American Dolorologies

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LATE MODERN PAIN

Paradox designates a condition in which resolution is the most uninteresting aim.

—Wendy Brown, States of Injury

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

DEMOCRATIC PORNOGRAPHY

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

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

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

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

Obama’s statement is noteworthy in that it presents an attempt to regard “terrorism” through American sentimental registers. By naming “poverty and ignorance, helplessness and despair” as the sources of fundamentalism, Obama inadvertently enlists the attackers into a landscape of victims of globalized capitalism to be rescued by American democratic compassion. In Obama’s victimology then, terrorism emerges both as the ultimate madness and the test of compassion: the terrorist—incapacitated from feeling sympathy—figures simultaneously as the antihumanist enemy of American sentimentality and as the most radical challenge to compassionate and humanist recognition. Achilles Mbembe (2003) offers an insightful discussion of the bodily performances and meanings of the suicide bomber, which elucidates how the numbness of the terrorist preempts his or her assimilation into Western registers of compassion or sacrificial heroism:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brody: Physical torture doesn’t work.

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

. . . .

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

UNSCathed LIfe

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

—David Brooks, “The Empathy Issue”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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