Anti-austerity Politics: Marxism, Materialism, and the Scope of the Political

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> *I would describe Marxism as a philosophy of wonder: what appear before consciousness, as objects of perception, are not simply given, but are effects of history. 'Even the objects of the simplest "sensuous certainty" are only given him through social development, industry, and commercial intercourse' (Marx). To learn to see what is ordinary, what has the character of 'sensuous certainty', is to read the effects of this history of production as a form of 'world making'.*
>
> — Sara Ahmed

Ahmed's description of Marxism as a 'philosophy of wonder'[1] has, itself, something of the startling and engaging character we associate with wonder. It is strartling because even those of us who are well-disposed to Marx would probably not immediately associate his work with the kind of wide-eyed openness to the world we would call wonder. Marx tends to bring to mind other terms, such as necessity, whether historical or material, or immiseration. Ahmed, however, reminds us of the importance of the sensuous intimacy of human and world in Marx's work, from his early discussion of the humanisation of the sense (in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*) through his discussion of the politics of appearance (in the *Eighteenth Brumaire*) to the riotous overflow of diverse working-class experiences in *Capital*. This paper is part of a larger project which looks at a number of these moments in Marx's work, which leads me to consider the potential value of a 'sensuous Marxism', or of a rethinking of Marxism which emphasises

1 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 180.

Marx's interest in the sensuous. To this end, I consider some theorists, Marxist and non-Marxist, which emphasise the sensuous, the phenomenological, or the experiential, and argue for the value of such an approach to political theory.

My interest in a sensuous and phenomenological approach stands in stark contrast to a major approach to understanding the political in contemporary political theory, particularly post-Marxist theory. For many post-Marxists, the political is a vitally important category and it is established, and must be defended, by maintaining the specificity of the political, by preventing its colonization by other categories. The authors I have in mind here include Alain Badiou, Ernesto Laclau, Chantal Mouffe, and Jacques Rancière, as well as more recent work by Jodi Dean and Peter Hallward. In very general terms, all these authors share a concern with something encroaching on the political, whether that is a theoretical encroachment of Marxist economic determinism, or a practical encroachment of neoliberal marketisation. In either case, these authors assert the separateness of the political as a way of ensuring a space for human agency against the realm of necessity.

The problem is that this insistence on the separateness of the political leads to a narrow and abstract understanding of politics, which cuts politics of from the world in which it is supposed to act. Instead of all the complex considerations we encounter when we engage in political activity, these approaches reduce politics to some formal criteria, such as 'contestation' or 'the incompleteness of the social'.[2] It is because of this reductionism that I refer to approaches to the political which

2 A similar criticism to the one I am making here is made at length in Lois McNay, *The Misguided Search for the Political* (Polity Press, 2014).

concentrate on its separateness as 'austere'. In this paper, I attempt to find what we might call an 'anti-austerity' conception of politics. A turn to the sensuous or phenomenological, I argue, helps us to understand the richness of politics, that is to say, the multiple varying factors that come together to form the space in which we can take political action. I begin by looking at one framework for understanding the multiple influences on politics, the concept of intersectionality. I then consider in more detail an attempt to understand the imbrication of two specific aspects of political struggle, and show how the experience of Marxist feminists allowed them to expand the theoretical capacities of Marxism. I then turn to an account of experience which multiplies the complexities while maintaining its specificity, Gloria Anzaldúa's discussion of *mestizaje*. Anzaldúa gives us a theory of the richness of experience which I attempt to supplement and clarify through a discussion of Linda Martín Alcoff's use of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. This gives, I hope, an indication of the kind of theory which would be an alternative to the narrowness and abstraction of post-Marxist austere politics.

The complexities of compoundedness

Jasbir Puar makes a sharp criticism of the political effects of a 'mainstreamed' intersectionality which has become 'a tool of diversity management' which 'colludes with the disciplinary apparatus of the state'.[3] What allows this political

3 Jasbir K. Puar, 'Queer Times, Queer Assemblages', *Social Text*, 23 (2005), 121–39 (p. 91) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/01642472-23-3-4_84-85-121>. In a subsequent work, Puar adopts a more reconciliatory approach to intersectionality, in which at least the initial formulation of intersectionality can come into a productive 'friction' with the theory of assemblage which Puar prefers (Jasbir K. Puar, '"I Would Rather Be a Cyborg than a Goddess": Becoming-Intersectional in Assemblage Theory', Philosophia, 2 (2012), 49–66).

deployment of intersectionality is, according to Puar, its theoretical reliance on a liberal understanding of fixed identities, leading to 'an intersectional model of identity which presumes components – race, class, gender, sexuality, nation, age, religion – are separable analytics and can be thus disassembled'.[4] In the approaches going under the name of 'intersectionality' that Puar discusses, difference is accommodated by a multiplication of identity, with these multiple identities being treated as separate quantities that can be added together: one can be white *and* a man, and ones privileges are the sum of white privilege and male privilege.[5] Puar argues that this additive form of intersectionality derives from a position which sees representation as central to politics, and she rejects representation in favour of the Deleuzian idea of assemblage. I will take a different tack in this paper: while I agree with Puar about the problems with a model of additive identities, I do not think the solution to this problem is to reject representation. Instead, I argue that representation itself is more complicated, and that intersectional accounts of experience can help understand this complexity.

The temptation to theorize intersectionality in additive terms can be seen even in authors who have a sincere commitment to understanding the complex imbrication of race and gender. One particularly clear example is Charles Mills's attempt to combine his criticism of the racist underpinnings of social contract theories with Carole Pateman's theory of their sexist underpinnings. Mills writes that these two 'intersecting contracts' should be understood as a single racia-

4 Puar, 'Queer Times', p. 90.

5 One of the problems Puar identifies with the use made of intersectionality is that it is, in practice, rarely applied to privileged groups (Puar, 'I Would Rather', p. 64.). Because white masculinity is the implied standard of identity, I, at least, experience a certain amount of theoretical friction in disaggregating white masculinity into separate identities.

sexual contract in which 'the racial contract is rewritten on patriarchal terms and the sexual contract is rewritten on racial terms'.[6] When he elaborates on this position, however, it becomes clear that this does not involve reconceptualising race and gender themselves, but rather combining these terms additively to produce a space defined by two orthogonal axes of race and gender. 'Axis' is quite literal here: Mills explains his theory using a diagram, placing different identities at different positions on these two axes. Mills's explanation of this diagram makes the additive procedure clear:

> The four locations denote one position of unqualified privilege (white men, privileged by both race and gender), two hybrid positions involving both privilege and subordination (white women, privileged by race but subordinated by gender, and nonwhite men, privileged by gender but subordinated by race), and one position of unqualified subordination (nonwhite women, subordinated by both race and gender).[7]

Kimberlé Crenshaw's article introducing the term 'intersectionality' does contain some statements that might seem to support the kind of additive theory espoused by Mills, as, for instance, when she calls the (non-intersectional) views she is criticism 'single axis' theories which are incapable of understanding the 'multidimensionality' of the oppression experienced by Black women.[8] However, it is clear from the article that Crenshaw is not, in fact, proposing that we can

6 Carole Pateman and Charles Mills, *Contract and Domination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 172.
7 Pateman and Mills, p. 174.
8 Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 139–67 (p. 139).

understand intersectional oppression by adding together separate oppressions. First of all because she says as much: 'intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism.'[9] But perhaps more importantly, the impossibility of understanding intersectional oppression purely additively is deeply embedded in Crenshaw's theory as she develops is through the article. The cases which prompted Crenshaw to develop the theory are precisely those cases which cannot be understood by adding oppressions. The cases she discusses are not cases where Black women were oppressed as Black and as women; on the contrary, the cases create such difficulty for established anti-discrimination discourse because courts persistently found that the Black women in question were not oppressed as Black, and they were not oppressed as women: they were oppressed only in the 'compound' singularity, as Black women. Crenshaw writes:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double-discrimination – the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.[10]

When Crenshaw employs the intersection (in the sense of a road intersection) as a metaphor to explain intersectionality, the intersecting roads are not simply axes

9 Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing', p. 139.
10 Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing', p. 149.

we can use to categorise identities; rather, the intersection marks a space on which events take place:

> If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars travelling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them.... But it is not always easy to reconstruct an accident: Sometimes the skid marks and the injuries simply indicate that they occurred simultaneously, frustrating efforts to determine which driver caused the harm.[11]

In a subsequent article, Crenshaw expands on the idea that an intersectional approach involves studying the overlapping spaces in which harms are experienced. Crenshaw introduces the idea of 'structural intersectionality', which she defines as 'the ways in which the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women'.[12] Here Crenshaw is defining an important area of study; there is one particular question which follows from Crenshaw's work which I will explore in what follows: what is the nature of this space in which oppressions intersect, or, what is the underlying mechanism which produces from this complex of structural forces the experience of oppression? That is to say, what ontology do our theories need in order to grapple with what Crenshaw calls 'the complexity of compoundedness'?[13] I will

11 Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing', p. 149. Puar draws attention to this passage when suggesting that we should understand intersectionality as an event ('I Would Rather', p. 59).

12 Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review*, 43 (1991), 1241 (p. 1245) <http://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.

13 Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing', p. 166.

argue that the reference to experience is crucial here, and this is why what we might call a sensuous Marxism is valuable in understanding intersectionality.

Intersecting systems in socialist feminism

To explore further this question of how we theorize the space within which oppressions appear, I will turn from the discussion of intersectionality to an earlier debate on a similar topic within Marxist feminism, which we might also call a debate between Marxists and feminists in which some of the participants were both. This was the debate on what Iris Young calls 'dual systems theories'. This term describes most socialist feminist theories developed in the 70s which, in one way or another, assigned the analysis of women's oppression to a theory of patriarchy while capitalist oppression was analysed alongside this in Marxist terms.[14] The value of such theories is clear: where socialist theory and practice had often marginalised women and the specific oppression they face, dual systems theories insist on the need to account for the specificity of women's oppression, which they attempt to accomplish by maintaining a specific and separate theory of women's oppression. Particularly in the 1970s, a period of extraordinarily productive theorising around the issue of patriarchy, the advantages of including this theory within a socialist feminist theory must have seemed obvious

Young makes two main, related, criticisms of dual systems theories. The first is that these theories fail to take into account the historicity of the two systems they discuss. That is, if there are two separate, nonoverlapping systems – patriarchy and

14 Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory*, Historical Materialism Book Series, 45 (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), p. 26.

capitalism – there must be two separate spheres in which these systems operate; but the separation of an economic sphere from other spheres, particularly a domestic sphere, is a distinct historical feature of modernity which arises with the development of capitalism. A dual systems theory, Young writes, 'tends to hypostasise this division between family and economy specific to capitalism into a universal form'.[15] Paying attention to the historical development of these separate spheres reveals that their apparent separation is is a particular, historically specific, relation between them. This leads to Young's second argument against dual systems theories. Because these theories depend on keeping the two systems separate, they cannot theorise the interaction between the two systems, and they cannot extend prior theories of either system in ways which would take into account their articulation. As Young puts it, 'the dual systems theory allows traditional marxism to maintain its theory of production relations, historical change, and analysis of the structure of capitalism in a basically unchanged form.'[16] Dual systems theories cannot develop a theory of the articulation or imbrication of multiple systems in which our understanding of one form of oppression allows, or forces, us to modify our theory of other areas of activity. Because of this limitation of dual systems theories, Young advocates that 'instead of marrying marxism, feminism must take over marxism and transform it'.[17]

A particularly useful example of this procedure, in which Marxism and feminism are allowed to modify one another, is the work of feminists in the *autonomia*

15 Iris Young, 'Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: A Critique of the Dual Systems Theory', in *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism*, ed. by Lydia Sargent (South End Press, 1981), p. 48.
16 Iris Young, p. 49.
17 Iris Young, p. 50.

tradition, of which Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James's 'Women and the Subversion of the Community' is probably the best known in English. This work is sometimes considered as an attempt to subordinate feminism to Marxism, or to explain women's oppression in Marxist terms and thereby to deny its specificity. Indeed, when Young discusses dual systems theories, she mentions Dalla Costa and James's work as an example of the Marxist downplaying of feminism against which dual systems theories were reacting.[18] However, I believe this rests on misunderstanding Dalla Costa and James, and in explaining how I think their work has been misunderstood, I hope also to bring out the aspects of their work which would serve as particularly good examples in developing a Marxism of the sensuous.

The part of Dalla Costa and James's work that was most widely taken up in subsequent Marxist-feminist debates is a claim couched in the Marxist language of value. 'We have to make clear', Dalla Costa and James write, 'that, within the wage, domestic work produces not merely use value, but is essential to the production of surplus value.'[19] This claim was addressed by Anglo-American Marxist political economists under the name of the 'domestic labour debate'.[20] This was a largely formalist exercise involving pronouncements on which categories in Marx's work

18 Iris Young, p. 44. Young, like a number of authors, attributes 'Women and the Subversion of the Community' to Dalla Coasta alone, probably due to the way James describes the text in her introduction. Nonetheless, the authorship was clarified in the 1975 edition (Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Falling Wall Press Ltd, 1975), p. 4). This tendency to downplay James's involvement in the text has an interesting parallel in the tendency to ignore the influence of the American Johnson-Forrest tendency, with which James was associated, on Italian *autonomia*. For more, see Christopher Taylor, 'The Refusal of Work: From the Postemancipation Caribbean to Post-Fordist Empire', *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 18 (2014), 1–17 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/07990537-2739812>.

19 Dalla Costa and James, p. 33.

20 Vogel, pp. 21–4.

encompass women's unpaid domestic work: does it create use value or exchange value? does it produce surplus value or not? The general conclusion was quickly reached that domestic work produces only use value, not commodities, thereby placing it largely outside of the sphere of political economy. To frame the debate in these terms, however, is to misunderstand the type of argument Dalla Costa and James were attempting to advance. Such misunderstanding was perhaps understandable, as the autonomist Marxist tradition on which Dalla Costa and James were drawing was not well known in the English-speaking world at the time. Be that as it may, looking again at Dalla Costa and James's work to see what formalist Marxist economists failed to capture is helpful in understanding alternative, richer approaches to political economy.

The tradition of Marxism to which Dalla Costa and James belong is distinguished by beginning its analysis with struggles against capital; the particular organisation of capitalism at any given time, then, must be understood as the result of capital's attempts to contain this struggle.[21] Hence Dalla Costa and James's starting point is not a particular set of Marxist categories, but instead a particular struggle, namely the struggle of Italian housewives 'against the organisation of labour, against labour time.... To "have time" means to work less'.[22] Their deployment of Marxist theory in the text is then conditioned by this struggle: the question becomes how can Marxism help explain the imposition of particular organisations of time on

21 Dalla Costa and James, p. 29. The standard account of *autonomia* in English is Steve Wright, *Storming Heaven: Class Composition and Struggle in Italian Autonomia* (London: Pluto Press, 2002). For a shorter account of what is distinctive about the *autonomia* approach to Marxist theory, see Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically*, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2000), pp. 64–77.

22 Dalla Costa and James, p. 40.

women. Questions to do with use value and surplus value are not irrelevant, but they cannot be approached in an atomistic or empiricist way. To return to Dalla Costa and James's own statement that domestic work 'is essential to the production of surplus value' it is important to pay attention to their elaboration that this is about 'the pursuit of productivity at the social level'.[23] We can see that this is not a narrow claim that a particular type of work directly produces surplus value; rather, it is a call to understand a more complicated totality within which domestic work and surplus value exist.

The purpose of Dalla Costa and James's analysis, that is, is to espy possibilities for struggle, and they do this by connecting the apparently isolated situation of an individual housewife to others in similar situations, and to others in different locations within capitalist society. This is a theoretical articulation of the practical demand for collective action they make in the text, and the reason they make the theoretical argument is to make visible the collective struggle which exists, if only partially, already. Dalla Costa and James argue that 'to the degree that the working class has been able to organize mass struggles in the community, rent strikes, struggles against inflation generally, the basis has always been the unceasing informal organisation of women there'.[24] However, this fact needs to be made visible if women are to have 'the experience of social revolt', which is 'primarily the experience of learning your own capacities, that is, your power, and the capacities, and power, of your class'.[25]

23 Dalla Costa and James, p. 33.
24 Dalla Costa and James, p. 30.
25 Dalla Costa and James, p. 30.

Dalla Costa and James develop their theory as a way of making visible and explicit the construction of a particular political subject at a particular, complex and differentiated location. A particularly important differentiation is the division between the public and the private introduced with modernity,[26] and so the theory must be on of articulation: not a unitary theory which attempts to explain patriarchy in terms of capitalism or vice versa, but a theory which attempts to explain the way different spheres modify and constitute one another.[27]

The materiality of experience

Dalla Costa and James are distinctive, among Marxist feminists, in theorizing the way a particular, multiply ramified, location gives rise to a particular experience. In this, they follow Marx in paying attention to the concreteness of compoundedness. As Marx puts it, 'the concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse.'[28] This insight has also been developed by non-Marxist theorists, indeed arguably has been developed more outside of the Marxist tradition. One particularly powerful example of the development of theory theough an attention to the concrete, material textures of complexity is Gloria Anzaldúa's theorisation of *mestizaje* in *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Anzaldúa theorises the particular situation of *la mestiza*, the inhabitant of borderlands, a

26 Dalla Costa and James, p. 24.

27 This point is made particularly clearly in Maya Gonzalez, 'The Gendered Circuit: Reading The Arcane of Reproduction', *Viewpoint Magazine* <http://viewpointmag.com/2013/09/28/the-gendered-circuit-reading-the-arcane-of-reproduction/> [accessed 18 September 2014]. This article also provides an excellent summary of the most detailed engagement with Marx to come from the autonomist feminist tradition, Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* (Brooklyn, NY.: Autonomedia, 1995).

28 Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage, 1973), p. 101.

situation defined by the crossings of the influences that meet at these borders, by 'by racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination'.[29]

Mestiza consciousness is plural, expansive and inclusive, and in that sense has a holistic, universalising tendency.[30] But it is also specifically situated; the borderlands Anzaldúa discusses are the borderlands between the US and Mexico, and the borderlands formed by that colonial division of the Americas. In other words, Anzaldúa presents a 'unity of the diverse' which depends on multiplying differences in all their particularity, not on dissolving them. We can see this concrete complexity in the way Anzaldúa presents the borderlands to us. The first chapter of *Borderlands/La Frontera* as a multiple history – of the American southwest, of Anzaldúa, of Chicanos – and further multiplicities proliferate as Anzaldúa tells these histories. The objects in these histories are diverse in scale and type: over ten pages we encounter the Aztecs, the US-Mexico border, Texas, the Anzaldúa family, agribusiness and migration.[31] And this already dizzying diversity is not enough: Anzaldúa adds another level of multiplicity by adopting, over the same ten pages, multiple modes of expression, including poetry, allegory, anecdote, secular history, mythology, song, economic analysis, and reportage.[32] The choice of

29 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Second edition (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), p. 99. Anzaldúa takes the term '*mestizaje*' from José Vasconcelas, but she does not use his concept so much as, in her words, her 'own "take off" on José Vasconcelas's idea' (Anzaldúa, p. 119.). For a discussion of some of the problems of Vasconcelas's uncritical celebration of *mestizaje*, as well as an assessment of the ways Anzaldúa pushes the term beyond these limitations, see Juliet Hooker, 'Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race', *Politics, Groups and Identities*, 2 (2014), 188–201 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2014.904798>. See also the distinction between Anzaldúa's ambivalence about *mestizaje* and postmodern celebrations of hybridity in Linda Martín Alcoff, 'The Unassimilated Theorist', *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 255–59 (p. 257).

30 Anzaldúa, p. 101.

31 Anzaldúa, pp. 23, 25, 27–9, 30, 31, 33–4.

32 Anzaldúa, pp. 23, 25, 26, 26, 27, 28, 32, 33. Another example of Anzaldúa's multiple modes, which because of its brevity is perhaps theoretically less rich, but rhetorically more powerful, is

what mode of description to use has theoretical consequences, and can be used to produce theoretical effects. In Anzaldúa's work, the theorisation of concrete complexity takes place *through* concrete complexity. The diversity of Anzaldúa's descriptions forcefully makes the point that there are borderlands that cannot be understood except by approaching them from multiple angles, while their richness in detail and location remind us of the concrete, material process that generate these appearances and are the precondition of our ability to theorise them.

Anzaldúa insists throughout *Borderlands/La Frontera* not just on the materiality of the theorist, but on the materiality of theory. 'Writing is a sensuous act', as she puts it; 'the spirit of the words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable.'[33] Anzaldúa insists, that is, on the specifically sensuous and phenomenal character of theoretical work, particularly the use of images and language. The connection between the image, its sensuous force, and the phenomenology of its expression is central to her work:

> My love of images – mesquite flowering, the wind, Ehécatl, whispering its secret knowledge, the fleeting images of the soul in fantasy – and words, my passion for the daily struggle to render them concrete in the world and on paper, to render them flesh, keeps me alive.[34]

This results from her broader concern with the materiality of language, expressed in the multiple meanings of her chapter, 'How to tame a wild tongue', where the tongue in question is Anzaldúa's literal tongue, her metaphorical tongue (her

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the paragraph on p. 51 which begins with an academic discussion of Catholic history and ends with Anzaldúa's mother's impassioned prayer for her son.

33 Anzaldúa, p. 93.

34 Anzaldúa, p. 20.

unruly speech) and her language, the language or languages she shares with other Chicanos.[35] There are thus multiple levels of materiality in play, from the geography in which Chicano Spanish is spoken (and the forces that prevent this speech) to the materiality of the organ of speech, the materiality that makes speech possible.

Here, I am particularly interested in the materiality of the mouth and a series of images through which Anzaldúa reminds us that the mouth which speaks does not just speak. Mouths also eat, and it is by no means a digression that Anzaldúa's chapter on language includes a discussion of the way we 'internalize identification' through 'food and certain smells'.[36] The mouth that speaks is also the mouth that ingests, which is the basis of Anzaldúa's inversion of the phallogocentric connection of the mouth to a language gendered masculine:

> The Olmecs associated womanhood with the Serpent's mouth, which was guarded by rows of dangerous teeth, a sort of *vagina dentata* …. Snake people had holes, entrances to the body of the Earth Serpent; they followed the Serpent's way, identified with the Serpent deity, with the mouth, both the eater and the eaten.[37]

In connecting language to the other materialities the mouth participates in, Anzaldúa accomplishes what Derrida calls 'a breach of philosophical identity', an undermining of the self-contained, self-sufficient monologue of the subject

35 Anzaldúa, pp. 75–86. The diversity of language is one of the most striking features of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, encompassing English, Nahuatl, and multiple registers of Spanish. For a discussion of this linguistic diversity, see Walter D. Mignolo, 'Linguistic Maps, Literary Geographies, and Cultural Landscapes: Languages, Languaging, and (trans)nationalism', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 57 (1996), 181–96.

36 Anzaldúa, p. 83. 'My mouth salivates at the thought of the hot steaming *tamales* I would be eating if I were at home.'

37 Anzaldúa, p. 56.

theorised in Western philosophy, a breach in which 'the bloodiness of a disseminated writing comes to separate the lips, to violate the embouchure of philosophy, putting *its* tongue into movement, finally bringing it into contact with some other code, of an entirely other kind'.[38] By paying attention to the sensuous materiality of language, Anzaldúa shows us how a phenomenological approach can undermine the ostentatious separateness of the subject implied by much western philosophy and political theory, and show us instead the subject's location at a concrete and multiply ramified location.

Deconstructive experiences

My focus on the location of experience, particularly when that location coincides with the speaking subject, may raise some questions for more post-structurally inclined readers, and rightly so. One of the major contributions of theory in the latter part of the 20th century is to have made untenable any appeal to experience as a foundation or unquestionable basis. Experience is always questionable, and the way I have been discussing experience so far in the paper does not deny that. In fact, as I will now try and argue, we are better able to question experience – to ask about its causes and effects – if we do not simply turn away from experience to something else, like discourse or language, but instead reconceptualise experience as part of a sensuous materialism.

Perhaps the most widely cited critic of a dependence of theory on experience is Joan Scott. Scott writes from the disciplinary perspective of history, lesbian and gay

38 Jacques Derrida, 'Tympan', in *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 148–68 (p. 157).

history more specifically, but her her influential article on experience is, or has widely been taken to be, an argument that applies much more generally against any use of the concept of 'experience' which takes experience as a foundation, 'as incontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation'.[39] Scott's first objection to taking experience as foundational is that to do so naturalizes differences of subject position. If our starting point is the experience of different subjects, we may not ask the prior question of how it is that different subjects come to be, and come to be in the position to experience differently;[40] indeed, if we take experience as an unquestionable or unanalysable foundation, we will not be *able* to articulate such questions. Scott's second objection to taking experience as foundational has to do with the consequences of such a theoretical move. Scott argues that histories founded on experience end up being universalist or universalising in a way that erases difference. If experience is foundational because every individual is the ultimate authority on their own experience, then the category of experience becomes a universal, something held in common among diverse subjects: although we may have different experiences, we all experience in the same way. Thus what we might call the historicity of experience – the social and structural forces that lead not just to different experiences, but different *modes* of experience – is neglected.[41]

As an alternative to taking experience as an unquestionable foundation, Scott advocates a study of how experience is constructed, and in particular the way in

39 Joan W. Scott, 'The Evidence of Experience', *Critical Inquiry*, 1991, 773–97 (p. 777).
40 Scott, p. 777.
41 Scott, pp. 783–5.

which discourse (understood as linguistic practice, construed broadly) constructs experience. This requires paying attention to 'complex and changing discursive processes',[42] which instead of treating experience as unanalysable requires 'attributing experience to discourse'.[43] Scott insists that this does not involve simply introducing language or discourse as a new foundation, which would be 'a new form of linguistic determinism'.[44] Instead, Scott wants an analysis of experience which refuses 'a separation between "experience" and language'.[45] Nonetheless, in the way she presents this interrelation, it does seem that language has a certain priority. Scott writes, for instance: 'Experience is a subject's history. Language is the site of history's enactment. Historical explanation cannot, therefore, separate the two. The question then becomes how to analyze language.'[46] A discussion of the inseparability of language and experience, that is, gives rise to a question about language alone. When Scott writes that 'the history of … concepts … becomes the evidence by which "experience" can be grasped',[47] the relationship seems rather one-sided: it is the history of concepts, that is to say, discourse, which grasps experience.

Scott's emphasis on language makes sense given the polemical intervention she was making into a field in which the value of experience was already widely accepted. However, it would be a shame if Scott's focus led us to read her article as a rejection of the concept of experience, with discourse taking its place. Indeed,

42 Scott, p. 792.
43 Scott, p. 787.
44 Scott, p. 793.
45 Scott, p. 793.
46 Scott, p. 793.
47 Scott, p. 796.

Scott does not call for us to reject the category of experience, but rather to analyse experience on the understanding that 'experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straightforward; it is always contested, and always therefore political.'[48] This kind of critical analysis of experience is something we can see in the authors I have been discussing so far, and which would be a critical part of the 'sensuous Marxism' I am attempting to develop. Thinking in terms of a critical analysis of the sensuous might provide a better way of understanding Scott's approach than her own characterisation of it as 'reading for "the literary"',[49] which overemphasises the linguistic. Scott demonstrates the method she has in mind in an attempt to read a crucial scene in Samuel Delaney's memoir in a way which would not reduce it to the testimony of a fixed authenticity. She draws attention to the way Delaney's writing itself calls into question the transparency of experience, endorsing another reading of the text which emphasises 'the properties of the medium through which the visible appears – here, the dim blue light, whose distorting, refracting qualities produce a wavering of the visible'.[50] This description emphasises something we might miss if we think too quickly or too narrowly in terms of language: that language is itself sensuous, that it traffics in affect and its use has its own phenomenological character. This imbrication of language and experience is the place where we can find an

48 Scott, p. 797.
49 Scott, p. 796.
50 Karen Swann, 'The Social and Political Construction of Reality' (unpublished), quoted in Scott, p. 794.

intersection between Anzaldúa and Scott, and the very different ways in which they call for a critical analysis of experience.

Linda Martín Alcoff points out that more complex and critical accounts of experience have a tradition in philosophy going back at least as far as Hegel, who does not take experience as foundational but 'understands experience as epistemically indispensable but never epistemically self-sufficient'.[51] Alcoff turns to the phenomenological tradition and particularly to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Alcoff finds Merleau-Ponty particularly helpful as an alternative to Scott's discourse focused account of the relationship between language and experience because he attempted to theorise 'the cognitive aspect of experience without separating mind from embodiment or reifying the object world as over and against subjective, corporeal experience'.[52] What is important to Alcoff is the dual attention that Merleau-Ponty pays to embodiment and to meaning; Alcoff finds in Merleau-Ponty a materialist phenomenology in which it is embodiment that makes experience meaningful. Experience is not self-sufficient or foundational because experiences happen to material bodies and so take place *at* a place: every experience has a 'constitutive relationship to the specificity of social location'.[53] But this embodied location cannot be subsumed under the term 'discourse', or explained purely by reference to language (as Scott sometimes seems to imply), because this embodied location itself enters into the explanation of language and of meaning: 'meaning is produced through the embodied actions of consciousness in

51 Linda Martín Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty and Feminist Theory on Experience', in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. by Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), pp. 251–71 (p. 254).
52 Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 257.
53 Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 260.

the world…. Social practice, and thus experience, is not the result of discourse, but the site where meaning is developed.'[54] Merleau-Ponty, and Alcoff, reject the idea that language imposes meaning on a prior, meaningless, non-discursive reality. 'Meaning and knowledge are not locked into language, but emerge at the intersection between gesture, bodily experience, and linguistic practice.'[55]

Although Alcoff does not quite phrase it this way, we could say that a materialist phenomenology is always already deconstructive: the (im)possibility which post-structuralists find in language is already present in experience. That is, the conditions of possibility for experience to exist at all prevent experience from self-evidence or from providing a secure foundation. Embodied experience is always experience within the material world, and, because of its dependence *on* the material world, is always incomplete:

> It is only because being is always being in the world, and not apart or over the world, that we can know the world. But it is also because being is always being in the world that our knowledge is forever incomplete, caught as it is inside, carried out within the temporal flux.[56]

Experience is always at the same time a reaching out within the world and a failure to grasp the world; and at the same time, a failure of the world to grasp *us*. Merleau-Ponty calls this ambivalent contact 'flesh', emphasising its connection to embodiment in general (i.e., an embodiment that exceeds the embodiment of the subject), and uses this concept to emphasise that, as Alcoff puts it, 'just as

54 Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 260.
55 Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 261.
56 Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 258.

whenever I touch an object so I too am touched by it, flesh is the experience of the world in me, a doubled sensation imperfectly represented by dualist language'.[57] Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, 'every relation with being is simultaneously a taking and a being taken, the hold is held, it is inscribed and inscribed in the same being that it takes hold of.'[58]

This ambivalence of contact, or the idea that the limit always deconstructs itself in the very act of limiting, is a theme Derrida explores throughout his work. I want to draw attention here to the text 'Tympan', in which Derrida critically discusses the metaphor of the ear as a way of thinking about how philosophy restlessly attempts to know its own limits. The ear is central because philosophy 'has always intended to hear itself speak',[59] and it is the ear which could hear philosophy speak to itself, or disrupt this monologue. We could assimilate this to Derrida's well-known critique of phonocentrism, the idea that spoken language provides a direct guarantee of authenticity or truth (the same guarantee, not coincidentally, that experience is supposed to provide in the approaches criticised by Scott). What I want to draw attention to, however, is the way in which, in making this criticism, Derrida repeatedly refers to the physicality of the ear. 'Indefatigably at issue is the ear, the distinct, differentiated, articulated organ that produces the effect of proximity'.[60] Paying attention to the materiality of the ear as organ disrupts that effect, the supposed proximity or immediacy of the voice.

57 Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 263.
58 Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, quoted in Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 264.
59 Derrida, p. 151.
60 Derrida, p. 156. See also the discussion of the hammer, stirrup and anvil bones (p. 157) and the labarynthine structure of the ear canal (p. 157).

Pheng Cheah points out that the materiality of language is crucial to its deconstruction, because matter 'depicts the opening up or overflowing of any form of presence such that it becomes part of a limitless weave of forces or an endless process or movement of referral'.[61] Combining this with Anzaldúa's discussion of the specifically sensuous materiality of language and Alcoff's identification of the 'open-ended, multilayered, fragmented and shifting'[62] character of embodied phenomenology, we can extend Derrida's argument to encompass a deconstructive materialist phenomenology. For Derrida, the ear drum (the tympanum) is the site of the deconstruction of the philosophical subject's attempt to talk only to himself; but the tympanum could also be the tongue, the retina, or the skin; the ambiguous, fleshy borders of any of the senses. The phenomenon of experience is itself split, as Anzaldúa above all points out, and it is this split in experience that makes possible the kind of critical phenomenology I am advocating here.

The tympanum, the tongue, the retina, the skin; or, as Derrida mentions, the otoliths, the small stones in our ears that provide our sense of balance.[63] This kinaesthetic sense is perhaps the most intimate sense, and so is the occasion for one of the most striking examples of critical phenomenology, which illustrates how far from simple self-authenticating evidence the discussion of appearance experience can be. Frantz Fanon's phenomenological account of his being a Black man, or more specifically a Black Martiniquan in metropolitan France, begins with the kinaesthetic, the 'corporal schema' or 'consciousness of the body':[64]

61 Pheng Cheah, 'Nondialectical Materialism', *Diacritics*, 38 (2008), 143–57 (p. 145) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/dia.0.0050>.
62 Alcoff, 'Merleau-Ponty', p. 258.
63 Derrida, p. 157.
64 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove

> I know that if I want to smoke I shall have to reach out my right arm and take the pack of cigarettes lying at the other end of the table …. And all these movements are made not out of habit but out of implicit knowledge. A slow composition of my *self* as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world – such seems to be the schema.[65]

The sense of the self here is built out of direct experience of the body as agent in the world. But in examining his own experience, Fanon does not find this directness, this 'real dialectic between my body and the world'.[66] Instead, interposed betweenhis self, his body, and the world, Fanon finds 'a historico-racial schema' formed 'by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories'.[67] Hence Fanon's phenomenological analysis is the analysis of a division, an anlysis of the historically and socially constructed racial schema that overdetermines and divides him from his own experience.[68]

In Fanon, that is, we find one of the clearest examples of an alternative to Scott's idea that experience is always a unifying category. For Fanon, on the contrary, the experience of the Black man is always divided from itself.[69] Furthermore, it is in the process of analysing this experience that Fanon demonstrates that experience is not a universal category that applies to everyone in the same way. It is specifically as a Black man that Fanon encounters the 'historico-racial schema', the stereotypes

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Press, 1967), p. 110.

65 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 111.

66 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 111.

67 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 111.

68 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 112.

69 I write 'Black man' deliberately, as the subject analysed in *Black Skin, White Masks* is, with a few specific exceptions, gendered male. Fanon does, however, provide a fascinating phenomenology of the divided experience of Algerian women in the resistance in 'Algeria Unveiled', in *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 35–68.

concocted by white people, as a barrier between himself, his body, and the world. You might object that the history of racism exists for white people too, and this is true, but it does not function in the same way; such stereotypes do not interpose themselves in the way of experience for white people.[70] Fanon provides us with another demonstration of the way in which experience is historicised and localised, and of how a phenomenological approach can illuminate the complexities of such a compounded location.

Towards a non-austere politics

Fanon's and Anzaldúa's work shows us that experience is a field striated by difference and power. Any attempt to develop a sensuous Marxism would have to remember this, but this is also at the heart of why a turn towards the sensuous would be a valuable way of enriching Marxist or post-Marxist theory. The way differences as sites of power unfold in the production of experiences is an area in which Marxism has often been lacking. The visibility of one particular difference – class – in Marx's work has led to a downplaying of other differences in the Marxist tradition. [71] Although much of Marx's work is concerned with showing how materially embedded differentials of power manifest themselves in the production of particular experiences, Marxists have often not considered the diversity of names under which such experiences might be spoken. The result has been that

70 See the discussion of the privilege of not seeing the barriers others come up against in Sara Ahmed, *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 175–6. This is not to deny that other histories might not place themselves in the way of experience for white people, or some white people; for an example concerning white women, see Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality', *Human Studies*, 3 (1980), 137–56.

71 This includes, arguably, Marxist uses of the category of experience. When Scott objects to the use of experience to flatten difference, it is the Marxist E. P. Thompson she gives as an example , pp. 784–5.

Marxists have often treated certain experiences as epiphenomena, rather than subjecting them to a materialist analysis. Post-Marxists have been more open to thinking about difference, but have often done so in a way which talks only about difference in general rather than particular differences. One example would be Laclau and Mouffe's discussion of politics as a process in which differences are articulated in a hegemonising strategy, where questions of *which* differences are articulated, and where these differences come from, are bracketed.[72] In abstracting away the details and the origins of differences, these post-Marxist theories become *austere*, they lose contact with the rich material complexity of the political struggles they had intended to analyse.

The various ways of looking at the complexity of experience (or looking at complexity *through* experience) that I have considered in this paper provide an alternative to this austere conception of politics. In different ways, Crenshaw, Dalla Costa and James, Anzaldúa, Alcoff and Fanon, begin with concrete experiences of subjects in political struggle, but they do not take these experiences as self-sufficient; on the contrary, it is through the analysis of these experiences that the power relations which construct them are unpicked and modes of resistance to them are espied. The analysis of experience I take to be at the centre of the phenomenological method, and an analysis of experience which pays attention to power relations would be at the centre of a *critical* phenomenology. But this analysis of experience is also not alien to Marx, from the discussion of the sensuous in his early work, to the reiteration of witness testimonies he employs in *Capital*. It

72 Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2001), p. 44.

is my hope that a reminder of the potential of a materialist phenomenology will also draw attention to these neglected elements of the sensuous in Marx. In doing so, this would allow theorists in the Marxist tradition to avoid the politically paralysing road of austerity.

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