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ARTICLE

Sentimental politics or structural injustice? The ambivalence of emotions for political responsibility

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Abstract

Stories and representations of suffering are frequently central to attempts to arouse our emotions and initiate political action. Yet, the evocation of emotion and, in particular, empathy, remains politically ambivalent. It does not necessarily lead to the acknowledgement of political responsibility or to actions to address the historically-constituted roots of contemporary structural injustices. Moving beyond the legal, moral, and institutional boundaries of political responsibility, this article argues for greater recognition of its affective dimensions. In particular, it differentiates between a sentimental politics and testimonial empathy to better understand the affective dynamics of political responsibility. While the former finds close company with pity and a lack of acknowledged political responsibility, the latter offers an ethical–political orientation towards radical reflexivity and social transformation, situating experiences of injustice within wider networks of power, privilege, and agency. Drawing on the work of feminist, cultural, and social theorists, the article offers a critical conceptualisation of testimonial empathy and its limits. The article illustrates the insights offered by re-thinking political responsibility in terms of testimonial empathy through a close reading of a historical account of structural injustice – slavery in the United States – as written in Harriet A. Jacobs' 1861 slave narrative.

Keywords: political responsibility; testimonial empathy; structural injustice; emotions; slavery; Iris Marion Young; Hannah Arendt

When the image of Alan Kurdi swept across the world on 2 September 2015, there was an immediate optimism that the emotional explosion generated by *this* death – amongst so many – would see a transformation of attitudes and political action towards refugees and asylum seekers. Kurdi was a 3-year-old toddler whose image was captured by photographer Nilufer Demir as he lay dead, face down, on a Turkish beach at the edge of the Mediterranean. He wore a red t-shirt and blue shorts and had shoes on bare legs. His image crystalised, and screamed to a deaf world, the depth of vulnerability and desperation that migrants were

experiencing in trying to make the crossing from Syria to Europe. Many inches of newspaper print and commentary were dedicated to the notion that the emotions triggered by Kurdi's image should generate a sense of political responsibility amongst the global community, extending from international organisations to states and national leaders, to civil society organisations and grassroots communities. It was claimed that the affective encounter with the image of Kurdi's death and the story that this represented would move citizens and nations alike to become active agents and engage in meaningful political action to end the suffering of those in similar positions. As Britain's Chief Rabbi, Ephraim Mirvis, noted, 'For far too long, we have related to these suffering individuals as if they are people who are living on Mars. Thanks to that image, that desperately sad and tragic image, it's moved our hearts…It's an image of that boy that has brought us to our senses and we must respond adequately' (O'Hagan 2015). Former UK prime minister David Cameron declared that 'as a father I felt deeply moved' in response to the images of Kurdi, while former French prime minister Manuel Valls said a 'Europe-wide mobilisation is urgent' (ABC 2015). Cameron went on to say that 'Britain is a moral nation and we will fulfil our moral responsibilities', a task which requires that we 'try and stabilize the countries from which these people are coming' (Tharoor 2015). Italian premier Matteo Renzi said that '[f]aced with these images which tear and move the hearts of every father, we must be aware that we need a global strategy and Europe cannot lose face' (ABC 2015).

What is concealed by this highly affective response to Kurdi's death is the acknowledgement of the 'shared and interconnected histories that link Europe and the migrants washing up on its shores' (Danewid 2017, 1681; Sirriyeh 2018). This discourse of urgent emotion works to erase the links between Europe's colonial past – and its ongoing involvement in war/peace operations – and the countries where the majority of migrants seeking asylum come from, such as Somalia, Libya, Iraq, Eritrea, Syria, and Afghanistan (Danewid 2017, 1680). While what has been termed a 'refugee crisis' reflects contemporary injustices perpetrated and experienced in the present, 'it is not possible to tell this story of the production and reproduction of [structural injustice] without reference to the past' (Young 2011, 185; Sirriyeh 2018). The image of a child – vulnerable, helpless, and stripped of political agency – was a powerful conduit for legitimating an emotional narrative that formed in relation to *some* migrants. Yet such an emotional narrative did not expand to include *all* migrants and asylum-seekers. In the rendering of lived experiences of (some) others' misery through news reports, images, social media representations, and first-hand testimonies, what was produced was a sentimental discourse which maintained the asymmetry between spectator and sufferer, largely refused to seriously engage with the affective and political claims of migrants and asylum-seekers upon European states, and was only temporarily disrupted by the acts of resistance mobilised by the inadequate political response. Consequently, the emotions and narratives – historical and contemporary – of which this photographic testimony became a part were far more complex than was represented by the media and politicians. Emotions, in this political context, were profoundly ambivalent, serving as both sites of resistance and calls for change as well as support for the status quo (Schick 2019). I suggest that the initial outburst of emotional responses to a single picture elided complex expressions of empathy, compassion,

and pity. In doing so, it revealed not only the affective dimension of our engagement with the questions of political responsibility, but also the need to avoid an easy slippage into a sentimental politics. While a sentimental politics is likely to signal alignment with a certain set of moral values, thereby simulating a desire for justice, it nonetheless lacks a sustained political commitment and evades questions of political responsibility for suffering embedded in historically constituted global structural injustices.

The story of Alan Kurdi draws our attention to the problem of political responsibility in response to individual and collective experiences of structural injustice. The focus on understanding and communicating human vulnerability as a cause of collective political responsibility is relevant to a wide range of contemporary harms which are embedded in the forms of historically-constituted structural injustice, such as conflict, occupation, poverty, economic precarity, climate, and environmental insecurity. Often in such contexts, the focus on the individual's narrative distracts us from its position within wider networks of power. Reflexive calls for political responsibility and action may be easily marginalised in the urgency of a sentimental politics that beats its collective brow but enacts little change. Moreover, the political work of these 'humanising' emotions – often perceived as an antidote to humanitarian crisis – is not always critically examined despite their crucial role in both resisting and enabling the forms of oppression constitutive of injustice. What is revealed by a sentimental politics is the potential for collective emotions to be mobilised to support the existing structures of power which work to limit what are perceived as legitimate demands for political responsibility and political change. Interrogating the political character of empathy and the discourses through which it is represented reveals how some groups and identities are brought within its umbrella of care, concern, and responsibility, while others are excluded. In other words, it offers insights into the situated and historical dynamics of power that shape our responses to the experiences of others.

The account of political responsibility offered in this article takes seriously the epistemological claims made by testimonial narrative and the affective dimensions of our encounters with experiences and subjects of injustice. The ethical and political practice of what I have termed 'testimonial empathy' works to challenge the fleeting and asymmetric nature of a sentimental politics which all too often reinscribes the 'other' as victim or threat through emotional expressions which are articulated independently from any recognition of wider structural relations of power and, therefore, political responsibilities (see also Sirriyeh 2018, 27). As such, testimonial empathy recognises suffering as an object of affective connection and structural injustice as a site of collective responsibility and action.[1] It recognises the 'potential for empathy to disrupt and resist hegemonic emotional regimes' (Schick 2019, 265). It acknowledges both the individual and the interconnected structural experiences of injustice, retaining a capacity to engage with the narrative of the particular without losing sight of its location within broader relationships of power. Testimonial empathy draws attention to the affective dimension of everyday epistemic practices and their political consequences: whose narratives are accepted

[1]My thanks to one of the reviewers for this phrasing.

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as valid knowledge claims and accounts of injustice and how do we make meaning of our own and others' experiences?

The article proceeds in four parts. The first section considers the relationship between structural injustice and political responsibility, following Iris Marion Young's account of historically-situated structural injustice as the driving force for political responsibility (see also Lu 2017). Young understands political responsibility to emerge out of an understanding and recognition of the degree to which we are all, as citizens of a global and interconnected world, implicated in the suffering of both proximate and distant others as a consequence of structural injustices. I engage with Young's and Hannah Arendt's conceptualisation of political responsibility wherein it becomes clear that both scholars identify a set of ethically-attuned political responsibilities as intrinsic to our role as citizens in political communities.

In the second section, I unpack the concept of testimonial empathy in more detail, situating it within Young's argument regarding the importance of connection in locating and acknowledging our responsibility towards others. Within the asymmetry of power that Young acknowledges as always characterizing our relations, what is at stake is 'not only the ability to empathize with the very distant other, but to recognize oneself as implicated in the social forces that create the climate of obstacles the other must confront' (Boler 1997, 263). Empathy is often variously represented as benign, apolitical, a moral resource for civilising processes, ineffectual as a site or source of political change, and dangerous as a guide for political action. Many of these arguments implicitly, if not explicitly, acknowledge empathy as both an ethical and political act, while rarely focusing on the significance and form of its political interventions (for exceptions see Boler 1997; Chabot Davis 2004; Hemmings 2011; Pedwell 2014, 2016; Head 2016a, 2016b; Schick 2019). Testimonial empathy offers a more radical and reflexive engagement with others which places greater emphasis on listening with humility, a recognition of asymmetric vulnerabilities, a recognition of the distance between listener and narrator, and a willingness to position and interrogate the self within these global interconnections. The key distinction which emerges from such an encounter is between *empathy*[2] as a generative of political action which recognises and responds to the vulnerability of others constituted through historical narratives of structural

[2]Empathy, along with sympathy, compassion, and pity, is defined in multiple, overlapping, and contradictory ways in a variety of literatures. In this article, following Pedwell 2016 I am referring to empathy as a socio-political relationship which involves affective, cognitive, and perceptive processes that do not seek to erase the self through identification with the Other and acknowledges the qualitative difference and distance of the Other as a unique and equal individual. Ultimately, I have chosen to adopt the term 'testimonial empathy' rather than compassion – despite areas of overlap identified within critical scholarship – as a way of avoiding additional confusion and addressing two related factors: (1) compassion in Arendtian (and etymological) terms focuses on a process of co-suffering which does not extend beyond the individual's experience in the private sphere and cannot contribute to non-violent political transformation to address injustice. This definition is the subject of my critique and therefore suggests the need for alternative terminology. (2) The historical usage of compassion, sympathy, and pity has evolved stronger associations with hierarchical relationships and charity which, while relevant for a liberal sentimental politics, do not serve a more radically reflexive purpose. The literature on empathy suggests the importance of a more reflexive distinction between self and other which, under conditions of asymmetric vulnerabilities, is important for the ethical and political orientation of my argument.

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injustice, and *pity* for those suffering which instead tends to lead to a passive or short-term engagement, voyeurism, the commodification of suffering, and an erasure of the histories of structural violence and injustice which have contributed to contemporary suffering.

In the third section, I turn to the insights offered by re-thinking political responsibility in terms of testimonial empathy through a reading of a historical account of structural injustice offered in Harriet A. Jacobs' 1861 slave narrative, *Incidents of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. A direct product of colonialism, slavery is a *prima facie* example of global structural injustice. Jacobs' testimonial narrative explicitly addresses concerns of class, gender, sex, and race that remain fundamental to the experiences of suffering and injustice in global political relations. As I illustrate, an examination of such historical and contemporary narratives reveals where and with whom political responsibility may lie, how it might be recognised and acknowledged, and the powerful social, affective, economic, and political dynamics which work to prevent such acknowledgement. Jacobs' testimony mobilises a series of epistemological and affective claims in her attempt to achieve her desired political transformations regarding slavery.

In the fourth and final section, I bring together the earlier theoretical interventions with the analysis of Jacobs' testimony to suggest that testimonial empathy offers an ethics of encounter shaped by ambiguity, uncertainty, rupture, disorientation, the risk of transformation, and differences lived rather than commonalities shared. Highlighting the many affective obstacles to such encounters, I conclude that emotions – and empathy – remain profoundly ambivalent: capable of contributing to both a sentimental politics and to a recognition of political responsibility oriented to historically-situated structural injustices.

Structural injustice and political responsibility

In her work on sweatshop labour and global justice, Iris Marion Young articulated a series of claims regarding the responsibilities that we hold towards others as a consequence of our imbrication in complex global social processes. The problem that she focuses on is the nature of individual responsibility in relation to unjust outcomes produced by 'large-scale social structures in which millions participate, but of which none are the sole or primary cause' (Young 2004, 374). Structural injustice she defines as existing when:

> social processes put large categories of persons under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time as these processes enable others to dominate or have a wide range of opportunities for developing and exercising their capacities. Structural injustice is a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent or the wilfully repressive policies of a state (2006, 114).

Young's entry point to this dilemma of accountability is to distinguish between a liability model of responsibility and a social connection model of responsibility (2006). The liability model establishes a direct causal link between the actions of specific agents and their outcomes; it is, in other words, blame-oriented. As such

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it is backward-looking, whereby the primary concern is to ensure punishment or to extract compensation. This form of responsibility is moral and legal in that it attributes responsibility for what has been done to particular agents. Young's articulation of a social connection model of political responsibility, by contrast, refers to a broader set of relationships which connect distant individuals and collectives with transnational structures and processes through which widespread and egregious harms occur.

Young is keen to emphasise the distinction between political responsibility and blame. The latter, which features centrally within the liability model, she sees as an impediment to motivating political action as it is likely to be met with defensive behaviour, a re-distribution or mitigation of liability, and the accusation of others. This characterisation of political responsibility as something that belongs both to the individual and the collective is not a careless moral or legal conflation of guilt with actions *not* actually committed by individuals, but a form of responsibility that is uniquely political in that it is part and parcel of membership of a community without which we cannot live – or act – as human beings. In a similar fashion, Hannah Arendt distinguishes between political responsibility and guilt. Arendt is highly sceptical of expressions of guilt for actions not directly committed by individuals as she sees it as an attempt to 'escape from the pressure of very present and actual problems into a cheap sentimentality', thereby avoiding what should properly be understood as a form of political responsibility to actively pursue justice (2006, 251).

Young draws on Arendt's conceptualisation of political responsibility in order to develop an alternative to the liability model. For Arendt, political responsibility, which is clearly separated from moral and legal responsibility, is a collective affair. She writes that 'legal and moral standards have one very important thing in common – they always relate to the person and what the person has done' (2003, 148). By contrast, collective responsibility requires that 'I must be held responsible for something I have not done, and the reason for my responsibility must be my membership in a group (a collective) which no voluntary act of mine can dissolve' (Arendt 2003, 149). Young extends this argument, declaring that 'all agents who contribute by their actions to the structural processes that produce injustice have responsibilities to work to remedy these injustices' (2006, 102–3). Political responsibility derives not from the membership of the nation-state but from the social and economic structures in which we are embedded and which transcend national borders (2004, 376). It is this premise which is at the heart of Young's social connection model of responsibility.

A social connection model posits that individuals, political institutions, companies, and multinational corporations are all embedded in highly mediated connections to structural injustices. This means that while individuals may not be easily or appropriately held accountable for specific harms, neither may individual or collective agents be absolved in light of the economic and political stability and profit frequently derived through the injustices experienced by others. In Young's view, most, if not all of us, contribute to varying degrees in the (re)production of structural injustice because we follow accepted rules and conventions of the communities in which we live (Young 2003, 41). This 'business as usual' mind-set fails to question the degree to which ideological and habitual ways of thinking and acting

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fuel the perpetuation of structural injustices. Importantly – as shall be seen in the empirical illustration later on – within the social connection model, those who may be identified as victims of structural injustice can also be said to share responsibility with others who perpetuate the unjust structures to engage in actions aimed at transforming these structures (Young 2006, 123). In Young's account, the agency in relation to political responsibility is therefore located anywhere within the system.

Where there is a clear consensus between Arendt and Young is in the value of labelling this notion of responsibility as *political*. As Young notes, 'political' refers to something broader than the government: 'by politics or the political I am referring to the activity in which people organize collectively to regulate or transform some aspect of their shared social conditions' (2004, 377). Young argues that taking responsibility means 'acknowledging that one participates in social processes that have some unjust outcomes….My responsibility becomes to enjoin others to *reflect* on and *acknowledge* their participation in the structural processes, and to *listen* to their account of how they work and our role in them' (2004, 380, italics added; see also Coles 2004).

This characterisation of responsibility implies, I argue, four dimensions of an ethics of encounter oriented to engaging with political responsibility in response to structural injustice. First of all, it suggests a set of interpersonal and representational exchanges oriented towards a greater understanding of other perspectives and experiences that are not shared by all interlocutors; second, it asks that we listen to the narratives and testimonies of others who have suffered injustice; thirdly – and most uncomfortably – it asks that we hear and reflect on how those narratives implicate our own behaviours, attitudes, and practices in the continuation of injustice, and fourthly, it acknowledges that political responsibility can be discharged only by joining with others in collective action. While Arendt and Young provide some guidance regarding the connection between the political responsibility of citizens and structural injustice, they stop short of fully conceptualising the modes of attending to the experiences of others which facilitate the recognition of such connections and it is in this spirit that testimonial empathy builds on and goes beyond existing accounts through an articulation of the four dimensions identified.

Walking the line: from pity to testimonial empathy

Writing on the difficulties of teaching multiculturalism through literary texts, Megan Boler distinguished between 'passive empathy' and 'testimonial reading', wherein the difference lies with the responsibility borne by the reader who, in the latter account, 'accepts a commitment to rethink her own assumptions, and to confront the internal obstacles encountered as one's views are challenged' (1997, 262). Playing on Boler's terminology, I argue that 'testimonial empathy' opens up a connection to our political responsibility through an acknowledgement that, as citizens, we bear some responsibility for reflecting on our relative position of power, agency, and privilege and can locate ourselves within these networks. As Young argued, in so doing, we may become actively engaged in unravelling the chains of agency and structure which reach beyond the boundaries of our own communities and stretch towards those relations which shape structural injustices such as modern slavery, racism, sexism, poverty, climate change, and conflict.

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Many of the practices and dispositions called for in a normative demand to attend to social and political difference as structural injustice can be located within a politicised conceptualisation of empathy. Indeed, as Pedwell writes, '[w]ithin feminist, anti-racist and other social theory, the feeling and articulation of empathy has been established as crucial to the attainment of cross-cultural and transformational social justice' (2014, 47; Berlant 1998, 647). Neither 'feeling' nor 'knowing' by themselves are sufficient to shift from passive or vicarious emotional responses to political responsibility and acknowledgement. Situating 'testimonial empathy' as a response to structural injustice also seeks to prevent reinforcing 'individualizing and entrepreneurial discourses of political responsibility that veil systemic or collective sources of injustice' (Beausoleil 2017, 314) while nonetheless recognising that the 'personal realm of affect and the public sphere of political praxis are intertwined' (Chabot Davis 2004, 402). Keeping open a dialogue between the individual and interconnected collective and structural experiences of injustice – often perceived as distinct levels of analysis – is particularly important in relation to the distinction drawn between a sentimental politics and the more ethically and politically demanding account offered by testimonial empathy. Here I look more closely at the political implications of this distinction by engaging with Arendt's political writings on pity and compassion in the public sphere.

Arendt famously did not consider compassion (which she often conflated with empathy) to be a political matter and she touched upon the question of the place of the emotions in relation to the public sphere in a number of her works. She distinguished between compassion, 'to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious, and pity, to be sorry without being touched in the flesh' (1990, 85). Compassion, she argued, 'cannot be touched off by the sufferings of a whole class or a people, or, least of all, mankind as a whole. It cannot reach out further than what is suffered by one person and still remain what it is supposed to be, co-suffering' (1990, 85). Compassion cannot be, Arendt thought, the subject of 'talkative and argumentative interest in the world' and so cannot change 'worldly conditions in order to ease human suffering'. But, she warns, 'if it does, it will shun the drawn-out wearisome processes of persuasion, negotiation, and compromise, which are the processes of law and politics, and lend its voice to the suffering itself, which must claim for swift and direct action, that is, for action with the means of violence' (1990, 86).

Arendt's caution was grounded in the belief that pity – the 'perversion of compassion' – would instead take root in the public sphere. She argued that because pity 'is not stricken in the flesh and keeps its sentimental distance, [it] can succeed where compassion will always fail; it can reach out to the multitude and therefore, like solidarity, enter the marketplace' (1990, 89). Arendt argued that 'without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has…[a] vested interest in the existence of the unhappy' (1990, 89). The compassion for the suffering of the people, which Arendt argued to be a driving force for Robespierre during the French Revolution became, in his insistence on the 'will of the people', the downfall of the public sphere. In its focus on the misery of the masses, the emotion became one of pity rather than compassion as the latter can only comprehend specific suffering of individuals while the former excels at its capacity to generalise, to aggregate humanity into a suffering mass with what Arendt understood to be potentially

violent repercussions. Once in the political sphere, pity's capacity for dealing in the abstract rather than the particular suffering of individuals, coupled with its instinctive desire to be relished, risks the glorification of its cause – the suffering of others (1990, 89) – and the commodification of this suffering through the gaze of the spectator.

Arendt rejects any place for emotions in the public sphere for several reasons. She feared their public eruption in destructive and violent ways as evidenced by her analysis of the French Revolution. They also threatened the strict separation of the social and political sphere central to her work, serving to displace politics into the social question (Arendt 1958, 1990). She argued that compared with the 'reality which comes from being seen and heard', emotions cannot appear in public unless 'transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized' (1958, 50). Moreover, pain 'is so subjective and removed from the world of things and men that it cannot assume an appearance at all' (1958, 51). Rather than confront the *emotion* produced by suffering, Arendt wanted the listener to confront the *reality* of suffering. She was adamant that emotions obscure and limit our capacity for thinking through their all-consuming nature and their boundlessness, thereby facilitating thoughtlessness which was the basis for her analysis of the evil committed by Eichmann. Thinking should not, she believed, be contaminated by feelings as this prevents the possibility of political discussion. When brought into the public sphere, emotions – the motivations of the heart – are likely to be corrupted through their use for political purposes. Coupled with this was the belief that emotions blind or mislead us to reality and it is only by enduring the sheer pain of reality that we may avoid falling into the trap of thoughtlessness (Nelson 2017, 69).

Arendt's caution awakens us to the potential for the boundaries of these affective categories to collapse both conceptually and empirically (see also Berlant 1998, 641). However, whilst retaining the cautionary thrust of her argument, its limitations are relevant to the current conceptualisation of political responsibility. Broadly speaking, she overlooks – or rejects – the degree to which the political sphere is already always affectively constituted (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Kingston and Ferry 2008; Ross 2014; Hutchison 2016). More particularly, her concepts of enlarged thought and representative thinking or perspective-taking (2006) leave little room for affective dimensions of experience and knowledge. This separation of emotions or affective knowledge from the political sphere cannot be sustained. Within a process of enlarged thinking, Arendt does not recognise the contestation of suffering as meaning-making mediated in the public sphere. Yet, the experiences and meanings attributed to pain and suffering cannot be so readily identified and universally agreed upon that they can be relegated to action in the private sphere as Arendt suggests. Furthermore, Arendt's reluctance to allow emotions into the public sphere misconstrues the degree to which perspective-taking is constituted by and through emotional expression. Thinking, for Arendt, only happens when the person or object is removed from our senses (2003, 165). As such, she does not allow for embodied or relational forms of knowledge that enable and constitute 'thinking' *through* the encounter. This is made clear in her definition of representative thinking:

> I form an opinion by considering a given issue from different viewpoints, by making present to my mind the standpoints of those who are absent; that is, I represent them. This process of representation does not blindly adopt the actual views of those who stand somewhere else, and hence look upon the world from a different perspective; this is a question neither of empathy, as though I tried to be or to feel like somebody else, nor of counting noses and joining a majority but of being and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not (Arendt 2006, 237).

The emphasis attributed to the mind, to the imagination of thought and cognition, works to remove affective dimensions of knowledge from the purview of the political. The affective and disruptive function of narratives – stories, testimonial accounts, and representations – and their role in the political sphere as a constitutive of identity, contestation, and meaning-making, have little place in Arendt's account of representative thinking. Moreover, her suggestion of '[b]eing and thinking in my own identity where actually I am not' does not capture the hermeneutic resources required to make sense of asymmetric social and political experiences (see Fricker 2007).

Although Arendt rightly warns of the commodifying effect and spectatorship of pity in the public sphere, her conflation of compassion with co-feeling raises concerns over appropriation and projections by the non-sufferer and, through its location in the private sphere, fails to question when private responses may be either insufficient or a part of the practice of injustice (see Berlant 2004, 9). Set against Arendt's account, multiple scholars have recognised the dynamics of power and politics within pity and compassion[3] and located them both firmly in the public political sphere (Boler 1997; Boltanski 1999; Whitebrook 2002; Berlant 2004; Chouliaraki 2004, 2010; Hoggett 2006; Zembylas 2013; Pedwell 2014; Hutchison 2016). Pity, they suggest, denotes the feeling of empathic identification with the sufferer, while compassion refers to the feeling accompanied by action (Whitebrook 2002, 530). Echoing Arendt's caution, pity also prefers an object, whereas compassion looks for a subject. Suggestions of co-feeling, however, are rejected in favour of a clear understanding of the need – integral to empathy – to maintain an ontological distinction between the self and other (Pedwell 2016). Pity and its politics are laden with the dynamics of power wherein the asymmetry between the spectator and the sufferer is maintained – often through the over-identification and imagined comprehension enabled through sentiment – ensuring that no radical reflexivity turns our gaze towards our entanglements in the creation and perpetuation of vulnerabilities and injustice. Compassion, in this reading, is oriented towards recognition of the connection between the personal and the political and emphasises the inter-relational dimensions of the process (Whitebrook 2002). It entails the political recognition that while we are all vulnerable we are not so in the same way or to the same degree.

These reflexive characterisations of compassion – as responsive to the other, as relational, as political, and as oriented towards political action – are all integral to

[3]In this critical scholarship, compassion is conceptualised in terms akin to testimonial empathy and thus the terms, when derived from other authors, are used interchangeably in this section.

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the conceptualisation of testimonial empathy. The process and practice of testimonial empathy are located within interpersonal encounters as well as more broadly representational practices such as historical narratives, testimony, art, images, music, and fiction, through which the accounts of structural injustice and political responsibility are constituted and contested. Locating political responsibility at the level of interpersonal and representational encounters in no way removes or limits the political responsibilities of states, global political actors, or institutions but it does acknowledge that politics 'exists, is reinforced and challenged, in the capillaries of the everyday and at the level of gestures, practices, and bodies' (Beausoleil 2017, 314). As indicated by the representation of Kurdi's story and as narrated in Harriet Jacobs' account, testimonial empathy requires movement *from* the particular suffering of individuals or groups *to* reflection on more general historical and sociopolitical conditions constitutive of asymmetric vulnerabilities which leads to the acknowledgement of political responsibility in the public sphere. This is not the work of a sentimental politics, the consumption of which returns us to a private world of thoughts and feelings: of impotent compassion without action in the public sphere towards a politics of equality, of a pity which serves to create distance without reflexivity, or of a comfortable and fulfilling outrage which ultimately leaves untouched both subject and injustice alike.

A 'theatre of compassion': an encounter with slavery

Harriet Jacobs' first-person account of slavery published in 1861, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, and narrated in the voice of Linda Brent, exemplifies an appeal for political responsibility to be acknowledged through a process of testimonial empathy and it is to a close reading of this narrative that I now turn. The publication of Jacobs' account was an important marker in slave narratives and in Afro-American literature (Yellin 1981, 1987; Stover 2003). Moreover, it was significant for enabling a marginalised and disempowered voice to articulate and, crucially, to curate her experiences in the public sphere and, in doing so, to raise the consciousness of the intersecting harms suffered as a consequence of the structural injustice of slavery. Jacobs' testimony anticipated contemporary affective perceptions of gendered, racialised, and socialised bodies and ideas. Jacobs' case for political action rests in large part on the affective understanding created in her interlocutors through the self-conscious use of narrative that conveys emotion and thick description of both an individual and generalised human experience situated within legal and political structures. Her testimony offers insights into our understanding of where and with whom political responsibility for injustice lies, how it might be recognised, and the powerful historical, social, affective, economic, and political dynamics which work to prevent the acknowledgement of the epistemic and affective claims made by those who have experienced injustice.

Each of the four dimensions integral to political responsibility identified in the first section is clearly represented in Jacobs' account which calls for political intervention and action to end black slavery in the United States. First, Jacobs' narrative provides a form of encounter between author and reader which offers the opportunity for greater understanding of experiences and perspectives that are not shared by both parties. Second, Jacobs asks that we listen to her narrative not out of

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sympathy for her personal sufferings, but to reveal the systemic nature of violence and suffering imposed by slavery. To this end, she writes 'Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings. But I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage' (Jacobs *et al.* 1987, 1). Her account is a plea to both the intellect and emotions of her readers to understand the wrongs of slavery and to accept as credible and valid the knowledge claims she is making and her interpretation of them. In doing so, Jacobs reveals a perspective on slavery which constituted suffering where it had previously been rendered invisible or marginalised. By revealing such suffering, she asks that the reader come to understand it properly and act accordingly. Jacobs is not asking for compassion such as Arendt understands it, as a form of 'co-feeling of suffering', but rather she seeks an 'informed passion from someone who is without a doubt another subject, occupying quite a different position' (Spelman 1997, 85). Third, she asks that in listening to her narrative, white Christian women in the north will attend to the uncomfortable implication of their own (racist) practices, behaviour, and attitudes for the maintenance of this social and structural injustice.

Last of all, Jacobs calls for collective political action to end the institution of slavery as she writes that she hopes to 'kindle a flame of compassion in [northern] hearts for my sisters who are still in bondage, suffering as I once suffered'. She asks, 'why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right?' Her intention in doing so is with the hope that it may cultivate solidarity and enable readers to join those 'laboring to advance the cause of humanity', that is, to join the abolitionist movement (1987, 29–30). The affective response Jacobs seeks to invoke is intended to trigger action towards greater social and political justice. As such Jacobs utilises her testimony to mobilise affect for specific political ends and, in doing so, disrupts the epistemological grounds that her target audience has hitherto been acting upon. The targets of this plea – northern white Christian women in the United States – are being asked to undergo the discomforts of travelling towards an abolitionist position through being open and responsive to encountering the experiences of slavery as narrated by a black woman who was herself a slave. Jacobs' narrative addresses a primarily female audience and, as Yellin argues in her Introduction to *Incidents*, it offers a

> social analysis asserting that the denial of domestic and familial values by chattel slavery is a social issue that its female readers should address in the public area. Jacobs' Linda Brent does not seek to inspire her audience to overcome individual character defects or to engage in reformist activity in the private sphere, but urges them to enter the public sphere and work to end chattel slavery and white racism. Informed not by 'the cult of domesticity' or 'domestic feminism' but by political feminism, *Incidents* is an attempt to move women to political action (1987, xxxii).

Recognition of and responsiveness to the experiences of slavery is a necessary precondition for, and is generative of, collective political action. Implicit in Jacobs' call is both an affective and epistemological claim upon the listener/reader: alongside

alternative knowledge of the circumstances of slaves in the south, understanding is sought for the purpose of greater recognition and care for other human beings – black slaves – and for the transformation of social and political injustice to allow for freedom and emancipation of all.

Jacobs' account leaves little room for misunderstanding her perception of slavery as structural injustice when she addresses herself directly to the reader:

> What would *you* be, if you had been born and brought up a slave, with generations of slaves for ancestors? I admit that the black man *is* inferior. But what is it that makes him so? It is the ignorance in which white men compel him to live; it is the torturing whip that lashes manhood out of him; it is the fierce bloodhounds of the South, and the scarcely less cruel human bloodhounds of the north, who enforce the Fugitive Slave Law. *They* do the work (1987, 44).[4]

Recognising the mutual, if highly asymmetric, vulnerabilities constituted as a consequence of the dual structural injustices of slavery and patriarchy, she goes on to write:

> I can testify, from my own experience and observation, that slavery is a curse to the whites as well as to the blacks. It makes the white fathers cruel and sensual; the sons violent and licentious; it contaminates the daughters, and makes the wives wretched….Yet few slaveholders seem to be aware of the widespread moral ruin occasioned by this wicked system. Their talk is of blighted cotton crops – not of the blight on their children's souls (1987, 54).

The licentiousness of chattel slavery to which Jacobs is referring to forms part of the patriarchal institutions and ideologies which maintained political and economic power: 'slaveholders have been cunning enough to enact that "the child shall follow the condition of the *mother*," not of the *father*; thus taking care that licentiousness shall not interfere with avarice' (1987, 76). In other words, if the mother is a slave so too shall the children – often fathered by slaveholders and their sons – become the property of her owner, to be used for labour or sold as befits his economic interests and ensuring a nexus of transgenerational injustice and profit.

Much of Jacobs' account is an attempt to politicise the stigmatised subject of the sexual abuse of slave women. By situating this issue in the political and public sphere, Jacobs is demanding that the suffering it imposes on others be acknowledged and acted upon as well as removed from the confines of the private life of the individual slave women. She does this by breaking with literary convention at the time, refusing to characterise herself as a passive female victim (Yellin 1987, xxx–xxxi). Instead, she seeks to maintain a degree of moral agency and autonomy through relating her own sexual experiences as a tactic which was part of her struggle for freedom and explicitly naming her oppression as a sexual object and as a mother who runs away to save her children from slavery. Reflecting an

[4]In 1850, Congress passed a Fugitive Slave Law, ruling that all citizens, including those in northern states where slavery had been abolished, would be subject to punishment if they aided fugitive slaves escaping from the south.

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Arendtian call for 'thinking', Yellin asks whether Jacobs' intention is to demand that her readers reflect on and re-think the moral standards of judgement they apply, asking whether 'women like herself should be judged (like men) on complex moral grounds – rather than (like women) on the single issue of their conformity to the sexual behaviour mandated by the white patriarchy?' (1987, xxxi).

It is difficult to see, however, how the empathy that Jacobs calls for as leading to political action to abolish chattel slavery and its related evils might have been met in Arendt's account. While representative thinking would likely have revealed the evils of slavery, the risk is that the collective response would have turned to either pity or violence. Yet Jacobs' call for political responsibility rests on an affective account which allows her to contest dominant white narratives regarding slavery and its injustices as well as to curate what she understands the appropriate response to be. Drawing on a particular affective dimension of her experience and appealing directly to the hearts and minds of her predominantly female audience, Jacobs makes frequent references to the oppression endured by slave mothers: 'Could you have seen that mother clinging to her child, when they fastened the irons upon his wrist; could you have heard her heart-rending groans, and seen her blood-shot eyes wander wildly from face to face, vainly pleading for mercy; could you have witnessed that scene as I saw it, you would exclaim, Slavery is damnable!' (1987, 23). The function of the law to protect the rights of slaveholders is harnessed, for Jacobs, to patriarchal structures which facilitated and enabled the sexual abuse of slave women as well as harming the relationships of white women. She writes that

> No matter whether the slave girl be as black as ebony or as fair as her mistress. In either case, there be no shadow of law to protect her from insult, from violence, or even from death; all these are inflicted by fiends in the shape of men. The mistress, who ought to protect the helpless victim, has no other feelings towards her but those of jealousy and rage (1987, 27).

In acknowledging the (admittedly asymmetric) suffering of white women, Jacobs provides further affective grounds for female support of her cause.

Jacobs understands that competing interpretations of 'the nature of her pain, its causes, its consequences, its relative weight, its moral, religious, and social significance' are possible (Spelman 1997, 61). It is through seeking to assert interpretive control over the narrative of slavery that Jacobs sees the means to maintain both her own moral agency as well as to draw attention to the responsibility of white people for the perpetuation of the suffering created by the institution of slavery. Jacobs assumed that 'debates over the meaning of suffering of slaves were shaped by and were shaping what people felt or didn't feel' (Spelman 1997, 66) and, therefore, it was imperative to interpret and curate – through her own experiences of slavery – the demand for outrage.

Mobilising anger and outrage was, in her eyes, the path to an acknowledgement of responsibility and appropriate action. These emotions are a necessary counterweight to the much easier tendency towards pity which, as Arendt understood, facilitates the objectification and commodification of the suffering subject through the gaze of the spectator. In attempting to provoke such emotions, Jacobs sought to prevent the slide towards the passive empathy of a sentimental politics whereby a

satisfying and self-centred form of emotional engagement precluded the discomfort of self-reflection and the effort of political action. As Jacobs alludes to, 'being the object of charity is hardly to be compared with being the subject of freedom' (Spelman 1997, 71). Jacobs' argument is persuasive partly precisely because it was *her* argument. Having refused the assistance of white female abolitionist supporters to write her story – and potentially to appropriate it – Jacobs' call for anger and outrage is not an abstract call for charity or compassion as co-suffering, but a historically situated and socially astute demand for structural reform and restitution for black slaves. While emotions of anger and outrage direct Jacobs' interlocutors to the slave owners, those that work with them, and the institutions that perpetuate slavery, pity (and compassion) focuses our attention instead on the slaves themselves, limiting the likelihood of active engagement with their experiences in the form of political action and increasing the probability of feeling pity towards those suffering. White abolitionists also struggled with the political logic of pity and anger as demonstrated by Angelina Grimké who read the "pity' and 'generosity' of certain whites as indicative of their 'regard[ing] the colored man as a *unfortunate inferior*, rather than as an *outraged and insulted equal*' (Spelman 1997, 59). The specific emotion and the identity of its narrator/curator matters, therefore, in constituting the understanding and knowledge of her interlocutors that Jacobs seeks to elicit.

Jacobs was aware that white northerners were 'ignorant, misinformed or complacent about the meaning of slavery for slaves' (Spelman 1997, 69), which served to inhibit the acknowledgement of their implication in the suffering of others. Yet, as Jacobs writes about the everyday violence of slavery:

> Senator Brown, of Mississippi, could not be ignorant of many such facts as these, for they are of frequent occurrence in every southern state. Yet he stood up in the Congress of the United States, and declared that slavery was a 'great moral, social, and political blessing; a blessing to the master, and a blessing to the slave!' (1987, 122).

Whether this reflects an individual failure of conscience, habitual practices which erode an awareness of others, ideological thoughtlessness, or a combination of all is debatable (see Schiff 2014). What is clear, however, is that they inhibit the possibility of recognition of and responsiveness to the epistemic and affective claims of the other. Jacobs provides other evidence of such processes of 'turning away' fed by habit, ideology, and self-interest when she writes that northerners who become southern slaveholders 'seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves' (1987, 44). In a similar fashion, she speaks of the northern clergyman

> who comes home to publish a 'South-Side View of Slavery,' and to complain of the exaggerations of abolitionists. He assures people that he has been to the south, and seen slavery for himself; that it is a beautiful 'patriarchal institution'; that the slaves don't want their freedom; that they have hallelujah meetings, and other religious privileges. What does *he* know of the half-starved wretches toiling from dawn till dark on the plantations? of mothers shrieking

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> for their children, torn from their arms by slave traders? of young girls dragged down into moral filth? of pools of blood around the whipping post? of hounds trained to tear human flesh? of men screwed into cotton gins to die? The slaveholder showed him none of these things, and the slaves dared not tell of it if he had asked them (1987, 74).

Setting such denials and disavowals of suffering and, therefore, responsibility, alongside her own emotional articulation of practices observed and experienced serves to challenge the reader to reflect on how their own understanding of slavery has been constructed. Jacobs' counter-narrative is intended to disrupt the comfortable assumptions of white northerners who have previously not had to look at the suffering of others, who may have pitied them while perceiving them as naturally inferior and therefore undeserving of moral or political equality, or who have been able to convince themselves of the positive rationale for the institution of slavery as beneficent towards those under its yoke. This epistemic disruption is furthered by her narration of the links between north and south; the laws which maintain northern complicity in the perpetuation of slavery and the racism which ideologically underpins the permissibility and desirability of such laws. Jacobs' narrative is constructed in such a way as to resist the slide into a sentimental politics and to demand recognition of the forms and causes of the structural injustice she has experienced.

Testimonial empathy as an ethics of encounter

Jacobs' narrative functions as a call for testimonial empathy which looks for a distinct kind of ethical–political encounter on the part of her interlocutors, requiring a disposition towards recognition of and responsiveness to the epistemic and affective claims of the other. The responsiveness towards the other which it demands may be defined as:

> the acknowledgement and experience of connections between our everyday activities and the suffering of others. Responsiveness is, importantly, not simply a matter of 'knowing that' I am implicated in others' suffering. It is not only a cognitive capacity and undertaking, although it is partly that. It is also, crucially, an affective stance involving attunement to the suffering of others and openness to acknowledging and experiencing the claims that such suffering might make upon me (Schiff 2014, 34).

The distinction between knowledge and acknowledgement is important because it refers to both an epistemic and a political dimension. Knowledge, for testimonial empathy, requires listening without presuming a complete or full understanding of the other. It does not seek to master the narrative or knowledge of the other, to subsume it within a pre-established hierarchy of ideas, values, and beliefs, or to reduce the other to fit our own limited imaginations or perspectives. To do so would be to conflate empathy with a strategy of knowing intended to perpetuate, rather than disrupt, the existing structures of injustice. Rather than '[f]orcing understandable identities, overlooking differences "for the sake of a comfortable,

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self-justifying rush of identification"' (Lather 2000, 20), the ethics of encounter integral to testimonial empathy conceives of the relationship as one of humility, modesty, reflexivity, and respect. Testimonial empathy in this understanding is not a drawing closer to become one – as suggested by some definitions of compassion – but rather recognising and respecting the distances between narrator and listener, accepting the difficulty of 'grasping' the position of the other and acknowledging that understanding cannot be a reiterated action of violence or imposition, of 'appropriation in the guise of an embrace' (Lather 2000, 20, citing Sommer). Although in the moment of recognition within an encounter, there is always the possibility that such openness can collapse into defensiveness and denials (Beausoleil 2017, 296), acknowledgement affirms recognition of the epistemic claim being made and is itself a form of political action.

Challenging structural injustice through a process of testimonial empathy does not assume that one is required to adopt the perspective of another human being as is sometimes suggested: 'when one presumes to adopt another perspective without reflection on the boundaries of one's own *body* and location, more often than not one simply imposes the view from there upon another' (Orlie 1994, 691). Testimonial empathy looks for an awareness of the very different subject-positions present, attunes us to being implicated in the vulnerability of the other and begins to assist in the articulation of responsibility to both reflect and to act. Nothing about this process, however, is simple or linear, and there are many potential impediments to our ability to practice testimonial empathy. Jacobs' testimony makes us aware that there are many factors which cast doubt on the capacity of empathy and its complex, ambivalent dynamics to act as a conduit for political and social transformation.

As Berlant acknowledges, 'Self-transforming compassionate recognition and its cognate forms of solidarity are necessary for making political movements thrive contentiously against all sorts of privilege, but they have also provided a means for making minor structural adjustments seem like major events, because the theatre of compassion is emotionally intense' (Berlant 2011, 182). In other words, we must be aware that the emotional rewards of empathy may serve as a comfortable end in itself rather than contributing to a process of political change and an acknowledgement of responsibility for structural injustice. Doubts regarding the capacity for empathy to trigger social and political change emerges from 'passive empathy' (Boler 1997, 256). Passive empathy is effectively an abdication of responsibility; a satisfying emotional engagement with the narrative of the other that does not elicit active participation and self-reflection on the historical conditions within which the narrative was created. Akin to a politics of pity, it permits an 'epistemology of ignorance (of not knowing, or of not wanting to know)' (Danewid 2017, 1681). As James Baldwin wrote of the sentimentality of 'protest' novels such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), whatever unsettling questions they raise 'are evanescent, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all' (Baldwin 1955). Jacobs well understood the danger of sentimental 'womanly' or 'Christian sympathy' and sought explicitly to counter it through her direct appeals to her interlocutors not to merely enjoy the emotional thrill of

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her account or to congratulate themselves on their 'kindly' feelings without any self-reflection at their own complicity in the perpetuation of the structural injustice of slavery.[5]

Jacobs understood compassion as becoming 'fine-tuned through a process of exchange between the nonsufferer and the sufferer in which the nonsufferer's passion is honed by growing awareness of the details of the sufferer's being and situation' (Spelman 1997, 87). Testimonial empathy and the ethics of encounter which underpins it thus implies a mode of attending to the other which is not only open to the experiences and interpretations of the other, but which involves a willingness to challenge our own assumptions and world views, our affective attachments, our historical knowledge and the manner of its production. Empathy of this kind requires us to be self-critical rather than self-referential. It privileges discomfort over our tendency to soothe away what may have troubled us through ultimately self-oriented actions. Significantly, testimonial empathy requires attention to the self in order to be aware of the myriad of 'affective obstacles that prevent the [listener's] acute attention to the power relations guiding her response and judgements' (Boler 1997, 265). As Jacobs understood and sought to manage through her explicit choices about how much atrocity and suffering to include in her own narrative in an attempt to balance the reader's response to her as a victim or moral agent (1987, 28, 160), such affective obstacles may include moral repulsion, contempt, a rejection of the experience of the other, attempts to minimise the significance attached to their experiences or to misinterpret what is heard, '"paralysis" from "fear of merger [sic] with the atrocities being recounted"; "anger unwittingly directed at the narrator"; "a sense of total withdrawal and numbness"; and an "obsession with fact-finding" that shuts off the human dynamic' (Laub cited in Boler 1997, 265–66). These everyday practices or habits of feeling, ideology, and self-interest – singularly or in combination – all work to turn us away from injustice and suffering in the lives of others. They shape our desires and capacity to withhold empathy and work to prevent us from attending to the epistemic and affective claims of others.

Conclusion

The narratives of suffering as a result of structural injustices to which we are constantly exposed pose a number of questions regarding the construction and implementation of political responsibility. In response to this puzzle – to what extent can such narratives lead to sustainable social and political transformation through empathic encounters – I offer three arguments. First, we need to explicitly acknowledge and explore the affective dimensions of political responsibility which are shaped by historical, cultural, local, and transnational encounters. Contra Arendt, the transmission of affect through micropolitical encounters disintegrates conventional boundaries of the private/public and international political spheres and cannot be understood without being situated within historical narratives of difference and power. Second, we should differentiate between sentimental emotions such as

[5]For an example of the ambivalence of the collective mobilisation of humanitarian emotions in relation to slavery, see Kellow 2009.

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pity and the emotional, cognitive, and embodied processes of testimonial empathy. While both are constitutive of political 'work', the latter calls for radical reflexivity and epistemic humility that is self-critical rather than self-referential in its interrogation of position, privilege, and power. Third, and consequently, empathy must be tied to a political understanding of responsibility and action because ethics alone cannot be a substitute for political redress of structural injustices. Jacobs' narrative, located within the socio-political context of slavery as a product of colonialism and the abolitionist movement, eloquently articulates the nexus of these conceptual links, embodying the transmission of affect from the 'private' reading of her narrative to the public sphere in a call for political change through an appeal for testimonial empathy.

The struggle articulated by Jacobs to facilitate political responsibility for the structural injustice of slavery and her awareness of the obstacles that dogged her appeal continues to be played out in world politics. Kurdi's image sparked a wave of emotional discourse in which the question, history, and locations of political responsibility remain paramount. Narratives – in a plurality of forms – are a critical part of the human face of contemporary issues in international relations around migration, security, conflict, poverty, climate, and the environment. As with other forms of injustice, the marginalisation of the recognition of the 'refugee crisis' as *structural* continues to facilitate a form of gatekeeping which shapes the effectiveness of particular kinds of affective discourses and their capacity to be mobilised to support legitimate accounts of political responsibility. It is for this reason that nation-state apologies and reconciliation efforts are frequently contested because the degree to which they represent a process of testimonial empathy – the acknowledgement of injustice and its historical and structural dimensions, subjective shifts of understanding, and collective political action – as opposed to a performative display of empathy which evades political responsibility and enacts a 'turning away' is often questioned by the state's interlocutors (Mihai 2013, 201; Waterton and Wilson 2009). Attending to the affective dynamics of narratives draws our attention to the constant presence of emotions and the ambivalence of the political processes they are constitutive of (e.g. Woodward 2004).

As should be clear, the evocation of emotion, and empathy in particular, does not necessarily lead to action that is likely to address the problems posed by structural injustices at a macropolitical level. The risk that narratives of suffering provide some interlocutors with nothing more than a 'vicarious sensory experience that does little to alter their own sense of privilege' (Chabot Davis 2004, 414) cannot be avoided. Recognising the distinction between a sentimental politics and testimonial empathy, however, allows us to better understand how these dynamics play out in practice and why sometimes social and political transformation occurs and at other times it does not. Political responsibility does not solely lie within the realm of parties, institutions, and elections. Subjective shifts and self-transformation as a consequence of radical understanding can lead to political action at all levels of societal interaction. Affective encounters with the experiences of others can disrupt our epistemic comfort and render visible dynamics and hierarchies hitherto unaccounted for by the powerful and unaccountable to the oppressed.

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