

The contemporary making and unmaking of Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*

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2015 marked the 30th anniversary of the publication of Elaine Scarry's *The body in pain: The making and unmaking of the world* (1985). Immediately recognised as a persuasive and original exploration of embodied experience (Goldsmith, 1985; Kolenda, 1988), this study was subsequently described as 'classic' (Zhang, 2014) and 'monumental' (Bourke, 2011). At the close of the 20th century, no less than Edward Said (1999, cited in Douglass and Wilderson, 2013) stated that "[t]here is no one even remotely like Elaine Scarry for the depth of originality of her thinking in the humanities today". However, responses to Scarry's text have definitely not always been enthusiastic; critics have indicated her inaccuracies, omissions and methodological and argumentative peculiarity (for example, Singer in 1986 criticised Scarry for ignoring the standards of argument) while others, as Harpham (2001) points out, have been bluntly dismissive.

Harpham's (2001) review probably represents one of the most sustained critiques of Scarry's oeuvre thus far. For him *The body in pain* represents 'one of the most stunning academic debuts in memory' and the obvious foundation piece for the rest of her published work (2001, p. 204). Harpham (2001, p. 218) notes how 'Scarry has a facility that might be called uncanny for detecting order in domains that appear to be disorderly, spontaneous, ungovernable, or mindless'. However, he also points out how the book is puzzling and lacking, for example, in its consideration of referentiality, negation, imagination, and self-reflexivity. At moments his review even takes on a distinctly psychoanalytic tone as he seeks to understand what drives Scarry's approach. Harpham (2001, p. 219) notes that what may provoke this 'most structural of thinkers' is a profound concern with the possibility of disappearance, indeterminacy and traumatic exposure, an



unease that guides a dark moral vision. In a time in which lives are regularly snuffed out *en masse* and multitudes seeking precarious asylum in foreign lands literally disappear beneath the waves, this vision continues to provide an analytical and conceptual resource for thinking through the notion of subjectivity in light of current political priorities (Blackman *et al*, 2008).

The diversity and depth of the aforementioned (and other) reactions clearly indicate that Scarry's work is distinctly provocative. By foregrounding and emphasising the lived, experienced body, the body that can feel (amongst many other things) pain, Scarry clearly indicated what was problematic or absent in the linguistically dominated theorising that was in the ascendant when her book was published. At the same time, by so thoroughly detailing how the traces of textuality construct and position bodies – for example, in her analysis of the making of belief, which engages closely with two of the most influential yet fundamentally opposed texts of 20th century thinking; the Bible and Marx's Capital – Scarry demonstrated how analyses that ignore the textuality of being will necessarily gloss or naturalise many of the processes of meaning making intrinsic to human life. Simultaneously, by drawing out an ethics of the body in pain, through her analysis of torture and through her linking of the body to political movements and excesses, Scarry showed that lived flesh and blood is always the ultimate nexus and measure of moral concern and ethical consideration (a demonstration with possible implications for contemporary debate, e.g., Rekret, 2016).

Already in 1985 then, Scarry's work began delineating the poles of a series of enduring tensions that have structured much theoretical debate in social science during the years that followed. These tensions, which continue to be addressed both in this journal and elsewhere (Blackman *et al*, 2008), surround questions about the constitutive relationships between subjectivity, language and the body; about the limits of linguistic theorising and the simultaneous problems of conducting analyses that transcend these limits; and about the various directions of theorising, and the varied resources being drawn upon, as theorists continue to grapple with the field of problems that Scarry delineated so thoroughly and clearly three decades ago.

In this regard, it is notable that, in the three decades since 1985, the ubiquitous turn to language in the social sciences has evolved into a turn to the body, a corporeal refocus that has involved, amongst other trajectories, preoccupations with both neural materiality and the more ethereal notion of affect. Hence this journal alone has in recent years published work on neuroscience and subjectivity (e.g. Martin, 2010; Cromby *et al*, 2011), on affect (e.g. Clough, 2008, 2010), and in relation to what is being described (at least, by those who comment upon it, if not by the contributors) as a kind of 'new materialism' in social science (e.g. Mol, 2008; Puig de la Bellacassa, 2009). Throughout this period, the influence of Scarry's thesis has been visible across multiple disciplines and topics, including black subjectivity (da Silva, 2012;

Douglass and Wilderson, 2013), drama (Thompson, 2006; Freeland, 2011), history (Bourke, 2011), literary studies (Krimmer, 2008; Bernatchez, 2009; Townsend, 2012; Richards, 2013; Zhang, 2014), media and cultural studies (Biressi, 2004; Dauphinee, 2007), political and feminist scholarship (Philipose, 2007), and sexuality studies (Ross, 2012). As the diversity and reach of Scarry's influence demonstrates, her ideas have consistently provoked and informed debate about the body, about pain, and about the making (and unmaking) of subjectivity and world (and note that these last two are necessarily conjoined, since Scarry clearly shows how the making or unmaking of one is inevitably and simultaneously the making or unmaking of the other).

As indicated earlier, this does not imply that her arguments have been naively accepted. For example, Douglass and Wilderson (2013) question Scarry's assumptions about the nature of the subject prior to being tortured, Ross (2012) in her investigation of masochism troubles Scarry's implicit definition of pain as bad, Bernatchez (2009, p. 216) similarly questions the distinction between 'innocent-victim and culpable torturer', whilst Bourke (2011) argues that Scarry underplays the sociocultural and historical nature of pain. It is important to note that the above does not imply that her work has been adequately represented during this time. Rather it has been her explorations of pain as unmaking, specifically in torture and war, which have been most consistently explored and utilised. Less visible, although not absent (e.g., Brown, 2016, this issue; Harpham, 2001; Thompson, 2006), across this work are Scarry's comments on creativity, the making of the world or, as mentioned, her fascinating explorations of the body in biblical texts and the work of Marx.

At this moment in the 21st century, bodies seem to be astonishingly exploitable, both completely emptied out and yet strangely filled up. Contemporary bodies are simultaneously targets of disciplinary practices (for example, at work), guarantors of individual uniqueness (highlighted through tattooing and other practices of body modification), attractors of pride, shame and other emotional responses (responses which can get medicalised and pathologised as supposedly purely *individual* disorders), pristine containers of subjectivity and character (understandings sealed with the warrant of neuroscience), vehicles for new political tendencies centrally concerned with forms of illness and health (understood in relation to Foucauldian notions of biopower), targets of surveillance and data mining (in increasingly sensor-saturated physical environments), objects for ceaseless and rapacious commercial exploitation (clothing, gyms, make-up, pornography): the body today is all of these things, and still more besides. In this context, the suffering body-subject frequently gets positioned as a source of entertainment, whether in reality shows of multiple forms or as fodder for news channels. Corporeality is perpetually and innovatively colonised and dissected and reshaped by medicine and self-disciplinary technologies, and these developments, too, get mediatised, circulated and reflected back more widely as potential elements of subjectivity for



all. And clearly, all of these practices, disciplines and innovations are in an intimate relationship with corporate capital where every micron and dimension of the soma is sought for commodification. The result is global battles to both cover and uncover the body, including its penetration, eruption and destruction by nefarious methods new and old.

On the other hand, through engagements, academic and otherwise, the body has been reconceived, reclaimed, opened up to, and embedded in the world, celebrated in its diversity and plasticity, made sacred and subjectified, and put in perpetual motion through a myriad of channels (Grosz, 1994; Blackman, 2008). Its richness and wonder as a self-conscious substance that is gendered, raced, sexed, and classed is constantly articulated; made explicit is a body that desires, transgresses, excites and perplexes, that resists attempts to bring it under control whether by science, theory, fundamentalism or neoliberal surveillance. Questions must nevertheless be asked about the extent to which bodies *in and of themselves* can be sources of transgression, resistance and undisciplined excess: as opposed to their being the source of various, contradictory potentials which get channelized, realised and amplified in contingent relations of mutual regulation within matrices of political and sociocultural influence. To what extent then, can an analytics of the body-subject provide an adequate basis for an ontology of agency and resistance that does not succumb to a reductive psychological individualism or to ahistorical or depoliticised modes of explanation (see Blackman *et al*, 2008)?

Thus, bodies today are at least as relevant as they were when Scarry first published her book. Sadly, as mentioned, so too are her other prominent concerns, and in recent times we have seen high profile, yet peculiar, struggles for meaning over what counts as torture, of war as perpetual, and of the capacity to meaningfully declare war, not against a nation state, but against an *affective* one. So it seems very apt, at this point just-post this 30th anniversary, to engage in a process of reflecting on, utilising, commenting, redirecting, reconceiving, and reengaging with Scarry's important text. Importantly, this means asking what the implications are of such work for the contemporary embodied subject; both with regard to its conceptualisation and, significantly, its being, becoming and experience. This special issue of *Subjectivity* responds to this question in a series of articles that reengage productively with Scarry's book by interrogating and expanding her conceptualisation of pain and tracing the relevance of her careful structural analyses of torture for understanding present-day practices of pleasure, war and entertainment.

In the opening article of this special issue, Steve Larocca engages in a critical expansion of the claims of Scarry's text, challenging her assertion that pain essentially transcends mediation by arguing that, instead, pain is an authoritative and unpredictable semiosomatic force: Pain demands signification albeit no single semiotic rendering will suffice as pain sets about speaking or, rather, moving corporeality, subjectivity and culture anew. Larocca challenges Scarry's

limited referential notion of language, emphasising its performative capacity as well as pointing out other semiotic forms. As Brown (2016, this issue) likewise points out, Scarry's work marks a point where the turn to the corporeal is initiated and language is nudged from its perch. But as Larocca observes, there is a problematic modernist notion of the body at work in Scarry's text which isolates the body from, and locates the subject as prior to, language. Instead of the appraisal that arises from pain being a matter of brute fact, its phenomenology is related to its intensity, quality, duration, context, and its meaning to the self-in-pain and others. Such a rendering allows Larocca a more nuanced reading of pain; one where the extreme pain which Scarry so focuses on can be regarded as more than world obliterating but as turning the embodied subject inward in a manner that is still intimately entwined with context. Thus pain seeks to speak to the world, hailing and troubling us, but not in the limited language of translucent referentiality. And, naturally, it also then troubles the subject, undoing its sense of unity, control and social proficiency, and in this way articulates an alternative subjectivity.

Taking a critical, phenomenological perspective, Smadar Bustan notes that, in Scarry's book, her moves between individual-isolated and social-political instances enable the reader to acquire a better grasp of the complex, contingent relations between the lived experiences and the social, material and embodied circumstances of the pained. Bustan observes that Scarry speaks of pain and suffering as "framing events" that do not necessarily have a language or an intended object, and that in so doing she perhaps tends to place pain beyond linguistic expression. In an argument that has interesting resonances with recent debates associated with the affective turn (where affect is sometimes said, problematically, to reside entirely outside language – Leys, 2011), Bustan interrogates both the extent to which this reading is central to what she takes to be Scarry's main argument (that pain is exceptional because of its capacity to continuously make and un-make the subject), and the extent to which this argument can in fact be sustained. In this regard, Bustan considers subjectivity not as a fixed identity but as a lived modality that gets constituted within dynamic shifts between individually oriented and collectively oriented ways of being in the world. She proposes that human agony is intrinsically entangled with these continuous movements between personal and public, individual and collective, and that it is in the oscillations between them that pain-inflected subjectivities are forged. In this context, Bustan further proposes that language is not wholly unrelated or unrelatable to pain. Like other feelings, pain does seem to be of a different ontological order to language (Cromby, 2015); nevertheless, developing Scarry's arguments, Bustan explores how linguistic formulations which imbue the pained speaker with agency, or which mobilise appropriate metaphors, can still work to convey some version of the ineffable experience of being in pain.



Our third contributor, Michael McIntyre, questions two core suppositions of *The body in pain*: first, that pain is only aversive; second, that those who inflict pain *are*, in some sense, stupidly unaware of the pain they inflict. The first of these suppositions, he argues, is simply empirically incorrect. In everyday life there are many practices to which pain is not merely concomitant but intrinsic, and these practices include mundane sporting activities as well as less mainstream activities such as those associated with BDSM, kink and other sexual practices within which pain can figure as attractive or alluring (e.g. Weille, 2002; Langdridge and Barker, 2007). McIntyre also argues that Scarry's second supposition is incorrect: that some of these practices of pain-infliction are undertaken in full awareness, in the expectation of personal gratification, social validation or shared fulfilment. Whilst BDSM and related sexual practices are exemplary here, McIntyre further subverts Scarry's arguments by highlighting both parallels and distinctions between the sensations of pain and other less aversive feelings, including those of sexual pleasure. But rather than reject Scarry's work on these bases, McIntyre instead highlights a form of somatic-affective communication based primarily in embodied empathy, shared sensation, and dynamic self-other feeling. In this communicative mode, lovers (including those who practice BDSM) aim to share and extend each other's worlds, whereas torturers – as Scarry demonstrates – aim to destroy the other's world. Nevertheless, this raises the disquieting possibility that torturers, and others who use violence politically, may take pleasure in such actions. McIntyre discusses some of the political ramifications of this, drawing upon the works of Sontag, Bataille and DeBois to consider their performative dimensions and societal consequences. He concludes that, politically, practices such as BDSM can be neither celebrated nor condemned. Their significance – like many other, more everyday practices – instead lies in the way that they might reveal forms of relating, and corresponding constellations of subjectivities, instantiated more prominently through embodied feeling than any other medium.

Focusing on children's experience with domestic violence in the U.K., our fourth contributors, Callaghan, Alexander, Fellin and Sixsmith, take issue with the universalising and totalising conception of pain as unmaking of the subject and her world, which, they reiterate, tends to position child witnesses of adult violence as entirely passive and damaged victims. If, as Scarry argues, language is constitutive of the subject, then pain's inexpressibility also reduces the subject to bodily, speechless existence, to a body-as-object. For Callaghan *et al*, this is not a completely abject state. Although they agree that Scarry's analysis of the torture chamber overlaps with an understanding of situations of domestic violence, they point out that her formulation underestimates victims' capacity for resistance and cannot account for cases in which violence is used precisely against those whose voice might in some way be threatening to the perpetrator. That is, it underestimates the relational and intersubjective nature of abusive control. Through analysis of children's accounts of living with violence, the

authors explore the ways in which children are able to actively resist the abusive control of a violent parent. For example, they show how wounds sustained, or defensive postures learned through repeated beating by an abusive father, can simultaneously be a symbol of their aggressor's agency (and thus a diminution of their own) *and* an expression or articulation of their endurance and resistance. They suggest, ultimately, that it is in children's very moments of being thoroughly embodied in their pain, that they can also be seen to assert their subjectivity and agency. By opening up ways in which the agency of children in violent homes can be reimagined, Callaghan *et al* invite us to consider that it is "not (just) the victim who experiences powerlessness or who has 'run out of words' (p. x).

Next, Clifford van Ommen considers the commodification of pain achieved in a particular genre of reality entertainment, what he terms 'nocitainment'. Focusing his analysis on the MTV show *Ridiculousness*, van Ommen draws out the stark similarities between the structure of torture and the ways in which the show stages the spectacle of pain, the latter's comedic rendering being achieved through an array of 'distancing' techniques which help to extract entertainment value from suffering bodies. The transformation of footage of people in pain into objects of laughter and ridicule is simultaneously disciplinary, drawing viewers into a visceral valorisation of particular forms of masculine and neoliberal subjectivity. Here, van Ommen develops his argument through an analysis of both the show hosts' commentary – which dominates and defines the meaning of the pain being witnessed – and the broader social processes by which such video clips come to be mediated and circulated. Van Ommen argues that these practices are driven by the lure of gains in social capital, promised in the contemporary fantasy of instant Internet fame. The paper extends Scarry's insights on the relations between pain and power into a cultural domain that has undergone a major transformation in an era of "mass self-communication" (Castells, 2009) and the monetization of connectivity; in which self-expression has become indistinguishable from self-promotion (van Dijck, 2013). As van Ommen so poignantly puts it, "Thus we have a subjectivity turning its own moments of becoming solely body, becoming solely object, into profit... a subjectivity enthralled by neoliberal ideology" (p. x).

Larocca, in his contribution, locates the transhistorical focus of Scarry's book in the academic context of the USA of the 1980s. The book's concerns and arguments both align with and resist, often in an (at the time) passé and peculiar manner, the intellectual currents of the period, a point also developed by Harpham (2001). Contrasting the period of its writing with contemporary times allows Steve Brown, in the closing article, to examine both the limits and the ongoing relevance of Scarry's arguments and notions. Noting Scarry's penchant for carefully numbered lists, he undertakes this affectionate critique across three themes: The first deals with the antagonistic relationship Scarry develops between 'pain' and 'imagination': Work produces artefacts which act to reduce pain and



extend the body's capacity, allowing imagination to transcend the body and alter the world in complex ways. In this process artefacts give external form to our internal ruminations, including our values and desires. Scarry's distinction between artefacts which are tools and those that are weapons, where the one makes and the latter unmakes, however suggest an adherence to structure that underestimates the imagination at work whereby a tool can be used as a weapon and vice versa; a cunning capable of ceaselessly exploiting functional instability. Brown argues that this then calls for a transition from a structural to a relational ontology. The second theme involves a meditation on Scarry's understanding of the structure of war. Here again the theme of instability emerges, this time in referring to the semiotic instability of the maimed bodies produced by war. This time it is in the form of imposing a convenient cultural fiction on these bodies that once achieved is difficult to unsettle given, it would seem, its simultaneous affective recruitment of living bodies. Brown then asks whether such notions born out of 'conventional warfare' can still hold given the complexity of contemporary warfare where, for example, the line between soldier and civilian, us and them, and national and personal is more blurred than ever. In the final theme, Brown considers Scarry's portrayal of torture where everything, including the victim's body, is turned against them and their voice is abducted in service of the regime. Scarry is clear; the expressed motive of information gathering for such brutality is a considered fiction. Rather what we witness here is the absolute reduction of the subject's self-extension as a display of the power of the state at its most arbitrary and thus most intimidating. Brown then asks, granting obvious differences, whether contemporary state practices as imposed on the unemployed and poor in the U.K. does not share a similar logic? Perhaps we are witnessing in this context a further example of the routinisation of the logic of torture?

The reader will find across the aforementioned articles a variety of rich and critical engagements with Scarry's *The body in pain* that explore the configuration of subjectivity in relation to contemporary body practices and socio-political changes. This includes questioning and expanding her take on pain, language, the body, and ontology, and undoubtedly demonstrates the continued importance of Scarry's text in thinking through the complexity, creativity and violence of our contemporary world. In his review of Scarry's work, Harpham (2001, p. 229) concludes by elegantly referring to the 'life of a mind in a time of trauma' marked by 'an urgent sense of worldly responsibility motivated by passion, with its roots deep in the dark soil of human hopes and fears. We could do worse'. We certainly could.

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