Robin May Schott

Pain, Abjection, and Political Emotion

Abstract
The mass war rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990's have created an increased awareness of sexual violence in war. The newly re-issued diary, *A Woman in Berlin* makes an important contribution to the belated study of sexual violence during World War II. In this article, the diary is analyzed to elucidate the concepts of pain, abjection, and political emotion. The text offers insight into the role of pain in creating political identities as well as the role of abjection in showing the fragility of these identities. The notion of abjection also challenges the adequacy of a cognitivist approach to emotion, such as Martha Nussbaum develops, and shows how emotions are effects of political practices and norms.
Introduction
Following the closing of World War II and in the field of studies that has been named post-Holocaust studies, debates about the meaning of the terms “victim” and “survivor” have been central for ethical and political understanding. What is the role of the testimony of victims in historical understanding? Does the term “victim” itself imply passivity and helplessness, and should it be replaced by the notion of survivor, which draws attention to individuals’ resources, ingenuity, and strength? Or does discarding the term “victim” in favor of the term “survivor” risk overlooking a critique of the materiality of power that has created massive harm and suffering? Are victims innocents, who against their will are subject to horrific tortures? Or are they sometimes also co-responsible for carrying out the harms that they themselves suffer from, as indicated by Primo Levi’s notion of the gray zone.¹ These debates surface not only in reference to the wars that have informed the consciousness of present generations but in reference to mass atrocities of the past, including American slavery, as well as contemporary aspects of globalization such as the trafficking of women for commercial sex.²

In the context of these debates, the book A Woman in Berlin, originally published anonymously in English translation in 1954, is a remarkable text. In it, the author, herself a German journalist who experienced multiple rapes during the Soviet occupation of Berlin in the final weeks of the war, disabuses

² For a discussion of the dilemmas of the “victim” in American slavery, see Elizabeth V. Spelman’s discussion of Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself, written by the ex-slave Harriet Jacobs, in Elizabeth V. Spelman, Fruits of Sorrow: Framing our Attention to Suffering (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), pp. 59–89. At a seminar on May 5, 2010, at the Danish Institute of International Studies on “Managing Vulnerability: The Rescue Industry and the Struggles of Female Migrants,” with speakers Laura Augustín and Sine Plambech, many of these same issues were discussed in relation to female sex workers.
many of the currently prevailing assumptions about victims and more specifically about victims of rape. The highly increased public and legal awareness of sexual violence in war, following the genocides and mass rapes in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s, has brought with it an image of the rape victim as a brutalized and traumatized figure who receives a voice in the public awareness of Europeans and North Americans through Western journalists, advocates, and lawyers. Differences in language, nationality, and the facts of geographical distance have all contributed to the image in the media of rape victims as requiring the intervention of Western spokespersons. In this moment of public culture, reading the diary of a German woman who was repeatedly raped in war demands that we revise our cultural presuppositions about victims and rape victims. The author provides in astonishing detail an account of the dailiness of war, filled with descriptions of both those who did not survive and the strategies of those who did. Moreover, this text is an important contribution to the belated study of sexual violence during World War II, which recently has begun to consider the sexual violence committed by German soldiers as well.3

Just as the position of the victim has been considered problematic, so have the discourses of pain sometimes voiced by victims. Does the pain move beyond the dimension of individual, subjective experience that is our everyday understanding of pain? Does the articulation of pain put a claim on public consciousness, and if so, what implications do discourses of pain have for historical and political understandings? Does pain keep something alive that one otherwise risks forgetting, as Nietzsche suggests when he writes “only what goes on hurting will stick”?4


These queries about the subjective, public, historical, and political dimensions of pain cover another layer of questions posed by scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and many others regarding the way in which pain is to be categorized. In studying the discourse of pain in this diary, one might ask whether it is a study of the physicality of pain or of its mental and emotional expression. As Roselyne Rey noted, such a question itself presumes a dualistic thinking about the relation between mind and body that typically underlies our way of thinking about pain.⁵ The dominant theoretical debates about pain have been a struggle between two poles of thought: pain as situated in a body part, as in a naturalist approach, and pain as a form of consciousness. It is an interesting footnote to the way in which many philosophers have sought to model themselves as scientists that twentieth-century philosophers have increasingly moved to the path of naturalism, whereas scientists have increasingly chosen the path of consciousness as an explanation of pain.⁶ Instead of entering into these debates, I pragmatically situate myself in a “mixed” position that acknowledges the complexity of the phenomenon of pain, and recognizes it as having sensory, affective, and cognitive dimensions. David Morris, amongst others, stresses that pain is never “entirely timeless or solitary” but is “deeply historical.” This is so in terms of how pain is expressed, and how the expression of pain informs the way in which it is felt, in terms of who is identified as being capable of feeling pain (as Morris points out, slaves in America were regarded as property and hence incapable of human feelings, so pain “has helped to support the practice of suppression and genocide”), and in terms of the history of the theories that are used to interpret pain. Tracing the discourse of pain in the diary A Woman in Berlin is one avenue for studying how pain—and the related concept of abjection that

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I introduce below—is part of political history, both in terms of how political history is made and how it is experienced.

In particular, I will focus on the discourse of pain in the diary in relation to questions about political community. Many studies of testimony have posed the question: What does the telling do with the pain? There have been two primary answers to this question. The first answer focuses on the processes of survival and recovery or reconstitution of the self. The psychiatrist Dori Laub, a child survivor of the Holocaust and co-founder of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale writes, “The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive … One has to know one’s buried truth in order to be able to live one’s life.”8 In Laub’s account, telling one’s story brings to light truths that enable one to avoid the contamination of distorted memory that can create self-inflicted emotional imprisonment. Telling can therefore create a sense of human relatedness. The philosopher Susan Brison, herself a survivor of a brutal rape and attempted murder, also sees narrative as one, albeit limited, means of recovery. Narrative enables the survivor to establish more control over her life and her recalling, and enables her to make a self in which she is the subject of her own speech.9 For both of these authors, the telling of pain, which helps personal survival, is closely linked to the appeal to another, to the reintegration into some kind of community.

This creation of community is the second answer often given to the question: What does the telling do with the pain? The Indian anthropologist Veena Das focuses on this aspect of pain in relation to community, and calls

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8 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 78. Laub emphasizes that such witnessing was impossible at the time of this historical event. The Holocaust extinguished “the very possibility of address, the possibility of appealing, or of turning to, another.” But attempts were made, diaries were written and buried. However, these attempts were doomed to fail at the time (see p. 82).

both for a social theory of pain and a place for pain in social theory. She points to two classical sociological paths for tracing the social meaning of pain: 1) on the one hand, pain can be understood as the “medium through which society establishes its ownership over individuals;” 2) on the other hand, pain can be understood as the “medium available to an individual through which a historical wrong done to a person can be represented.”

With the first path, telling the pain can be an expression of social criticism, of the high price of belonging to a specific community. With the second path, telling the pain is understood as an appeal to others to acknowledge the suffering that has been inflicted and as an avenue by which individuals can be integrated into a moral community. For Das, when private experiences of pain are allowed to move into the realm of publicly articulated experiences, they can be collectively experienced.

To these inquiries that focus on the telling of pain in relation to recovery, social communities, and moral communities, I will add the dimension of political community. Does telling the pain open up avenues for individuals to be integrated into political community or to be excluded from it? Are those who speak or write of pain positioned as victims deserving of protection, or are they positioned as criminals or outcasts? What do these discourses tell us about the relations between bodies and sexuality and state and nation, issues that George L. Mosse highlighted in his now classic book Nationalism and Sexuality?

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11 Ibid., pp. 193-194.

12 On Danish radio P1, on July 9, 2009, Morten Kjærum spoke of the importance of the category of “victim” for illegal immigrants who are subject to violations of child labour laws or who are prostituted. As victims, they were entitled to protection, but if they are categorized as “criminal,” they are subject to deportation.
A Woman in Berlin, begun when “Berlin first saw the face of war,” offers us good resources for probing these questions. The author was among the 95,000 to 130,000 women in Berlin who were repeatedly raped by Russian soldiers in the closing weeks of the war, and she documents in detail her experiences from April 20 to June 22, 1945. The historian Antony Beevor cites the estimate that two million German women were raped in 1945, a figure that excludes Polish women and Soviet women and girls brought to Germany for slave labor by the Wehrmacht. First published in English translation in 1954, a German language edition of the diary was published in Geneva five years later and caused a furor. Critics accused the author of “besmirching the honour of German women,” and chastised her “shameless immorality.” The author refused the publication of another edition during her lifetime. Not until 2003, following her death, was the diary rereleased in Germany. Although the author had insisted on maintaining her anonymity, recent journalists have “discovered” her identity.

The Diary and the Discourse of Pain

Here I will discuss the diary with the following questions in mind: What does the diary tell us about the concept of pain? What does it tell us about the notion of abjection? What does it tell us about the political issues of the relation between the body and the nation? And what does it contribute to an understanding of political emotion? I suggest that there is a double movement in the diary, where on the one hand the discourse of pain contributes to processes of political identification, while on the other hand, the language of abjection points to centrifugal forces of dis-identification.

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14 Ibid., p. 10.
15 Ibid., p. 3.
16 Ibid., p. 310.
17 Ibid., p. 4.
As noted above, the dominant debates about pain have been structured by dualist assumptions that situate pain either as objective (Rey notes that the Latin root *doleo* could use an impersonal form so that “the painful member itself became the subject”\(^\text{18}\)), or as subjective, in which case it is often identified with suffering, which carries a moral connotation. Elaine Scarry’s path-breaking book *The Body in Pain* pursues the inquiry into the relation of pain and consciousness, but suggests that, first of all, the movement of pain is the destruction of consciousness, language, and world. Scarry argues that physical pain is “unsharable,” that it brings about an “absolute split between one’s sense of one’s reality and the reality of other persons.” Hence, one’s own physical pain and another’s pain are two wholly distinct events.\(^\text{19}\) Pain shatters language and it must be understood as part of the unmaking of the world, as the content of one’s world, language, and self disintegrates.\(^\text{20}\) Scarry studies a variety of texts, including publications of Amnesty International, transcripts of personal injury trials, and works of artists, to explore the passage of pain into speech and the ability to communicate the reality of pain to those not themselves in pain, as a prelude to the collective task of diminishing pain.\(^\text{21}\) She is convinced of the “radical subjectivity of pain,”\(^\text{22}\) that pain is an event that takes place inside the privacy of the sufferer’s body and that it uses the path of imagination and expression to “project” itself into the external world.\(^\text{23}\) Recent critics have noted that Scarry’s account is tied to an implicit dualism, which shows the difficulty of developing an analysis of pain.

\(^{18}\) Rey, *Pain*, p. 3.


\(^{20}\) Ibid., p. 35.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 9.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 50.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., p. 170.
or violence that is not moored in the dualisms of inside-outside, body-mind, self-other.²⁴

Veena Das, by contrast, challenges the view that pain destroys one’s capacity to communicate. She explores how the expression of pain is an invitation to share, a call for acknowledgement and recognition, and, in this sense, argues that pain cannot be a purely personal, subjective experience.²⁵ She argues that there is no individual ownership of pain but that it can come to be collectively experienced, and she calls on Wittgenstein’s reflections about the idea of feeling pain in another person’s body to support her position. Wittgenstein argued that it was necessary to abandon the traditional way of speaking about pain, and to question ordinary prejudices about the distinction between what is internal or private and what is external or public.²⁶ If pain were strictly a private, inner experience, it would be impossible to represent pain in language. Yet other people commonly are said to know when I am in pain, and I would never have learned the meaning of the word “pain” without other people. When he notes that “the expression of pain is a cry,”²⁷ he suggests that the cry of pain presumes that there is a listener or potential listener, who also at some point has felt pain. In The Blue and Brown Books, Wittgenstein even reflected on whether it is conceivable that one person should have pain in another person’s body. Here he distinguished the metaphysical proposition, “I can’t feel his pain,” from the experiential proposition, “We can’t have (haven’t as a rule) pains in another person’s tooth.”²⁸

²⁵ Das, Critical Events, p. 194.
probes the imaginary case that I may feel a pain that seems to be located in my left hand, and when reaching out to touch it find that I am touching my neighbor’s hand. With this thought in mind, he indicates that from a metaphysical point of view it is conceivable to have pain in another person’s body. As Stanley Cavell notes, Das puts Wittgenstein’s fantasy to sound and creative use in suggesting that in one’s receptivity to the world, one can lend one’s body to other’s experience. For Das, this means that in moral life, one can form “one body, providing voice, and touching victims, so that their pain may be experienced in other bodies as well.”

Das argues for the need to “allow private experiences of pain to move out into the realm of publicly articulated experiences of pain.” This formulation by which pain is described as moving out into the public space has some affinities with the position of Scarry described above. But Das also makes the stronger claim that pain can be collectively experienced by forming “one body.” By this, Das indicates that providing voice to pain is the avenue for other bodies to experience pain as well. For Scarry, the trajectory of pain is from radically subjective pain, which in its intensity destroys language, to its reconfiguration in language by the sufferer, witness, or artist, to its subsequent communicability to others. For Das, the trajectory is from private pain to a public articulation of pain, enabled by institutional structures such as therapeutic spaces and tribunals, to pain becoming experienced in other bodies as well.

The diary *A Woman in Berlin* probes this more radical position, and I will draw out some of the features of the text that insist on the collective meaning of pain in its documentation of the author’s multiple rapes and the rapes of the women around her. The author writes about what happened when Berlin “first saw the face of war,” when the war in this city became a war against

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29 Cavell, “Comments,” p. 98.
31 Ibid., p. 193.
civilians. There were no more Völkischer Beobachter with headlines about rape that were read over breakfast, there was no more governing, people used their sleeves to wipe off the blood from their meat coupons, when a shell hit a meat market while people were queuing, and a man pushed a wheelbarrow with a dead woman “stiff as a board ... Her withered legs in grey stockings sticking out at the end of the wheelbarrow.” War changed the sounds, smells, images, habits, and humor of daily life. Stories of rape and crude jokes were beginning to circulate: “Better a Russki on top than a Yank overhead.” The author, who speaks some Russian, seeks out a Russian officer to ask for help, and manages to help the baker’s wife escape the Russian soldiers. The baker’s wife asks, “Are they gone?” and the author writes, “I nod, but just to make sure I step out into the dark corridor. They the (Russian soldiers) both have me. Both men were lying in wait. I scream and scream ... I hear the basement door shutting with a dull thud behind me.”

This was the first of multiple rapes experienced by the author, and it is marked by her screams. Her scream is a spontaneous response to this physical violation, to the experience of sexual things as “a lot of sharp knives.” When she later muses about “whatever new evil the day might bring,” she describes pain as the response to “the fact that my body has been mistreated, taken against its will.” She copes with the violation of her bodily will through alienation and numbness. Both as a response to the “sharp knives” in her body and to the violation of her will, the scream calls out something.

33 Ibid., p. 21.
34 Ibid., p. 29.
35 Ibid., p. 45.
36 Ibid., p. 63.
37 Ibid., p. 37.
38 Ibid., p. 70–71.
39 Ibid., p. 72.
40 Ibid., p. 133.
41 Ibid., p. 113–114.
about her relation to her self, and in this sense the author seems to support the subjective view of pain. But her scream is also a call out to others. In this way, her pain is also intersubjective, linked to an expectation of belonging to a human collective, and an implicit challenge to the view that pain is radically subjective.

Her scream can be understood, as in Das’s account, as “asking for acknowledgement and recognition.” This call for acknowledgement may be answered or not, and when not it is an accusation as well as an appeal. In this context, the scream is an accusation to the rapist who refuses to desist in his violence, as well as to her neighbors—the very neighbors whom she had just saved from being raped and who now abandoned her behind the shut basement door. To these women, the author yells as soon as she is able to drag herself to the door, “You pigs!” Then everyone screams, and a “platoon of women” takes shape to speak to the commandant. The neighboring women addressed as “You pigs!” here take the shape of a collective military unit, brought into formation by the author’s accusation. In this context, the appeal and accusation of pain brings these women to act in a collective manner.

But the author’s accusation is effective in bringing about collective action also because these women share a common situation. The author makes an explicit distinction between peace-time rape, where individuals suffer a different shock, and mass rape. She writes, “But here we’re dealing with a collective experience, something foreseen and feared many times in advance ... . And this mass rape is something we are overcoming collectively as well. All the women help the others, by speaking about it, airing their pain and allowing others to air theirs and spit out what they’ve suffered.”

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43 Ibid., p. 70.
44 Anonymous, A Woman in Berlin, p. 73.
shared in the common fear and anticipation of rape; in the gallows humor and new language of “sleeping-for-food” or “rape shoes”; in the conversations about “How often did they ...?” and in the subsequent fears about pregnancy and venereal diseases. The sharing of pain in the author’s view is rooted in the common fact of being in the situation of pain, which calls forth a collectivity that is fragile and unstable. When bits of normality begin to re-appear, the sense of community recedes: “our vaunted community, the communal sense forged by national identity and living in the same building and sharing an air-raid shelter, is gradually eroding. In fine urban fashion everyone is locking themselves within four walls and carefully choosing the people they mix with.” One might even say that for the author, pain is the driving factor of belonging. In this sense, pain is a form of collective affect, as Sara Ahmed suggests in her analysis of the sociality of emotions in The Cultural Politics of Emotion. Pain is social, not in the sense of a contamination metaphor where the feeling of pain issues from one individual and is communicated to others, nor in the sense that the feeling of pain exists in a crowd and is absorbed by the individual, but in the sense that pain in part creates the borders of collective belonging. Here one should add that it is not just the emotion that creates the group, but the materiality of the situation that also creates the emotion. The dailiness of air raids, shelters, starvation, and

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46 Ibid., p. 222.  
47 Ibid., p. 192.  
48 Ibid., p. 231.  
49 Sara Ahmed, in The Cultural Politics of Emotion (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) argues against the “inside out” model of emotion, in which the individual is the origin of feeling. She also argues against the “outside in” model, where emotion originates in the social group such as the crowd. Instead, she suggests that “emotions are not ‘in’ either the individual or the social, but produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they were objects” (p. 10).  
50 Ahmed adapts from Marx an analysis of production and circulation to analyze the sociality of emotion. But she overlooks the importance for Marx of analyzing the material conditions of production as well.
sexual assaults, as the author notes, were crucial in forging the sense of communal belonging.

In this context, one might ask whether any kind of emotion can create the borders of collective belonging, or whether certain emotions such as pain have a special role in group identity, as Durkheim suggests. Moreover, is the social role of pain more prominent in some kinds of groups than in others? Does the diary answer the question: What kind of group is driven by pain? The author yearns for the collectivities of the “nation” and the “people.” She has the urge “to belong to the nation, to abide and suffer history together.”

She had returned to Germany from abroad, despite the advice of friends, because she had the “painfully clear feeling of not belonging.” She writes, “I feel that I belong to my people, that I want to share their fate, even now.”

Pain is a dominant drive in her identification with the German nation, with the only way to assuage the painful feeling of not-belonging being to share the suffering of her people. Her drive to belong is powerful even though the national collectivity is bent on keeping women silent about their rapes and their pain. “We … will have to keep politely mum; each one of us will have to act as if she in particular was spared. Otherwise no man is going to want to touch us anymore.”

In the diary, pain is the motivating ground for belonging, it is the price for belonging, and it is the consequence of belonging. Returning to the classic sociological paradigms about pain, the diary seems firmly entrenched in the conviction that pain is the medium by which society establishes ownership over its members. As Durkheim reflects on initiation rituals, the violent transformation of the body is “the most enduring witness to a consubstantiation between the social and the individual.”

One can add that nationalism in Nazi Germany, with its promise of self-fulfillment through community and its identification of the strength of the state with

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52 Ibid., p. 205–206.
53 Ibid., p. 176.
war, is a particularly good candidate for the position that pain is the path of community.

The author of the diary also exemplifies the second paradigm of pain, the view of pain as a medium to represent historical wrongs. In Das’s view, this is important not just as a form of social criticism but as an avenue for creating moral community. This avenue was disappointed both at the time of writing (the author knew the need to keep mum), at the time of first publication in German (where she was hounded as shameless), and at least until the late 1980s, when a younger generation of German women encouraged their mothers and grandmothers to speak about their experiences.

Hence, the diary embodies both of the classical sociological paradigms of pain, whereby pain is the price paid for belonging to community, as well as a protest against this price and an appeal for recognition. The diary treats pain as a social phenomenon, not as a radically individual one. Pain is not privately experienced and subsequently communicated through language but is a scream in which an appeal to the other is implicit. Language plays a crucial role in creating a social experience of pain, with the airing of suffering in conversations and through gallows humor. But pain also is activated in the bodies of others through the circulation of related emotions of intensity such as fear and humiliation, which arise from the shared material conditions and dangers of the occupation.

While the diary explores the sociality of pain, the way that pain creates the identification with a collectivity and the borders of the community, the text is also haunted by another movement with the opposite effect—a movement of being spit out of relations of belonging, a movement that one can call abjection. The feeling of abjection refers to a kind of dizziness, nausea, a physical revolt at the conditions of one’s existence. Julia Kristeva describes abjection in Powers of Horror as the loathing, meaninglessness, and uncanniness that


56 Anonymous, A Woman in Berlin, p. 11.
shows me “what I permanently thrust aside in order to live...It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”\textsuperscript{57} Abjection is one expression of the precariousness of embodied subjectivity. The subject is dependent on systems of distinctions that create borders between inside and outside, health and disease, nourishment and waste, cleanliness and filth, life and death, but at the same time the subject is balanced precariously at the collapse of these distinctions. What is necessary for human subjectivity is also fragile and potentially disruptive.

The author of the diary gives testimony to abjection when she writes of how the ordinariness of bodily existence—skin, undergarments, saliva, and snot—becomes a marker of disintegration and death. Following the multiple rapes, she is repulsed by her own body. She writes, she feels “so dirty. I don’t want to touch anything, least of all my own skin.”\textsuperscript{58} And later, “I’m constantly repulsed by my own skin. I don’t want to touch myself, can barely look at my body.”\textsuperscript{59} Instead of being a woman who had grown up in a good home, she has become “filth.”\textsuperscript{60} Instead of feeling, she intends “to stay dead and numb, without feeling.”\textsuperscript{61} Instead of spit being saliva ejected from the mouth, it is the ultimate humiliation. She describes how, after one rapist ripped apart her last untorn underwear, he stuck his finger in her mouth. “A stranger’s hands expertly pulling apart my jaw. Eye to eye. Then with great deliberation he drops a gob of gathered spit into my mouth.”\textsuperscript{62} Afterwards, dizzying, nauseated, and throwing up, she reaches her turning point. “I make up my mind ... I have to find a single wolf to keep away the pack. An officer, as


\textsuperscript{58} Anonymous, \textit{A Woman in Berlin}, p. 80.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 96.

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 97.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 114.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 84.
high-ranking as possible.” And snot is no longer what drips from the nose because of colds or allergies, but it becomes the marker of enemy or friend. After they left the basement shelters and she was forced to work for the Russian soldiers in the laundry, she was washing handkerchiefs sneezed in by strangers. “Was I nauseated by the enemy snot? Yes, even more than by the underwear—I had to struggle not to gag.” Marmalade and coffee substitute became not just standard pantry fare, but what was horribly spooned onto the hair of a nineteen-year-old girl by three Russian soldiers after they had had their way with her on the sofa. In this vertiginous universe, bodily excretions like spit and snot become visceral markers of the distinction between friend and enemy, between “our boys”—German soldiers who “probably weren’t much different over there”—and them—Russian soldiers and rapists. The author’s own skin has been spoiled and turned into alien territory, and the enemy has the capacity to turn food into filth.

On the one hand, in this abject universe the subject is pushed to the borders of the human collective, as if she were outside of the categories that structure ordinary human relations. On the other hand, she is inscribed in the war-time relations between her enemy and her people. Following Nietzsche, one could say these relations are inscribed on her body and the bodies of the soldiers who rape, spit, and sneeze in proximity to her. This first aspect of abjection seems to correspond to what Agamben calls shame or desubjectification. In Remnants of Auschwitz he describes being ashamed as the “I” that is “overcome by its own passivity,” which is at the same time a presence to itself. He writes, “In shame, the subject thus has no other content than its own desubjectification; it becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as

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63 Ibid., p. 85.
64 Ibid., p. 262.
65 Ibid., p. 263.
66 Ibid., p. 159.
a subject. But the diary also illustrates that what Agamben calls desubjectification is not just the subject’s witnessing of its own disorder. The subject’s disorder is also the matter on which the collectivity maps its structures—in this case the political collectivity of the nation at war, with its distinction between the people and the enemy, German and Russian, defeated and conquerors, all of which are mapped onto her skin and on what comes from under the skin of the Russian soldiers.

Tracing this trajectory of abjection in the diary leads me to four reflections on the relation between abjection and political community. First, abjection points to the irreducibly sensuous dimension of belonging to the political. In this case, the practices of war stir feelings of bodily revulsion not only against the enemy but against one’s own body. This is an important insight, given that a companion to a cognitivist view of emotion that treats emotion as a form of judgment is a cognitivist view of the political that treats the political arena as primarily an arena for discussion and deliberation. One aspect of the sensuousness of the political is the relation of proximate bodies. What is at stake in the diary, for example, is not what happens to bodies at a distance but to those in close contact, neighbors and occupying soldiers, when war takes over the basements, bedrooms, and kitchens of civilians. Second, abjection points to the potentially uneasy relation between belonging to a political community and belonging to the human community. Arendt has argued that without the rights of belonging to political community, what she calls the “right to have rights,” one is expelled from the category of hu-

68 One could argue that Arendt overlooks this bodily dimension in her view of the political. In discussing Arendt’s dismissal of the role of suffering and compassion in the political, Spelman writes, “for Arendt what enables something to become part of the public realm is not whether it can be seen or touched, but whether it can be talked about from a variety of perspectives.” See Spelman, Fruits of Sorrow, p. 83.
manity.\textsuperscript{69} But in the description of the diary, it is the fact of belonging to a particular political community in wartime that thrusts the author into a position of abjection at the borders of the human community.\textsuperscript{70} When war is a war against civilians (as contemporary warfare has become), the rights and dignity inhering in belonging to a political community are put at risk. Third, the diary indicates that one can be abjected by a collectivity (e.g., by the invading Russian soldiers), and one also can be collectively abjected (all raped women must keep mum). Fourth, the diary indicates that abjection is a specialty of wartime. When Kristeva analyzes abjection, she positions abjection as an immanent possibility of human subjectivity and social order. But she also provides an image of abjection as epitomized by Nazi crimes. She writes, “In the dark halls of the museum that is now what remains of Auschwitz, I see a heap of children’s shoes, or something like that … dolls I believe. The abjection of Nazi crime reaches its apex when death … interferes with what, in my living universe, is supposed to save me from death: childhood, science,
among other things.”71 Through the diary we see that it is not only Nazi crimes that have the power of turning life-giving attributes into death. War against civilians has this same effect, also when these civilians are Nazi supporters.

**Pain, Abjection, and Political Emotion**

To return to the question, “What does the telling do with the pain?” the diary traces out a double movement. On the one hand, the articulation of pain is firmly rooted in pain as social experience, in contrast to approaches that treat pain as radically subjective. The sociality of pain lies not just in its public articulation and communication, but pain is crucial in creating collective identity—both on the micro-level of the sense of community with neighbors and neighboring women, and on the macro-level of identifying with the Nazi state. In this context, the diary illustrates both classic sociological theories of pain: 1) pain as an expression of the price of belonging; and 2) pain as an appeal to creating community. But one should note that the community to which the author appeals is not just a moral community. Instead, the author traces a relation between suffering bodies and national identity that is embedded in a Nazi conception, even as she traces the growing disillusionment with, and crumbling of, the Nazi world.

On the other hand, the diary illustrates how the process of abjection pushes the subject to the border of collective existence, as if she were excluded from the human community (e.g., the Russian soldiers did not waste their condoms on German women).72 The shadow existence of the distinctions between cleanliness and filth, inside and outside, neighbor and enemy that sustains the order of community become visible in the bodily experiences of abjection. The process of abjection implies that the social identification that takes place through pain, in the diary, is uneasy, unstable, at risk.

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In this final section, I will consider whether the movement of pain and abjection in the diary opens a window to issues regarding the relation between emotion and political community, and regarding the concept of political emotion. Here I will focus only briefly on three aspects of this debate: 1) the issue of the relation between individual psychology, emotion and the political; 2) the theoretical models for understanding emotion; and 3) the pedagogical issues of educating emotions.

First, Martha Nussbaum’s work on the relation between emotion and the political provides a useful benchmark for this discussion. In both Hiding from Humanity and Upheavals of Thought she draws attention to the relation between emotions and different forms of political organization. She notes that “emotions are not alike in their relation to different forms of political organization.” A political system brings with it a “political conception of the person” and one of the primary tasks of politics is to cultivate appropriate emotions for its citizens. The relation between emotions and law can be viewed as bidirectional. On the one hand, political conceptions must concern themselves with the motivations of its citizens, in order to develop feasible conceptions that are stable over time. Here Nussbaum refers to John Rawls’s observation that it is necessary to have a “reasonable political psychology.”

The political sphere must in some sense build on the emotions and psychology of its citizens in order to envision a general adherence to political institutions and regulations. On the other hand, she notes that law “does not just describe existing emotional norms; it is itself normative, playing a dynamic and educative role.” In matching political psychology with political systems, Nussbaum is particularly interested in highlighting the forms of emotion that are appropriate for a liberal state. Her concern is to consider the

75 Nussbaum, Humanity, p. 12.
cognitive content of particular emotions—the judgments they express—as well as the specific history of emotions. Based on this cognitivist and historical approach, she highlights certain emotions as highly appropriate to the liberal state (anger and indignation; fear and grief; gratitude and love; compassion) and others as highly inappropriate (disgust and shame). She argues against the role of disgust in public life, and in particular in law, because its thought-content embodies magical ideas of contamination, and it historically has been used to “exclude and marginalize groups or people who come to embody the dominant group’s fear and loathing of its own animality and mortality.” And she argues against shame as normatively unreliable.

In using *A Woman in Berlin* as a dialogic partner for Nussbaum’s theory of political emotions, I will confine myself to two issues: 1) the question of whether there is symmetry between political psychology and political systems; and 2) the question of whether there is a family resemblance between disgust, shame, and abjection. As indicated in the discussion of pain in the diary, there are strong connecting links between emotions, motivations, and conceptions of political community. In this sense, the author of the diary seems to illustrate Nussbaum’s view of symmetry between politics and individuals, in other words, that a political system gets the citizens it deserves, and that the citizens are educated by the political system they inhabit. But the diary also points to two problems in this view. Through her pain, the author identifies with the political collectivity of the Nazi state (though we observe her growing disillusionment). In other words, the symmetry between political emotion and political system does not provide a point of entry for critically evaluating the norms of the political system. If a certain kind of emotion motivates adherence to a certain kind of politics, and the latter has a normative role in the education of emotion, then one might worry that there is too good a fit between political psychology and politics. Another way of

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76 Ibid., p. 14.
77 Ibid., p. 345-346.
voicing this concern is to ask about the affective basis for critique, and whether there is not a need for a kind of mismatch or disjointedness between political psychology and politics. The author of the diary points to this dimension as well, in what I have described as the process of abjection. Here one can observe that abjection, as described by Kristeva, seems closely related to the emotions of disgust and shame that Nussbaum argues provide unreliable norms and dangerous precedents for judgments. Yet the role of abjection in the diary implicitly challenges the adequacy of a cognitivist approach to emotions. Instead of just focusing on cognitive content, the diary also shows emotions to be effects of political processes. It is this latter dimension that is a crucial dimension of emotion in the context of political violence such as war.

Second, the theoretical models for understanding political emotion typically divide cognitivists like Nussbaum, who stress the thought-laden character of emotions, from noncognitivists, who emphasize the relation between emotion and bodily sensation and reject the attempt to view emotions primarily in terms of judgments. I will not here touch on the vast and

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79 Presumably Nussbaum would respond to this objection by arguing that liberal political psychology and political systems have ample room for critique, as evident in the lively role for dissension in public debates in democracy. Moreover, she might add that Nazism has given us a historical example of how worrying the relation between politics and psychology is when political norms violate basic human needs and capabilities. In other words, her argument for the positive role of the match between political psychology and politics is rooted in a strong claim for liberalism to embody human goods and aspirations—a claim that is not uncontroversial.


81 This view is often ascribed to David Hume and William James, who treat emotion as the feeling of bodily change. Hence, we feel fear “*because* our heart is racing, our skin is sweating” (Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotions*, p. 5). Ahmed adds that the shift toward a cognitive orientation often involves a shift away from attending to bodily sensation, instead of focusing on emotion as both bodily feeling and cognition.
detailed philosophical discussions of these topics. But instead I will return to the diary to ask what perspectives it contributes to this debate. The diary provides ample evidence for both cognitivist and noncognitivist positions, in terms of the role of emotion both as an experience of meaning or meaninglessness in this war against civilians, and of the incarnate features of pain and abjection. But, perhaps more interesting, the diary directs the reader’s attention to another set of issues about political emotion: how emotions circulate to produce collective identities. With this perspective, the question of how to understand political emotion is shifted away from its role as motivation, justification, or response to political institutions and norms and towards the question of political emotion as aspects of the process of creation of political identities and as effects of political practices and norms.

Third, I will briefly raise some questions of education and emotion. Nussbaum argues for a cultivation of particular kinds of emotion to strengthen particular kinds of political institutions. She suggests that emotions such as indignation and compassion attune us to the vulnerability and neediness of human existence, and to the need for liberal political institutions that will safeguard and nurture human capabilities. As suggested above, this project of matching political psychological to political institutions may be asking in one sense too much of a fit between subjective and institutional levels, and in another sense asking too little, by overlooking the gaps between these dimensions and the affective roots of political critique. Instead of seeking to educate human emotions for political systems, it may be more promising to pursue another strand of Nussbaum’s project, exploring how we learn from emotions. Her own studies of literature make a major contribution to understanding literature as a serious candidate for expressing truths about human life and its dilemmas, stretched tragically as we are between vulnerability

and agency. This strand is evident in *A Woman in Berlin* as well, where the form and content of the emotions provide a kind of therapeutic education for the author—where writing the diary has kept her free of the nightmares that haunt most other women. And these emotions may be educative for a reading public. With respect to the latter, it is interesting to bear in mind María Pía Lara’s notion of negative exemplarity. An exemplar, as Hannah Arendt noted in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, is “a particular that in its very particularity reveals the generality that otherwise could not be defined. Courage is like Achilles. Etc.” Whereas Kant explored positive exemplars in his analysis of judgments of taste regarding beauty, Lara argues that Arendt, in her work on totalitarianism, Nazism, the concentration camps, and the widespread assent of Germans to this regime, explored horror as a form of negative exemplarity. The diary, written by a German woman who also had assented to the Nazi regime, provides a powerful example of a negative exemplar: an education against not just this war but against war in general as war against civilians.

I have endeavored to show that *A Woman in Berlin* is a text that is rich on many levels. It contributes to understanding the specific history of the Soviet occupation of Berlin; to understanding sexual violence against civilians in wartime; to positioning the author as both agent and victim; to understanding the role of pain in creating political identities and the role of abjection in showing the fragility of these identities; and to rethinking some dominant positions in the debates about political emotions. As the notion of exemplarity emphasizes, it is in its particularity that its truths become evident. Foremost here is the intensity of sexual violence that is a stark reminder of the af-

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ffective and bodily dimensions of the political when polities engage in practices of war.

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