TWO

SUBLIME PAIN AND THE
SUBJECT OF SENTIMENTALISM

. . . if I may venture to borrow a prostituted term, to feel . . .

—Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Men

The chapters of Burke’s Enquiry, when taken only by their titles, seem composed of quotes from the motorcar pages of men’s magazines or pulp adventure novels (“Terror,” “Difficulty,” “Magnificence”), and the cosmetic advice sections of women’s magazines (“Proportion not the cause of Beauty,” “The real effects of fitness,” “Grace”).1 Interspersed are phrases that sound like a bereaved child repeating to itself how the world of things and properties works: “Beautiful objects small,” or “Sweetness relaxing.” Not to ridicule the text, but rather to draw attention to some of the explicit genderisms2 of the Burkean text that—though primarily in reaction to his later Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)—prompted his contemporary critic Mary Wollstonecraft to issue the following sentences on Burke’s composure as a writer and public figure. In her Letter to the Right Honorable Edmund Burke of the same year, better known as A Vindication of the Rights of Men, she mocked the compassionate tears which you have elaborately laboured to excite . . . like a celebrated beauty anxious to raise admiration on every occasion by witty arguments and ornamental feelings . . . all your pretty flights arise from your pampered sensibility; . . . vain of this fancied preeminence of organs, you foster every emotion till the fumes, mounting to your brain, dispel the sober suggestions of reason. It is not in this view surprising, that when you should argue you become impassioned, and that reflection inflames your imagination, instead of enlightening your understanding. (2010 [1790])
While Wollstonecraft’s text is primarily intended as an attack against the antirevolutionary sentiments expressed in the *Reflections*, most of her acidic comments on Burke’s “rhetorical flourishes and infantine sensibility” target as well the stylistics and arguments of his earlier aesthetic arguments in the *Enquiry*, its gendered logistics and peculiar orchestrated prose. The critical and parodist point of her inversions is precisely a gendered one: in portraying Burke as a thinker invested in the pomp and glitter of “artificial affections,” she characterizes his position as feminized in the derogatory sense—linked to shallow affect, sentimental effect, and pleasing rhetorics. Wollstonecraft constructs Burke’s “linguistic femininity,” as Barbara Taylor writes, in order to denounce him as, “in his own terms, a beautiful writer, with all the connotations of fanciful and denigrated femininity implied by this” (2003, 65). Wollstonecraft claims her own position as being secured by reason and affective compassion, the “prostituted” nature of the term feeling notwithstanding: “[I]n my eye all feelings are false and spurious, that do not rest on justice as their foundation, and are not concentrated by universal love.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

**GENDERED AESTHETICS**

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

The stern discontinuity between these emotions is important since Burke equates them with two distinct sets of aesthetic criteria (which he analyzes in parts 2 and 3 of the Enquiry), and with two modes of self-conduct: pain is exclusively tied to the notion of self-preservation, and works in the confrontation with danger and death to produce the aesthetic emotion of the sublime. The opposite—pleasure—is associated with the principle of society, sociality, and generation, or what Burke calls “the multiplication of the species” (88); its affect is beauty. As several critics have pointed out,7 these separate spheres are equated with masculinity and femininity in obvious ways. The beautiful is characterized by “smoothness,” “smallness,” “delicacy,” and “mildness”; the sublime always inhabits the “great,” “vast,” and “powerful.” The sublime incites admiration because it is fearsome, the beautiful is loved because it marks the subordinate—Burke leaves no doubt that the aesthetic is reflective of a gendered power dynamics: “There is a wide difference between admiration and love. The sublime, which is the cause of the former, always dwells on great objects, and terrible; the latter on small ones, and pleasing; we submit to what we admire, but we love what submits to us” (147). The infusion of the observing subject with love renders beauty a “social quality” (89), and the site of the social is tied to everything pertaining to reproduction and the multiplication of the species: “The object therefore of this mixed passion which we call love, is the beauty of the sex. Men are carried to the sex in general, as it is the sex, and by the common law of nature; but they are attached to particulars by personal beauty. I call beauty a social quality” (89).

The beautiful is first and foremost a quality that secures heterosexual reproduction as a hierarchical relation. Women, which feature in many of Burke’s elaborations on the beautiful as prime examples, are in this way not only “sex objects” (Balfour 2006, 328) that inspire lust and the instinct for reproduction.8 The feminine is always subordinate, and by virtue of its
beauty it is virtually tied to the reproductive role, for “the idea of utility . . . is the cause of beauty, or indeed beauty itself” (139). The Burkean system in this way uses gender in two ways: firstly, the juxtaposition of self-preservation and society and “generativity” explains all social relations and the sentiment that inspires them as feminized, while the struggle with terror and pain are masculinized. Moreover, women figure in this logic solely as beautiful objects to be perceived for the purpose of reproduction, that is to say, subordinated to an observing male subject whose instincts seem to waver between seeking out the sublime shock and carrying the burden of multiplying the species. In answer to passages like these, Wollstonecraft wrote mockingly that Burke had indeed written a textbook for subordinate feminine performance in genteel culture.9

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

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

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

**SUBLIME PHYSIOLOGY**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This early figuration of a “pathological femininity” in connection to sentiment resonates strongly with the physiological theories of female inferiority that proliferated at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Amounting to what Claudia Honegger has termed “female special-anthropology” (1996), these theories isolated the female body as biologically completely different from a generalized human body, associated with masculinity and subject to general scientific inquiry on “mankind.”16 Burke’s remarks on the physiological inferiority and resulting “horrid convulsions” of women also provides an eighteenth-century reference point to a genealogy of female nervousness and hysteria, a point that Sorisio considers: “[E]ven before hysteria became a category of disease for middle-class women in . . . the nineteenth century, scientists had already established the perception of middle-class women as highly nervous and sensitive, yet not seriously ill” (2002, 30).17 By virtue of the discontinuity between the sublime and the beautiful, the male body emerges as rigidly opposed to female “languidity.” The masculine position is for Burke marked by a sort of “double burden”: while the male has the responsibility for multiplying the species and thus must follow its instinct to love the beautiful object, that same attraction also implies a dangerous amount of relaxation—for the overly relaxed subject (Burke defines
love as relaxation) is at risk to lose “the vigorous tone of fibre which is requisite for carrying on the natural and necessary secretions” (164). The specter of impotence threatening from within the male instinct to procreate can only be countered by engaging in pain and sublime experience, in order to overcome feminine weakness and preserve the natural superiority of the masculine.

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

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

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

**MUSCLE COMPASSION**

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

—Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*

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

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

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

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

It was (unless we have been strangely deceived) a spectacle more resembling a procession of American savages, entering into Onondaga, after some of their murders called victories, and leading into hovels hung round with scalps, their captives, overpowered with the scoffs and buffets of women as ferocious as themselves, much more than it resembled the triumphal pomp of a civilized martial nation. (159)21
Both the class privilege of compassion and the devaluation of the “savage body” open up further critical perspectives on the Burkean text that will guide my following analysis: that of compassion or sympathy, and of the racialization of bodies. Focusing on the direct repercussions Burke’s aesthetic treatise on sensibility had for the political modes of sentimentality, I ask for the implications of the corporeal logistics underlying the Enquiry for the question of compassion: which bodies for Burke are capable of “feeling with,” and which bodies are privileged to have their pain recognized by the subject of aesthetic sensibility—specifically in regard to race. How does Burke’s physiological and aesthetic gendering of sensibility translate into degrees of access to the bourgeois virtue of compassion, to suffering, and the “politics of pity”?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The corporeal aspect of this compassionate “drive” is also stressed by Gibbons as speaking to the immediacy of the Burkean subject’s engagement with other people’s pain. He differentiates Burke’s direct link to the pain of others against the moral theory of Adam Smith: the latter, Gibbons explains, installs two instances in the compassionate subject: “the impartial spectator . . . and ‘the agent’ engaging in acts of sympathy and charity” (2003, 102). Participation in the pain of others is for Smith therefore always moderated through an abstract authority or a “willed uninvolve‑ment” that maintains a distance within sympathy.27 In contrast to this detached mode of compassion, Burke’s positioning of the sublime as an emotion also resulting from watching others in pain indicates that his compassionate subject is engaged in an aesthetics of shock, which exerts the perceptive muscle as much as a personal experience of pain would do. Gibbons cites from Burke’s Reflections in order to argue that this indeed “felt” compassion nevertheless invests the sympathetic subject with the capacity for action and critique:

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

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

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

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

On the same grounds, masculinity is secured from the potential excesses of emotional engagement: for the male body, watching the pain of others spells humanitarian fitness. He has the capacity to feel with and deal with pain, thus employing pain as a form of cultural and corporeal capital. The male is the only position to be able to articulate pain, understand it in corporeal terms “as his own,” and to develop knowledge and agency from it. The male body thus owns suffering of others like its/his own, able to spell out its meaning and political relevance. This investment of masculine subjects with the ability of bodily (self-)ownership, the access to pain and its subsequent objectification into experience, provides a corporeal extension of liberal theorist John Locke’s concept of the “proprietal self” (see Herzig 2005, 25–35), that is, the self-ownership of the subject of liberalism. In Burke, the capacity for pain and its sublime mastery instantiates self-ownership. It marks the site where the idea of proprietal selfhood is materialized and performed, where the subject comes into its own as always already gendered and, as I will further argue, racialized.
I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed in that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing... taking me out of the world... every ontology is made unattainable in a colonized and civilized society.

—Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Though the effects of black be painful originally, we must not think they always continue so. Custom reconciles us to everything. After we have been used to the sight of black objects, the terror abates, and the smoothness or glossiness or some agreeable accident of bodies so coloured, softens in some measure the horror and sternness of their original nature; yet the nature of the original impression continues. Black will always have some melancholy in it, because the sensory will always find the change to it from other colours too violent; or if it occupy the whole compass of the sight, it will then be darkness; and what was said of darkness, will be applicable here. (176–77; my italics)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

AMERICANIZING PAIN

... everything suffers from translation ...

—Thomas Paine, Rights of Men

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

These missives indicate how the question of “feeling pain” and “feeling with pain” moved center stage in nineteenth-century American culture. The dialectic of proto-biopolitical and sentimental discourses found in Burke, enabled principally through the boundary object “pain,” will critically guide my analysis in the next two chapters on nineteenth-century American discourses. Both will visit hegemonic discourses—the medicalization of bodies in scientific medicine, and the humanization of black bodies in visual abolitionist discourses of the Civil War—where gendered and racialized figurations of subjects are installed through their proximity to pain. It is my focus in these chapters to follow the sentimental modes of self by looking for particular figurations of subjects as performances of pain: for example, universally compassionate white masculinity; the nervous woman as risk and resource to American democracy; the black body as it is variously abjected from and recognized within the modes of national compassion.
The next two chapters will align these aspects by asking for their respective figurations in nineteenth-century American sentimental discourses on pain, suffering and democracy. I concentrate on (1) the compassionate subject, engaging in the sublime pains of feeling with other people’s pain; (2) the evocation of the body in pain; and (3) the discursive state of exception in which both meet and the inclusion or exclusion of one’s suffering is decided by the other’s compassionate response. What emerges from the analysis of these figurations—their racial and gendered organization, the biopolitical framing they are situated in, the particular governmental performances they articulate—is what I call American Dolorologies: the biopolitical logistics, sentimental meanings, and political uses of pain in American bodies.