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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Weight, relief and overcoming: a safe space for racialized women learning to swim in Sweden

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to contribute to the nascent field of critical phenomenology in geography by elaborating on a feminist-phenomenological understanding of the conceptual binary of weight-relief and Nietzsche's (self)overcoming. These notions provide a theoretical language for the universality of the human condition, transcending the tendency for theoretical-political reification of marginalized subjects' lives and agencies. The empirical component consists of in-depth interviews with predominantly non-white, immigrant women who have either learned or taught other adult women to swim in a women-only swimming school founded in the multicultural suburb of Fisksätra, Stockholm, Sweden. By historicizing and contextualizing this setting, it is argued that the lack of swimming ability in Sweden (and elsewhere) is today a partly racialized phenomenon, where this deficiency constitutes a socio-phenomenological weight in individuals' everyday geographies. What this gender-exclusionary space enables, in its quality as a 'safe space', is not so much the integration or securing of minority identities as the possibility to overcome one's own fears and bodily challenges regarding water through shared experiences of safety, convivial solidarity and the joyful pleasures of being-in-water together.

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Introduction

I think when people see me, they think I cannot swim. Just because I'm an immigrant, a woman, I have a veil, y'know. And they don't even know if I can speak Swedish or not, those who pass me by.

This is what a middle-aged woman told me, recounting one summer's day when she followed her son to a beach in the Stockholm area. On this occasion, she did not feel like swimming, so she was sitting on the shore waiting for him. She felt how others looked at her with, what she identified as, pity. Namely, she was not white, had a Muslim veil, and did not participate in aquatic activities. Accordingly, to common prejudices, she should not be able to swim. In Sweden, this is no small matter, as swimming ability during the last century has evolved from being a novelty for the commoners into a commonsensical part of *being* a Swedish resident (Johansson 2011). Namely, our woman on the shore had reasons for feeling doubly stigmatized: not only racialized as Other due to her visual appearance but also Other for her misplacedness as supposedly not being able to swim. What probably no one suspected, however, was that she actually was a licenced swim teacher.

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Moreover, she had learned to swim only months before receiving her licence, through a women-only swimming school she had founded with neighbours of various ethnic, national and religious belongings.

This article engages with the story of how this school was formed in the multicultural suburb of Fisksåtra (Stockholm), and how it provided a safe space (Burtscher and Britton 2022; Roestone Collective 2014; Spaaij and Schulenkorf 2014) for adult non-white women with non-European heritage to learn how to swim. Its empirics consists of in-depth interviews with women who were members of *Nacka Simsällskap* (NSS) – the (mixed-gender) swimming association running the school – and who have learned and/or taught other women to swim. Based on their stated experiences, the theoretical argument dismisses these women’s collective desire to learn to swim as merely an expression of assimilation or integration into the dominant ‘culture’. Epitomized by the opening quote’s testimony, learning to swim does not automatically make one feel (or be treated) as more ‘culturally’ belonging (Lennis, Agergaard, and Evans 2020). However, this safe space was not formed as a ‘resistance’ against monoculture either. Instead, I rely on and expand the notion of a socio-material binary of weight (*tyngd*) versus relief (*avlastning*, or *lättnad*) from Scandinavian urban and mobility researchers (Friberg, Brusman, and Nilsson 2004; Lagerqvist 2019; Østerberg 2000). While previous research on social practices in swimming pools tends to apply Foucauldian theories on the powers of surveillance, disciplining and technologies of the self (e.g. McMahon and Penney 2013; Scott 2009), I put this binary in dialogue with the new wave of feminist phenomenology (Bortolan 2020; Heinämaa 2021; Heinämaa and Jardine 2021) to explain how these women, situated in the early 2000s Sweden as Othered, learn to swim as an embodied and existential relief from various weights of their everyday geographies.

By articulating weight–relief as embodied sensations in spatio-temporal settings permeated by social differences and hierarchies, this study contributes to the nascent field of critical phenomenology in geography (Simonsen and Koefoed 2020), which seeks ‘to illuminate how bodies, objects, spaces, and intersubjective worlds are (unevenly and differentially) composed’ (Kinkaid 2021, 301). Critical phenomenology aims to reintroduce the phenomenological tradition to geography without repeating the subjectivism of humanistic geography or the relativisms of postphenomenology (including object-oriented ontologies and new materialisms). Simonsen and Koefoed (2020, 8, 10) define critical phenomenology as ‘a critical theory that emphasizes experience’ and ‘a phenomenology sensitive to difference [and] involves a politics that emphasizes coexistence’, while Hepach and Kinkaid (2024, 7, original emphasis) highlights the *critical* aspect of this branch of phenomenological geography as addressing.

the perspective of *specific, historically and socially situated bodies*. Beginning from these locations, critical phenomenologists seek to make broader arguments about the social and spatial formations that produce the world and our experience of it as stratified or “differentiated.”

Not being able to swim constitutes a weight in a society where one is supposed to enjoy aquatic leisure in public, and becomes extra weighting with the intersectional layers of gender, race and class positionalities. From this perspective, it is concluded that what this gender-exclusionary space enables as a ‘safe space’ is not so much the securing or negotiating of minority identities (Lennis, Agergaard, and Evans 2020; Rana 2017; Shavit and Wiesenbach 2012) as the possibility to *overcome* (Monahan 2007; Nietzsche 1968) one’s own corporeal and mental limitations and fears regarding water through shared experiences of safety, convivial solidarity and the joyful pleasures of being-in-water together. By and large, this safe space’s utility is to be found in its provision of social and phenomenological relief. In this way, I hope this article contributes to further studies in human geography and other disciplines on how the concepts of weight–relief and (self)overcoming might help us better understand how subjects experience and handle their life situations within their socio-material facticities at hand. Moreover, it aims to provide a contemporary theoretical language for the universality of the human condition, which defies the tendency for theoretical-political reification of disadvantaged subjects’ lives and agencies (Kapoor and Zalloua 2021). Such

universality is nonetheless always mediated through particular historical-geographical situatedness, why I also historicize the intersectional experiences through secondary literature on world history and contemporary racialization (Wiltse 2007; Johansson 2011; Irwin et al. 2011; Willcox-Pidgeon et al. 2020; Carr 2022) of swimming.

Weight and relief with feminist phenomenology

The binary weight–relief was originally introduced by urban sociologist Dag Østerberg (2000, 30–32) as a more dynamic replacement to mobility studies’ constraint–enablement. He was inspired by Sartre’s (2022) philosophy of ‘the situation’ as constituting a dialectic between the subject’s freedom and the situation’s facticity: when the subject faces facticities like sickness, tiredness, or oppression, these constitute restrictions upon the subject’s freedom. The facticity puts *weight* upon the subject, its undoing is a *relief*. While Friberg, Brusman, and Nilsson (2004) added a feminist perspective to explain how physical infrastructure influences gendered everyday mobilities, Lagerqvist (2019, 284) advocates the pair’s utility for place studies as it grasps how places’ material and immaterial characteristics ‘can be experienced as putting weight onto and limiting everyday life and as helping, freeing, and relieving it’. Indeed, these concepts’ intuitive meanings *and* fluidity enable them to address subjects’ sensations of being-in-the-world that can simultaneously imply physical, corporeal, social and emotional dimensions. Of course, the binary also works particularly well to describe sensations of aquatic immersion. To float makes your body relieved from gravity as it becomes almost weightless; to not be able to float turns your body into a sinking weight. To learn to swim thus makes both body, water and body-in-water turn from a weight into a relief. Furthermore, these corporeal senses of relief and weight appear, in our empirical context, to be interconnected with existential senses of weight–relief regarding one’s own being in its *social* world. It is for this double intersection between mind–body on the one hand, and individual–social on the other, that I read the binary through feminist (transcendental and existential) phenomenology to better grasp the sensation of learning to swim as an adult, non-white, (most likely) immigrant woman in contemporary Sweden.

While Iris Marion Young’s (1990) fusion of existentialist-phenomenology with pragmatism and social theory was a seminal contribution to feminist phenomenology, such fusions tended to dilute phenomenology itself into ‘any philosophical or human scientific discourse on experience’ (Heinämaa and Rodemeyer 2010, 4). Many feminist phenomenologists have therefore (re)turned to the ontology’s origins, even back to the (non-feminist) philosophy of Edmund Husserl, to evolve analyses of embodied constitution. In order to explicate the experience of sexual difference and concretize gendered constitutions beyond crude categorical dichotomies, ‘these scholars believe more in the letter of Husserl’s program of a rigorous, unprejudiced science than what can be seen in its execution in the tradition’ (Heinämaa and Rodemeyer 2010, 6) – indeed, de Beauvoir (1974) was indebted to Husserl’s distinction between ‘the living body’ (*Lieb*) and the body *qua* physical object (*Körper*). Instead of a simplifying dichotomy between manhood/subject as emphasis on *Lieb* and womanhood/object on *Körper*, contemporary feminist phenomenology understands the pair as ultimately the same constitution: the living body is always an object through which subjectivity comes into being. However, ‘for the completion and fullness of the living body’s ‘constitution, other subjects are needed’ (Heinämaa 2021, 254). Namely, renewed attention to Husserl’s texts has identified an *intersubjective* foundation for his transcendental cogito (cf. Husserl 1993). One could argue that the connection between individual and social origins of sensations are all to be found at an intersubjective level in the ‘pre-objectiveness’ of immediate sensations – in the layer before/beneath the egoic mineness of the living body (Heinämaa 2021, 244). This interpretation opens for phenomenological studies on the mediation between social forces and embodied experiences through socio-psychological phenomena (Heinämaa and Jardine 2021).

It is in this vein that I apply weight–relief to describe subjective sensations of both social and material externalities, and of one’s own living body placed in its particular social world. For the latter dimension, I borrow Ratcliffe’s (2020, 251) notion of *existential feeling*: a felt ‘sense of how one

finds oneself in the world as a whole' which conditions one's sense of possibilities. Bortolan (2020, 358) understands self-esteem as such a 'background affective orientation' for one's phenomenological being, as self-esteem structures the subjective sense of capacity. The crucial social aspect is that this affective background is 'pre-egoic' in its mediation of sensations – it is influenced by one's social lifeworld as a whole, including mediated sensations of patriarchy and racialization. For example, an overall existential feeling of weight would affect one's self-esteem negatively as one would find new challenges, such as learning to swim as an adult, too (phenomenologically) heavy. Being a racialized woman in Sweden would, in turn, make this challenge even more massive because of additional internalized weight stemming from intersectional social hierarchies. Components of this overarching weight upon one's self-esteem could be shame due to cultural stigmatization, anxiousness over risking exposure and embarrassment, and, of course, *fear*. Feminist geographies teach us that socialized fears have socio-spatial consequences by affecting individuals' mobility patterns and restricting accessibility to certain places (Valentine 1989), and fear of drowning might turn into an actual phobia of fearing proximity to deep and/or open water overall (Irwin et al. 2011, 563). Thus, while non-white Swedes might already sense hindrances to participation in outdoor aquatic activities due to fear of being Othered by their very physical presence, aquaphobia constitutes an additional racializing spatial obstacle. The relationship between Otherness and (non)swimming is, however, not unique to Sweden but runs throughout the history of swimming itself.

History and racialization of swimming

To historicize the skill, one needs to overlook the now commonplace moral reasons for teaching/learning swimming (to save lives, to promote health, and to enhance freedom of movement). Indeed, there is nothing 'natural' about human beings' ability to swim. Human creatures' erect backbones distinguish them as one of the few animals that do *not* instinctively swim when entering deep water (Carr 2022, 17). Instead, swimming for humans is a learned technique that must be acquired and passed down through generations (Andersson 2016). Furthermore, there is no inherent environmental connection between societies' hydrogeography, economy and swimming culture. Simply because communities have historically relied on fishing and/or navigating waters does not necessitate a 'need' to swim. For instance, at the turn of the last century, about a thousand drowned annually in Sweden – despite its abundant watercourses and fishing populations (Johansson 2011). Since it is rational to fear deep water in many situations, a logical means of avoiding drowning is to refrain from entering it. In other words, it is as human to swim as it is to fear water.

Throughout humankind's global history, swimming skills have been invented, crafted, forgotten and (re)discovered. Rather than being a sign of evolutionary heritage or civilizational progress, swimming has a contingent history through which it has served as a social distinguishing marker – both horizontally between society's members and non-members, and hierarchically between society's elite and commoners. Carr (2022, 7–8) explains: 'Swimming is well suited to the establishment of cultural identity: it is fairly difficult to learn, especially as an adult, and impossible to fake. As a shibboleth, swimming is very effective'. In the case of Euro-America's cultural history, swimming became 'rediscovered' as an art form not only through colonizers' encounters with swimming cultures but also amidst the Renaissance's celebration of Greek-Roman Antiquity. However, it was with Romanticism that swimming truly gained status among Euro-American elites as a virtue and source of enjoyment. According to Lenček and Bosker (1998, 104), it was

the access that swimming afforded to [the] spiritual dimension that drew Romantics to this sport. Aquatic immersion gave them an unprecedented way of experiencing the body. Suspended in water, they imagined themselves released from the tyranny of gravity, hovering high above the earth, carried along by waves and currents.

Swimming thus became a marker of modern, free-thinking individuals liberated from social constraints. Eventually, by the early twentieth century, it also became democratized and popularized

across Euro-America. This was due to a convergence of factors including the European state-powers' colonization of the globe into a single world system of socio-cultural racial hierarchy, political-economic interests in the health of the urbanized working class, the latter's securing of the right to leisure time, and the feminist movement. However, in this process, the status dimension was not overcome but displaced, as swimming skills became a marker for *whiteness* in general (Andersson 2016; Carr 2022; Wiltse 2007).

Indeed, Carr (2022, 7–8) argues, 'Most people today can't swim' because 'people's ability to swim depends largely on their social identity: on race, income and education. The world's most powerful people are the most likely to know how to swim'. The global dimension of this racialization of swimming ability is striking. The World Health Organisation (WHO) (2021) summarizes: 'lower socioeconomic status, being a member of an ethnic minority, lack of higher education and rural populations all tend to be associated' with higher risks of drowning worldwide as lack of swimming skills is the main cause of drowning. While it should be impossible to measure the global distribution of swimming ability, it is easier to compare the distribution of recorded drownings. On the global level, over 90% of all drownings occur in low and middle-income countries – the Sub-Saharan death rate is 15–20 times higher than in Western Europe (WHO 2021). This divide is also discernible *within* state territories: in the U.S., indigenous, black, and Latinx minorities are over-represented as drowning victims (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2024; Irwin et al. 2011). Meanwhile, the highest drowning rates in New Zealand are among Maori and Pacific Islanders, whereas in Canada, Aboriginal people (Willcox-Pidgeon et al. 2020, 279). This distinction between White, Wealthy and West versus 'the Rest' has had its causes in outright racist segregation and discrimination (cf. Wiltse 2007) but does also find roots for its reproduction in the (contingent) relationship between one's cultural identity and the social line between 'swimmers' and 'non-swimmers' 'dividing "us" from "them"' (Carr 2022, 7). Indeed, just as swimming is inter-generationally transmitted, aquaphobia and avoidance of water can be taught over generations out of parental care (Irwin et al. 2011, 563).

(Self)overcoming

In order to articulate a language that reflects the sensation of transitioning from weight to relief when learning to swim, which transcends one-dimensional dichotomies such as empowerment–disempowerment, freedom–oppression, tradition–modernity, natural–unnatural, religion–secularism and alien–integrated, I draw inspiration from the Romanticism of Friedrich Nietzsche. My contribution to the minimal field of Nietzschean geography (Kingsbury 2010) involves appropriating Nietzsche's concept of 'self-overcoming' (*Selbstüberwindung*) (Monahan 2007), which remains compatible with the phenomenological tradition due to his like-minded focus on the body as the subject of knowledge (Grosz 1994).

In Nietzsche's ontology, all life forms are propelled by their inherent *will to power*: a metaphysical 'force' that is ultimately synonymous with life itself; 'that which must always overcome itself' (Nietzsche 1995, 115). For him, engaging in the quest for overcoming is the noblest pursuit, as it celebrates one's striving for power in a Dionysian manner – whether through war, the arts, athleticism, or other endeavours. He particularly values the overcoming of the self; of one's own organism. The 'moral' impetus of Nietzsche's body is the sensation of struggle, towards overcoming obstacles:

It seems, a little hindrance that is overcome and immediately followed by another little hindrance that is again overcome – this game of resistance and victory arouses most strongly that general feeling of superabundant, excessive power that constitutes the essence of pleasure. [This is] the highest form of individual freedom [...]. [That way one] attains 'freedom of movement.' (Nietzsche 1968, 371, 404)

This account of self-overcoming, this 'essence of pleasure', appears to aptly describe the sensation of mastering the body-technique of learning to swim – quite literally, one overcomes what Zarathustra calls 'the spirit of gravity' (Nietzsche 1995, 107–108). Compare this with Ward's (2017, 111)

description of the swimmer's aquatic transcendence: how one's body is 'floating but submerged. Indeed, the swimmer is simultaneously released from and bound by their own limitations, floating and breathing but also constantly fighting the body's inclination to sink'.

'Self-overcoming' should, however, be understood here in a nihilistic sense – not as something normative to be applauded as righteous per se. Instead, it describes a certain phenomenological sensation of surmounting one's own limits as experienced through one's existential feeling(s): the 'most illustrious human joys, in which existence celebrates its own transfiguration' as one's 'spirit' is 'as much at home in the senses as the senses are at home in the spirit; [enkindling] a subtle extraordinary happiness and play in the senses' (Nietzsche 1968, 540). Moreover, while Monahan (2007) applies self-overcoming as the aim of engaging oneself in an ongoing practice of personal growth (as the concept designates not an end state but a continuous process), we should be cautious against the individualism of Nietzscheism. Regarding the self-overcomings of this article's story, they would have hardly been possible if it were not for collective solidary efforts, in the co-production of a women-only 'safe space'.

Safe space as placing conditions for overcoming

According to Irwin et al. (2011, 570), 'A conventional strategy to treat people with specific phobias is to empower the individual with a sense of control' through creating 'a more consistent expectation of the situation so as to alleviate fear'. One such way is to create a 'safe space'. In this study, I am treating the spatio-temporal setting of NSS's swimming classes as the materialization of a safe time-space for its participants. Indeed, every pool is a safe space in the sense of providing a place of tamed water – a predictable and securitized space compared with the erraticism of open water (Ward 2017). However, the concept mainly concerns the sense of safety in a *social* sense, as it was coined by the women's movement and primarily used for activist and pedagogical ends (Roestone Collective 2014). It has become increasingly mobilized for sports activities exclusively for marginalized women/girls – especially in the context of Global South and NGO projects (Burtscher and Britton 2022; Spaaij and Schulenkorf 2014). Uncritically applied, 'safe space' contains problematic essentialist assumptions regarding stiffened binaries of safety–unsafety, inclusion–exclusion, belonging–non-belonging and similarity–difference. Understanding 'place' as inherently relational, these boundary drawings cannot but become porous and contested. From a feminist standpoint, the Roestone Collective (2014, 1361, original emphasis) encourages those who wish to participate and create safe spaces to ask themselves 'what and who they seek safety *from* and safety *for*. Such reflexivity can be used to better link the intentions and actualities of safe spaces, even though intentions can go awry in practice'.

The data

During the summer of 2020, I set out to study the struggle to relocate a planned indoor swimming pool from the symbolically affluent Saltsjöbaden to the neighbour multicultural (and stigmatized) locality of Fisksätra in the municipality of Nacka. Rather quickly, I realized that out of this activism a swimming association had emerged that held women-only swimming classes. Thus, the study developed into two – one concerning the struggle (Hansson 2022) and this one, focusing on the experiences of learning to swim in NSS. I found volunteer interviewees by chain-referral sampling through initial contact with one of the association's founders, and conducted in-depth interviews (audio recorded and transcribed) with 10 women who were engaged in NSS as founders, teachers, students, members and/or volunteering assistants. The interviews concerned both studies simultaneously, as many of those interviewed had also been involved in the relocation protests. As I had an inductive approach, the themes of this article emerged organically through the conversations and the analysis of the total material. The theory was also inductively designed to make sense of the identified themes conjointly. Themes identified include: the utilities and problems of the

educational setting itself, why people wanted to learn to swim in adult age, in this school, what they thought of the women-only setting, how it feels not being able to swim, to then learn it, and to be part of this social space.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish, then transcribed and translated into English after anonymization. They were held individually in various settings that best suited the interviewees – at their homes, workplaces, or in public spaces in Fisksåtra – and lasted between 20 and 145 minutes. Most women were in their 40s. Five identified themselves as practicing Muslims, six were foreign-born (in Eritrea, India, China, and the MENA region), and two had foreign-born (non-white) parents, while two were ethnic Swedes. Five could not swim before joining – three of whom eventually became swimming teachers themselves.

Many did not respond to my request. Possibly, people declined due to a lack of interest, a sense of lacking language skills, concerns about being identifiable, or due to my male sex and my whiteness (Swedish ethnicity). This positionality of mine probably affected the number of volunteers. Furthermore, it certainly influenced which experiences and thoughts were shared with me and which were not (Valentine 2002). Despite these potential barriers, I must say that our almost non-structured conversations overall appeared relaxed, open-hearted, and covered a wide range of topics.

According to the interviewees, most course participants have jobs and education. Clearly, the small sample cannot claim to represent all positional experiences in the swimming school. However, given this sample's heterogeneity regarding social status, employment categories, language skills, migration histories and swimming experiences, and these voices' collective description of what was going on in this women-only time-space (which I have no – and should not have – access to), provides an enlightening depiction of the sociality and dynamics of this secured space.

All quotations have been approved by their originators. Nonetheless, several interviewees were keen on minimizing the sharing of personal information that might become traceable back to them as individuals, notwithstanding my guarantee of aiming towards absolute anonymization: therefore, I do not for example have knowledge of some informants' exact age or their country of origin. This combined lack of information and urge by interviewees to be anonymous has led me to be very scarce in my provision on information regarding the different individuals quoted – for example, it is not always intended whether if a presented speaker has already appeared in the text previously.

While the interviewees themselves did not mention weight-relief or overcoming, when I encountered these concepts, I found them intuitively resonating with the accounts in their entirety. After presenting the swimming school's background story, I first explore the themes of the safe space itself, focusing on the weights and reliefs it has provided its participants. Then, I delve into the realm of personal existential feelings.

The gradual revealing of a relieving space

In 2017, following their defeat in the pool struggle, some activists initiated a local sports association. The rationale behind this move was to establish a representative body supporting Fisksåtra's cause in case the issue resurfaced, as one of the arguments by the municipality board against localizing Fisksåtra was its lack of a local swimmers' club. The association's transition to educational activities was rather incidental. The individuals initiating the association happened to be women of different ethnic backgrounds. One of them, an ethnic Swede, happened to be a former swimming teacher, while another, a practicing Muslim immigrant, happened to be unable to swim. The latter asked the former if she could attempt to teach her and some female neighbours to swim. As the aspirants preferred to avoid male presence due to religious convictions, they arranged to meet during the nearest indoor pool's weekly women-only hour. Thus, the physical setting of a safe space already existed, as women-only hours in Swedish bathhouses have a long tradition and never were a political issue until 'immigrant women' started to attend them (Johansson 2011). The 'first student' recalls how their first lesson sparked a collective demand:

Then all the women were like ‘Can’t you help me?’ [...]. Some have swum in their home country but knew very little, [some maybe] dared to be in water but couldn’t even swim. Many used swimming plates, arm pads, etcetera just like children do when they learn. And then [we] saw that there was a need, and then more people started coming, often, often, often, often.

After a few weeks, over 70 women, some even from faraway parts of the city, attended. While not everyone was Muslim, all students had heritage from the Global South. Flabbergasted by this response, the initiators gradually organized a course with a symbolic fee, implemented queuing systems, and assigned responsibilities for teaching, supervising and cleaning. The association established statutes and an electable board, and all students became members. Eventually, the association participated in a national diversity project to train swimming teachers from ‘other ethnic backgrounds’, wherethrough women who had learned to swim in less than a year became licenced teachers themselves.

Weights–reliefs of the safe space

Obviously, the educational setting had proved effective. It had emerged as a compromise between different needs and preferences, as the students were heterogeneous in age (from adolescents to 80-year-olds), health, and views on modesty, hygiene and risk. Of course, such a process is not effortless.

Negotiating weighting facticities

What is this dynamic space’s strengths are probably also its weaknesses. The whole enterprise is based on volunteering evenings and weekends by zealots organising, supervising, overseeing and cleaning. Those carrying these weights have been on the brink of burnout, and it is a constant struggle to budget money and time.

The lack of money is also a prominent reason for having only women’s classes. Indeed, when NSS applied for grants to expand the setup, they aimed to launch a complementary male-only course. However, the grants received could only fund two hours per week, making two courses practically impossible: ‘*We cannot make it one hour each because then the men will be in the [facility] anyway*’. Instead, the association continued with the established female community, while, as the relevant grants demanded inclusion of children, those younger than thirteen and able to swim were allowed to participate. Several informants thought kids’ presence complicated the educational activity itself.

Another facticity was the collision between different hygiene and modesty regimes. While a majority of the participants self-identify as practising Muslims, one can practise a religion or culture in many ways. In the pool, some considered burqinis as too revealing of body shape and would not undress in front of other women, while others felt comfortable in ‘Western’ clothing and had no issue with interpersonal nudity. (For context, in the Nordic region, changing rooms are almost-always divided into gender sections, with hardly any private booths for changing or showering). However, the ‘Swedish’ hygiene regime is one non-negotiable morality: like all Swedish pool operators, the leaders have ruled that one *must* shower completely naked before and after a pool visit – albeit this is only one of many conceptions of hygienic conduct and not uniquely Nordic either (Karlsson Minganti 2013). Nonetheless, this demand is compensated with fixing shower curtains and accepting showering back home afterwards. Aside from the changing rooms, the design of the pool hall itself constituted initial problems vis-à-vis participants’ demands for a male-gaze-free zone. Besides quarrel with the administration as to whether male staff could be in the security booth during class, a panorama window at the entrance had to be covered by a homemade curtain.

Finally, the preferred amount of fabric used for swimwear can constitute a literal weight. Many prefer burqiniesque outfits, which tend to become heavy when waterlogged; an obstacle when learning to swim, as it is then pre-eminent to learn – and dare – to float.

Reliefs of a shared female situation

One benefit of men's absence is that some women then feel enabled to try lighter swimwear. This concrete relieving of weight appears as a metaphor for this school's ethics: with the principal goal to teach swimming, the ethical means are to relieve all weights possible that hinder the learning process. Considering the debate on 'cultural' gender separatism in sports environments, one founder explained that the association is.

completely impartial in that discussion. We're neither for nor against separate times [but] we want everyone to learn to swim. And, if you feel like you wanna learn to swim with only women, [then] fine. It doesn't matter. [...] We lower the bar, you can shower behind a curtain, you don't have to wear so many clothes because it's just us women [...]. Here's a need that exists, and we teach in an environment in which they want to learn. [We] teach swimming in a calm and safe environment for them. This works for them. [...] We're trying to remove some anxieties, which apparently are there.

It is this choice of words, among other statements, that made me interpret the dominating, cross-cultural, 'what' that this safe space predominantly provides safety *from* as anxieties regarding one's relation to water and swimming (Roestone Collective 2014). The ultimate commonality between the female students, after all, was not religion/culture, but the shared situation of not being able to swim. A case in point regarding the divergence of moralities within the group is one Asian woman (formerly student, now teacher) who during our interview stated that she was *against* 'gender separatism' overall in society: 'I don't want others to try to change this country. [...] I want Sweden as it is.' When I pointed out that yet she was active in a 'separatist' setting, she recognized that she had never thought about the classes as such:

I had actually never thought of this [paradox] that, I, who don't want gender separatism, still work with women in this way. Yeah, I've never thought of that actually. But it's probably 'cause, maybe, I respect them [who want it that way], because I want to give them the chance [to learn to swim]. So, I guess that's good.

In the interviews, gender exclusivism appears crucial in establishing a relaxed environment where people can face their fears to a different extent than if gender-mixed. One woman who initially did not dare to enter the water, and had tried other courses previously, explained:

When you feel a sense of belonging to the group – no one can swim, all are women – you see, it's a completely different feeling. [This] makes it much easier for me to dare to swim.

The woman who opposed 'gender segregation' felt similarly:

It felt like this was the right place for me to learn to swim. [Because] there were so many other women who couldn't swim either. [...] I was actually so afraid of the water. [But,] when you see the other women, that they cannot swim, but they dare to enter the water anyway, then I actually dared as well.

Convivial playfulness

Crucial to this bravery seems to be the environment's lack of status stratification. Due to the improvisational origin, a rather non-hierarchical order became the conventional sociality, as different skill levels train in the pool simultaneously and students occasionally act as temporary teachers to help others. That aquaphobic subjects get help from others who have overcome their fear seems to generate an atmosphere of empathetic encouragement:

When you hear that there are women who've struggled for several years and [can finally] say: 'God, it feels so good, I promise, it took a long time for me [to] just let go of this fear, and you'll manage, c'mon! [Everyone] will help you!' [...]. [When teaching], they're like 'feel the water, hold here, look, how does it feel?' So eventually, I dared a little, just to get into the water. Only that was a very big thing – Wow! I could step in [...]. [Then] just to let go, stretch out in the water, that took a long time. Maybe two months. [Now, when] I've learned [to] float, just that bit, and a woman comes who's very scared, then I can say: 'Believe me, it's *very easy*, come, I'll help you!' Although I can't (laughs). Everyone does that. *Everyone*. And you see like these

two, three persons, they're like: 'Try to let go, we'll hold you.' *Everyone* helps each other. And when she lets go of this fear, everyone says: 'Do you see?! Do you see?! You made it! It was so good what you did!'

Such a friendly atmosphere helps explain why the classes also have become a *social* occasion. The original teacher reflected:

I think a lot of people thought it's fun [to attend], that it becomes like a community. [...] And when there're only women there, then you can play a little. You can jump, formed like letters – they would *never* do it if there were *men* in the swimming pool too. But now we can be childish, we can laugh together.

Indeed, this appears to be a crucial aspect of this safe space's pedagogical success: because it is only women (save some children), and a safe yet exciting environment, there is space to be silly together.

According to the teachers, 'childishness' is almost mandatory when learning to swim because the water security exercises share similarities with children's play. This parallel with children's lifeworld is also conceivable in the sensations of helplessness that people face when beginning to learn to swim. Here, however, students are enabled to disavow such embarrassment by instead embracing the childish aspects of the situation. This childishness, in turn, fuels playfulness, which further combats aquaphobia. In the interviews, the sensation of *having fun together* is at the forefront of the community feeling.

Overcoming personal weights

Intersectional sinking weights

When asked why she thinks adult women want to learn to swim, one of the founders (herself an immigrant) answered:

It's part of being *Swedish*, I think. It's part of integration. [It's] part of being Swedish to [be] out and about, and not drowning when you fall into water (laughs) and then you can dare to be close to water – on piers, in boats, by lakes, which we have so much of.

This answer is symptomatic not only of how it illustrates the blending of nationalism with environmental determinism, together with sympathetic considerations for others' security and spatial freedom. It reveals clear interconnections between Swedish belonging and swimming ability, which helps explain why aquaphobia is not only a weighting fear in its own right but also if racialized, generates more weight through enhanced sensations of being Other.

Fear of water

One woman remembered being a newly arrived refugee in her early teens, and encountering a pool for the first time as part of a school visit:

[The teachers] asked: 'Can you swim?' But I couldn't speak Swedish then. I remember saying yes. Only nodded. Then we went up [this] slide, very high, and then you land into the deep part. And it was a matter of life and death for me. [For] a while it was like I was fighting for my life. [From] that moment on, me and the water were enemies. I didn't dare to get close to water. [This memory] was awakened when I started swimming here. And when I started learning to swim, I didn't dare go into the water.

While only two interviewees had experienced traumatic drowning encounters first-hand, the theme of fearing deep water was omnipresent. Some had been taught by their non-swimming parents to fear water outdoors – one interviewee's mother, who had forbidden her to swim as a child, was now learning to swim in NSS together with her daughter. While these narratives contain a 'cultural' aspect of inheriting a negative attitude towards swimming, their class aspect was striking (Carr 2022): immigrant working-class often struggle to secure the '*necessary things in life – food, clothes, good education, maybe a man, what kind of house [one should] have*' and such concerns, why the already strange activity of swimming becomes de-prioritized. Others, who had grown up where no one swam, or where it was expensive to take swimming classes, also feared deep water.

Motherhood

Why then choose to face this fear? Evidently, the safest way to not risk drowning is to never be close to the sea; evidently, knowing how to swim does not undo the risk of drowning. However, everyone interviewed was a mother, and the narrative linking parenthood with the decision to overcome aquaphobia was recurring. Not only must their children learn swimming to receive their PE grade – if something happens, they must be saved. One woman remembers taking her children to swimming school and constantly thinking: ‘*If something happens in front of me, either I will let my children die, because I don’t dare to go into the water, or I’ll jump in, and then we [all] die*’. However, the parenthood connection was not only due to the risk of harm. Perhaps even more guiding was the desire to bathe together with their children. Two women’s memories:

- [It] hurt a lot, when I took my children [to] bathing places during the summer, and they bathe, and I stood there with a towel waiting for them. I wished, from the bottom of my heart, that one day, I’ll stop standing here holding towels and waiting for my children (laughs). I will *myself* go in and swim with them.

- I didn’t know how it would end but I was determined for the sake of the children; it’s not fun to sit there on the edge and not be able to do anything.

As a parent, not being able to swim was thus weighing down one’s everyday geographies. As the quotes illustrate, one’s freedom of movement becomes hampered if one is not feeling safe (Valentine 1989) of being close to water courses, where plenty of social activities take place during summer time.

Racialized shame

Those interviewees who had attended other women-only hours had felt these occasion as weighting rather than relieving:

I actually felt *alien*. Not because [the others] were Swedes, but because they [have] been swimming since they were small. This was no swimming lesson. It was women’s time, so I thought maybe I can learn there. But I felt very alien: ‘this is not my place.’ Because everyone could swim. I was just standing there looking at them, [and] you lose, this volition that you have – it eventually disappears.

Those who had attended ‘ordinary’ swimming classes had also felt themselves alien. Not only did they feel Other because of their skin colour and dressing, but primarily because of their *fear* of being-in-water – of which the teachers did not seem to have pedagogical experience.

[The] swimming instructor [simply] said: ‘Well, it’s just sliding!’ Sooo easy! [‘Do] this! You will just slide’ and then you stand there, just afraid to throw yourself into the water. [Everyone] who couldn’t, stood still. ‘Well, then get to feel the water, how it is, while the others do something else,’ then she focused only on those who dared. And then we’re forgotten [...].

Add to such a situation to also struggle with Swedish language: ‘*It was this, the shame in some way. I was an adult and I couldn’t [swim] and I didn’t know the language*’. The same woman returned to the notion of racialized shame (Heinämaa and Jardine 2021) when she spoke of how her confidence had grown after having learned to swim:

[The] image we [have], unfortunately, [is that] ‘All Swedes can swim,’ but there are many Swedes who cannot swim, or swim very poorly. [Many Swedes] who were born in the 60s or 70s, they can’t swim! [Swedes’ swimming skills are not] self-evident but we, immigrants, think it was obvious and we are *ashamed* because we can’t swim. That’s the image in the media, [as] if it’s only we who can’t swim and forget how it was in Sweden [before] and that there are also [Swedes] who [can’t swim].

In NSS’s classroom, however, this shame is almost constitutional for its conviviality.

The transcendental event

The missing link between the sense of safety and the collective enjoyment this place provides is the very event of learning to feel safe in the water. In the interviews, the true event of phenomenological

self-overcoming occurs as a leap of faith either when one manages to float one's body or make one's first strokes. One interviewee in her 80s, who had been holding swimming instructions for immigrant women in Fisksåtra before NSS (to a much smaller extent) verbalized the sensation of mastering one's body-in-water she perceived in students as 'a kick': 'One becomes absolutely blissful'. This wording seems very close to Nietzsche's account of self-overcoming, and fits well with my received accounts:

[The] first time when I just started floating in the water, well, *wow*, what a feeling! [You] can't imagine. I was overjoyed. Just that I'm floating in the water. That day, I didn't sleep when I got home. I was *so* happy. (laughs) So happy, you've no idea. I was so happy.

The sensation of ecstatic happiness, the relief of the living body overcoming one's own fear and weights, was everywhere in the interviews:

- Once I've learned to swim, it's hard to describe how *happy* I was. I was *so* happy [...]. I started to enjoy life a little bit more. It was such a different feeling. You start, in fact, to feel *young* again. (Big laugh). [I] said to [the teachers], 'I can't describe [what] you've done for me, for my life.' [This] joy, which [is] difficult to describe[. So] that's why I engaged myself in this association, to share my joy. The feeling I got, I want others [to] also experience.

- [There] are those who have visited all the teachers and pools, and they haven't learned. [When] they came to us, [they] were still afraid of water. But [after] ten times, then they could swim breaststroke. [And] they were so grateful that they screamed, had tears in their eyes, and so did I[. I'll] never forget, I still get tears in my eyes when I remember, [how I went on], and then when [the teacher] took me for the first time to the deep part and believed in me.

A relief that spread like ripples

Through this self-overcoming, the struggle against weighting fears transforms into the pursuit of enjoyment. Some talk about how swimming has become a 'way of life'. The childlike excitement of mastering swimming reveals further trajectories of exploration, as a new geography emerges for the post-aquaphobic subject:

To only to look underneath [the surface,] it's blue and [...] I don't know, I feel [that] now I'm in a world where I never before would have ever dared to enter.

Indeed, as one's self-esteem becomes radically elevated by this endeavour (Bortolan 2020), there seems to occur an overall change of the existential feeling structuring one's sense of possibilities (Ratcliffe 2020).

One of the teachers claims that the Muslim women she knew who had learned to swim had '*started swimming during public times*. [Like,] if you can swim, then how can you stop yourself from swimming during public times?' I interviewed two of those, who argued that when aquaphobia was overcome, the presence of the male gaze became less of an issue. However, as the woman quoted in the introduction illustrated, according to the *dominant* societal gaze, swimming ability alone hardly made her less 'alien' or more 'belonging' (Lenneis, Agergaard, and Evans 2020). She will still *look* different. Nonetheless, her self-overcoming, swimming teacher license included, provided a relief of this racialized mental weight, as she answered to my question of how she felt back there at the beach:

I was proud. Y'know why? Because I knew in my heart that I could swim maybe better than many of them. (laughs) 'If only there'll be a situation where I can show that I know better than them, that I'm a teacher,' but I promise that when I tell [people] 'I'm a swimming teacher' everyone looks at me in a weird way!

Conclusion

Guenther (2019, 16) claims critical phenomenology ought to develop 'concrete strategies for dismantling oppressive structures and creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world'. Meanwhile, to upheave the choice between neo-colonial

universalism and the narrow particularism of ‘identity-based politics’, Kapoor and Zalloua (2021) calls for a conceptualization of ‘the universal’ that can ground a global solidarity towards a better world. Maybe the Husserlian feminists’ account of the intersubjective foundation for the living body (Heinämaa 2021) might serve as an inspiration for this quest, as articulated through the intuitive meanings of the binary weight–relief: these everyday words are comprehensible for everyone yet incredibly dynamic. Indeed, the desire for relief from weights and striving to overcome them, whether or not those weights register as bodily pain, mental suffering, imposed restrictions, or structural oppression, ought to be universal. Moreover, this particular case illustrates a universal joyfulness of being-in-water-together that transgresses age, language, background, and identity. At the same time, however, the universal is always mediated through the particular, and the empirical subjects’ weights and reliefs were due to their particular intersectional situatedness as racialized adult women in Sweden. Indeed, the advantage of critical phenomenology in geography is its positioning of ‘the first-person consciousness of minoritised or otherwise marginalised subjects’ as ‘an epistemological vantage point to encounter and render visible the logics that shape those broader orders and one’s place within them’ (Hepach and Kinkaid 2024, 7).

By interpreting the women-only swimming school as providing a safe space for its participants to overcome intersectional phenomenological weights, and through this sensation of relief transform existential feelings of one’s possibilities, I intended to reveal how subjects experience their socio-material situations through a language that opposes fetishization of identity and/or turn to one-dimensional causalities. While ‘empowerment’ is the conventional description for the purposes of safe spaces (Roestone Collective 2014; Rana 2017), today this concept appears subsumed by neo-liberal entrepreneurship and therefore romanticizing of strength in a *too* Nietzschean sense. The interviewees might indeed have felt ‘empowered’ by their successes, but instead they used words connoted to joy and gratefulness – that is, closer to a sense of invigorating *relief* before power.

While it might appear hyperbolic to make this mundane case into an inspiration for universalizing politics, I believe the mundaneness is what makes the case universal. Instead of making sense of the social phenomenon of women-only swimming as a symptom of politics of integration or identity (since the women in question are racialized) one could understand women-only swimming schools as a ‘*calm and safe environment*’ for daring and learning to swim. That is: a particular way to relieve particular weights, yet universally recognisable in the shared experience of being a living body between weight and relief. This dialectic between universal and particular is also what the history of swimming should teach us (Carr 2022). Swimming is not universal itself, but the relieving sensation of overcoming water’s gravity and redeeming one’s own body through immersion is. Finally, we should be inspired by the fact that swimming is inherently a *collective* endeavour, as it must be taught to be transmitted (Andersson 2016). Among the interviewees, there was a shared consciousness of how these subjective experiences of individual mastering were only enabled by collective efforts. Indeed, their weights could not have been (self)overcome if it was not for cross-cultural, universal, solidarity.

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