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9 Entangled in trauma patterns

WHERE HAD I got to in understanding my entanglements? Looking at stories, I had tracked some of the narratives I am caught in, and was creeping slowly towards a felt and not just intellectually grasped appreciation that it is possible to stand up for the stories and ideologies of the changes that I want, without making them such a part of my identity that I have to go to war with everyone who disagrees with me. Looking at structures of power, I'd made some sense of my list of neoliberal manifestations in the organisations I'd worked in, organisations that often supposedly worked against the damage caused by neoliberalism. I'd realised that it was possible – indeed, many might say, probable – to obtain a first class history degree from Cambridge that covered topics including postcolonial thought, and still have failed to decolonise my own thinking about what needs to change, how, and who has the agency to make it happen. Something was still missing, however. These were still observations from the 'outside'. I was missing the interior view. I still hadn't grasped quite *how* the stories and structures of power are woven into us, and what this means for how we go about trying to change how power works in the world.[217] It was time to return to psychotherapeutic ways of thinking, which I'd earlier found useful in seeing what was going on when people react to activists and activists react to everyone else.

Foucault had been helpful in looking at power structures, in illuminating the risks of being an activist who helps keep the system as it is. His body of work and the scholarship it has provoked is key to understanding how invisible forms of power can entangle us. But he left two big realities out of his thinking. One of them was the 500-year history of colonial domination, and the other was our inner life.[218] Both of these realities, I was coming to see – and as people in different positions to me have been able to see much more clearly – are at the heart of our activist entanglements and how we internalise aspects of the world that we want to change. And the two kinds of thinking that I had been using to cast light on them, so far, were decolonial theory and psychoanalysis. Neither can quite account for activist entanglements on its own. Decolonial theory, as far as I have seen, does not provide a full account of the effect of coloniality on the inner life of oppressed and oppressor. And psychological theories about the unconscious

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have been notoriously unpolitical. Critical psychology notes how psychoanalysis has been too likely to say it's all in our heads and our projections, and to disavow social and structural reasons for our discomfort. Psychoanalytic theory has missed, too, an analysis of coloniality and racism; has operated, itself, from racist assumptions,[219] with only emerging attempts at awareness.[220] Eco-psychologists would add that psychoanalysis places the human indoors in a room, unable to account for the distress that arises when we are cut off from our roots in the rest of the non-human world.[221] In all these ways, psychoanalysis stands accused of emerging directly from the dominant culture. Does it even make sense to use it to cast light on our entanglements in that culture?

And yet, while emerging from the dominant imaginary, psychoanalysis still offers a key insight into how it works: it understands that we are split. Taking threads of decolonial and psychoanalytic thinking together, I was starting to see the extent of the tangle that activists are in. By attending to what lies beneath our utterances and behaviour, psychoanalysis sees that we split off aspects of ourselves and knowledge of ourselves that we cannot bear or that are not permitted, and we suppress them. This insight is mirrored in decolonial theory's understanding that the dominant imaginary is also split: in its conceptualising of the world as subject and object, a split that was made manifest in the politics of coloniality. This epistemological dualism at the heart of modernity – a binary way of thinking – has been made manifest in ideas, put into practice for too long, that falsely suggest an ontological – materially real – division between some types of human and other types of human.

In short, if psychoanalytic theory sees the split on the inside, then decolonial thought sees the split on the outside. Psychoanalysis sees the split within each of us, as individuals. Decoloniality, while seeing that the individual has to decolonise their mind and heart, also sees the split within a larger 'us' – as communities, as nations, as a global society of humans. These dynamics are not mirroring each other by coincidence. They help to create each other. Coloniality, the idea that some people are 'object', to be extracted from, was and is put into practice by people who have disavowed the violence and inhumanity in themselves and projected it onto the people who are colonised and extracted-from. In this light, activists who cannot see these

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splits, both in themselves and in the shared imaginary, are trying to heal the world without understanding the hurt at the heart of it. What might activists need to do to heal these splits, in ourselves and in the shared culture? And what obstacles are in our way?

One aspect of the split that needs healing is our splitting-off of either agency or vulnerability to unbearable feelings. In Chapter 4 I used psychoanalysis's insight that we split ourselves to explore what happens in the interaction between those who identify as activists and those who do not. But splitting and projection is key, too, to understanding how oppression works. Those who have suffered histories of oppression, of whatever kind, may have had to split off and hide their agency and power in order to survive. Reclaiming that agency and power has often been a necessary aspect of activism for those fighting for their lives; a necessary step to be able to engage in activism at all. It is a pushing back against the negative projections that have been part of the oppression, and an owning of the positive attributes that may have been pushed away in order to survive. This reclamation has been done by those with racialised identities since the beginning of colonialism and enslavement and it is still being done now.[222] It went on in the consciousness-raising groups that women held in their living rooms during the second wave of feminism in the 1970s, as women learned not only that the conditions of their lives were shared and attributable to patriarchal structures, but also that they could speak up about them. It is still going on now, as people from marginalised groups of all kinds step into leadership and activism and start organising and training others.

Those who have benefited from histories of oppression, meanwhile (and there is no neat division, as one person may be in different positions with respect to different aspects of their identity), have been able to hide their split-off vulnerability and dependency in projections onto the 'others' who have suffered under the domination of the mainstream culture.[223] Their great difficulty in acknowledging that these histories are ongoing is, in part, because it raises for them the possibility of having to face their own vulnerability to unbearable feelings, which has long – perhaps intergenerationally – been put out of sight. This may feel, internally, intolerable, even if materially their lives appear comfortable. Politicians and

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commentators defending Britain's imperial past act out this difficulty on news discussion programmes; men defending patriarchy act out this difficulty at dinner tables up and down the land. Activists with various forms of privilege may increasingly be able to acknowledge their privilege in words, but reclaiming – which means actually *feeling* – the vulnerabilities that they have been more accustomed to 'seeing' in others, including the people they have been trying to 'help', can be much more uncomfortable.

So, for those with privilege who have been engaging in activism to try to 'help', work towards dismantling projections has rarely been seen as a necessary step. It has not been so obvious to those who assume they have agency, answers and access to power, that there is anything split off from themselves – and I can say 'ourselves' here, as this is true for me – that needs to be reclaimed. Nor, conversely, has it been obvious that there is anything assumed that we should relinquish. It has not been so obvious that what we have thought of as agency and knowledge and power has been experienced that way because another aspect of our self – our not-knowing, and vulnerability to experiencing unbearable feelings – has been pushed away. It has been hiding behind the shield of privilege, or has been projected onto others, including others whom we are trying to help, or are working alongside in our attempts to change the world, or even those whom we are vilifying as the perpetrators of the problem. This is why the lessons of decoloniality, with which the previous chapter finished, can seem so hard. We have been keeping our vulnerability to unbearable feelings at bay by assuming that we know and that we are right, and by keeping ourselves in the centre of the picture.

Another manifestation of the split at the heart of liberal modernity that needs healing is the subject–object thinking that we also saw in the previous chapter. This habit unthinkingly places the activist who is trying to help as 'subject', and the situation they are trying to change, or the person they are trying to help, as 'object'. Those placed as 'object' are faced with the task of epistemic resistance: reclaiming their status as a knower, whatever form their knowledge takes. Epistemic resistance is practised by formerly colonised peoples whose cultural and knowledge practices have been suppressed, and by women everywhere who have internalised men's needs,

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desires and ways of thinking, speaking and acting as their own. It is part of the process of claiming the necessary agency to engage in activism.

But what those doing this reclamation of agency can encounter in activism is people trying to help who think *they* are the only ones who are the subject with agency, people who are engaged in that particularly activist form of epistemic violence: assuming they know better. I have experienced this in the form of male activists 'mansplaining' things to me, and I have done it myself, as I described in Chapter 5, when approaching NGOs in Nigeria and Uganda as potential partners while holding my own or my organisation's fixed ideas about what sort of policy changes or interventions are going to help, even when we were asking what we thought were open questions. For activists, and indeed anyone, who has been assuming they are the subject and everyone else is object, the very idea that we are all subjects, all entangled to the point of being co-created with everyone else, can feel both cognitively and emotionally challenging.

I found a helpful description of this challenge in the work on 'doer and done-to' dynamics and 'mutual recognition' by the celebrated relational psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin. Her writing shines light on how our habits of relating to others as if they are object and we are subject can be deeply buried in our psyche. Our routine mode of relating to each other is too often what Benjamin calls 'two-ness': two individuals relating to each other *as individuals*, rather than as people made up in part by the relation between them. Inherent in 'two-ness', Benjamin suggests, is a relation in which both parties are trying to be the subject and place the other as object. This process invariably turns to power dynamics, to the constant push-me-pull-you of what she calls 'doer and done-to'. The 'power of actual psychic experience,' she writes, 'all too often is that of the one-way street – in which we feel as if one person is the doer, the other done-to …. To recognise that the object of our feelings, needs, actions and thoughts is actually another subject, an equivalent centre of being, is the real difficulty.'[224] Once again, the novelists perhaps have it best. Love, the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch reminded us, 'is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real'.[225] Benjamin is suggesting that this realisation is always difficult, whoever we are relating to. She is talking about the difficulty in allowing others to have – to return to Toni Morrison's words

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that I used at the end of Chapter 4 – 'the specific individuality we insist upon for ourselves'.[226]

Why is it so hard to relate to other people as 'subjects' in themselves? One answer lies in infancy. In Chapter 4 we saw Martha Nussbaum building on Donald Winnicott's developmental models to explore the roots of disgust in our intolerance of our own vulnerability. Benjamin builds on the same body of work on infant attachment to describe how easily a person can retain, from childhood dynamics with their primary carer, the desire to assimilate others to their centre, rather than allow them to exist, however differently, at their own centre. Another answer, of course, is that we are living in an imaginary that is constructed around subject–object polarisation. The individualistic structures of modernity created individuals and set us up against each other, and then, more recently, turned up the volume on that competition with neoliberal ideology and practice. So mutual recognition requires constant work. 'Recognition continually breaks down,' Benjamin observes. 'We are always losing and recovering the intersubjective view,' she says, and this may be at the root of many of our difficulties in living peacefully with each other, whether in intimate relationships or as communities or nations.[227]

I have found Benjamin's approach, which emerged from her thinking about what happens in the therapeutic encounter between an analyst and patient, a useful diagnosis of some of activism's difficulties.[228] I was sensing that activism is missing something when it goes into saviour mode or shout-down mode, and was starting to see, as I wrote at the end of Chapter 8, that the missing something might be intersubjectivity, a way of relating to each other as interdependent beings with our own centre of gravity. Her writing helped me to see what gets in the way and what could potentially be different. It helped me to see how that motto of ubuntu philosophy and relating, 'I am human because you are human; we can only be human when we recognise each other as human', is, as she puts it, 'not a banal slogan but a representation of a complex psychological process within and between individuals'.[229] Her suggestion of a 'mental space' in which mutual recognition can occur feels like something potentially valuable to activists who are struggling to avoid 'doer and done-to' dynamics in our own actions.

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While recognising that absence of mutual recognition can be an illuminating diagnosis, Benjamin's critics question, however, whether the application of mutual recognition as a reparative tool is sufficient in situations where profound inequalities of power are already entrenched.[230] For activists who are willing to start in a different place, mutual recognition may be a helpful lodestar and aspiration, but it may not be enough. And in addition to the limitations of good-intentioned efforts to create mutuality in profoundly 'un-mutual' situations, there is also the limitation in its framing of 'mental space'. We are not just mental creatures; we are also bodily creatures. The ways that we respond to others when we are doing activism are shaped by the workings of our nervous systems, and our nervous systems have been conditioned by the effects of (yes, it's an entanglement) the very problems that we are trying to change in the world.

Trauma thinking

potentially a lot? Van Der Kolk

The perspective we need to understand the tensions of mutuality in the context of asymmetric power, I have come to think, is trauma, which is held in the body, mind and emotional memory through the workings of our nervous systems. Rooted in our physiology, a trauma perspective can bring us down to earth in our search to understand how systems of power work within us. Trauma is not just the bad event that happens; it is the long-term dysregulation it causes in the nervous system, a physiological set of changes that can alter how we experience, perceive and respond to the world and everyone we encounter. Thinking in the terms of trauma can help us to understand our challenges as activists to achieve intersubjectivity and mutual recognition, as well as our human tendencies to project onto others what we may not be able to bear in ourselves. Thinking in the terms of trauma can help activists to understand the depth of the impact of the stories and structures that we are trying to change: on ourselves, on everyone else, and on the shared culture and its habits, which can so easily become our own. With a trauma lens, we start to see the ways in which the splits in the imaginary and the splits in ourselves are held at the level of our nervous systems.

For Judith Herman, an American psychiatrist who has devoted her career to the treatment and study of trauma, traumatic events 'overwhelm the

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ordinary human adaptations to life'.[231] Being traumatised, says Bessel van der Kolk, another trauma expert, 'means continuing to organise your life as if the trauma were still going on – unchanged and immutable – as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past'. The last two decades have seen a revolution in the understanding of trauma, through new knowledge in areas including neuroscience, developmental psychopathology (what can go wrong with the development of mind and brain) and interpersonal neurobiology (the way that we affect the workings of each other's brains).[232] This new knowledge has changed the way that trauma is recognised and treated, and will continue to do so. Trauma healing is a growing field; there are summits, trainings, online trainings, grief circles and a growing number of practitioners developing ways to resource individual and collective healing. It opens up deeper possibilities for understanding the problems of our collective psychology.

What has this got to do with activism? For those who feel that nothing really awful has ever happened to them, it can seem hard at first to see the relevance of 'trauma' to the question of how we perceive and relate to everyone who is not us. However, I have come to see that trauma is centrally important to how we understand the world and I will try to set out how. Trauma, to the uninitiated, sounds like bad things that happen to other people. It is accidents, violence and the horrors that soldiers experience in combat, or that frontline emergency workers witness on the job. These horrors, we may be aware, can revisit survivors in the form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): the heightened reactivity and hyper-vigilance, or the locked-down numbness of a nervous system that is stuck in its emergency states of 'fight', or 'flight', or 'freeze'. If we know a bit more, we might be aware that people with trauma can be treated. They need a holding that allows them to establish a sense of safety from which they can, with help, grow the resources needed to tolerate the unbearable feelings. They need a holding that maps a return path for their nervous system to revert more consistently to its healthy cycle of action and rest. We might know, too, that our body's regular cycle of action and rest is led by the two branches of the autonomic nervous system. One is the sympathetic nervous system, which is our 'accelerator'; it enables us to get up in the morning and do our normal activities, to enjoy physical activity as well as, in extreme

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situations, to fight or run away. The other is the parasympathetic system, our 'brake', which enables us to rest and digest and, in extreme situations when fight or flight is not an option, to freeze and play dead.[233]

That we know this much about trauma, that it is recognised at all, is because of activism. 'The study of war trauma becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the sacrifice of young men in war. The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the subordination of women and children,' says Herman. It was the anti-war movements after the First World War and later during the Vietnam War that made possible the developments in trauma understanding that, in 1980, resulted in complex PTSD being recognised as a specific psychiatric condition. The feminist movement of the 1970s was the context that helped to legitimise research into the trauma caused by rape, domestic violence and childhood abuse. It was ground-breaking to be able to show that the suffering of women who had been raped and abused in the home had strong parallels with that of men who had experienced the battlefield. Herman observes that 'the study of psychological trauma is an inherently political enterprise because it calls attention to the experience of oppressed people'.[234] She is right, though it is also not that straightforward. There has been an immense and warranted effort to understand the traumatic intergenerational and ongoing consequences of the Holocaust, for example. But there has been – so far – less focus on the equally warranted matter of the traumatic intergenerational consequences of colonialism and enslavement. And the conversation about the trauma that people experience as a result of ongoing racism and other forms of marginalisation is only beginning.[235] As with every other field of enquiry that is now seeking to decolonise itself, the study of trauma has been shaped by the assumptions, priorities and unconscious motivations of those who have been in positions to do the research.[236]

What we might not know about trauma is quite how widespread it is, quite how unrecognised the extent of it is, and – manifesting as it does in other symptoms – quite how shockingly normalised it is. One cause of trauma is distressing experiences in childhood. Reading Bessel van der Kolk's book, *The Body Keeps the Score*, it became startlingly clear to me, to give just one example, what a high proportion of adult distress has its roots in childhood

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trauma. A landmark study in the US in the late nineties identified 'adverse childhood experiences' including physical, sexual and psychological abuse, neglect, witnessing domestic abuse and having a family member with addictions or mental health problems. It showed that these 'ACEs' cumulatively increased the likelihood of multiple problems later in life: mental and physical health, addictions, obesity, violence and being in abusive relationships.[237] Eradicating child abuse in the US, one of the researchers concluded, would reduce depression rates by more than half, alcoholism by two thirds, and suicide and domestic violence by three quarters.[238] Studies in the US and other countries continue to back these findings up. Yet trauma researchers are still battling for formal recognition of what they call 'developmental trauma disorder' for children whose symptoms do not meet the adult PTSD criteria, yet who display pervasive emotional and physical dysregulation. Children may be diagnosed with multiple different psychiatric syndromes, none of which recognises the systemic abuse and neglect that is at the heart of their problems.[239] What looks like mental illness, behavioural disorders, educational problems, then, is actually trauma: in this case, children who have been gravely hurt by the adults they live with, and who are likely to go on living with the consequences.

'Trauma decontextualised in a person looks like personality; trauma decontextualised in a family looks like family traits; trauma in a people looks like culture,' says Resmaa Menakem, an American trauma therapist.[240] His point is that trauma disguises itself. Unattended to, it remains at the heart of a person, a family, a culture, manifesting in a wide variety of symptoms, behaviour and habits, which are either pathologised – seen as ill, criminal or deviant and treated as such – or are normalised and become invisible. The reason, then, that I am talking about trauma in a book about how we do activism is that I have started to see the trauma 'habits' that run, normalised and invisible, through the heart of the culture that we live in. That have been running, normalised and invisible, through my own behaviour. Trauma patterns help to shape the tone of public life – and family life – as well as shaping how activists go about our task of changing things.

I was introduced to this perspective by Sophy Banks, a psychotherapist and co-founder of the Transition movement, who is now researching the way

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that trauma patterns create a 'deep frame' for how we relate to each other.[241] I wasn't thinking about trauma when I went to talk to her. It was early in my enquiry and I'd seen her writing about her observations and experiences of burnout in Transition, a community-scale initiative that has spread around the world, where people work together to restore and increase local resilience to climate change and ecological breakdown. After my own experience of burnout and chronic fatigue as a young journalist, and my intuition that my illness was about something more than 'me' and 'my' behaviour, something in what she was saying had touched me, and I wanted to hear more. But our first conversation went far beyond burnout, which she takes as just the starting point: a feedback mechanism from a system that is not functioning healthily. I left her kitchen table, reeling at the implications of what she was saying, and after two years of conversations, reading and exploration, I find that her account, rooted in emerging trauma research, offers a deep and valuable perspective on how our inner lives are entangled with the world we live in and that we are trying to change.[242] Activist behaviour is entangled in trauma patterns, because the culture we live in – and that we want to change – is shaped by them too.

In what ways is trauma at the heart of the dominant culture? There is a bit of unpacking to do here before looking at how activism is shaped by the terms of trauma. The first point is that this country is full of traumatised people. That the UK *produces* trauma is perhaps more obvious than that it is itself traumatised. Historically it has colonised and enslaved other nations and peoples. Now it makes and sells weapons to other governments who use them against civilians; creates and maintains poverty in other countries through economic, trade and tax policies and the power of its financial markets; and then employs racialised immigration policies to turn away, detain and deport people who arrive here seeking safety from the impacts of all those actions. But such behaviour has never solely been inflicted on people elsewhere. The ruling classes have long produced trauma for people here in the UK. They (and might I say 'we' if I knew more about my family history? Two of my ancestral lines that I know about were working-class people, but there are other lines whose origins I do not know) have done this historically through colonisation within these islands, enclosures, factory conditions and forced migration, a brutally violent criminal justice system

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and the savagery of the witch hunts. They (and again, should I say we?) continue it currently through systematic inequality and the oppression of the poorest, via austerity and the dismantling of public services.

It is tempting, here – activists do it all the time – to point to particular groups and say, 'those people over there are the oppressors, and they have oppressed these people over here, who experience trauma as a result'. It's not that this isn't true. And the trauma that results from oppression is grave. But, in looking at cultural trauma patterns as I am here, a binary opposition of oppressed and oppressor is not the focus. The concept of intersectionality fragments such polarisation, allowing as it does for some people to experience particular forms of oppression and not others. Nor is the point to generate a false equivalence between the trauma experienced by those who have been oppressed, and the trauma experienced by those who have benefited from the oppression of other people. There is no equivalence. The point here, is that a culture which produces people who oppress others and cause them trauma, is a disturbed and unhealthy culture. This holds whether the oppression in question is racism, violence against women and children by the men they live with, or the devising of economic policies that punish people for being poor or having a disability.

Another factor that embeds trauma at the heart of the dominant culture is that, by and large, we don't have healthy ways of dealing with it. Sophy Banks observes that the 'missing link' in traumatised cultures is the 'return path' from the fight/flight or freeze states to regular nervous system functioning. The return path should be a social one. People who have experienced trauma need the soothing of others. They need holding, and they need practices that create safety and that support them to 'shake out' the emotional and physical residue of the event.[243] Rituals, spiritual practices, community: all of these can serve that function. These social pathways are a 'holding' that can return individuals from the overwhelm of the traumatised state, in a resonance of the way a parent holds a baby to soothe them when their immature nervous system is overwhelmed. But these social pathways can be broken. They can be broken by colonial violence: invasion, dispossession, forced migration, enslavement, the forceful imposition of alien culture … horrors experienced within these islands, and that the UK has exported to other lands. They can also be broken by war,

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the terrorising of healers by torturing and drowning or burning them as 'witches', enclosures and land grabs, industrialisation, migration to cities, secularisation, individualism … all things that have happened here in these islands, as elsewhere in Europe.[244] C. Fred Alford, an American scholar who writes about the political aspects of trauma, suggests that despite its limitations as a clinical diagnosis, 'PTSD is a pretty good political diagnosis', revealing 'something about the emptiness of modern life, at least in Western industrial societies. PTSD is a diagnosis that fits someone who is cut off from traditional sources of support that people have relied on for millennia.'[245] The violent processes that helped to cut off those sources of support were doubly traumatising: both as events in themselves, and also because they destroyed the social means of recovering equilibrium. When the lines of knowledge of holding trauma are broken, there are few people modelling how to do it well. These capacities to 'hold' are rarely available, because we need to have received it to know how to offer it to others, and many of us have not received it. There are few people who can meet trauma with the presence, empathy, co-regulating touch and 'being with' that it needs. Many of us opt instead to offer a cup of tea or an alcoholic drink, or to talk over it, or we just shuffle nervously because we don't know what to say.[246] So we learn to suppress unbearable feelings in ourselves or turn them into addictive behaviours, for they have nowhere safe and social to go.

Trauma remains at the heart of the dominant culture, too, because of the well-documented fact that it is passed on intergenerationally. It is not just the people who suffer trauma personally who are exposed to it; trauma is passed on, through time. Evidence is building for epigenetic changes that alter how DNA responds to our environment.[247] And then there is social transmission, through the intimate personal relation between parent and child. Alford, who has studied Holocaust testimonies and the relations between survivors and their children, observes that one generation transmitting its experiences on to the next generation is more likely to happen when the older generation is 'unable to speak its trauma, or when the way it speaks and the way it acts are at odds'.[248] Traumas that occur 'inside', in the privacy of the home, are passed on too: the children of abusers are more likely as adults to be in abusive relationships;[249] a minority

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of those men who have been sexually abused will go on to abuse their own children;[250] boys who witness domestic violence are seven times more likely to abuse their own partners.[251]

Abusive and other adverse childhood events are not the only kinds of trauma that occur in the home. Developmental trauma occurs when children's needs for loving responsiveness are not met, usually despite best intentions, or at the instruction of socially sanctioned childrearing advice. And this, too, is passed on, as we saw in Chapter 4. Mothers who were not sufficiently held as babies are more likely to fail to attune to and meet their own children's attachment needs, especially when they are isolated and insufficiently supported, as so many are.[252] This can result, in turn, in another generation of children with insecure attachment who have not learned to regulate their own emotions; who can grow up to be adults who are unable to cope with their own strong feelings, including or especially rage, guilt, shame and sadness. If rage, guilt, shame and sadness feel unbearable, it can be easier to project them onto other people. People who have power – in relationships, or in their job – are at risk of misusing their power in this way. They are at risk of using it to make other people more vulnerable, to make themselves feel stronger. The damage can be compounded, for the upper classes, when young children are separated from parents by sending them away to school and teaching them to put away their emotional selves, an abusive tradition long practised by the British ruling classes and those who aspire for their children to join it.[253] 'A peculiarly British form of abuse,' the journalist George Monbiot called boarding school, in an article about the prevalence of politicians 'drawn from this damaged caste'.[254] 'Having forsworn all forms of vulnerability since they were seven or eight, they can't imagine that humans might depend on one another,' writes the psychotherapist Nick Duffell, author of *Wounded Leaders* and himself a boarding school survivor.[255]

So there are arguably many people who are traumatised, and trauma is continuing to pass down the generations, without sufficient cultural and social forms of trauma support. These are things that are happening to individuals. Before we start looking at what this all means for activism, what does it mean for the culture at large? Is it even true to say that if lots of individuals are traumatised, then the culture is too? Links between the

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individual and the collective can never be as simple as saying that if lots of people are doing or feeling 'x', then that adds up to the culture doing 'y'. The limitations of drawing such causative lines are debated across the social sciences. Sociologists and psychologists often view each other's work with mutual suspicion, because their methods do not reach across the gap between what the individual experiences, feels and thinks, which can be described subjectively, and what happens in that large group of individuals constituted as society, which has to be described objectively. The growing discipline of 'psychosocial studies', which aims to be in critical conversation with both sociology and psychology and is motivated 'by the belief that the division between … sociological and psychological understandings of the human world is a mistake', only fledged and started publishing its journal with an academic publisher in 2019.[256] Trauma thinking, in my view, can be another solid bridge across the gap between the individual and the collective.

Studies of 'cultural trauma', told from a sociological perspective to widen out the medical or psychological focus on the individual, tell the story of how collective identity can be disrupted, forged or transformed when an entire group experiences an event, or events, that leave 'indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways'.[257] Collective trauma events are felt in individual bodies and minds, and also in the shared identities and narratives, as well as the shared taboos and avoidances, of the collective. The emergent field and practice of 'cultural somatics', meanwhile, which is being led by therapists seeking to heal racial trauma, works with the link between individual bodies and their reactivities to racial difference, and cultural 'bodies' of people of colour or white people whose members react in culturally conditioned ways.

'Only a small fraction of white supremacy lives in our conscious mind,' says Resmaa Menakem, the American trauma therapist who coined the term 'cultural somatics'.[258] He describes the 'constriction' in white bodies when conversations about race arise, and teaches practical tools for white people to begin noticing the constriction – which is a fight or flight response – and to learn to stay present. White people's nervous systems have been culturally primed, he argues, to register even mention of race as a threat, which is why

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they so often become defensive or turn away from the conversation. With their grounding, then, in the operations of our nervous systems and the ways that we affect each other when they are activated, trauma thinking and therapeutic practice legitimise the drawing of deep connections between individual bodies and psychology, and the wider culture. Trauma is an embodied link between what happens in individuals, and what happens in the collective.

Trauma patterns in the culture and in activism

Sophy Banks, like the cultural somatics practitioners, sees patterns in the shared culture as a mirror and a result of the widespread trauma that has been and continues to be experienced by so many individuals. In the cultural landscape of the collective, she suggests, we can see reflected the patterns that occur in the landscapes of the nervous system, physical body, emotions and mind. Her observation is that, over time, defensive behaviours and states that we use to cope with traumatic events have become self-replicating cultural patterns. And once they have become cultural patterns, individuals have to mirror the collective patterns in order to fit in, and so the patterns are perpetuated. They become an invisible deep frame that guides what we think is normal, that guides how we respond to each other, as parents, workers, lovers and friends. If enough people behave in traumatised ways, it starts to become normalised: invisible. And if people in positions of power behave in traumatised ways, it is legitimised.

What happens to the culture at large that activists are grappling with, in a country like the UK, when the underlying social rules are defined by the logic of coping with trauma? What happens when a significant number of people are permanently attuned to a form of 'fight or flight'; when many people are driven by the need to feel safe and not experience unbearable feelings; when those in charge cannot admit their vulnerability? The question of power, Banks argues, becomes primary. When the sympathetic nervous system is aroused in this way, the result is a form of altered perception, in which the question that matters is this: do I need to fight or do I need to run? To make that choice we need to know: can I win? Who has more power here? The *frame* through which we see the world, the frame that structures our questions about it, becomes power and dominance.

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In a culture structured by invisible and normalised trauma, people seek power over others, see everything as a competition that must be won, and need at all times to be in the dominant position in order to feel safe at all. It's another way to describe the jockeying for the 'subject' position that Jessica Benjamin calls 'doer and done-to'. The consequence of 'fight' mode is not just a mental frame that elevates the importance of power, however. The power gets used, whether in the home or in politics. The dominant person, or group, behaves in such a way that the shame, worthlessness and vulnerability they can't bear to feel themselves are experienced in and by the more vulnerable person or group.[259] Activism is trying to fix the problems that are caused by this dynamic, but activism too is structured by this same deep frame. What does this power frame arising from 'fight' mode look like in activism? It is the framing of activism as conflict, and the arising of and failure to manage conflict between activist groups, and I will return to what this looks like in practice in a moment.

In 'flight' mode, meanwhile, we have to keep running: this aspect of trauma logic is about speed. As Resmaa Menakem points out, speed is at the heart of trauma. Everything is sped up by the hyper-vigilance of a nervous system on red alert, which is why healing involves slowing down enough to notice what is going on in our bodies.[260] In flight mode, what feels safe is relentlessly driven activity: and those three words are a good description of modern life. In this altered perception, the logic of an economy built on endless growth makes a perverse kind of sense: at least we are still running. A rapid-fire reactivity has come to be seen as normal. We see commentators doing it on the news every day. It rarely feels safe to pause – really pause – before speaking, because we will be seen as not knowing, and in practical terms somebody else will just jump in. For activists, the tangible result of 'flight' mode is reactivity, hurry and burnout. Activists' habit of valuing speedy action over reflection is partly because of our awareness of the urgency of our task, but it is also culturally conditioned. Conflict, speed and burnout are endemic, then, in our homes, workplaces, activist movements and the wider culture. An underpinning feeling of scarcity feels normal. There isn't enough power, so we have to fight for it. There isn't enough time, so we have to move quicker. We haven't achieved enough, so we need to keep going. Almost every activist I have spoken to, regardless of

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background, has acknowledged this internally felt pressure to keep going, no matter the cost.

My personal experience is of the fight and flight version of activism. This is what I would be doing when people asked, 'are you all right?' because I was speaking so aggressively and so fast. If there was a chance to 'get the bastards' or even just to score a point in a difficult meeting I would go at it like a rocket, blood rushing to my face, heart racing. I was quick to react, and primed for fighting. This is a pattern that I have been stuck in, and I have my own reasons for that, but it is also the pattern that a lot of the activism I have been attracted to is stuck in. There was a reason that I thought getting the bastards mattered, and it wasn't only strategic. It made me feel more comfortable to be operating like that. And I wasn't the only one. I suspect that it is the people who are drawn to that kind of fight-y activism who are most noisy in defining what 'activism' is. Perhaps even people who are not activists, but who are nevertheless reacting strongly – fightingly, we could say – to the fight-y kind of activism, are also helping to define 'activism' through their reactivity to it. This is to the detriment of activism's appeal to people who do not feel called by being in fight mode, as I explored in Chapter 4. It may be drowning out the voices of those who are doing activism in other ways.

I used to keep an informal mental log, at the NGOs I worked in, of the use of military and violent metaphor by people who were working explicitly for peace. Included in this log were the dedicated and thoughtful people I worked with on gun control who would get awfully interested in the specifications of weapons systems, one of whom kept back copies of *Jane's Defence* in the pile of reading material next to the loo. Also included was the human rights advocate – and from anecdotal stories I've heard, I'm fairly sure this person will not be the only one to have done this – who posed for a photograph with a borrowed automatic weapon and a grin on a research trip to a conflict zone. 'We'll take them outside and bayonet them in the eye,' said in jest while planning tactics for a difficult diplomatic negotiating room, won the prize for worst military-metaphor offender. I used to groan, many of us did, at how utterly, inappropriately violent it sounded, but I now think it was pointing to the underlying frame we were all acting from. And

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how different were such utterances, anyway, from the 'let's get the bastards' that I was happy to join in with?

Activists are caught. We might be able to see that the bromides about relentless competition promoted by the neoliberal imaginary are not really the common sense that they are painted as. We might comprehend with our intellect that humans are evolutionarily primed for both competition and cooperation, but that we have created an economic system which values one of these faculties over the other. It is less apparent, however, that other unremarked behaviours we consider to be common sense – the competitive and aggressive ways in which we may behave among ourselves, or the way that it feels wrong not to be in rapid-fire-reaction mode – have been constructed by the same forces that shape the systems we want to change. It makes me wonder about the adrenaline highs that can be experienced in 'cancel culture', Twitter pile-ons and the shouting down of those who are trying to make their point, and about the competitiveness among activists for purest status, whatever the metric. Being stuck in these frames also requires certainty. Psychotherapists I spoke to noted that trauma can bring a flattening of perception that makes it hard to perceive nuance. Our survival needs, when we are stuck in trauma patterns, require us to make quick decisions about what is safe and what needs fighting. This pattern brings a false certainty and a rightness, a sense derived from our heightened perception of safety versus danger, that things must inevitably fall into binary oppositions of right and wrong, us and them.

The rapid-fire reactivity of 'fight' or 'flight', then, frames and conditions activists' response to problems. It triggers us into action-panic mode; heightens anger; promotes jumping in with a solution. The urgent reactivity of 'flight' mitigates against the possibility of sitting still, perhaps even in silence, to find the best response, a way of acting in solidarity rather than trying to be the saviour, and a way of acting that avoids burnout. The instincts of 'fight' can increase the competition for victim status, and heighten criticism of other activists who we think are getting it wrong. In this scarcity pattern, there is never enough time to do anything but act fast and keep going. The dominance-seeking of 'fight' leads to having to know best, assuming we are right, getting into conflict with those on the same side and, for those who are trying to help, riding obliviously over the sensibilities,

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voices and needs of anyone we think we are helping. And all of this fighting and running is helping those activists with privilege to avoid unbearable feelings of inadequacy, helplessness or shame. Those of us who have been doing activism to help cannot hope to minimise the impact of these trauma frames on our behaviour unless we face the feelings of powerlessness and shame that can be hiding behind them.

The other side of trauma perception, however, is numbness, and this too, running deeply in cultural patterns, has an effect on how we do activism. Trauma feelings are overwhelming so we will do anything to avoid feeling them, and one way to protect ourselves is through not feeling at all: through numbness and dissociation.[261] These states can alternate with moments of heightened threat perception. If we have experienced trauma we can find ourselves in 'freeze', with its paralysis and loss of agency, where the parasympathetic nervous system overrides arousal and we 'play dead' because we cannot fight or run. We can also find ourselves in a learned state of helplessness that comes from repeatedly being in situations of harm that cannot be avoided. This is not to suggest that everyone who is harmed loses their agency, just as not everyone who suffers trauma acts out the harm they have experienced on others. Resistance movements can be a healthy restoration of agency, and activist resistance as a means of recovery is a recurrent theme in decolonial approaches to understanding trauma.[262]

But numbness is a helpful frame to understand the dominant imaginary that activists want to change. When those with privilege are operating from these cultural trauma patterns, are shutting down feelings in order to go on at any cost, and are prone to seeing things in terms of power, then there are costs for everyone else. They are more likely to make decisions that will preserve their privilege by preventing them having to acknowledge it, in case they have to experience the intolerable feelings that it helps to hide. They are more likely to make decisions that will result in those intolerable feelings being felt by those who are more vulnerable. Numbness, then, is a tangible phenomenon that links the split within us (our tendency to deny what we can't bear to feel in ourselves and to project it onto others) to the split in the dominant imaginary's conception of the world (its separation of the world into people who are subject and people who are object; people who are subject and non-human beings who are object). Numbness is deeply

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implicated, therefore, in privilege of all kinds, and in the deep-running patterns of whiteness and patriarchy.

Numbness is entangled, too, with the dominant imaginary's privileging of reason. Emotions and emotional pain are experienced in our bodies, and so we can avoid them by disconnecting from our bodies and retreating to our minds. The Eurocentric imaginary that Descartes helped to found is notoriously disembodied: mind is separated from body, feelings from thinking. *Ideas* such as Cartesian duality help to create our cultural frames and patterns, but so do our very real *feelings* of numbness that derive from emotional wounds. The two come together when the dominant culture promotes and encourages reason over feeling. It becomes very easy to avoid feeling by filling our minds with thinking, analysis and intellectualising. Indeed, that has been a risk in my whole enquiry. Turning to theory – as I have been doing to shed light on my questions about activism – can be a form of distancing, of turning away from the difficulty.[263] I like the feeling of coherence and intellectual pleasure when it all hangs together, when it all seems to make sense, when somebody else's idea speaks and sparks across time and space to illuminate my own questions. For those who like thinking, theory can be a retreat into the certainties of the intellectual sphere, a retreat from the discomfort of the feeling realm.

Numbness from our own feelings, however, is what allows us to be numb to the feelings of others. Together with the desire to split off the internal discomfort and displace it onto someone else, numbness is what allows us to harm others, or to be complicit in harm, and not to feel the impact of what we are doing. It switches us off, so that difficult information about the suffering of others, human and non-human, does not land. It gets in the way of emotional expression: George Lakey, an American trainer who has been supporting activists since the civil rights movement, writes about the difficulties, for middle-class activists who have been socialised to suppress emotions, in harnessing the emotions necessary for social movements to flourish and grow.[264] It also leads to insensitivity and an inability to notice their effect upon others. Combined with privilege and access to power, emotional numbness heightens the potential to replicate oppressive behaviours within activism.

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Now, harmful behaviour is not going to manifest in an unaware activist in exactly the same way that it manifests in, let's say, a politician who orders refugee boats to be turned away from port and then prosecutes their captains, or in a director of a company that profits from contracts to run detention centres for migrants. Progressive activists like to differentiate ourselves from such people, and indeed, we are obviously making some different choices. But cultural trauma patterns in unaware activists may cause us to act out patterns that cause harm and that perpetuate existing systems. That is why trauma patterns are worth talking about as the activists try to welcome the boats, close the detention centres and unseat the politicians.

This is relevant to the scandals of Oxfam staff paying for sex in Haiti and the organisation failing to disclose allegations of child abuse, and sexual harassment of female staff by Save the Children managers in London.[265] But it also applies to cultures of overwork, to treating administrative staff differently to those staff working on 'the issue', to the use of aggressive language. 'Whatever dynamics come at the centre of your movement are there to teach you what your movement is about,' Banks warns. 'Where you're destructive internally – between individuals or in relationships within your organisation – is where you will be destructive in your movement. It shows you where your shadow is: what you haven't yet been able to understand about your mission. It's showing up because you can't see it. If you're not curious about it, it will fundamentally harm your mission.' The overwork and burnout culture of many activists mirrors the relentless activity of the industrial growth economy we may be trying to change. The silencing of grassroots activists, often people of colour, within coalitions dominated by well-funded, mostly middle-class, mostly white NGOs mirrors the silencing of people oppressed by the structures of colonialism or globalised capitalism.[266] The activation, by activists, of panicky fear about climate change and ecological breakdown risks pushing people further into the extreme nervous system states that are already part of the problem.

Trauma matters for entangled activists because it explains, at an embodied level, how we can end up 'running' the system we want to change through us, and manifesting it once again in our own behaviour. The point is not necessarily that everyone is traumatised, although many may be, but that we

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are all living in a culture that is running on trauma patterns. Even if we aren't actually traumatised ourselves, the social norm is to act as if we are. Nor is the point that everyone will act out their power over others, or be numb to the harm that we are causing or are complicit in. But a culture that has been structured by trauma around a dominance frame, and that is characterised by emotional numbness, will make it much more likely that any of us will do so.

Whether we describe jockeying for dominance in the terms of trauma, as Banks is doing, or of a failure of 'mutual recognition', in Benjamin's terms, the result is the same: it is a deep metaphorical frame, a disposition on the world, a political outlook, that emerges from the imperatives of control, force and knowing-best. We have come to confuse dominance and control with power itself rather than understanding it as just one form that power can take, because it's the only kind of power – manifesting in the state or patriarchy, for example – that we usually see. The cognitive linguist George Lakoff, who built on his work on embodied metaphors to see that the frames underpinning politics in the US correspond to two different and deeply held understandings of the family, calls it 'strict father' (albeit he is not speaking explicitly in terms of trauma). In his terms, this is the conservative approach that values firm punishment and early 'independence' from both mother's knee and the state. He contrasts this with the 'nurturant parent' approach of progressive political outlooks, which in both parenting and the social sphere can tolerate the idea of vulnerability and dependence (although Banks's point is that those arguing for progressive politics are as likely to be run by cultural trauma patterns as anybody else).[267] The author Riane Eisler, in search of the roots of patriarchal domination, calls this frame 'dominator culture', which she contrasts with the possibility of 'partnership culture'.[268] The author Charles Eisenstein's explorations of intersubjectivity, for which he uses the Buddhist monk Thich Naht Hanh's term 'interbeing', see its opposite in terms of the 'programme of control'. He means the deep-rooted programme of dominance, force and control that manifests in politics, business, debates on the evening news, our food supply systems, our relations with the natural world, and, through parenting styles, with our children. Eisenstein's book *The More Beautiful World Our Hearts Know is Possible*, which encourages activists to move out of this 'programme', was

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part of the inspiration for my own enquiry.[269] I wanted to explore how his ideas looked in the light of the particular form of activism that I had been doing, and my questions about it.

Looking at activism through a trauma frame has helped me to make further sense of the instinct with which I began my enquiry: that trying to persuade people to change through rational argument alone was profoundly insufficient. Talking, exchange of ideas, new stories, new policies, new agendas, will not be enough when our behaviour is conditioned by the habits of our nervous systems and the patterns of cultural expectations that these habits have formed. Our bodily responses are implicated in our every interaction, and carry the weight of long histories. Looking at activism through a trauma frame also helped me make sense of the behaviour that I had observed within activism. It suggests a deep set of reasons for why activists might be finding it hard to achieve the mutual recognition and equal co-creation of real intersubjectivity. Neither running fast, nor armouring ourselves to fight, nor numbing ourselves to feeling is conducive to developing the sensitivity to others that we need to relate to each other in a truly mutual way. So we don't find that place of 'betweenness' where we relate to each other as fellow human subjects, each party open to being altered by the other and by the relationship.

What does this mean for our activism? We need to slow down enough to notice what is going on. We need to notice where our own actions fit the trauma survival patterns of power-seeking, running and numbness, and see if we are able to make any shifts ourselves. Where we have been influenced by cultural habits, we may be able to alter some aspects of our responses through our own attentiveness. But first we must slow down. The great divide that can open in activist groups – between those who want to focus on action plans and strategy, and those who first or simultaneously want to do the necessary work to come into good relationship with each other – can sometimes map on to the divide between those people who are on the run or numbed and keeping busy so they don't have to acknowledge it, and those who have experienced trauma and recognise it or who have done enough work to be able to acknowledge that its patterns may at least be in play. Being on the run can manifest in thoughts like 'this is all very well but we need to get on with business', or 'this sounds like nonsense'. Slowing

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down doesn't mean we can't do our activist work. But it does mean we don't hurl ourselves at each task. That we take time for some stillness between the tasks. That we pay attention to difficulties that emerge in and between our groups. And, perhaps, that we are more compassionate with ourselves than we have been before.

And where we are on the run ourselves, we may need some help. I have had several experiences where my earnest attempts at stillness, including through meditation, scared the life out of me. Intellectually, I knew they were necessary, because I couldn't keep running any longer, but they triggered such frightening feelings that I needed to seek support. Stillness, unsupported, if we have been running or fighting for a long time, can be existentially terrifying. Learning to tolerate the feelings that have been hiding behind anger, control and speed is a slow and difficult task, but at least I am now learning what the task is. And while I still need much practice, my growing awareness of what has been *running me* leaves me feeling freer to respond differently; to approach my activism in a different way.