harbour of Nagasaki Bay and its natural beauty. The scene intimates that the artist will test the limits of his own body in the context of the land's geological history. Barney's investigation of the complexity of geological materials makes of him an archaeologist or geologist who studies the transformations of layers and structures of the Anthropocene through focusing on understanding human interactions with the land. However, even though the Anthropocene is officially defined as the epoch of the irreversible influence of human and global industrialisation, the work does not present clear pictures of species extinction, ageing populations, global warming, post-peak oil and the wholesale exhaustion of worlds. Rather than using widely acknowledged images of ecological catastrophe, in subsequent scenes Barney opens up his and Bjork's bodies to the complex structures of the environment and its materiality, forging a mobile network of constitutive relations with fossils, underwater flora and fauna, highly industrialised objects produced by the factories in the bay and socio-cultural rituals conducted on the deck of the whaling ship. In other words, referring to Stacey Alaimo's concept of transcorporeality that implies humankind's inseparability from the environment, the work emphasises the idea that "if nature is to matter, we need more potent, more complex understandings of its materiality" (2010, 2), not the sentimental and romanticised representation of nature that is dominant in socio-cultural codes.

Thus, in the opening scene, the camera closely studies the details of the fossils and their porosities, trying to find signs of their agency in an attempt to establish their connection with the human world and unfold the history that derives from the accumulation of human and non-human encounters. In this respect, this relationship is inspected not merely in regard to human history, but also to a measure of time that uses "rock strata as the main focus for understanding evolution and change" (Parrika 2018, 51). The ritual of wrapping the fossils indeed suggests the complex interaction of both social practices and natural phenomena. The fossils are the archives of human and non-human activities throughout geological epochs, thanks to which we can understand our interactions and relations. The scene implies that thinking through both bodies and the world's materiality "may catalyse the recognition that the environment is not an inert space for human use but, in fact, is

the world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims and actions" (Alaimo 2010, 2). So even though this is a world on the verge of ecological disaster, the work avoids looking at the tragic position of the human and instead unearths the other entangled territories/layers of materials and discursive, natural and cultural elements, biological and textual, as if trying to prove that this is a fluid space, with many alternatives and potentials that enable humans to act creatively and to understand the substance of the self as being interconnected with the environment.

Barney's subversion of the traditional apocalyptic scenario is in line with Rosi Braidotti's assertion that by "moving across and beyond pain, loss and negative passions" (2011, 322), humans can actively create affirmative ways to overcome the resignation, passivity and negative connotations that have come to dominate our existence in the Anthropocene. This approach allows the artist to subvert the anthropocentric fallacy which lies behind the solely scientific understanding of the Earth framed through modes of the visual: data visualisation, satellite imagery, climate modelling, etc. Instead, we are in fact both affecting and being affected by mental, social and environmental transformations, constantly undergoing an endurance test. As Frichot contends, "Barney's experiments can be seen as a series of extreme experiments that enable an imaginary of these new ecologies to emerge, but only by placing the man-form under extreme duress" (2015, 61). Braidotti also emphasises that our body can signalise and map out the threshold of sustainability and limit-experience which breaks the frame of predictable subject positions (2011, 316). For her, the poetics of sustainability entails the necessity of containing the other, suffering, enjoyment, the organic and non-organic, and allowing subjects to redefine the same-other relation, affecting and being affected by others through mutually dependent correlations, and finally finding possible and creative ways to endure the painful consequences of the ecological transformations of the planet. Indeed, this emphasis on the relational materiality of ecologies and bodies allows us to trigger more positive approaches towards the relationship between the human and the non-human in the Anthropocene. Also, while continually imposing obstacles to overcome his physical limitations in the film, Barney sees the body as a productive system that strives for potential metamorphoses, as we will see in the next section of this essay.

## Multispecies Bodying and Posthumanist Ethics

McKenzie Wark points out that, in trying to redefine the anthropocentric perspective, “one can understand the Anthropocene as a metabolic rift, movement of materials and the labour that mobilises these elements” (qtd. in Parrika 2018, 51). Inevitably, this fluid exchange and assemblage of bodily and socio-cultural processes is particularly accentuated in the scenes of the film that take place below deck on the whaling ship where Barney and Bjork participate in a traditional Japanese tea ceremony. Just before the event, the guests are bathed, dressed and groomed in the elaborate skin and fur costumes associated with traditional Shinto wedding attire.<sup>7</sup> Bjork’s teeth are blackened with squid ink and porcupine quill ornaments are placed in her hair, and horns are attached to Barney’s head, enriching his arctic-like fur. The natural adornments on the garments worn by Bjork and Barney—shells, feathers, antlers and animal skins—are not intended to make them more sophisticated or to assert human superiority over other organisms, but rather to place all those elements close to one another irrespective of their roots and traits. There is a tension between self-imposed resistance and the restrained body overburdened with the heavy garments, and the possibilities of crossings between inside/outside, human/animal, natural/artificial, organic/inorganic dichotomies. The process of becoming non-human is set in motion, building up the two artists’ relations with the more-than-human worlds. Then, interestingly, the stable connection with the non-human is enriched with the social event in a tatami room below deck, where they engage in the highly-ritualised tea ceremony during which the tea ceremony master asks a series of questions. So although the words—the only discursive moment in the whole production—provide the guests with rules and patterns of behaviour that must be obeyed in order to respect tradition, they also constrain them, both by limiting their bodily movements and by making them follow a normative code of behaviour.

When the formal ceremony finishes, the artists are left alone, and an erotic and passionate embrace takes place. However, this intimacy does not last long as we are soon exposed to the images of the subsequent morphogenesis of the artists’ bodies. The transformation is accelerated by the

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<sup>7</sup> Barney refers here to the traditional Japanese Shinto wedding tradition, which is connected closely to practices of worshipping nature. While performing wedding rituals, the couple—dressed in traditional outfits—firstly undergoes the ritual of purification, and then they participate in a ceremony of sharing sake. Barney’s film adopts the core stages of the traditional ceremony, which brings the actors closer to the natural world, blurring the borderland between the human and the non-human.



stormy weather outside and the events happening on the deck, where the crew are constructing a sculpture created from a Vaseline-like substance that resembles the shape of a whale. Then everything changes all of a sudden when the tea-room begins to flood with a mixture of seawater and petroleum from the mould, covering up the bodies of the lovers and filling the space below deck. The distance between various bodies and matters is reduced as the liquids engulf and implicate all participants. And as the mixture of Vaseline and water rises rapidly, Bjork and Barney pick up flensing knives (used for the butchering of whales) and begin to cut flesh from one another's legs, layer by layer, very carefully, the whole process being observed by the viewer. The ritual of slaughtering of whales transforms here the lovers themselves. However, rather than blood and gore covering the scene, the substances emitted from the wounds they inflict on each other mix with the other substances present in the room, producing a metabolic assemblage of human and non-human fluids.

At this point, it is worth noting that pain barely surfaces in the scene. It is there but beneath the visible, belonging to the realm of affects that accelerate the characters' mutation to the non-human. There is the acknowledgement of pain, but then it is reconfigured into something more positive. Following Rosi Braidotti, we can see this as a direct effect of the awareness that "internal disarray, fracture, and pain are the conditions of possibility for ethical transformation" (2011, 322). As the flesh is removed from the artists' legs, whale-like tails are revealed beneath and, finally, we see the artists' metamorphosis. They become half-whale, half-human. However, there is neither sentimental glorification of the proximity of humans with animals nor an attempt to make visible the brutality act of cutting away the flesh, since the action is driven by their desires and passion, strengthening their close relationship with the underwater world. We may conclude that Barney and Bjork dissolve into a series of non-dualistic and non-oppositional dualities, organic and nonorganic, visible and invisible, the important hybrid matters (Braidotti 2011, 145), subsequently also destabilising the cinematic imagery of the production.

These scenes imply that one gets to know the other through the fragility of the human subject stretched to its limits. Pain in Barney's film is not understood as an obstacle, but as a threshold that maps out vectors of emancipatory practices. If for Deleuze and Guattari becoming-animal means "making the move, reaching a continuum of intensities that only have value for themselves, finding a world of pure intensities, where all the forms get undone, as well as all the significations in favour of matter yet un-formed" (1986, 13), these scenes from the film go further, showing that experiments

with the limits of our bodies and the levels of subversion that are possible can challenge the complexities engendered by our historicity. Once the interaction with non-human affectivity is embodied, its materiality can be explained by its particular metamorphic quality, which oscillates between the states of disintegration and reintegration. As Ron Broglio asserts, “Barney’s cutting undoes human subjectivity and the myth of human interiority [...] there is no interiority there, no *Dasein* or being-there below or within the human body. Instead, there are layers of flesh and organs that shift in shape and function” (2011, 131), while encountering the other. The artists’ organs are repurposed as they now stretch between the lives of humans and the life and death of whales, “spilling out in new ways, in a pidgin language of surfaces, worlds and desires” (2011, 133).

## Coda

Pain is a sensorial, affective phenomenon as it stems directly from our encounters with the inexpressible and the diminished, bringing us closer to the more-than-human-world. One of the aims of artistic practice is thus to experiment for the living in the damaged world, picking up on non-representational methods that offer us possibilities to forge a relationship with the non-human. As Karen Barad contends, “all bodies, not merely ‘human’ bodies, come to matter through the world’s iterative intra-activity—its performativity” (2003, 823). In other words, human bodies are not objects with internal boundaries and properties; they are material and discursive phenomena, not inherently different from the non-human. Seen in this light, Barney’s performative production, while taking us on a journey—a rite of passage through his physical, psychological and geographical landscape of digestion, repression, morphing and destruction—accelerates transformative affects that point out the markers of sustainability. Viewers are confronted with scenes of the surplus accumulation of objects and posthuman bodies, interconnected thanks to movements and transformations of different matters. His posthumanist reflection allows the artist to rework the discourse on pain and its relation with the Anthropocene and thus concentrate not only on the negative impact of humans on the environment but also on offering a reading of human history through the atmosphere and geological processes (Parrika 2018, 51), indicating the complex patterns of connectivity that produce outcomes of justice and injustice. Barney’s assemblages show, and particularly so during the tea ceremony scene of the film, that “[in] Japan we recognise ourselves as a part of nature, accepting the impermanence of our existence” (Barney 2005).

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**Alina Mitek-Dziemba\***

## **Vulnerability, Mourning and Religious Compassion: A Cross-Species Perspective**

### Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the notion of vulnerability and suffering as an aspect of animal bodily existence that, despite its negative connotations, is a highly interesting point of convergence for human-animal studies and the branch of aesthetics concerned with the interplay of individual and collective affectivities in the works of art. Arguing for the existence of a cross-species community of affect, the author bases her analyses on Judith Butler's ontology of precariousness and seeks to establish a vital connection between the political and social experience of vulnerability on the one hand, and rituals of mourning inspired by compassion on the other. The argument points to the possibility of charting new trajectories of affect in political praxis and art which do not only establish a cross-species community of suffering, but also bridge the gap between humans and animals as religious subjects, which is conceived here as a profoundly emancipatory gesture.

### Keywords

Vulnerability, Aesthetic of Affect, Religion, Animals, Mourning

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## Introduction: The Aesthetics of Affect and Animal Vulnerability

We are all seen by animals. Individual animals with their own biographies and sufferings and desires [...]. This is a basic datum, a naked fact, a fact shared among the sentient: we look at each other. We are naked, vulnerable, exposed, suffering, and we can communicate this to each other. [...]

We are born into our own vulnerability among vulnerable others, and a basic restraint—the seed of what we are here calling compassion—must be present for the world to continue [...] The realization that “yes, [animals] suffer” cannot be doubted because it is prior to the subject who asks questions—it is in a sense the origin of questioning.

Aaron S. Gross, *The Question of the Animal and Religion*

Being in pain, suffering, feeling vulnerable and susceptible to violence are all modes of experience available to both human and non-human agents as they are endowed with flesh and share the faculty of sentience. The community of suffering, vulnerability and finitude is merely “a basic datum, a naked fact” (Gross 2014, 127) that precedes all reasoning and philosophical speculation: something so plain and obvious to see that it becomes conspicuous and shaming. Even so, it is also conspicuously absent from the aesthetics and ethics of quotidian human existence, which has its own notion of bodily susceptibility and physical distress that in most cases serves simply to underscore human exceptionalism. Narratives of pain and illness transform the human body into a site of communicable experience that attracts attention and triggers sympathy. Thus, even the most monstrous display of physical degeneration can be rendered back to the image of the individual, highly precious intelligent life-form that it used to be prior to its period of malfunctioning, and which it still is, despite signs to the contrary. In asking for the response of compassion, human beings more often than not insist on being treated as individual beings, temporarily locked in physical distress and betrayed by their bodies, yet still proudly asserting their belonging to the “healthy” part of the human species. In this way, bodily suffering becomes disavowed rather than lived: a private problem to be overcome by technical (or medical) means, a purely negative episode which is most often to be erased from an individual biography once it is gone.

Discourses of human ill-being are therefore commonly buttressed by individualist ontologies, ones that focus their efforts on reintegrating illness and suffering into the structure of moral subjectivity. This essay wishes to argue, however, that there is much more to vulnerability than the celebration of individual injuriousness. Vulnerability and suffering are affective positions that can be widely shared, intensely social facts and political opportunities that help us make connections with other beings, and are even capable of crossing the boundaries of species. As such, they have an emancipatory potential that should not be overlooked; one which is indeed not overlooked in acts and works of compassionate imagination. Literature and art provide ample space and means to promote and share these politically potent affects.

In the article that follows I will address the notion of vulnerability as an aspect of bodily existence that most often remains socially ostracised, yet is still a highly interesting point of convergence for human-animal studies and the branch of aesthetics interested in the way individual and collective affectivities surface in works of art and literature. Importantly, the claim the essay makes is that animal susceptibility to injury, violence and death is closely linked to the erasure of the presence of non-human beings in communal living, which serves to justify their exploitation on a massive scale. Their fate is sealed by radical ungrievability, a stance of not being (even potentially) mourned. Animal suffering and deprivation is thus aggravated as it is not accompanied by publically recognised acts of mourning. Even more private than human illness and passing away, the recognition of animals' capacity for pain and for being subjects of life that can be lost sadly remains a subjective decision for human beings. The fact of their being "naked, vulnerable, exposed, suffering" (Gross 2014, 127) and precarious, or at every point threatened with decay and non-existence, is rarely recognised as the shared condition of embodiment. To paraphrase the description from the quotation above, the most frequent response of the human being looking at an animal is to avert their gaze from, rather than to exchange it with, the afflicted creature.

The discussion of animals in terms of "unmournable lives" obviously owes much to Judith Butler's social ontology of precariousness, which views all living things as radically interdependent and acknowledges that their chance of surviving relies on the cultural and historical image of what constitutes a life worthy of protection and sustenance. According to Butler, together with the production of the social knowledge of what life and death is, whole categories or groups of beings emerge who are under-recognised

as constructions of life. Their bodies, vulnerable by definition, stand at the boundaries of the socially accepted notions of humanity and subjecthood, a fact that renders the loss of their lives insignificant, or not worthy of sympathy, contemplation and symbolic prolongation in political or religious gestures of remembrance. Hence, to cross the threshold of mourning, to become politically visible as subjects of grief and compassion, as it became all too evident in the media images of dead refugees on European shores, may ironically be the only way of symbolic appreciation available to these marginalised human lives. Mourning depends on the interpretative frameworks that delimit what we apprehend as living and grievable, but it is an affective structure that may also call the frameworks into question. Thus, extending the range of beings identified as the bodies of suffering, and enabling “a new trajectory of affect” (Butler 2009, 11) which is endowed with political and moral significance seems to be intertwined with establishing new practices and rituals of grieving.

Mourning can thus be seen as emancipatory whenever it becomes a radical gesture of identification with and recognition of a singular being whose life has lost its legitimacy. It is a celebration of the unprecedented relationship to the bearer of that life which is capable of transgressing the social norm of who is to be grieved and what it means to grieve. Yet the question remains whether the relationship can be even more transgressive than in the case mentioned above, that of the underprivileged and dehumanised victims of war and oppression. Can the acknowledgment and commemoration of the loss of a living creature, a symbolic and religious act, and one that demonstrates the mourner’s political resistance to previously committed acts of violence, refer to other-than-human existence? This article will respond in the affirmative, suggesting that some complex ideas, including vulnerability, mourning and compassion, read against the background of politics, ethics and theology, can sensibly be applied to the task of depicting the relationship of human animals to other sentient beings. Moreover, the role of religion is far from negligible in this respect, even if the conventional aim of religious discourse has been to liberate the human self from its supposedly embarrassing animal origins.

Viewed from the perspective of philosophy and religion, mourning and compassion can thus be conceived as radical gestures, which are potentially emancipatory to non-human agents. My intention is not only to point to the constitution of the interspecies community of vulnerability and suffering as something that undermines anthropocentric privilege, but also to present religious experience, which includes celebration of some of the most signifi-



cant moments of physical existence, as a realm of social affect and bodily response that is common to different species. The case some political campaigns and works of art make for the actual engagement of animals in human rites of passage—the way animals become a mournable presence, awarded political and aesthetic/symbolic recognition—reflects a more general tendency among humanities scholars to reconsider the notion of human exceptionality based on the religious and metaphysical view of what constitutes personhood, and to bridge the gap between humans and animals as both philosophical and religious subjects.

### **Precariousness and Suffering/Mournable Lives**

The notion of precariousness has been a constant presence in Judith Butler's work for more than a decade now (Butler 2000, 2004, 2009, 2012 and 2015), marking her interest in what can be identified as the basis of social solidarity among various vulnerable subjects, including those that do not automatically belong to a community bound by immediate moral obligations. What makes us respond ethically to suffering and to be overwhelmed with affects such as horror and outrage at its sight if there is no obvious connection—no close relationship of blood and ideology—binding us to the body in pain? And why is the situation that in the first place renders the body unrecognisable as a socially respectable form of life also productive of an emotion that may inspire acts of ethical and political significance in defence of that life? To answer these questions, as Butler has striven to do, it is essential to think of a vulnerable body as not just an individual organism affected by unfavourable conditions in its immediate environment but as crucially located in the network of relations that it has to rely on for its preservation and well-being. Bodily life is universally precarious, or exposed to both pleasure and suffering precisely because of its being social, and being social means "being bound to one another and to living processes that exceed human form" (Butler 2012, 141). A individual life form is distinct and yet its boundary provides not only the limit of its being but also a site of adjacency which is often, in political terms, a zone of "unwilled proximity and unchosen cohabitation" (145), resulting in diverse forms of interaction that can both sustain and destroy an individual. Precariousness or vulnerability is thus the foundation of the ontology of the body which points to interdependency as both an ethical/existential fact and a point of departure for social and political considerations.

The relationship between sociality, vulnerability and death or mourning is also of vital significance to the post-deconstruction interventions of Jean-Luc Nancy, especially when he elaborates on the notions of exposure and finitude, drawing on the Heideggerian discussion of *Mitsein* (being-with) in *Sein und Zeit*. The topic is discussed at length in Nancy's *The Inoperative Community* (1988). Having asserted the closure of the modern philosophical project as it fantasises about the individual self-constitution in a social void—since “death irremediably exceeds the resources of a metaphysics of the subject” (Nancy 1991, 14)—the French thinker turns to the examination of singularity that is always already grounded in relation to other singularities by referring to beings other than itself. This relation or openness is originary, in that *Dasein* (the notion of an individual self which points to a peculiarly human way of existing) is a being for whom engagement with being “there” or being exposed to whatever there is outside of the self is part of its ontological definition. Nancy thus dwells on the impossibility of immanence conceived as isolation or communion understood as fusion (29), pointing out that being-in-common (being in community) is about offering and sharing between singularities, and what must be exposed and shared is the experience of mortality/finitude. In fact, that which defines community, communication, is best described as the event of the co-appearance of finitude because a “finite being always presents itself *together*”, in “the *between* as such: you and I” (28–29; emphasis in the original). In the subsequent passages of Nancy's work, the presentation of finitude is revealed as that of “the triple mourning I must go through: that of the death of the other, that of my birth, and that of my death” (30). The importance of the death of the other is not to be overlooked here: Nancy follows Bataille and Blanchot in suggesting that going beyond oneself or discovering the possibility of community is primarily found through exposure to the painful epiphany of someone else's utmost vulnerability (Blanchot 1988, 9 and 25). And, quite significantly, Nancy also signals at one point that this sharing of finitude may pertain to beings other than human, though the possibility is never analysed in much detail (1991, 28).

Butler's work is similarly anchored in existential-ontological considerations; these are however properly counterbalanced by social contextualisation. In her view, being fragile and susceptible to injury can be very specific through its connection to unequal political and economic conditions, which is referred to as precarity. It is thus imperative to recognise the distribution of precarity as a basic fact of social living and to strive for its more egalitarian character, starting from the premise of universal bodily precariousness. Vulnerability, exposure to injury, violence and death, erasure of social pres-

ence or stigmatisation all belong to the same narrative referring to the lot of individuals and groups of individuals who live their precarious lives literally on the fraying edges of the communal fabric. The examination of their spectral existence, an aim of the discourse of social solidarity the American thinker has consistently been developing in recent years, starts from the premise that it is haunted by an acute sense of loss. The loss stems from the fact that their disgrace and deprivation is hardly ever accompanied by any public acts of recognition. In Butler's words, an unrecognised existence is not a grievable life, i.e., life in the fully human sense, one deserving sympathy, reflection, political gestures of emotional identification and, finally, mourning and grief, as a celebration of the ultimate departure from the community of the living. "Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of the life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters" (Butler 2009, 14). And there is certainly a lot to be said about this uncomfortable proximity between vulnerability and erasure of mourning, especially as the juxtaposition seems to be vibrating with ethical, political and religious overtones. The practice of mourning and remembrance is the staple of human culture: that humans have evolved the need for respecting and paying homage to their deceased is most often treated as the ultimate proof of the intellectual integrity and self-reflexivity of the species. Hence its absence always remains conspicuous.

This spectacle of vulnerability and impossible grieving brings to mind Sophocles' old story, painstakingly analysed in one of Butler's books. Antigone, who insists on the absolute singularity or irreplaceability of the event of her brother's death regardless of the political circumstances, enforces her right to mourn the exposed body, naked and vulnerable, already rotting, the body of the dearest family member, in the name of compassion and religious devotion, and in defiance of the law. The burial rites are here performed twice, even though they are obviously and "fatally criminal" (Butler 2000, 79). Antigone's insistence on the official act of mourning can thus be read as a radical gesture of identification with and recognition of a singular being whose life has long lost its legitimacy, as well as a celebration of her unprecedented relationship to the bearer of that life which transgresses the social norm of what it means to grieve. The nature of the transgression is contemplated in Butler's work by pointing to the incestuous legacy behind Antigone's actions. Yet, one may ask, can the relationship be even more transgressive? Can the acknowledgment and commemoration of the loss of a living creature, a political and religious act, and one that demonstrates the mourner's resistance to violence, vulnerability and suffering, extend beyond the human realm?

The starting point for this discussion is the claim that Butler's notion of precariousness, viewed as the basic somatic condition of individual and collective living, is what apparently spills over boundaries between species, at times rendering them irrelevant. Judith Butler's argument has indeed been interpreted in non-anthropocentric terms.<sup>1</sup> Sentient lives are universally precarious simply because their bodily being can be affected in a variety of ways: regardless of the species, they are vulnerable to suffering and destruction caused by others since they "depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance" and are thus at risk from different forms of abuse "under unjust and unequal political conditions" (Butler 2012, 148). The interdependence of living creatures is ontological and existential (it belongs to the dimension of "shared finitude"), while the degree of their precarity follows from a given historical configuration of social and economic forces that pertain both to human culture and the natural environment. For Butler, politics is about managing populations (and these populations, we hasten to add, are both human and non-human, as they are impossible to disentangle). This takes place through the tactical and unequal distribution of precarity, on the basis of "dominant norms regarding whose life is grievable and worth protecting, and whose life is ungrievable or marginally or episodically grievable [...], and thus less worthy of protection and sustenance" (Butler 2012, 148). An individual body may thus persist and flourish or, contrariwise, may be subject to violence and destruction, depending on whether it is recognised as a life and a subject to the same extent as are others. It seems, however, that the normative conditions of recognisability operate first and foremost on the collective level: as already pointed out, in the social world there emerge whole categories or groups of beings who are under-recognised as constructions of life. These bodies, vulnerable by definition, with a highly insecure ontological constitution, stand at the boundaries of the socially accepted notions of livability, grievability and subjecthood, and are threatened to be blurred or erased.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For an example of a non-anthropocentric argument in Butler's work, see this passage from her discussion of the ethical philosophies of Arendt and Levinas: "In my view, some ethical claims emerge from bodily life and perhaps all ethical claims presuppose a bodily life, understood as injurable, one that is not restrictively human. After all, the life that is worth preserving and safeguarding, who should be protected from murder (Levinas) and genocide (Arendt), is connected to, and dependent upon, nonhuman life in essential ways; this follows from the idea of the human animal, as Derrida has articulated it, which becomes a different point of departure for thinking about politics" (Butler 2012, 147). See also Stanescu 2012, 567–582.

<sup>2</sup> Butler's narrative underscores the liminal and spectral quality of these lives, as a ghostly presence that keeps haunting social ontology. Her argument seems to owe much

Realising that precariousness is a universal condition describing the common lot of various sentient creatures is however not sufficient for any political action to take place, just as the incessant flow of media images of lost lives is hardly ever enough to make one stage one's opposition to suffering and violence. Precisely, we may ask, how and why do we become moved by a loss of life to the point that we start to grieve for it, questioning its exclusion from the community of mournable lives? Butler makes it clear that precariousness translates into a sense of existential obligation towards others, also those "we cannot name and do not know" or those who "may not bear traits of familiarity to an established sense of who 'we' are" (Butler 2009, 14). This cosmopolitan obligation may however be difficult to explicate on other than philosophical or religious grounds. As some of Butler's critics note, she "appears to rest her hopes for practicing ethics in precaritized situations on the abstract potentiality for ethical openness", which may not be enough to spur individuals and societies to action (Lloyd 2015, 230). What is needed is both the ability to recognise precarious lives as worth protecting and, in the final instance, grieving for, and a socially heterodox affect responding to their miserable condition, a sort of transgressive compassion arising from the realisation of similitude. The lesson of sympathetic imagination comes with the imminence of grief within a felt community of the living, and the community becomes all the more tangible in extreme circumstances such as war or natural disasters. Facing loss and participating in mourning, reacting with sadness, horror and guilt to the suffering and demise of others, though a disheartening experience, can also be valuable in that it enables the perception of all living beings as vulnerable, dependent on others and the environment, radically contingent and "exposed to non-life from the start" (Butler 2009, 15). Whether these forms of affect lead to political action is a different matter but they evidently make possible new forms of connectedness, which may also cross the species barrier.

In her recent essays, Judith Butler provides numerous examples of circumstances and conditions that contribute to the making of vulnerable and ungrievable bodies: these are situations connected with war, imprisonment, forced migration, unemployment, a failing system of social support, or the use of arbitrary violence by the state. She does not extend her argument any

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to the Derridean dialectic of the inside and outside: "What is this spectre that gnaws at the norms of recognition, an intensified figure vacillating as its inside and its outside? As inside, it must be expelled to purify the norm; as outside, it threatens to undo the boundaries that limn the self" (Butler 2009, 12). See also Derrida 1987, 18 ff.

further, but the systematic sanctioning of violence against some human lives, their disposability and anonymity, their progressive extermination, may bring to mind the immense scale of the exploitation and annihilation of animals in human industry, taking place in ways that would be judged monstrous by people in previous ages. The notion of precariousness seems to be exceptionally well-suited to the discussion of the lot of animal bodies—nameless, ignored, produced as redundant objects and killed without a second thought. If there is a clear instance of an ungrievable life, disavowed as a living and suffering creature and made disposable beyond hope, it is the existence of animals, especially the ones bred for consumption. It is cruelly ironic that in relation to other sentient beings, some of them qualifying as close human relatives, the narrative of shared embodiment, vulnerability and finitude seems to the majority of people far-fetched. From the perspective of the social ontology based on the idea of physical persistence, however, humans and animals are all alike: permeable bodies, bound to others and at threat from external intervention. Butler herself invites the inter-species application of her theory by stating that it is not possible to draw a firm distinction between the bios of the animal and the bios of the human in a way that would demonstrate the distinctive features of the latter (Butler 2009, 19). In many passages she is also explicit about the anti-anthropocentric thrust of her argument. Still, to draw the final consequences from the analogy is to admit that there are a large number of precarious lives beyond the human realm that are still unmourned and that deserve to be mourned in order to recognise and reduce their precarity.

Admittedly, the thought of caring for anonymous animals sacrificing their lives for the sake of satisfying human needs, of finding animal beings grievable, may appear radical and unthought-of to the point of risking sense. There is, however, an enormous potential in the gesture which imparts visibility to the animal condition by linking it to so many spheres of human life, whether public or private, political or religious. As James Stanescu remarks, mourning is a way of making connections, of establishing or recognising kinship; who gets to mourn and who is mournable shows which bodies matter socially and politically (Stanescu 2012, 568). To be in mourning, to demonstrate one's grief, is not only to overcome the feeling of shame connected with the public display of emotion, but also to point to a mourned existence as worthy of being celebrated, as a subject of remembrance and, possibly, of philosophical or religious reference. Mourning is essentially private, yet it may also create a sense of community, not only with those who are lost and grieved for but also among those who are stricken by grief.

It may thus become a promise of the common effort to minimise suffering and the loss of lives. With regard to animals, the recognition of their embodiment and fragility as something essentially shared with humans not only inspires com-passion (Latin *compassio* is “the ability to suffer with”) but also emancipates them as agents, as social subjects, those who can participate in rites of passage and are even themselves capable of mourning their relatives. The last argument has often been cited in support of the notion of animal religion, and it is the religious quality of animal living that will be discussed next, apparently the most interesting result of the application of Butler’s ontology beyond the narrow confines of anthropocentrism.

Grieving for animals is an exercise in human sympathetic imagination which may or may not be grounded in religious sentiment. Animal grief, a response to the death of close companions that cannot be reduced to merely instinctual behaviour, is a different matter, making one ponder whether the human definition of religion is expansive enough to account for this individual and social experience apparently involving elements of ritual. Cognitive ethology researching “the emotional lives of animals”, to remember Mark Bekoff’s famous title (Bekoff 2007, 62–69), has long provided evidence of the quasi-religious behaviour of some species when they are confronted by the passing away of their fellows, including what seems to be both affective and symbolic reactions. Elephants, wolves, dogs, foxes, baboons, llamas, magpies and other animals show signs of suffering and dependency, withdrawing into solitude or collectively behaving in an unusual manner, walking, howling, staring into space, losing interest in food and normal activities, sometimes resorting to desperately trying to revive the dead, staying with the carcass for many days or burying it in the ground (Bekoff 2007; King 2013). Some of the animals perform what appear to be elaborate rituals to demonstrate their grief and stage a farewell to their dear companions. These instances of animal behaviour, clearly proving there is a capacity for mourning and compassion in a number of non-human species, have also been adduced by researchers to support a more controversial view that in order to behave in this manner, animals must have evolved their own morality (Bekoff and Pierce 2009).

Rather than continuing with a discussion on animal morality, I will cling to the expanded notion of religion as capable of embracing other-than-human rites of passage. To the observers of the aforementioned activities it is evident that the animals respond to the loss of life of a close companion, demonstrating a complex array of behaviours that affect their bodies and lives in individual ways. Their grief is a puzzle because it has no explainable

value in terms of the evolution of the species or its reproductive success. Some of the responses, like elephants' funeral gatherings and gorillas' wakes, apparently overlap with corresponding human forms which tend to be described as having a religious character. Researchers have also noted instances of ritual behaviour in animals other than humans in situations involving natural phenomena like rain or fire (Goodall 2006).<sup>3</sup> Supposing there is a line of biological and cultural continuity between human and non-human animals, it is perhaps legitimate to draw the conclusion, as Donovan O. Schaefer does, that higher animals "are participating in the same affectively driven ritual actions that led pre-linguistic humans to develop *codified religion*" (Schaefer 2012, 185; emphasis in the original). Animal religion, if we allow for its existence, may not be a question of articulating beliefs or monitoring moral behaviour as in the case of a human cult; yet it can still denote a corporeal, deeply felt experience (such as compassion, horror, fascination and awe) stemming probably from the perception of mystery and inexplicable loss, power and beauty in the surrounding world.<sup>4</sup>

Attributing grievability and grief to animal beings thus turns out to be a profoundly emancipatory gesture in both political and theological terms. It means not only including animals in the community of suffering, vulnerability and finitude that has been the starting point of so much existential

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<sup>3</sup> I am alluding here to a famous account of the chimpanzees' ritual behaviour at the waterfall at Kakombe, presented in Jane Goodall's book *Reason for Hope: A Spiritual Journey* (1999), which she called "the dance of awe" (188–189). While discussing the passage, Kimberley Patton, who conducts an interview with Goodall, commented on its use of remarkably religious diction in the following way: "What is so amazing to me about what you describe [...] is that so often theorists and scientists, particularly sociobiologists, will try to reduce human religious ritual, saying, 'Well, it's like animal ritual; animals have ritual too'. But what you suggest to me is that maybe we're thinking about it backwards. It's rather that ritual action is a natural response to living in a world of mystery and beauty and divinity. It is a response that is shared by animals with human beings. So it's not that we can reduce human ritual behaviour to instinct 'because animals do it too', but rather that animals need to be brought conceptually into the sphere of human religious experience; animal ritual action might be 'elevated' to the world of human ritual action" (Goodall 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Labelling animal practices of grieving and other rituals as religious may sound controversial both to scholars of religion and to believers of most institutional churches. I do not want to embark here upon very complex considerations of what religion is; eschewing metaphysical declarations, I wish to point simply to the fact, as many ethologists do, that there is a clear overlap between some animal reactions to natural wonders or death and religious rituals as practiced by humans across history. Therefore, it seems justifiable to construe animal religion as a shared bodily (and emotional) response to what is beautiful, strange and inexplicable in nature.



reflection, but also turning them into ethical and religious subjects whose existence and affliction has clear ethical implications for the lives of their human companions. If they do mourn and are mourned by others, participating in rituals that fix their connection to culture (even if these ways of behaviour are highly specific, varying in content between different species), it becomes all the more plausible to view the social presence of animals as capable of producing a shared affect, as inviting new forms of solidarity and identification. As Stanescu remarks, “vulnerability and mourning are active forces that have been confused as passive and negative” (2012, 577). In humans, naming one’s vulnerability means recognising one’s capacity for being wounded and dependent on others, which has the potential to bring an individual back into a community for care and sustenance or to find out one deserves this form of communal support. In other sentient creatures, it is much more than that: credited with the ability to suffer and mourn, and found grievable (even if there is a high risk of anthropomorphising), animals become reinscribed into the community of living beings and awarded social value as subjects and moral patients. Adding religious quality to their existence is still more interesting, not only making their lives theologically respectable and precious but also expanding the human understanding of religion in quite unpredictable ways. To think with Judith Butler’s notion of precariousness and to radicalise its consequences for the human-animal relations is thus to look for the new possibilities of implementing a social ethic that finds it impossible to disregard the fact that animal bodies are subject to omnipresent violence such as being universally slaughtered and utilised for human consumption.

What still requires an explanation, however, is the question of political praxis and the chances of animal grievability entering the field of social perception. How can we make animal bodies a truly mournable presence if their precarity and suffering is hardly visible to the majority of world populations? How can the interpretative frames of what counts as a life be expanded to encompass the existence of an individual animal? These questions are not easily answered but one possibility is again provided by Butler’s discussion of precarity when she refers to the notion of political performativity (Butler 2015, 75). Making precarious and illegitimate lives visible in the public, in her view, entails embodied political resistance, or “the gathering of the ungrievable in public space” to demand recognition (Butler 2012, 18; Lloyd 2015, 220). Obviously, for animals themselves there is no way to exercise any political agency; yet their public appearance as vulnerable subjects is possible as part of human demonstrations highlighting

the problem of their affliction. Therefore, political actions such as animal rights rallies featuring dead animals over whose bodies people grieve may be one opportunity for animals to lay claim to public space (see photograph accompanying this essay).<sup>5</sup> The staging of grief by activists alludes both to the solemnity of a funeral procession as the ultimate gesture of symbolic recognition and to the religious iconography of the *pietà*, which has its transgressive and emancipatory potential.

Another option that Butler does not in fact mention is an aesthetics of affect in art and literature. Importantly, the imagery based on bodily vulnerability and mourning, with its philosophical and religious implications, can provide a powerful tool to innovative artists and writers who are concerned with imparting social visibility and ethical significance to animals. Cross-species communities of affect can in fact be achieved not only by sympathising with the suffering, dying or dead animal but also, more significantly, through gestures of grieving that go beyond the species barrier by inscribing the animal affective experience in the framework of religious meanings. I have attempted to trace the subversive displacements of the sacred in literary and artistic works elsewhere;<sup>6</sup> here, it seems sufficient to state that the poetic or dramatic representation of an animal as a fragile, precious and mournable being, one whose death is worthy of religious celebration, can be deeply empowering as it not only awards the creature with sentience and an affective experience of its own but also transforms it into a religious subject, a position long monopolised by human beings. Hence, it is an aesthetic intervention that may disturb the social image of spirituality and religiosity by questioning its distinctly anthropocentric contours.

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<sup>5</sup> One prominent example is the National Animal Rights Day established in 2011 and now celebrated in many countries. Its organisers state that the event, remembering the animal victims of ever-growing human consumption, “was created to give a voice to these billions and billions of anonymous nameless beings. On this day, we stop everything else, and remember them. We mourn their loss, express their pain through ours, and reach out on their behalf to anyone who has a heart to listen” (qtd. on the NARD website: [www.thenard.org](http://www.thenard.org) [accessed: 15 July 2018]).

<sup>6</sup> This essay complements a previous article where I discuss a number of literary works featuring animal vulnerability and mourning, located in a clearly religious context. See Mitek-Dziemba 2019.

## **Conclusion**

In its lengthy discussion of theoretical concepts, the present article has sought to provide a new perspective on the critical importance of vulnerability, mourning and compassion. Arguing for the existence of a cross-species community of affect, I have based my analyses on Judith Butler's ontology of precariousness in its possible non-anthropocentric applications. Being naked, susceptible to injury and harm, vulnerable and fragile, experiencing both pain and desire can all be treated as common to all forms of sentient living. Precariousness is thus a universal condition whose occurrence remains closely connected with the distribution of political and social precarity. Vulnerability and precariousness pertain to both human and animal lives, and their negative impact is made evident in the absence of social recognition. Being unrecognisable as a life, however, as Butler makes it abundantly clear, means also being ungrievable: a bodily existence which matters not at all or is totally insignificant and invisible to the public eye. Therefore, unworthy of symbolic appreciation, it can be made redundant and disposed of. To prevent such treatment of precarious beings, it is necessary to search for new forms of recognition and celebration, ones which also involve compassion and grief. This article argues that non-human animals can be recognised as political and religious subjects by means of new rituals of mourning which commemorate their death as the loss of living creatures. The argument points to the possibility of charting new trajectories of affect which succeed not only in establishing a cross-species community of vulnerability and suffering but also in bridging the gap between human and non-human animals as religious subjects. The specific strategies used to mourn animals are then sought in political praxis, art and literature. In conclusion, it can be said that the aesthetic of affect, especially one exploiting the political and religious potential of grief and compassion, is a powerful means of imparting social visibility to bodies in suffering which may also contribute to the ongoing redefinition of the human-animal divide.



Photo:JoAnneMcArthur



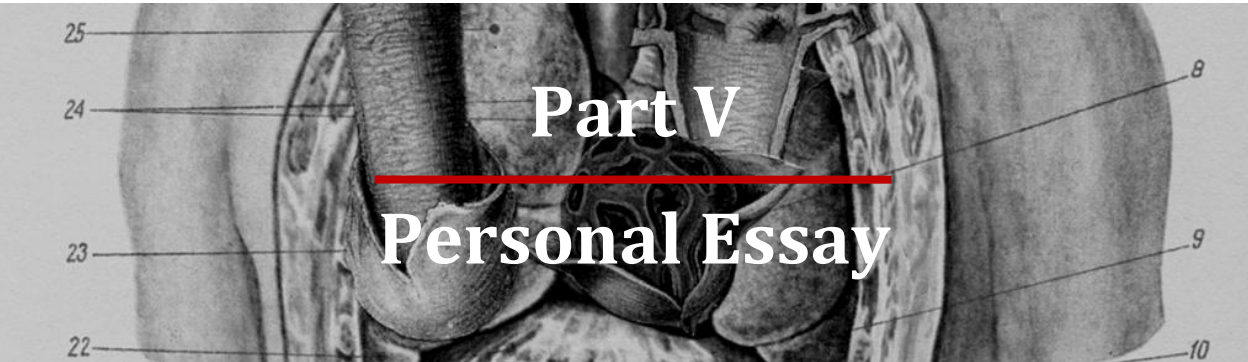
Photo:JoAnneMcArthur

2015 National Animal Rights Day in Toronto, Canada.  
Photo by Jo Anne McArthur, courtesy of Their Turn  
[available on [www.theirturn.net](http://www.theirturn.net)]

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## Part V

# Personal Essay





**Isabel Alonso-Breto\***

## **Riding the Sea Word<sup>1</sup>**

So this was us, my cancer and me.

As it happened, I had breast cancer.

I loved my breast.

My breast, it appeared, was trying to save my life. My body was ill. It wanted to tell me something. I did not take good enough care of it. Not enough exercise. Too much sugar. Unhealthy meals. Regular glasses of wine with dinner ... My body had already warned me the previous year with a severe thrombosis attack affecting the length of my left leg. A valve was stuck in my body at the time and I had started taking daily medicines. And then scarcely one year afterwards ... my breast. Just trying to save my life. I'm Serious.

... because I got breast cancer, and I learned I should be operated on, and my breast, or a piece of it, would go. And thus my cancer, that fearful Sea Word, would go as well.

And after that I was going to be so careful, so extremely careful, that it would never pay a visit again. I talked to my body and it answered, and we came to such a friendly agreement.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this text was published in Spanish in *Raudem: Revista de Estudios de las Mujeres*, 5, 2017, pp. 262–276. That version was dedicated to my husband, Christian. This one is dedicated to the breast cancer medical staff at the Hospital Clinic in Barcelona, with heartfelt appreciation.

My body had helped me so much, since forever.

I would help it as well, this time. We were a team, weren't we?

Sometimes I felt that my body was foreign, a distant thing, like somebody outside of myself. Like a threat to my life, since it housed the Sea Word. Then I told myself, no, this is not the way. Let me put it bluntly, how I reasoned out that point. I told myself: I am my body, my body is me. We are two and one simultaneously. Right now it's not easy to explain or understand, but that's the way it was and is. It's like love as expressed by Emily Brontë through the mouth of Cathy: "I am Heathcliff". We are the same thing but it is for me to take care of it, since it takes care of me nonstop, twenty-four/seven; it coddles me, houses me. It allows me to be worldly—not only in a Saidian sense. I felt Serious preoccupation that my body could stop existing, since that would mean I couldn't go on living in the world, because, without my body, where was I to go?

*Nulle part ...*

Within me was a Sea Word, and sometimes I would just forget. I would go about my routines as if nothing was happening, as if my life was not terribly compromised or under such a sombre threat.

Within me was a Sea Word and sometimes I got really, really scared. Then I'd feel that the possibility of dying was very present. Any thought or action would lead me to the thought of death; further, to the thought of imminent death. It was extremely depressing (even if this is such a dull sentence). I tried to avoid this line of thought and often succeeded, but often (too) I couldn't fight it. Then I would run away to the street and take a walk, buy some pieces of fruit or merely stare at the tree tops. This used to happen on cloudy days. I understood then why so many people choose to die in the Fall.

(Although Fall is a beautiful season, an early herald of the soon-to-come rebirth of the World.)

Here's why I didn't want to write about my illness: I was afraid of pulling closer the threshold, giving way to "thoughts about the possibility of dying"—yes, such a stream of subterfuges is necessary. Imminent death: that

grotesque black cloud which had suddenly appeared over my head, flying with me all day long, following every step of mine. My steps were indeed extremely frightened.

Later on, though, I would dare to write a little, but only when I hit the positive road. I progressively came around to the belief (convinced by medics, by treatment, by time) that I was on my way to recovery, and that I would get well within a few months. I would be healthy again, and then would have won so much! My new life would sport a new lustre, unknown to my life before the Sea Word. Hence, I must be thankful. Although, what a scare. As we say in Spanish: *Un susto de muerte*.

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Every day I had to ride the Sea Word. But this too would pass, and I'd be back to being healthy.

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A few snapshots to remember:

The one in which Dr. X told me the biopsy results were positive (or, inversely, negative, depending on how you look at it); that in effect there was something wrong in the tests I had taken and that for more information I should ask my oncologist. It meant, to begin with, that from then on I would "have" an oncologist.

I left the hospital with a sense of unreality.

As I arrived home, I found that a woman had been run over in front of my place. A police car and an ambulance were parked right there. The woman's body was still lying on the tarmac, covered with a blanket. I realised that any single minute that I'd live from then on would be a gift. I had always been careless when crossing that street.

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When I told my husband that something bad had got inside my right breast (homage be paid to it).

When I told my sister and brother that I had something.

When I lied to one of my friends saying the tests were OK. I needed more time for the shock to sink in.

When I told my mum I had something.

When I told ...

When I told my teenage children.

My daughter, my soul and beauty, kept crying for hours. After some time she calmed down, very slowly. Little by little she understood that it wasn't the end, that there was a cure and that I was determined to be cured, although we had before us a long and complicated process.

My son, my soul and beauty, who is younger, didn't really grasp the news. I told him in such a gentle manner, that he didn't really ... I had to explain it to him again a few days later, less euphemistically, but to this day I'm not sure whether he grasped the dimension of the whole thing, or not. It is probably better if he didn't.

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Some people try to help but they don't really help you. These are some sentences which did NOT help:

Good luck.

Everything'll be all right ... You'll see.

It's not like it was in the past.

I'm sure it'll be ok.

Don't worry, many people come out of it.

By way of contrast, other sentences DID help. What's more, they helped a lot:

Two of my cousins went through this and they are perfectly well.

My friend Kathy had one breast and a piece of her stomach removed last year and she is completely fine.

My sister-in-law went through the same illness, all her lymph nodes were removed and then she relapsed, and now she's in perfect health.

An Iraqi friend of mine had it last year and she's good now.

I know of five women who have gone through the same thing and they're all fine.

This and nothing else was what my body yearned to hear: that they were all perfectly fine.

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A new giant scare leaped at me in the shape of the word "survivor". I came across it early in the process. As I read the webpage of the Spanish Association of Oncologists, I learned that, once everything was over, I would be a survivor. It had a strong impact on me. Another Sea Word was reassuring me of the certainty that my life was in terrible jeopardy. Right when I had finally managed, with much effort, to somewhat appease my anxiety, another word, also containing a Sea, managed to put me back on the road to fear.

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Then, what a productive topic, that of nutrition-and-the-Sea-Word. Hundreds of thousands of websites are devoted to instructing us, beguiled by the Sea Word, on the bounties of healthy nourishment. Immediately after the bad news, you start not wanting/being able to eat virtually everything. And. Your body immediately resents such an abrupt change of habits and begins losing weight scandalously. And. It starts broadcasting all kinds of weird sounds, farting freely around and hurting in places hitherto unknown. Now you eat a lot less than you used to, but there's a good side to everything: you're never really hungry, because you're prepared to do whatever, go wherever, to heal. Even starving yourself.

I would wake up in the middle of the night with severe tachycardia. I was sure that my Sea Word was taking over by the hour. After some weeks I came to understand that it was the radical change in my diet that was making my body complain, not the Sea Word (not yet, at least). It was not used to watery vegetable soup alone for dinner. Nonetheless, fear that my body should be hosting something still worse than my breast alien remained.

\*\*\*

Before meeting my oncologist, I was to meet my (new) gynaecologist. Man he was handsome! Smart, elegant, he reminded me of a sinister character from Caribbean mythology whose name I won't write here out of superstition, a comparison surely influenced by the fear of dying to which I was prey at the moment (guess who I'm talking about?). The sexy gynaecologist told me my breast would be reconstructed. To my surprise and certain delight, he sort of said that I had a sort of a beautiful breast, or that's what I understood—mind you, I just mention this because in the midst of such oncological gravity it was unexpected, it's not to boast or anything. He also explained in great detail to my husband and me what type of Sea my Sea Word was exactly. After a couple of minutes I had forgotten literally everything.

I would sometimes be asked, "At what stage of development is your Sea Word?" I had no idea at what stage it was. I was too cowardly to learn what my body ... what I ... was really going through.

\*\*\*

A mean thing used to happen at the beginning: I would look at the anonymous people around me, on the street for instance, and felt it was so unfair, that I should be ill and the rest of them wholesome. Oh my, I would even have eugenic-type thoughts, I have a better right to live than that crippled old lady, who surely does not have children to raise or any other important mission in the world anymore. Unforgivable. Shame on me.

To be honest.

Or I would look around myself, in the metro for instance, and think, "Look at them, so fucking healthy, and they don't even notice; they don't realise how fucking lucky they are" (forgive my language but that's how it went; I was really fucked up, myself). And I would despise them with a vengeance. Or I would envy them. I don't know to this day.

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In fact, we are all constantly dying, one way or another, while we live. But we're simply not aware. Kazuo Ishiguro wrote somewhere that we all know we are going to die one day, but we just DON'T believe it.

The day you learn that you are indeed going to die, and that the day of your death might not be too distant, believe me, is a tough one.

\*\*\*

For a number of weeks I was dead worried about my liver, my stomach, my lungs. Then, again, I gradually pushed myself into the belief that they were OK. And since I came to be firmly convinced that my Tit had sacrificed itself for my sake, daily I commanded myself to talk to it, to thank it, to say thank you, thank you, thank you for saving my life. I love you. I love you. I shall always be thankful, also when you are no more.

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I sometimes had (still do) this overwhelming wish to install a huge Tit somewhere, I don't know, a gigantic mural of some gaudy material featuring a Superb, All-Mighty Tit. On Big Ben, or the Eiffel Tower. The Tit Saviour. The Tit which gave her life to save mine. My precious.

\*\*\*

One of my best friends is a Mad-Wonder-Woman with a variety of areas of expertise which she juggles in different periods of her mostly frantic life. For my good luck, she also specialises in hypnosis. Like my Tit, my friend also saved my life, hypnotising me and helping me talk to my body every Friday. Helping me tell my body "how much I love you, how much I need you, how much I want to encourage you to keep on sustaining my substance".

For this reason, I shall be forever thankful to my dear Mad-Wonder-Woman, too.

\*\*\*

When I was young and fresh like a daisy, I left my hometown to, can you believe this, create the consciousness of my race—I was influenced by no other than Stephen Daedalus, note my delusions! As a regrettable consequence, I live away from my extended family, only surrounded by my nuclear family.

After I entered the world of Sea Words, a regular stream of visitors started pouring from my hometown to see me. Every week somebody came along to take care of us, me and my Sea Word: my sister, my brother, my niece ... They're incredible. Definitely, the best family ever.

\*\*\*

When I told my mum, both of us sitting on a bench in a park near her place, she went on discussing petty stuff, literally as if she hadn't heard me. Only after a few days, very slowly, did she start asking timid questions about my breast. To my siblings, not me. She was so afraid. And she got ill, I mean, she got more ill: my mum has been ill for the last thirty years. After my news she grew more ill than ever. For one, she's old now. And then, having to grapple with the idea that your daughter is grappling with the Sea Word. It took her more time than expected to make a decision and come to pay a visit. For one, the house was always busy with volunteer caregivers. And then, I'd also have got more ill in her situation.

When she finally came, she would take such good care of me. Such good care of me.

\*\*\*

Even my childhood best friend came to see me. We had hardly met up in recent years, would just send a Whatsapp now and then after it came into existence. It was pure chance that she sent one just a few days after I had met my oncologist (I guess I should talk about him as well, but I won't, though he's splendid). I answered that Whatsapp with a brief "Call me". I couldn't not tell her, could I? She popped in soon afterwards. Lovely week-end together. She's very dexterous, so I took the opportunity for her to help me upholster some old chairs I'd bought last year on Wallapop, for next-to-nothing.

\*\*\*

Cheering up messages.

From work. From relatives.



Other friends of old got back in touch, friends who came to know about my Sea Word one way or another. And they would text me all the time. How are you feeling? Feeling ok? How's treatment going? How many sessions left, darling? Cheering up, cheering up, cheering up, cheering up ...

Others said nothing.

In the same way as every ill person reacts differently to the devastating news of the Sea Word, every non-ill person reacts differently to the news that somebody close to them has to ride it. And the mantra: Do not judge. Do not judge.

\*\*\*

Somebody lent me Deepah Chopra's *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*.

I could only turn more spiritual, right?

I started (sort of) grasping the notion of God (OMG). I realised it is a (sort of) Source of Infinite Possibilities, as Chopra puts it. My ex just calls it physics, more specifically cosmic rays. You're bitten by a cosmic ray and you enter the world of Sea Words, as easy as that.

I also realised Our Lady of El Pilar is a mandala. I would lose myself in her soothing silhouette.

I like thinking that Pilar, Oshun and Lakshmi are just one and the same: incarnations of Shakti, universal female energy.

What could I do, but become more spiritual.

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I also got back in touch with my ex. He walked me to one of the CMT sessions, and on that occasion gave me a graphic novel on the life of Miguel Hernández, the great poet and shepherd. Later on, he also paid me a visit with his current girlfriend, a lovely woman who had ridden the Sea Word nine years before. A survivor. And she was perfectly fine. Meeting her: one of those things which helped. A lot.

\*\*\*

My ex-brother-in-law is also a survivor. He called me, cheered me up. Texted me often.

My ex-mother in law. I had not seen her in sixteen years. She called me. Isn't that great.

To them and the all others: THANK YOU.

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The "Hospital de día", the Day Hospital. The nurses. The plastic bags full of chemicals. Transparent, red, juicy, tasty. What's your name? María Isabel Alonso Breto. And only after hearing this they stick the drugs onto your catheter. They need to make sure that your dose is your dose, and your substance your substance. In the early sessions I used to start the recitation with my surnames (in Spain we have two, the father's and mother's), like at school: Alonso Breto María Isabel, but that seemed to confuse them. I therefore changed tactics and recited names-first-and-then-surnames, with discipline. Anyway, after more than a dozen sessions they had learned both my names and my surnames by heart. One day I brought them a present: a huge plastic bag full of sweets, tasty and juicy. For them to sweeten the time, those sweet and patient young nurses, between the doses.

\*\*\*

I was obsessed with bodily defences. I didn't want to lose my defences. I was so afraid it could happen. I went to the Hospital Emergency Department twice because my toes would swell and redden, and I feared an infection. I spent hours on end in the waiting room, until it was my turn. Both times I was prescribed antibiotics, and then I felt closer to safe.

\*\*\*

I was so thankful to receive, via e-mail or mobile, lively and beautiful messages: songs, videos, jokes ... Jokes were my favourite. I just wanted to laugh my heart out ... I just wanted to die laughing. I just wanted ... to forget I was riding the Sea Word!!!

\*\*\*

They installed a catheter in my arm. It travelled with me for months. It saved me a few punctures: for blood tests, for the massive insertion of chemicals. My arm (my body again) behaved so nicely: it didn't complain, didn't hurt, didn't get infected ...

When they installed it, the catheter I mean, I was damned afraid, let me tell you. But I put on a brave face, as if I were a strong person. All the time I'd do that.

That's what you need to do, when you're riding the Sea Word. To put on a brave face. And then you feel strong. And, though you're going through hell, you feel better.

\*\*\*

At the beginning of it all, after one of those early biopsies—that is, before I knew about the Sea Word at all—while on a medical visit, suddenly more and more members of staff in white gowns started coming close to the stretcher trolley where I had been made to lie. They all looked deeply worried. Mind you, this deeply worried ME, but I kept silent. They were all looking at the computer screen like they were dazzled.

Then I was told I'd receive an appointment, and that was all. They left one by one without so much as a word, not even of farewell.

As I was leaving the place, one of the younger women, a nurse or some kind of medic, suddenly hugged me, a hug so strong, so long and so emotional that it gave me the certainty not only that I was ill, but that I was close to imminent collapse. I lived in a state of uneasiness until the announced appointment arrived, not long afterwards. Dr. X confirmed what I already knew, after the hugging, but refused to admit. Those days in-between had been extremely difficult. The gesture of that young woman, nurse or medic, was full of empathy, no question about that ... But I don't think it helped me at all.

\*\*\*

Because of the sacred matter of my defences, and so as to avoid untimely contagion, our family cat Bruno became Bruno The Rover. The poor thing was forced to spend stints in custody at several friends'. They would all fall

in love with the creature, I must say. As a putative but essential member of the family, we missed Bruno dearly. On his part, the new adventurer made the most of his changing venues: He became a worldly cat, a cat-cosmopolitan ...

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We became a truly German family: we invited (meaning forced) all our visitors to take off their shoes at the entrance, providing them with slippers, like I tell you, Northern style. I amorously envisaged this routine as barring the way into my home of any kind of undesirable bacteria. Call me a maniac, but Barcelona's sidewalks are full of dog-shit and a full range of non-descript fluids, a detail not often mentioned in tourist brochures.

\*\*\*

They say that cruciferous vegetables are the best against the Sea Word. The problem is: when you cook cabbage, the whole house smells like fart. THPPTPHTPHPHHPH, cauliflower, THPPTPHTPHPHHPH, steamed kale, THPPTPHTPHPHHPH, Brussels sprouts, THPPTPHTPHPHHPH, boiled broccoli day in day out, meaning, rather: day in, day in, day in, day in ...

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I tried growing kalanchoe without success. Anyway, I was afraid to mix kalanchoe with the heparin cocktail I injected myself with every morning to ease blood circulation. And in turn, I got worried again, this time because perhaps not eating kalanchoe was a serious sin of omission, meaning (and three), I wasn't doing enough to get healed ... Was I irresponsible? Dear God, Sea Words are Serious stuff. I was livid when I gave it a second thought. I tried to do this as little as possible.

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More or less this is all. Although it is nothing, in comparison to what it really was. But to slowly approach a conclusion: Throughout, I did eat a couple of biscuits, although I'd read on numerous websites that sugar is just the worst thing when it comes to the Sea Word.

It was only a couple of biscuits, I promise.

Just a couple of really-good-quality, quasi-ecological ones.

\* \* \*

And thus. The great protagonist of this staccato story was my body, this I shall never forget. Since then we have entered a whole new type of relationship.

It was, on the whole ... what can I say. It was a lovely reunion.

July 2018









**Kelley Swain****Three Poems****Introduction**

In January this year (2019) I had the opportunity to visit Edinburgh's Surgeons' Hall Museums. Walking through the beautiful architecture of the Wohl Pathology Museum—high ceilings, clean white walls and spotless glass jars and cases—I was particularly struck by the frail architecture of the human body. At one point, working my way along the sections of pathology (osteology, neurology, oncology...) I turned around, and was overwhelmed to see two skeletons hanging in glass display cases, on either side of a doorway I'd just passed through. Both had legs twisted as if seated in meditation; both were hoisted to hang from the skull, and loomed there like grotesque piñatas: once full of soul, now empty. Both were female. One had rickets, whilst the other suffered osteomalacia, adult rickets, both caused by Vitamin D deficiency. The dour grey skies of Edinburgh, the Gothic cobbled streets, and the stories of these women—both had died in childbirth—stayed with me. I was moved to give them each a voice, and the poem "A topography of souls" is an imaginative fiction about their lives, sparked by their skeletons and the brief captions alongside.

Likewise, reading last year about Helen Duncan, a Scottish woman who made her living as a Medium, a voice came out in a poem. Duncan was imprisoned for six months in 1944, the last person to be convicted under the English Witchcraft Act of 1735, which made it a crime to "falsely claim to procure spirits". Her trial as a "modern witch" caused a media explosion. I was particularly moved by the idea of what she, and her prosecutors, considered *true*—Duncan did choke down cloth to pull out as "ectoplasm"; but I think she truly believed she could communicate with the dead. I spent a bit more time researching Duncan than I did the Surgeons' Hall women, and while both poems—and the three voices therein—are from my own imagi-

nation, I find it important to seriously consider what is *plausible* regarding any of the historical figures about whom I write. With Duncan, I responded to her story; with the Surgeons' Hall women, I responded to their bones.

Whilst these poems are new and enjoying publication for the first time in this special issue, their themes surely stem from my verse drama, *Opera di Cera* (Valley Press, 2014). It is about the Anatomical Venus, the Renaissance wax model in Florence's La Specola, the Museum of Physics and Natural History. The Venus is a life-sized figure which disassembles to reveal a foetus in the womb, and was used as a medical teaching tool; the Venus and the surrounding collection, made by wax-modeller Clemente Susini, is one of the most celebrated wax figure collections in the world. Susini, the Venus, and two more historical figures from the Museum—Director Fontana, and assistant Cintio—are characters in *Opera di Cera*, which has been described by The Poetry Society as “a kind of ‘Milk Wood’ from hell—beautifully horrible and horribly beautiful”. Much of it is fiction: I drew inspiration from *Pygmalion*, *Frankenstein*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. I also drew from academic material—namely that of historian Anna Maerker—and hands-on experience from sculptor Eleanor Crook. In the drama, I am very interested in form, bodies, shaping, and the moulding, suppression, and ultimate freedom of ‘voice’ of the one woman involved in—indeed central to—the story.

I see *Opera di Cera* as a natural balance to my first poetry collection, *Darwin's Microscope* (Flambard Press, 2009), which is being reprinted in a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition this year (Valley Press, 2019) in concert with the debut of a song cycle based on some of the poems. *Darwin's Microscope* signalled my debut as a poet, specifically, one writing about science and museum specimens; I've often referred to myself as a “science poet”, though this is loosening up as my poetry moults, sheds, and develops. My poetry has, over time, ebbed and flowed between natural history, with a focus on animals, nature, and the environment, and the history of medicine, with a focus on the human body and its vulnerability. In 2016, I was brought happily back to my poetic origins through a residency at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History, whilst my work in Medical Humanities over the past five years has inspired a novel (forthcoming), *Ophelia Swam*, which blends the history of herbal and anatomical medicines. Thus, the ebb and flow continues, and, ideally, my exploration of human animals with, and within, the natural world.

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## A Topography of Souls

*Surgeons' Hall Museums, Edinburgh*

### I

One woman's bones, hanging in space.  
Mystic yogi, folded, legs bowed  
and crossed, crossbow-shot  
with pain. Past tense. Rickets.  
A spiralling spine, no line of beauty,  
no snake or sinuosity. Tight-twisted,  
crippled, she would have dragged,  
they say, useless legs, dead weight.  
But, they say, she had a fine fair face.

So this is why she died, failing  
to push the child out, the collapsed  
uterus, the coiled spine. But the pain  
was there all along. She carried  
the weight all her short life, had known,  
as her eyes skidded over rain-slick  
cobblestones, (so close,) with that bend  
in her back; had known gravity.

And does it seem likely the child,  
that added weight—a small presence  
pressing her pelvis—could have arrived  
any way that was kind, or good? (The fair face,  
the smile at the door. 'Some alms, sir?  
For the poor?') She would not have screamed,  
the pain little difference from walking  
these rain-slick streets.

But to unfold her was cruel, for brief  
pleasure, perhaps, or mere relief—  
the soft places, soft bones. Coiled spine.  
A curiosity. (May he have been struck  
with awe, the wonder and horror. The

innocence.) Her fine fair face. Spiralling,  
where they should not be; her limbs straight  
and strong; what might have been. That  
impossible birth, through impossible means.

## II

One woman's bones, hanging in space.  
The other woman. An other. Herself.  
Who cannot walk or stand. But, onetime,  
danced. Now can watch, and sing, and read  
the stars. Her living lies in telling others  
what they want. In reading eyes.

Her fabric of belief is quite smooth,  
quite straight. Thus she endures, praying  
thrice daily on the cold stone floor.  
She carries the city's blessing  
with its curse. ('Some alms, sir?  
For the poor?') Relief will come  
in Heaven. What's one small burden more?

Their coin, their gifts, distractions  
from the pain—once, an exotic thing, bright,  
soft, round, burnt her tongue. She spat,  
the bitterness lingering. The rot inside. Once,  
an egg-rock, split asunder. Araby's caverns,  
jewelled, caught rare motes of light. Quartz:  
a foreign, worthless architecture.

He enters not with a walk, but a stride—  
'Tell me, then, Sybil, what do you see?'  
She shakes out long hair. His look, in the gloom,  
of surprise. (Scent of jasmine, coal-fires.) *I will take  
from you all your kind's taken from me.* She bares  
small white teeth, tilts her head, meets his eyes.

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## The Truth

They call it butter muslin but it tastes nothing like butter.  
I choke it down in hics.  
It nests in my stomach, a scratchy ghost, waiting  
for its moment. I light the candles,  
dim the lights. People come – the grief-riddled,  
the lost, the hungry-eyed. If this helps  
soften their loss, what harm? Some say  
it is false, but I feel the voices crying  
on the other side. The veil is thin as butter muslin.

After contact—lost babies or great-uncles, those  
chatty ones, are most common—I roll my gut,  
gag out the cloth, so it pours from my tongue,  
the smell reminiscent of the dead. It ties up  
the evening nicely, leaves people something  
to wonder at beyond the grief resting  
in their own stomachs.

Now, I am at the Old Bailey, the Press  
howling with glee. They do not know how voices  
scratch within my gut, nesting beside the muslin.  
They do not know that most people prefer  
any answer in the face of the unanswerable.

I saw that ship sink in my dream.

They parade my cloth like a dirty ghost.  
They call me *fraud*.  
I would rather be called *witch*.



**Anna Adamowicz**

## **Three Poems<sup>1</sup>**

### **Introduction**

As legend has it, when the seven-year-old Jean-Michel Basquiat was recovering in hospital after being hit by a car, his mother brought him the classic *Gray's Anatomy* as a gift. The handbook's illustrations inspired his subsequent artistic output. Another legend tells the story of Erysichthon, the godless king of Thessaly, who cut down a sacred oak, for which he was punished by Demeter with insatiable hunger. What took the form of a myth in Erysichthon's case, however, with the passage of time, and under the name of polyphagia or hyperphagia, became the subject of medical research and description. However, this condition is hardly a comprehensive explanation in the case of Tarrare, a French circus performer and soldier, who not only suffered from unrestricted craving (devouring everything from rats and stones to morgue cadavers), but his oesophagus and stomach were also unnaturally capacious. Obviously, he was turned into an exhibit of oddity by the teething eighteenth-century study of anatomy. Nonetheless, much of this story could still be perceived as a mere gruesome legend. On the contrary, the most meticulously described case of hyperphagia was that of a man called Charles Domery, a soldier of Polish origin living in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, who had a penchant for a meat-based diet and who became notorious for, among other things, wolfing down 174 cats in the course of one year. All these peculiarities and oddities are hallmarks of Anna Adamowicz's poetry and she included them directly into her poems. Anatomical peculiarities can also be observed in her poem "systems: the spine" [*układy. kręgosłup*], which addresses deformities in the spinal curvature.

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<sup>1</sup> The three poems translated here into English by Lynn Suh were originally published in Adamowicz's collection *Animalia* (2019, Stronie Śląskie: Biuro Literackie): "do ośmiolatniego Jean-Michela Basquiata" (19), "układy. kręgosłup" (23), and "Erysichthon – Tarrare – Domery" (29).

The kind of historical explanation included above requires some erudition or reliance on sources on the part of the reader. It also exemplifies the conservative, or classically-informed element of Adamowicz's work. She oftentimes selects themes firmly embedded in history, intertwined with the biography of some more contemporary person, to then unveil in them moments of corporeal abuse and deformities in order to work through such topics in the realm of a poem, i.e., deviating it from the marked line, engrafting new threads, "through the resonant materials in the bones" ["przez rezonujące zrosty na kościach"].

The poems presented here deal with the motif of anatomical deformity, through which the reader is confronted with corporeality; yet this time the motif is sustained as a kind of basis, the skeleton of a piece of writing whose sole function is to bend, twist, and distort, like the eponymous worshipped spine. A similar gesture can be pinpointed in the majority of Adamowicz's pieces from her two books of poetry published to date. It might be called—to use an anatomical analogy—the ossification of a certain structure of meanings and manners of introducing characters, along with their stories, into poems. The most interesting, however, is yet to come, when the said bone structure begins to deform, break, and dissolve. Consecutive degrees of metaphorisation begin to operate, and instances of interceding vocabulary from other registers allow us to move out of the sphere of historical anecdote. What transpires in each and every one of the texts presented here can be aptly characterised as somatic distortion. Tissues cease to adhere closely to the bone structure, a damaged spleen leaves the body only to turn into an external organ, and a bent spine is pulsating like Europe: "it would wander, / spread, accumulate", "flopping in a shallow puddle, swallowing its own / amniotic fluid" ["będzie błąkać się, / plenić, nabrzmiewać", "wijącą się w płytkiej kałuży, łykającą własne / wody płodowe"]. The body pours itself out, expands, and externalises itself, yet concurrently, the things that it is composed of appear to be fluid and unstable, and not vulnerable to any sense of form.

Each story in Adamowicz's poems, if seen from afar, resembles an ostensible macabre oddity; but if studied more closely, through the mindful eyes of the poet, it turns out to be a tale of variegated, liquid, and malleable connections, and also of their material tensions. Apparently, the poet's eyes carry out a dissection but, in fact, they only partially emulate the methods of Enlightenment scientists, which is to say, science itself. No living tissue is cut and removed here to be experimented upon, clinically or poetically. On the contrary, tissue is reproduced by allowing the incremental growth of mean-



ings. Therefore, what we have called the classically-informed aspect of her poetry, eventually yields to the affective element, i.e., to the pulsating body-poem, much too elusive for the gaze of the anatomist or physiologist.

Adamowicz's poems are particularly powerful due to the interpenetration of what is traditionally (i.e., by Western metaphysical reflection) located at opposing poles: the inner vs the outer, the self vs the we, the body vs the mind, the skeleton vs amorphous tissue. The basic gesture of questioning the corporeal unity of a hero or lyrical subject or, to be more precise, their convictions about this unity, leads to the undermining of the subsequent levels of biological and social relations. After all, the poems seem to suggest, no legal provisions regulate us, nor any hierarchy or duty. We are rather—as Krzysztof Pacewicz put it while attempting to elaborate a new, anti-metaphysical ontology—a *flux*, i.e., a network and community of fluids, flows, and amorphous collectives.<sup>2</sup> Quite some time ago this stance was underscored by David Cronenberg in his feature films *Crash* (1996) and *The Fly* (1986), where he set about experimenting sadistically on his actors' carnality and fleshness. Adamowicz goes a step further: she shows that where biological multiplicity reigns and anthropocentric classifications fail, the world is no longer fuelled by psychoanalytically understood drives, but rather by basal affects, tensions, and interactions. Here, neurobiologists and philosophers like Antonio Damasio and Catharine Malabou take up the baton. Adamowicz keeps reflecting on the ailments, accidents, and cases which muddle and obfuscate the metaphysical sources of the "self" (all these meanings of "accident" are collated by Malabou in *The Ontology of the Accident*, where she describes the creative and destructive plasticity of our being).<sup>3</sup> If we fail to notice this element, Adamowicz's poems shall remain for us rather classical, artisan works and singular stories which gradually transform into *exempla* or allegories. That is what the lion's share of Zbigniew Herbert's and Wisława Szymborska's poems looks like. However, if we pay attention to it, weaving the tale of homeostasis maintained by this strange system that we are living in and which we are, it will no longer prove feasible and, as a result, the poem will stop signifying and begin to produce (relations).

Jakub Skurtys

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Pacewicz Krzysztof (2017), *Flux. Wspólnota płynów ustrojowych*, Warszawa: PWN, pp. 29–33.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Malabou Catherine (2012), *Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity*, trans. Carolyn Shread, Cambridge: Polity Press.

**to the eight-year-old Jean-Michel Basquiat**

that moment—the hum, the scream, the glimmering scales  
outside and in, then nothing, and then you're waking  
without spleen, instead of myriads of cells  
crumbling before the hand materializes.

the spleen—the body's Manhattan undulating like medusa,  
able to cleanse fluids, treat blood,  
neutralize pain and sift out trauma,  
digesting everything in black bile.

without it no injury would vanish, it would wander,  
spread, accumulate, finding its only outlet  
via the shoulder shaking to the rhythm of jazz,  
through the resonant materials in the bones

**systems: the spine**

*for A.O.*

i adore your back, from which a wing sprouts  
fashioned from ribs, comprised of the shoulder. its agile flutter  
wakes me in the night as the heart aflutter.

your back's my god, the spine's a serpent  
entwined between the ribs as among the stones,  
and placed in a river taking a sharp turn,  
a serpent to be stroked in expectation of an attack.

and they, stubborn, want to stretch you out, scaffold with rods  
like Europe, flopping in a shallow puddle, swallowing its own  
amniotic fluid, warped at so many points of contact  
with the body

**Erysichton – Tarrare – Domery**

i ate my dinner, your dinner, a family, two armies,  
a few cats and eels, some candles, a little carrion,  
maybe an infant, i honestly don't remember,  
i devoured memory as well, time, names.

in saying i ate what i'm trying to say is  
that the walls of my stomach are full of ulcers  
open to other worlds.  
the belly like outer space lurching back and forth in acid.

to swallow animals and people,  
to carry them to a safe place;  
to consume an unimaginable amount of meat,  
in order to feed this motley crew;  
to devour oneself, to get away  
from the universe, which consumes



## ***Notes on Contributors***

**Shadia Abdel-Rahman Téllez** graduated in English Studies and in the Master's Degree in Gender and Diversity at the University of Oviedo with a final dissertation about narrativity and embodied subjectivity in literary representations of child sexual abuse and trauma. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Gender and Diversity Programme at the University of Oviedo and her research interests include Medical Humanities, illness narratives, phenomenological philosophy and disability studies. More specifically, her thesis examines literary representations of chronic pain and disability in contemporary literature by women. Her academic publications include "The Embodied Subjectivity of a Half-Formed Narrator: Sexual Abuse, Language (Un)formation and Melancholic Girlhood in Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*" (*Estudios Irlandeses*, 2018) and "Talking Bodies: Sexual Abuse, Language, Illness and Dissociation in Camilla Gibb's *Mouthing the Words*" (*Atlantis*, 2018). She is currently working on an essay about urban space and agoraphobia.

**Anna Adamowicz** was born in Lubin in 1993 and currently lives in Wrocław. She is a medical laboratory scientist, poet, and author of two volumes of poetry: *Wątpia* (2016) and *Animalia* (2019). She was nominated for one of the most important Polish literary awards—Gdynia Literary Prize—in 2017. Her work has been published in numerous Polish literary and cultural magazines, such as *Przekrój*, *Dwutygodnik*, *artPapier*, and *Zeszyty Literackie*.

**Máximo Aláez Corral** lectures and researches in the field of Arts and Humanities at the University of Oviedo. He obtained his PhD degree in Gender and Women's Studies in 2013. He also holds BAs in Fine Arts (2001) and in English Studies (1996). His current research focuses on the interconnections and intersections of visual art, performance art and literature in contemporary female writers and artists such as Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, Gillian Wearing, Margaret Atwood, and Nuala ní Chonchúir. The link between art and the representation of disease is another important field of interest for

him. His recent publications include two monographs on the visual representation of the female body and on the representation of symbolic violence against women in the work of contemporary women artists (published in 2011 and 2018, respectively), as well as the translation into Spanish of Nuala Ní Chonchúir's collection of short stories, *Nude* (2009) (*Desnudo*, KRK, 2017).

**Isabel Alonso-Breto** is a lecturer in Postcolonial Studies at the University of Barcelona. Her research has explored the work of authors of Caribbean, South Asian, African and Canadian origin, in recent years focusing on the work of Sri Lankan writers. She is an occasional translator and writer: She has just concluded the translation into Spanish of an anthology by Tamil Sri Lankan poet Cheran, soon to be published by Editorial Navona, and has published short stories in a number of journals. A poetry lover, she recently edited issue number 5 of the journal *Blue Gum*, devoted to poetry in several languages. In 2017 she was diagnosed with breast cancer. At present she is a survivor, and she hopes to go on being one for a long, long time.

**Kate Antosik-Parsons** is an art historian and researcher at National College of Art and Design, Dublin, on the L'Internationale "Our Many Europes" project examining performance art in Ireland in the 1990s. She is also a research associate of the Humanities Institute, University College Dublin. Kate has published on gender and sexuality in contemporary Irish art, including essays on Amanda Coogan, Áine Phillips, Alanna O'Kelly. Recent writing includes "The Embodied Politics of Women's Sexual and Reproductive Politics in Irish Art and Visual Culture" in *Reproductive Justice and Sexual Rights: Transnational Perspectives* (2019) and the co-authored essay (with Niamh McDonald, Karen E. Till, Gerry Kearns and Jack Callan) "Campaigning for Choice: Canvassing as Feminist Pedagogy in Dublin Bay North" in *After the 8<sup>th</sup>: Implications and Futures* (Forthcoming, Jan. 2020).

**Monika Glosowicz** is Assistant Professor at the University of Silesia. She graduated from the Interdepartmental Individual Studies in Humanities of the University of Silesia and from the European Masters in Women's and Gender Studies (Utrecht University and University of Granada) within the Erasmus Mundus programme GEMMA, and holds PhDs from the Universities of Silesia and Oviedo. She has published *Maszynerie afektywne. Literackie strategie emancypacji w najnowszej polskiej poezji kobiecej* (IBL PAN, 2019) and co-edited the volumes *Imagined Geographies. Central European Spatial*

*Narratives between 1984 and 2014* (IBL PAN, 2018) and *Dyskursy gościnności. Etyka współbycia w perspektywie późnej nowoczesności* (IBL PAN, 2019), as well as a special issue of the journal *Central Europe* (2017, vol. 15)—*The Central European Archeology of Knowledge: Exploring Polish and Ukrainian Literature (1989–2014)*.

**Luz Mar González-Arias** is Senior Lecturer in the English Department at the University of Oviedo. Her research is primarily in the areas of body theory and Medical Humanities, as applied (mainly, but not exclusively) to the work of contemporary Irish women poets and visual artists. Publications include a chapter on Ireland in *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (2007), and her essay on PTSD “Impossible Returns: The Trope of the Soldier in Celia de Fréine’s Poetry” (*Irish University Review*, 2018); She has contributed to the volume *Animals in Irish Literature and Culture* (Palgrave, 2015) with her essay “‘A pedigree bitch, like myself: (Non)Human Illness and Death in Dorothy Molloy’s Poetry’”, and to *The Nordic Irish Studies Journal* with her piece “Ageing Iconography: Non-normative Representations of the Irish Maternal Bodies” (2018). She is the editor of *National Identities and Imperfections in Contemporary Irish Literature: Unbecoming Irishness* (Palgrave, 2017), and is currently working on a book-length monograph on the life and poetry of Dorothy Molloy. In 2016 and 2017 Luz Mar González-Arias curated the performances and exhibition of Amanda Coogan at the Niemeyer Centre (Avilés, Asturias).

**Dilek Menteşe Kıryaman** graduated from Ege University in 2010 with a major in English Language and Literature. Currently, she is a research assistant and PhD candidate at Ege University, in the English Language and Literature Department, where she completed her MA thesis entitled “The Industrial Novel: *Shirley*, *Hard Times* and *North and South*”. Her academic interests are in the fields of identity studies, multiculturalism, post-colonial theory and Victorian literature. Her recent publications include “Humour and Transnational Identity in Andrea Levy’s *Fruit of the Lemon*”, “Reversing the ‘Self’ and ‘Other’: Humour and Horror in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Blonde Roots*”, “Corporeality and Fragmentation in Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go*”, and “Reaching a Sense of Belonging in Bernardine Evaristo’s *Lara: A Journey into Past Traumas*”.

**Alina Mitek-Dziemba** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at the University of Silesia and a translator of academic texts into Polish. She teaches many subjects at both undergraduate and postgrad-

uate levels, including translation studies, religion, comparative literature and philosophy. She is the author of *Literature and Philosophy in Pursuit of the Art of Living: Nietzsche, Wilde, Shusterman* (2011; in Polish), as well as the editor of the anthology *The Tree of Knowledge: Post-Secularism in Translations and Commentary* (2012), and of two bilingual collections of essays (in Polish and English): *The Ties of Community: Literature, Religion, Comparative Studies* (2013) and *Polytropos: Tracing Tadeusz Ślawek's Paths* (2016). In her research she explores the intersections of comparative literature, ecocriticism, environmental aesthetics, animal studies, somaesthetics and post-secular thinking. She is currently working on a project concerned with the poetic ecotheologies of David Herbert Lawrence. She is also engaged in the animal movement, organising talks and conferences on the topic of human and animal co-existence, with a particular emphasis on its relationship to religion.

**Jakub Skurtys** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of the History of Polish Literature After 1918 at the University of Wrocław, and a literary historian and critic. He is interested in avant-garde literature and recent poetry as well as in the connections between economics and literature. He is currently at work on a study of the works of Adam Ważyk. His publications include articles about modern literature and the history of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde in *Wielogłos, Śląskie Studia Polonistyczne, Przestrzenie Teorii* and *Pamiętnik Literacki*. He is co-editor of *Tajne Bankiety* (2014), a volume of essays about poetry. His book *Wspólny mianownik*, devoted to Polish poetry after 2010, will be published later in 2019.

**Justyna Stępień** is Assistant Professor in Literary and Cultural Studies in the English Department at the University of Szczecin. She is the editor of *Redefining Kitsch and Camp in Literature and Culture* (2014) and the author of *British Pop Art and Postmodernism* (2015). Her research interests encompass the transmediatisation of cultural productions, aspects of everyday aesthetics, and posthuman body politics analysed from a transdisciplinary perspective. She has published essays on popular culture, postmodern literature, film and the visual arts, combining her interests in philosophy and critical theory. She is member of The Posthuman and Art Research Group, an ongoing network comprised of ten scholars, artists and curators from across Europe and North America.



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**Lynn Suh** is a writer and translator originally from Boston, Massachusetts. He's been living in Krakow for the past eight years. His poems, essays and translations have appeared in various publications in Europe including Berlin Quarterly, *biBLioteka* and *Kontent*. Apart from his literary activities, he is a member of a cowboy band in Krakow called The Razcals.

**Kelley Swain** is a poet, novelist, and critic specialising in Medical and Health Humanities. Originally from Rhode Island, she lived in London for a decade before moving to rural Oxfordshire. She reviews books, theatre, exhibitions and music for *The Lancet* journals. Her first collection of poetry, *Darwin's Microscope*, is enjoying a 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition in 2019 with an accompanying song cycle, *Endless Forms Most Beautiful*, debuting at the Oxford Lieder Festival.

