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Fahrid's insect world

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This article explores the subaltern corporeality of one of the many immigrants who are repopulating the city of Berlin. The ethnographer starts writing in the middle of the urban crowd, finding it almost impossible to write on the occurring phenomena due to the ephemeral conditions. Hanging out in the busy and heavily commercial Europa Center, the ethnographer meets Fahrid, an Algerian man who is seated quietly and bended forward. The generous and patient writing on such an apparently odd and absurd physical posture invades the thought of the ethnographer by revealing unexpected and often aberrant connections between Fahrid's body, the insects on the ground, the capitalist city and the practice of writing.

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1. The discovery of parasites

> *This description of someone watching minute creatures and reacting on a larger human scale hits upon the final theme that binds fire to attracted spectatorship, which lies in its excessive nature. 'The lesson taught by fire is clear' wrote Bachelard: 'After having gained all through skill, through love or through violence you must give up all, you must annihilate yourself*' (Moore 2000: 133).

It is Friday. I observe the Algerian man, patiently. Today, Fahrid is also sitting down, bent forward, facing the ground fixatedly. I observe his movements. He keeps his eyes open while facing the ground out of sheer curiosity. I cannot wait to see whether he keeps his eyes open or not while bent forward. I bend right down so that my ear is almost touching the ground. Fahrid's eyes are open. He is in deep concentration staring at the ground. I feel a strange tickling in my ear. I shake it and see a couple of ants walking restlessly over my hand. There is a big group of ants and other insects moving stressfully in all directions.

Finally! Hurray! How insensitive and clumsy of me! I realise now that all the sudden and apparently irrational bodily movements of Fahrid – while looking at the ground – have something to do with his close observation of the worms and insects moving around. Now, I watch him observing the insects. He does not care about me observing him. It is not worth finding a comfortable posture, since I have to keep my eyes very close to the ground in order to look into his face and eyes.

Moreover, I am continually fighting with the insects that start climbing up my body and on my notebook as a result of writing on the ground. I am aware of the way in which Fahrid and I are standing in the middle of a city square. This situation is quite awkward and strange; perhaps also alarming and embarrassing for the public.

Nevertheless, to my surprise, right in the middle of a hectic working day like this, it seems as if Fahrid and I are not being perceived. When I look around, the fact is that most people do not even wonder what we may be doing. I continue with this ethnographic writing.

For a while, we remain silent and stare at the stream of commerce workers, politicians, tourists and bureaucrats – walking through Kudamm square. '(laughs)... I think that bureaucrats and politicians are another type of ants and bees... because they work for the power... I do not know what sort of hell these insects work for...' With his finger, he points at the insects and compels me to observe them. Nothing we talk about seems to be as interesting and sense enhancing as observing the insects in their laborious and extremely singular endeavours. But returning to his comments, I wonder if states are not merely multi-faceted and homogenising institutions in which politicians *(bees)* and bureaucrats *(ants)* invest their insect-like potentials for change?

Surprisingly, Fahrid is willing to talk today and he is sitting up properly. He has shown me his infected back and has explained that he has been going to a clinic where his skin infection is being treated regularly. I am glad that his skin is getting better – indeed, it seems as if he is recovering some verticality, and with this more socially acceptable composure a more linguistically articulated being emerges. This reminds me of humanist thinkers such as Remo Bodei claiming – in defence of the Philosophy of Identity – that 'man without verticality is nothing but a maggot'. Indeed this may be the case and, I would add, a case with a full potential for affirmation and abjection – no matter how morally perverse and philosophically disturbing it may sound to such humanist ears.

The world of late capitalism was made flesh on Fahrid's skin. The undecipherable hyper-reality of domination is imprinted physically in the form of paradoxical pains and pleasures. In Fahrid's subjugated flesh, the fantasy and materiality of advertisements, the affect and technology of corporate logos, the paths of nerves and the circulation of money, finally coincide.

I can observe Fahrid pointing at the insects with his fingers. The expression on his face is of somebody who is completely absorbed in minute observation. He likes to laugh about the insects that he meets on the ground, even though his laughter frequently transforms into the bizarre face of somebody who is pleasantly disgusted. I ask him about all the insects on the ground around me. I feel like an island. He speaks about the insects that cross in front of his eyes everyday. His humour about insects is paradoxical; he refers to them as creatures that are disgusting, but at the same time exciting.

I am compelled to look at him with eyes similar to those with which he is looking at the insects. I wonder not only that I may becoming an entomologist – but since Fahrid is also becoming an insect with his intense, passionate and fascinated observation of the insects – whether I may be also becoming an insect. His sudden arm movements are physical drives that respond to the paradoxical excitement produced by the lonely insects, as well as the each-other-fighting insects and others-helping insects. My writing on the ground is flowing like an infested virus – the virus of the insects of the ground, the homeless-insect living in the city, the skin-insects or parasites of the Algerian homeless, the anthropologist-insect studying for the academy, and the bureaucratic, political and commercial insects injecting capitalist energy into one of the neo-liberal hearts – Europa Center – of the city.

This is somehow an atrocious and perhaps inevitable vision. Is not Fahrid himself a parasite scavenging capitalist society's leftovers and trash? Thus, is he not also an insect to a certain extent? And how do we reconcile this lifestyle with the humanist recovery of dignity? Fahrid embodies the condition of a post-human body. The parasites dwelling on his infected back-skin are neither part of him nor separate from him. They are blood-sucking creatures from which Fahrid cannot separate himself, yet at the same time he cannot fully integrate them into his personality. Fahrid cannot become cognisant of his skin parasites' alterity. Rather, just as Fahrid does in the capitalist Europa Center, the parasites dwelling in his skin insinuate themselves within him, as a new and uncontrollable alterity of his body. In fact, just as the stock-market broker superstitiously hands over 300 Marks to a sex worker called Natascha, Fahrid is passively invested by forces that he cannot recuperate as his own.

I stand up momentarily. The infected skin of the Algerian man is inhabited by parasites. This type of infection is well known by the homeless beggars that roam big cities like Berlin. They tend to live on trash and often have no access to minimal hygienic care. I realise that this is a multi-frame kaleidoscope in which the insect-paradigm (Haraway 1991) endlessly repeats itself, perhaps, like fractals, endlessly. These diverse and tiny worms and insects that follow extremely mysterious and enigmatic patterns on the ground constitute the first frame.

The Algerian man observes them: sometimes, he raises a finger, very slowly, and brings it close to the insects. He feels an incomprehensible attraction to crush one of them against the ground, but at the same time he resists performing this massacre in order to maintain a pleasurably paradoxical and abject intensity. The Algerian man remains with his finger up in the air and moves it closer to an insect for long and slow minutes. Within this dimension of dead time, Fahrid occasionally points to an insect, as if it was – sadistically – the *'chosen'* one for his God-like one finger execution, and follows its trajectory on the ground. He acknowledges that he enjoys feeling like *'God'* in such instances, even though what really turns him on is the randomness of not knowing which insect his finger will sacrifice…

Returning to the issue of the multiplicity of frames, I would like to locate the Algerian man in the second frame. Fahrid often displays a physicality and set of movements that have more in common with the world of worms and cockroaches than this other strange world of human beings. In the third frame, there is the excessive and irreducible materiality of his infected back inhabited by parasites, endlessly and disturbingly sucking blood from his veins and dwelling on the traces, marks, depressions and scars of his wounded skin. In the fourth frame, I would place myself, as the ethnographer – quite close to an entomologist in this case – sucking information from the unsettling life of Fahrid in order to preserve the sustenance for my own academic self.

And in the fifth frame, more through the bodily materiality of the Algerian man than his or my eyes, I am compelled to suggest that the ever-present capitalist and commercial impulse of Kudamm square and the Europa Center resembles a war universe, that is the insect paradigm associated with a western world of pragmatic rationalism. Throughout these frames, from the extremely dynamic and insensate insects moving on the surface, to the office and commercial workers walking between the buildings of multinationals, everything occurs in a cruelly parasitic atmosphere, where insect parasites as well as human parasites feed on various organiscist structures.

Every now and then, Fahrid wounds a worm and observes it closely and obsessively. He claims that 'I want to take it to my mouth, but I do not feel like it'. The furthest he has got, up to this point, is to caress his own teeth with the fresh trembling flesh of a squashed worm. My writing, like the skin parasites of Fahrid, is inhabited not just by the insects on the ground that tirelessly attempt to occupy the white pages of my notebook, but also by the skin of Fahrid's painful back, my own insect-like ethnographic endeavour and the capitalist city-vein, in which he and I are standing as two distinct parasites.

The insect world on the floor is in fact a war universe, not so different from the world open to the eyes moving hectically over the infected skin of the Algerian man. A Bosnian lady that hangs around attracts the attention of pedestrians by pointing to Fahrid's terrible and visible skin in order to dramatise sensationally her need of money. The Bosnian lady and Fahrid do not know each other at all. She seems today more desperate in her begging than usual. Fahrid does not realise any of this. He continues seated, bent forward, facing the ground, living alongside the insects. Every now and then, he scratches the skin of his belly. By the sound of it, I believe it must also be infected. I give some money to the Bosnian lady.

Observing the seemingly insignificant particularity of Fahrid, almost accidentally, my writing has moved from singularities without identity to insect-like urban multiplicities – the homeless, the anthropologist, the office worker and the politician – without having to invest it into overarching structures. I must acknowledge that the minute and literal observation of Fahrid has captured my attention fiercely. His patience in observing the tiniest activities and unpredictable miniscule moves of the insects is astonishing. In fact, I find Fahrid's world not only inspirational but also instructive for my work.

Paying attention to his patient and wise observation of the insect world on the ground provides an invaluable method that I could pursue in this ethnography of body and passions. Moreover, as an ethnographer disciplined in modern hermeneutics, I tend to draw attention to issues such as cultural structures, identities, symbolic articulations and gender. Unfortunately, such an orientation toward abstract categories and academic formulations on human life often ignores exteriority and pays little attention to the most obvious physical and material dimensions. The almost obsessive observation of Fahrid somehow teaches me to move my own ethnographic production from the conceptual – and supposedly invisible – to the corporeal – and thus, often excessively visible and palpable.

For an anthropologist interested in the sensations and drives of the body, I find the minute observation of entomologists more revealing than the work of all too often disembodied anthropologies. In fact, as an ethnographer of passions and the body, I am not interested in fixed identities or entities, but rather in reappearing passionate patterns and dramatic corporeal events. If the methodology I employ is multi-sited, this is not about bringing all my ethnographic material into a truth claim of a higher unity. I allow my writing to be affected by the diverse and shifting experiences of particulars.

Defining identities, situating corporeal experiences and contextualising them is often a way for the anthropologist to maintain an Archimedean position of total understanding and control, since any anthropological study – including this one – is unable to incorporate the many complex aspects affecting cultural as well as non-cultural phenomena. Thus, instead of building up a hierarchical text shifting from the

singular to the general, I have practiced the *paralogical* strategy proposed by Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984). I have moved from the specific to the paradigmatic in a discontinuous and radical fashion, in such a way that potential generalities continuously break down; furthermore, and surprisingly, often the singular, particular, insignificant and exceptional embodiments of affections are highlighted through this form of heterodox ethnographic practice.

2. An unavowable metamorphosis

I return to Kudamm square. It is a cloudy day. It is Tuesday. There are fewer tourists here now compared to when I came here before. The square is veiled by a heavy sheet of rapidly moving grey clouds. The movement of the clouds, perpetually changing and obeying patterns that cannot be anticipated or prescribed, reminds me of Fahrid's insects. I look around and find the Algerian man seated in the usual place. Today he is not bent forward. Fahrid has his legs crossed. I have a conversation with him about insects.

He insists on the overwhelming capacity of insects to move from the larval to the mature state, to be involved in transmutations. According to Fahrid's observations, there are different phases in the life cycle of a worm. Indeed, his fascination with such an affirmation of the minute and infinite changes of insects is such that he is not able to claim clearly how many phases can be distinguished in their lives. 'They can change so rapidly... it is incredible... they can adapt themselves to the surrounding very rapidly... (humourously) I am very slow compared to them... they do not remember anything... they are very busy doing what they are doing... they are so full of life...'

An insect's capacity for change through short reproductive cycles, which so fascinates Fahrid, cannot occur in the same radical way in his own emaciated body. Radical change or innovation – even in an abject form – is more difficult for humans. Furthermore, he also admires the fact that 'they (insects) do not remember anything'. Fahrid evokes the fact that he, a mammal, tends to sediment and accumulate furniture full of memories and often highly complex psychologies. Indeed, such an evocation is also proper to my own case; as a *homo academicus*, I have been trained in different anthropological traditions as well as critical reflections. To a large extent – and until this ethnographic work – these have constituted a rational set of memories that kept me from disrupting the control of identities, that is, from going beyond the tyranny of the normal.

'Not a thing of the past is remembered by a cockroach… he does not know that he was a maggot once'. Probably as the result of a background in left-wing humanist anthropology, when I first heard this I found such a claim uncomfortable. In fact, the unquestionable and orthodox leftist idea that forgetting the past is politically dangerous almost prevented me from appreciating the virtue of Nietzsche's *'active forgetting'* – a virtue which, of course, insects practice. In fact, here Fahrid's creative and radical singularity without identity might be conceived as a trans-cultural, insect-like practice. Could it be that the hybrid mutation of his Algerian identity or my own Basque identity in Berlin – both as a result of trans-cultural shock – is far from being ethnic or fixed?

And consider the vampirism, parasitism, the different sucking of living labour and cancerous simulation practiced in the five frames posed previously: the insect, the

Algerian tramp, the infected skin's parasites, the anthropologist, the urban worker and the corporate multinational in the metropolis. This powerful vision pushes my writing to consider – aided by the resonance of contemporary biology – that sexual reproduction may potentially have more to do with the practices of a virus than with the sentimentally male-engendered, trans-generational essence of life. In fact, it is highly likely that sexual (as well as identity) reproduction has more to do with the viral than the vital (Pearson 1997). And, if our own reproducing bodies are viral, is it too unreasonable to claim that, as the singularity of the Algerian man suggests, the insect condition of bodies throughout the frames posed above is acted upon and impels something previously unknown to life; namely, from the outside? Is this something unknown to life, this strange sensation of being affected, or this immanent and convulsive *outside* complete non-sense?

The abject and corrosive materiality of insects running around on the ground may – in fact – be a revealing image to understand the experience of trans-cultural shock in an urban environment. Such trans-cultural phenomena are indeed epitomised by the particularity of Fahrid, since his own body – reminiscent of Kafka's *Metamorphosis* or The Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper Lonely Heart Club Band* – is more open to the metamorphosis than that of the concept fetishising dialectician anthropologist. Nowadays the trans-cultural shock advocated by David McDougall might also be mobilised in the frame of this insect paradigm. But what do I know about the enigmatic world of insects? Observing them, I am impressed by the multiple and radically singular becomings which they experience in relatively short periods of time. And I would hazard a guess that I might not be careful enough to perceive the intensity of such quotidian brightness and singular worlds that also occurs in our own flesh.

Fahrid has squashed a worm. He has been staring at the atrophied, aberrant and formless shape of the wounded worm for more than an hour now. He tells me that he feels an attraction to touch foul matter and even to eat it. Nonetheless, simultaneously, he also feels repelled and disgusted by the smashed insect. Fahrid continuously refers to this ambivalence, without being able to articulate it clearly; while talking about it, he laughs, shakes his body and shouts spontaneously. He oscillates through various emotional intensities. He is slightly tired, amused, bored and excited again. Have we, so called human beings, perhaps beyond our own common memory, been partial embodiments of a larger *insect* network?

3. Mind the gap

It was a Saturday evening and Berlin was beginning to be swallowed by the night. I was returning home after having spent the afternoon with a group of tourists on a guided tour. I took the underground at the Zoologisches Garden. The pedestrian traffic going down and coming out of the underground was busy and hectic. While many individuals seemed to be returning home after work, there were also some young people who were dressed up and clearly ready to go out.

In the underground train, nobody could really move. It was extremely packed. The passengers seemed to avoid the looks of other strangers, and whoever was travelling with someone else reduced his or her human sensorium to the circle of the known. Some passengers were staring into the darkness of the tunnel; others seemed to pay attention to the underground map, while others looked curiously at the shoes or

trousers of other passengers. Nobody was willing to look into anyone else's eyes, perhaps because they feared losing a certain sense of privacy in a place that has none.

The train stopped. I was standing up. A number of passengers stepped out of the train and some others jumped on. Everything seemed to be as expected in the stillness of the underground when, all of a sudden, a complaining voice could be heard coming from the silent, static and packed crowd. For a moment, the male voice vociferating unintelligible groans seemed to be familiar, but I let that thought go by.

I craned my neck and tried to see what was going on. It was Fahrid, creeping along the floor. Passengers stepped away from him looking sideways. I could not move and did not have the courage to approach him and give him my hand. I carried on staring sideways like the rest of the passengers. The gangrene on his right knee was visible. It was infested and full of pus. By the faces of those passengers standing next to him, it was noticeable that Fahrid's body gave off an unpleasant odour.

Fahrid, defying the bipedal world, kept crawling along with an open hand begging for money. He used his other arm to help himself move on. He kept creeping along and begging for money. No one seemed to be willing to give him any though; somehow the tight, breathless atmosphere was too disturbing for the passengers to make any sort of contact with him. In fact, the passengers did not speak; most of them ignored his presence and a few looked at him with a mixed expression of compassion and disgust. Fahrid stepped out in front of a well-dressed young man who looked as if he was ready for a Saturday night out. The young man, who was sitting down, stared at him disdainfully with an air of superiority.

The young man seemed to belong to the German middle class. This was even more obvious when he began to swear. Even though Fahrid was not physically disturbing the young man, he began to raise his feet from the floor as if he felt harassed by the very sight of the beggar's gangrene. When Fahrid realised that the young man was looking at him scornfully, disapproving of his completely inhuman behaviour, he picked up the half broken ball of a strawberry lollipop from the floor and threw it into the well-dressed passenger's lap. Immediately the young man, trying to get rid of the filthy sweet that had fallen between his legs, shook his whole body urgently.

Pathetically, the unwanted, miserable and viscous lollipop residue fell onto the middle of the seat where the young man had been sitting. The young man, frustrated and desperate, extended the shirtsleeves of his velvet jacket and with one sudden swipe, was able to deposit the unwanted piece of lollipop on the floor. It then disappeared between the legs of the mesmerised passengers. It is striking how easily a sticky lollipop which is normally so adored by children falls into the dimension of the filthy and unwanted. This is an extremely fragile passage.

Afterwards, the young man, who had long, lank hair, together with a long face and nose as well as a tall, slim dandy-like body, sat down again yet did not stop insulting Fahrid while the latter kept creeping forward. The young man, humiliated, claimed with an inquisitive tone in his voice: 'You piece of shit, you scum bag… fucking shit…' Finally, the young man spat at Fahrid. Nobody said or did anything. Fahrid, disgusted and resentful kept crawling all the way to the closest exit door of the underground. Passengers moved sideways so that he could keep creeping along. He still had his right hand extended, while carrying the gangrenous leg in front. In the next underground station he must have stepped out of the carriage as I could no longer see him. Like the filthy lollipop, he might well have been devoured by the pedestrians that kept coming in and out of the train.

The question I have tried to raise through experimental writing is the following: how can one work with the violent gap between Fahrid and the civilisation of Berlin in ways that are irreducible and epistemologically challenging? Let me point out that Fahrid reiterates the centrality of *outsiders* to the construction of the Potsdamer Platz, and ultimately, Europe. I am afraid that the *pointillist* method I have employed does not really solve the problem of anthropological distance. Nevertheless, it does perform an epistemological irreverence by taking seriously the working methods proposed by Artaud, Benjamin, Kracauer and Vertov and making them operational.

This sort of experimental practice may be perceived as scandalous for it does not seek to communicate balanced and politically responsible accounts. The corporeal ethnography advocated here is not content with discursive resolutions that do not take account of the positions from which such predicaments are formulated. Furthermore, it advocates a 'speaking out' of one's own epistemological errors and failures, by taking its unpredictable consequences seriously. Indeed, I would contend that such experimental sensibility attuned to the unpredictable advent of alterities, displays challenging forms of ethnographic practice in which even the position of the seemingly stable anthropologist may be irremediably displaced.

Let me state the epistemological contribution of this experiment to the discipline of anthropology. This corporeal experiment, which cuts across various disciplines such as painting, film and literature, is transversal; it uses the forces of singularity and chance, to make a statement against objectifying academic practices that often reduce particulars to generals and insert bizarre instances into structural frames. It is a form of exploratory writing that attempts to place in a contextual foreground the affective and visceral responses of individuals, as a contrast to some anthropologists' overriding concern with meaning, ideology and form. I have discussed a myriad of vivid corporeal reactions stemming from fear and desire, pleasure and disgust, as well as the shame and fascination that fin-de-millennium Berlin arouses. In particular, I have often evoked pre-subjective responses when exploring the lives of highly diverse individuals.

Moreover, I have stressed that such assaying experiences do also involve a form of politics, namely by arguing that power works in the flesh perhaps more incisively than on the level of representation, ideology and discourse. This style of writing approaches the corporeal realm of experience in a way in which the personal and the political are intertwined. The embracing of excess, singularity and fragmentary traces has been undertaken precisely to avoid the appearances of objectivity and universality. In this sense, I follow Foucault's injunction (1983) that the orders of domination in society are not structural preconditions, but instead the empirical effects of a multiple and changing field of force relations like those discussed above. This analysis of modern society's disciplinary mechanism also underlines the point that desire cannot be merely referred to as a consequence of lack or need; and that power relations cannot be reduced to totalising discourses.

Irreversibly, my own subjectivity engaged with this subaltern process in ways which, although at times I was able to reflect upon the process to some extent, ultimately has probably remained beyond my grasp. In fact, as an anthropologist, I was often too deeply implicated in the corporeal experiences of the individuals whom I wrote about, and at times too embarrassed by my complicity or subordination to them to give a full and balanced account. Any sort of theoretical generalisation or political legitimation thus risked falling into the trap of a 'perilous' gratification in which the Others could

be easily placed in an unwanted position. I have, though, tried to retain this epistemological tension or irreducible ambivalence.

Contemplating the extreme figure of Fahrid sensitises us to the public spaces and irreducible distances of the city that have been opened up with the construction of the Potsdamer Platz in the last decade. The panoramic view of the pyramids seem to deploy the possibility of staring at the city from above, almost in a panoptic fashion. Nevertheless, by traversing and exploring specific predicaments of various public spaces and particular affective intensities such as Fahrid's, the distance opened up by these new pyramids has unavoidably become a sacrificial potlatch and a work of fire. By the time Fahrid's body has invaded ours, the pyramids attempting to establish a new order of civility have turned out to be yet another treacherous path within the labyrinth.

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