Affective Becoming, Affective Belonging: A Queer Phenomenological Account of the Social Reproduction of Bodies

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> To prevent possible misunderstanding, a word. I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense *couleur de rose*. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests. My standpoint, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them. (Marx 2010 [1867]: 10)

In his preface to the first German edition of *Capital*, Karl Marx emphasises that he deals with individuals living in capitalist society only as embodiments of specific social relations. He abstracts from the concrete to develop his theory of capitalism. This allows us to understand the capitalist mode of production and structural organisation of society, but leaves us with few tools to make sense of how we as individuals experience this society apart from being personifications of economic social relations. Many scholars and activists have broadened Marx's theoretical framework (cf. Skeggs et al. 2019; Gleeson/O'Rourke 2021); nevertheless it remains difficult to include the living individual in Marxist perspectives. The individual story only comes to fit into Marxist categories when individuals begin to organise (cf. Thompson 2021). In my own research, whenever I try to apply Marxist thinking to what phenomenology considers the "systematic description of first-person experience" (Haulotte 2023: 32), I struggle not to fall into dualistic notions, which place individuals as either privileged or unprivileged, discriminated or not discriminated against, radical or normative.

When Marx says he only considers individuals as embodiments of capitalist social relations, we might wonder: how do individuals experience these embodiments? As Søren Mau writes in his article on "The Body" (2019) in Marxist thought, perspectives on the body have been rare, although Marx himself considers the body in his writings, for example when he ponders how bodies are shaped by rhythms of production (cf. ibid: 1272). In this article, I show how bodies are not only shaped by these rhythms but also by modes of social reproduction and the need for care and affirmation. This is by no means a new argument, but by working with life stories in narrative interviews, I analyse how bodily surfaces are produced in affective relations between spaces, objects and other bodies, which can dis/enable individuals to reproduce their own existence. I will do so, first, by revisiting Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenological account of affective becoming, and, second, by combining it with Zoe Belinsky's perspective on how bodies can only become labouring bodies through reproductive work. Through this phenomenological-Marxist account, I finally analyse insights from an interview I conducted in Spring 2022.

1. Queer Phenomenology and Marxism?

1.1 Histories of Contact: Ahmed's Queer Phenomenologist Approach

In her *Queer Phenomenology* Sara Ahmed seeks to incorporate a Marxist perspective into her phenomenological approach. In her critique of traditional phenomenologists like Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she argues that phenomenology cuts off its object of interest and inquiry from its own arrival by only taking into consideration what can be perceived at a present moment. This perspective misses the background and historical becoming of an object, its past directions and interactions, which made it possible for the object to appear at a certain place in a certain time (cf. Ahmed 2006: 2). She builds her argumentation on Marx' understanding of commodity fetishism, which accentuates the histories of objects:

> Insofar as Marxism emphasizes the disappearance of labor in commodity fetishism, then it too provides a model of history as disappearance. A queer phenomenology, in which phenomenology is in dialogue with psychoanalysis and Marxism, might go 'behind the back' to account for what disappears in how things appear. (ibid: 190)

Ahmed uses this perspective to sketch out how objects, bodies and spaces are co-constitutive: "Neither the object nor the body have integrity in the sense of being 'the same thing' with and without others." (ibid: 54) Instead of perceiving bodies, objects and spaces as entities in themselves, Ahmed points to how they are intertwined. Spaces are shaped by the bodies and objects assembled inside them and vice versa. Ahmed emphasises that "some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others" (ibid: 11). For example: "When we refer to […] 'white space' we are talking about the repetition of the passing by of some bodies and not others." (ibid:135) White spaces extend white bodies, even to a point where one will not notice the whiteness of spaces if one is white oneself. Only if our bodies are not extended might we feel the space being full of obstacles, hindering our capacities, positing ourselves in a different place than others (cf. ibid: 132).

Ahmed's perspective enables us to take a look at how embodied individuals are directed through spaces, objects, relations with others as well as through practices they carry out: "in moving this way, rather than that, and moving in this way again and again, the surfaces of bodies in turn acquire their shape. Bodies are 'directed' and they take the shape of this direction." (ibid: 16) Precisely because bodies are not only doing things and encountering objects as being distinct from them, but actually gain their very own shapes during the ongoing contacts throughout life, the directedness is *in* the body and even *is* the body itself. Where individuals go is always accompanied by a history of where they have been going, because some ways and some objects are closer to them than others (cf. ibid: 56, 66). This history is an affective history. During the contact with the world around us we become affected and we feel these affects in our bodies. Our bodies remember these encounters, they leave affective traces and become a part of ourselves. In this way they also structure feelings of belonging and non-belonging: "affects […] are basically ways of connecting, to others and to other situations […] With intensified affect comes […] a heightened sense of belonging, with other people and to other places" (Massumi 2015: 110). To understand how someone arrived at certain places, their affective history of becoming must be taken into consideration.

This interrelatedness of bodies, objects and spaces is usually invisible if one only considers an object as it appears to be in a given moment. Yet, what is actually Marxist about Ahmed's interpretation remains unclear. In fact, she even strips commodity fetishism of its Marxist meaning. Marx accentuates how commodities are perceived as carrying value whereas the production of this value remains hidden. This value production can be considered as the com-

modity's history, the labour which manufactured it. As individuals exchange commodities on the market, "we equate as values our different products, [and] by that very act, we also equate, as human labour, the different kinds of labour expended upon them" (Marx 2010 [1867]: 84–85). Individuals relate to one another and to themselves in terms of commodity values. These values appear as natural, as belonging to specific products and kinds of work. But:

> The character of having value, when once impressed upon products, obtains fixity only by reason of their acting and reacting upon each other as quantities of value. These quantities vary continually, independently of the will, foresight and action of the producer. To them, their own social action takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them. (ibid: 85)

This specific meaning of commodity fetishism is not summed up in the history of the labour put into commodities or objects. It always exceeds this history and points to the specific ruling mechanisms in capitalist society.

Ahmed does, however, show how individuals become directed in their bodies, habits and practices and how these directions remain hidden – call that fetishism or not. I will inform these histories of contacts constituting individual bodies with Zoe Belinsky's social reproduction lens, which combines phenomenological and Marxist thinking in order to understand how individual bodies are enabled and disenabled to labour and reproduce themselves in capitalist society.

1.2 *I Cannot* and *I Can*: Belinsky's Phenomenology of (Reproductive) Work

In her essay "Transgender and Disabled Bodies: Between Pain and the Imaginary" (2021), Zoe Belinsky develops a phenomenological account of the Marxist term *work*. She argues that in order to work, individuals need to transform the nonfoundational experience of an *I cannot* into an *I can*. Like Ahmed, Belinsky rejects the way in which traditional phenomenologists such as Merleau-Ponty generalise their own bodily experience into an ontological experience of individuals. As Merleau-Ponty states that individuals turn towards the world with an attitude of *I can*, Belinsky reveals the male, white and ableist character of this experience (cf. Belinsky 2021: 179, 188). She further argues:

> The dialectic of the 'I can' and the 'I cannot' is the phenomenological horizon of the social reproduction of capitalist societies. It is the medium through which the labouring classes individually and collectively experience the reproduction of their existence. (ibid: 187)

In capitalist societies "workers are expected to appear at their workplaces with *their capacities* fully intact" (ibid: 180, original emphasis), but to capacitate themselves individuals must work to overcome the pain which accompanies the experience of the *I cannot*. In this sense "[t]o suffer is to experience the incapacity to remove the object, which causes sensuous pain" (ibid: 187). Belinsky discusses how trans people, people of colour, women, disabled people and other marginalised groups face more difficulties in transforming the incapacitating conditions they experience in their daily lives due to forms of structural discrimination like limited access to health care providers (cf. ibid: 193). In short, reproductive work – necessary to transform the experience of *I cannot* into *I can* – is more difficult for some people than for others.

1.3 Spaces, Bodies, Others: Affective Conditions of Capacitating Oneself and Others

I argue that the dimensions of reproductive work and the conditions, which enable and disenable individuals to reproduce their existence are connected to the constitutions of bodies, objects and spaces. Being dis/enabled to capacitate oneself is connected to how bodies can/not move, which spaces they can/not access, which other bodies are close to them and which objects they can/not reach. I argue that the experiences of *I can* and *I cannot* can be understood analogously to how Ahmed considers that some places extend specific bodies and not others. In this sense experiences of capacitation and incapacitation are connected to specific relations between bodies, spaces and objects. These relations are affective: Belinsky considers the experience of *I cannot* to be an experience of pain and Ahmed remarks that "it is through the flow of sensations and feelings that become conscious as pain and pleasure that different surfaces are established" (Ahmed 2014 [2004]: 24). Experienced and enacted embodiment is thus shaped and guided by affects which come to materialise *in* the body and *as* its skin. We need to "unlearn the assumption that the skin is simply already there, and begin to think of the skin as a surface that is felt only in the event of being 'impressed upon' in the encounters we have with others" (ibid: 25). The antagonistic character of social reproduction in capitalist society and the pain

we feel in the experience of *I cannot* unfolds as our skin. It is the bodily manifestation of our inability to reproduce ourselves in capitalist society without selling our labour since the means of reproduction do not belong to us (cf. Lewis 2022 [2016]: xi).

2. Body Shapes in Affective Relations

I will now interweave this perspective with an analysis of a narrative interview I conducted with Amira.[1] As I follow the remarks Ahmed made about taking into consideration the histories of how someone arrives at a certain place, I will trace the different narrative elements Amira told me about herself and the relationship to her body. I understand *bodies* as being physical, historical and social at the same time, rejecting essentialist notions about their characteristics. As Ahmed writes, bodily surfaces are constituted by engaging with the world. The shape of a body varies socially and historically. How individuals feel and see their bodies is mediated through social discourses and images and their personal histories of contacts (cf. Haraway 1994; Morris 2004; Ahmed 2006; Preciado 2016; Haddow 2021).

2.1 Between the Maghreb, France and Germany: Amira's Life Story

My interview with Amira was conducted in early spring 2022. I started the interview by asking her if she could tell me how she felt in her body throughout her life. This evoked a narration of Amira's life story with recurring references to her body. Amira grew up in a small village in France. She speaks French, Arabic, English and some German; the interview was conducted in English. Amira is a qualified engineer. She moved to a large city in France for her master's degree. Her parents are from the Maghreb and immigrated to France, both gaining advanced degrees and building successful careers. Amira has one sister and one brother. During her master's programme she came to realise she was attracted to women and met her first girlfriend, Sarah. She uses the term *gay* for self-identification. Amira was outed to her family by a friend of a cousin, who saw her and Sarah holding hands. Amira calls the events of this outing, leading to a fundamental break between her and her family, "the apocalypse" (Amira, personal communication, 19th March 2022). When Amira refused to

1 All names relating to the interview data have been changed.

break up with Sarah, her parents threatened and pressured her. Being scared, Amira chose to move back and forth between Germany, where Sarah lived, and France to finish her degree. She moved to Germany afterwards, then being in her mid-twenties. Later, Amira and Sarah moved in together and got married during the corona pandemic. They now live in a house they have bought. Amira was in her early thirties when we conducted the interview.

2.2 Medical Stigmatisation: The Emergence of a Felt Body Type

Right at the beginning of our interview Amira states that she had always felt she was "overweight" (ibid). This feeling seems to have been established by early medical records and examinations, which documented her body size as exceeding medical standards from the birth throughout her childhood and puberty. During the interview Amira repeatedly refers to herself as not fitting the norm in terms of body shape and size. She connects this to her desire "to defy expectations" (ibid). Pointing out that in society overweight people are not expected to be sporty. she explains her focus on practising taekwondo during her childhood and puberty, later developing a passion for weightlifting in her mid-twenties. Although Amira displayed pride about having had "the reputation of doing martial arts" (ibid) in school, her relationship to her body has been conflicted ever since she can remember: "I always felt kinda like you know this big, this big thing that you don't know what to do with yourself" (ibid). Her self-consciousness is formed by the medical norms she was exposed to. Although she pointed to their normative character, Amira struggles with the consequences these categorisations imply. As Sabrina Strings has argued in her Book *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (2019), "the phobia about fatness and the preference for thinness […] have been one way the body has been used to craft and legitimate race, sex, and class hierarchies" (ibid: 6). Strings analyses how fat-phobic discourses shifted over time. In the 18th century black people were increasingly characterised "as greedy eaters" (ibid: 84) and "[i]ndulging in food […] became evidence of actual low breeding" (ibid). Fat phobia is thus deeply entangled with racism and eugenics and the medical system engaged in the construction of these norms by connecting health to body sizes, shapes and skin colour. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century medical discourses shifted, focusing less on condemning black bodies and bodies of colour. Instead, discourses explicitly concentrated on the medicalisation of white bodies, serving as the desired norm (cf. ibid: 180). Amira is exposed to this norm of white women, which she will never be

able to attain. She is thus confronted with the experience of an *I cannot* which cannot easily be worked upon to remove the object of pain. This form of disenablement – being compared with a norm which is not even allegedly made to be reachable by her – did not remain outside Amira's body, but started to shape its contours early on. Amira felt the stigmatisation *in* her body, for example when she talks about how she doesn't want to be watched while training, because she is aware of the fat-phobic attitudes and gazes she is exposed to. Shame is thus the affective register structuring her perception of her body shape and she states she tried "to dodge thinking about my body, which was the obvious thing that was not correct with me" (Amira, personal communication, 19th March 2022).

2.3 Gender in Different Spaces

This 'dodging' worked until puberty, when people around Amira started dating: "I remember that yeah this is where I knew I felt ugly because, well, no one asked me out" (ibid). Although she did not even want to be asked out, she nevertheless felt the desire to relate to the other kids around her and mimicked their behaviour: "I remember that you know the girls were writing like the names of their boyfriend or of the boys they liked and I would just write a random name so because I didn't understand why I didn't feel that way" (ibid). Although she felt "indifferent to men" (ibid) Amira tried to be part of the practices she observed, but she didn't succeed. This experience led to reflections about gender and ethnicity: "It was always the same types of girls that had boyfriends, it's like the petite ones that already had boobs that were white" (ibid). Amira did not fit this profile: she was neither white nor petite. Additionally, she often wore masculine clothes and hung out with the boys, thus positioning herself in contrast to the girls described. On top of the medical institutions telling her that her body exceeded the norms, the dating experience made her feel she did not fit the norms for the dating game either. This led her to reflect on her gender identity and she went back and forth about "flirting with non-binarity" (ibid) but also wishing that "being strong and tall and bla, to not be gendered qualities" (ibid).

Whereas she wasn't able to share the dating experience in puberty and thus struggled to identify with her peers, fat phobia and gender stereotypes were not relevant in her family. Amira told me that she has never been fat shamed at home and body type and appearance weren't discussed. At the same time, she talked about having "had a vehemently egalitarian education" (ibid). Since

both her parents have successful careers and her father supported her mother so that she could go back to university to finish her degrees, Amira considers her parents somewhat feminist: "I don't know whether my parents were really activists in feminism, but I think they kind of are in a way" (ibid). Experiencing an egalitarian education meant for Amira not having been treated differently than her brother and engaging in the same tasks in the household.

It seems as if Amira experienced different allocations and expectations in the spaces she engaged with in her childhood and puberty: at home she felt accepted or at least her body and gender were not subject to conversation. At the doctor's, at school and with her peers she experienced gendered expectations about her body type and comportment, which left her struggling and developing a torn relationship to her body. Although Amira is conscious about the structural dimensions of the normative ideals she is confronted with, we can see how they access her body. The shaping of Amira's bodily surface can be understood as a mixture of normative notions and standards she felt exposed to at the doctor's and at school combined with the egalitarian and unbothered attitude in her family. These traces unfold as her skin. Depending on the spaces she encounters her skin shows marks of irritation or a feeling of belonging. Whereas she is confronted with the experience of *I cannot* in her dating experience and her medical appointments, her family offers her an opportunity to reinstate her capacities by performing all the tasks she wants to and wearing the clothes she likes.

2.4 Loss of the Family and Racist Encounters: Body without Space

This changes when Amira comes to realise she is attracted to women after moving far away from her family's home to a big city to study. After being outed to her family she is pressured and threatened to make her break up with her girlfriend Sarah. Amira lives through pain, grieve and fear, not knowing if her family might come to take her back to their home with them, disenabling her from seeing Sarah. The pain of this disruption seemed to be still present at the time of the interview. Amira was crying, trying to make sense of why her family abandoned her. Especially because she had always experienced them as being liberal due to the education and uprising she experienced, it is difficult for her to grasp the rejection she now undergoes. Amira does not think of her parents as homophobic, but believes that they are punishing her for not fulfilling their expectations: "It's because I didn't listen and when you don't listen it's a social suicide" (Amira, personal communication, 19th March 2022). She went on to

tell me that in her culture "the opinion of the group is more important than the individual" (ibid). Salima Amari has shown in her research on lesbians of Maghrebi origin in France that they developed a "strategy for living their affective and sexual life without taking the risk of losing the familial space"[2] (Amari 2013: 218), in order to respond to the felt pressure of their families. This strategy consists of not talking about their sexuality and even denying homo- or bisexuality when it comes to confrontations. Amira seems to be aware of this possibility. She talked about how it was possible to be gay in her culture when people don't talk about it, but she decided not to participate in this strategy of denial. We can thus see that through the rupture with her family – formerly a space where she was able to recharge her capacities and to transform experiences of *I cannot* into *I can* – she was then confronted with a huge disruption, stripping her of a place of belonging and care.

As the rupture with her family caused loss and trauma, Amira tried to find support elsewhere, reaching out to white queer spaces as well as to a white therapist. In both places she was confronted with racial stereotypes about Muslims and their alleged views on gender and sexuality. While she was suffering, white queer spaces and the white healthcare system failed to support her. Even worse, they confronted her with racism, putting her in the position of defending her family. Amira felt as if she "didn't even exist" (Amira, personal communication, 19th March 2022). Once again, she did not fit the expectations and concepts of white hegemonic culture. She emphasised that she

> suffered more from racism than homophobia because at least when I get back home at my parents', people are looking like me they have the same cultural reference. Also they don't question the very existence of racism because they are also suffering from it. (ibid)

Amira was not only losing an important place where she received acceptance and care and had the opportunity to mirror herself in the bodies around her, she was also confronted with white spaces not extending her body, disenabling her from existing in them, leaving her with no space to reside in. This led to a phase of Amira's life in which she described herself as "suicidal" (ibid). Amira told me about how she thought about ending her life but was prevented to do so by Sarah who texted her in the right moment. As I have argued, spaces and bodies co-constitute each other and Amira's story shows how her body nearly

2 Translation made by the author.

faded into nonexistence when she lost the space she resided in and was prevented from finding new ones. Her story poses questions about whether bodies can exist without spaces and, in capitalist society, this means spaces of care. Being suicidal must be considered the core of not being able to reproduce one's existence, of not being able to remove the object of pain, where instead the terminating of life itself seems like the only option to escape the incapacitating conditions which render life unliveable.

2.5 Loving and Lifting: New Body Shapes

The trauma and loss Amira experienced accounts for the dark sides of what she lived through while discovering she was gay, meeting her partner and finishing her studies. At the same time these new encounters also allowed her to address herself and her body in new ways and experience love and care directly linked to her body and body shape. While Amira realised she was attracted to women she discovered:

> I want women to be attracted to me in two ways: like in the most like beautiful in the quintessence of femininity that you can imagine in the world, like I want them to find me beautiful just like I want them to find me handsome. The way that they're attracted to men. (ibid)

Coming to terms with her sexuality also made her consolidate different longings concerning her gender identity, making room for what she considers feminine and masculine aspects of herself. She stresses that she wants women to like "those qualities about me I didn't like" (ibid) and finds these desires met in her relationship with Sarah. She tells me about how Sarah would touch her shoulders or her hair, calling her strong and beautiful. These touches reshape Amira's body. According to Amira it was also Sarah who kept her from committing suicide, providing love, care and support.

The reshaping of Amira's body is also enforced by her engaging in strength training: "I feel good when I work out, you know, I feel powerful, high on endorphins" (ibid). She goes on to tell me that she enjoys to touch her shoulders and feel her own strength (cf. ibid). We can see how these feelings concerning her body emerge in new ways of contact, with Sarah as her partner and objects like weight machines enabling Amira to feel herself differently. Instead of the *I cannot* that accompanied her experience in the medical system, at school and later also with her family and in white spaces, she experiences new possibilities,

feelings of power and strength. Amira's descriptions of her relationship with Sarah and her relationship to lifting provide an account of how her body comes into a different shape in these relations. Her body, which had been shaped by hegemonic white health and gender discourses, which produced shame, now comes to be felt by her differently: Her broad shoulders in contact with Sarah and lifting weights become strong, and in the way Sarah looks at her, expressing her attraction, Amira feels beautiful.

3. Conclusion: Creating Spaces of Care and Belonging

As I have argued with references to Ahmed and Belinsky, questions of social reproduction and care work come to matter as bodily surfaces and are felt as one's own skin. My analysis of Amira's life story and her history of contacts emphasises that individuals not only experience enabling and disenabling conditions as residing outside of themselves, but that these conditions shape their bodies and are felt in the body. The structural dimensions of the disenabling conditions that Amira was and is experiencing disappear as outside relations and become manifest in her body and as her skin instead. When she met Sarah, Amira's ways of relating to herself and to others started to change. Yet, this also cut her off from spaces in which she felt safe and familiar. While she was able to relate to herself in new ways, transforming her bodily experience from *I cannot* into *I can* by receiving affirming care from her partner and through the practice of strength training, she lost access to her family – a space which no longer extended her body. In her marriage with Sarah, Amira built a new space of love, care and belonging. As I said in the beginning of this article, Amira's life story and bodily becoming does not seem to lend itself in an obvious way to a Marxist perspective. She is not a factory worker of the kind Marx might have pictured at the time of his writings, but has a secure and well-paid job, owns a house and is married. She also did not mention being politically organised, when the interview was conducted. And yet Amira's story and the different shapes of her body are political. They tell a story of surviving in incapacitating circumstances in capitalist society, where the "heterosexual family is one of the central circuits of social reproduction" (Belinsky 2021: 193).

It is important to notice what Amira's story tells us about social reproduction, which concerns the realms of care and love. In her intimate relationship she was able to find the resources to stay alive and reproduce her own existence. By building a marriage, buying a house and pets, Sarah and Amira con-

stituted a space where these resources would flourish, where they could care and watch out for each other. This might remind us at once of the many ways in which romantic relationships are political. In the case of Amira it could provide what she needed to survive. Needless to say, marital and private spaces of social reproduction are important sites of the reproduction of capitalist social relations: "What capitalism relies on is the unpaid reproduction and maintenance of its workforce." (Lewis 2022 [2016]: 116) Amira's attempts to reach out for support elsewhere failed and the white queer groups as well as the white therapist proved to be spaces which reproduced their own whiteness by revoking Amira's experience, disenabling her to reside in them. This shows exactly how individuals who face marginalisation in multiple ways have limited access to the health care system and community services. It should be a reminder that whether individuals are able to politically organise and find spaces in which they can support one another and fight together is highly dependent on the spaces we create and the bodies who gather inside them. It is often stressed that trans and queer people form support networks and provide the care for each other that they are refused by the medical system. Amira's story shows how we must reflect on which bodies are extended by these networks and which are not.

A queer phenomenological perspective enriched with thinking about social reproduction and care work can help to understand how individuals experience the contradictory character of social reproduction in capitalism in and also as their own bodies. Capitalism needs labouring bodies, it needs us to reappear at our workplace every day, rested and in the state of *I can*, and yet it constantly shortens public resources for social reproduction in order to increase surplus value (cf. Raha 2021: 92). My analysis shows that we cannot idealise spaces of care as places of resistance, because they are essential to the reproduction of capitalist society, but that stories like those of Amira are stories of individual survival under capitalist conditions. These conditions differ among labouring individuals, as different aspects of discrimination and marginalisation intersect and produce specific experiences. We need to carefully analyse them and pay attention to the details if we want to get the complete picture of how contemporary capitalism is lived and experienced by its different participants.

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