Navigating citizenship and motherhood in and beyond Berlin

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ABSTRACT
This article centres on the predicaments of an East African migrant woman who resided in an Eastern EU country and is the mother of a child holding citizenship in the same EU country. Seeking asylum in Germany after having fled an abusive marriage, she found out that her residency in an EU country would most likely invalidate her asylum claim. Being classified as an EU migrant and withdrawing her asylum application, however, complicated her and her daughter’s access to welfare provision. Tracing this woman’s struggles in Germany and her onward migration trajectory to a country in the Arab world, offers a perspective on the consequences of legal complexity, challenging bureaucratic encounters, and missing support structures for a mother’s relationship with her daughter. Her negotiations of dominant parenting ideologies, attempts to create belonging, and striving to cope with racialization in the process of migration to and attempting to settle in Germany can be read as navigations of citizenship.

Introduction
Whenever I met Reem, her primary-school-aged daughter Layla was not far away. When walking in the street, she held her daughter’s hand firmly, when being indoors she rarely left her out of sight. Layla was the centre of Reem’s attention, and our conversations revolved almost exclusively around her. Reem wondered whether Layla was happy in Germany, whether she would find a good school for her and if her recent stubbornness could be a sign of traumatization caused by their abrupt flight from the Eastern European country where they had been living with Layla’s father. In this article, I present Reem’s struggles in Germany, as a migrant single mother originally from an East African country fleeing an abusive marriage, in order to shed light on the difficulties of categorizing her case with static legal labels and the consequences she faced regarding welfare provisions. Specifically, I am interested in the effects of categorizations on Reem’s position as a mother. This article follows her through several years of hardship in Germany, during which Reem tried to adapt and create acceptable living conditions for herself and her daughter, and ends with her decision to leave Germany and move to a country in the Arab world. Ultimately, this article situates her struggles, that is, her day-to-day
negotiations of belonging, wellbeing, childrearing and her daughter’s future, as navigations of citizenship. Here, I am inspired by Vigh’s (2009) suggestion to perceive social navigation as ‘the act of moving in an environment that is waver ing and unsettled’. The concept is particularly useful for contexts of prolonged instability and uncertainty capturing how people try to make their way through difficulties and direct themselves towards the future (ibid., 423). Due to her legal and ‘bureaucratic inscription’ (Horton 2020), Reem was in a position in which she had little control, and through the relationship to her daughter she was constantly caught between solving immediate challenges and those pertaining to her child’s future. She continuously tried to assess the here and now and anticipated subsequent future scenarios thinking through and applying different strategies and tactics to reach stability and safety. Importantly, Reem’s case also shows that there are limits to one’s capacity to control the surrounding and affecting social forces. Lems (2019) captures this existential experience in her conceptualisation of the dialectical inter-relationship of mobility and stasis. She describes it as a situation in which people sense that they are in charge of their own lives while simultaneously being acted upon when they find themselves thrown into situations over which they have little to no control.

By tracing Reem’s situation as a mother from an East African country, who, with her daughter, ran from her abusive husband – a cousin who lived, worked and had citizenship in an Eastern European country – I seek to shed light on the entanglement of legal status, mothering practices, and navigations of citizenship. Upon her arrival in Germany, Reem struggled to fit into state admission categories and criteria, which caused severe vulnerability and uncertainty for her and her daughter. Her migration trajectory, the decisions she made, and the labels she received, shaped her sense of being-in-the-world (Willen 2014), her mothering practices, and the relationship to her child. By taking in focus the dimensions of motherhood and legal status negotiations, I do not mean to reduce Reem’s multi-levelled struggle in these two factors. In fact, the challenges Reem encountered are based on a combination of various aspects, such as her legal status as a migrant, position as a single mother, socio-economic situation, nationality, marital status, and the racialized ways in which she was read in the German public sphere as a Black woman and practising Muslim.

One of my main aims is to point out that Reem encountered an immigration regime that did not provide her with the particular protection she needed. Furthermore, this article seeks to show that Reem’s experiences and practices as a mother shape her migration trajectory and that, vice versa, citizenship and migration regimes shape her experience of motherhood. Reem’s decisions are deeply informed by the crucial question of what might be best for Layla. Reflecting continuously on her daughter’s well-being, Layla’s experience of citizenship intersubjectively and interdependently forges her own. Following Reem’s migration trajectory offers a reading of citizenship as a claim to rights and protection, a sense of belonging and confidence (or the lack of both), an ongoing engagement with dominant discourses concerning childrearing and motherhood, and a burden. Thus, citizenship is not only understood as an institution but also as an embodied, lived experience. It can be read as an ambivalent force whose meaning is situated, context-dependent, in motion, intimate and embodied.
**Motherhood and citizenship**

In this article, I analyze navigations of citizenship, legal status and migration trajectory by focussing on the relationship between a mother and daughter. The connection between migrant motherhood and (racialized) citizenship has been made explicit in various recent studies (Bloch, this volume; Erel and Reynolds 2018; Ramsay 2017a; Longman, De Graeve, and Brouckaert 2013; Erel 2011). The analysis of the mother-daughter relationship and the consequent focus on a framework of intimacies sheds light on how migrants’ lives are governed and regulated through state control of personal relationships (Luibhéid, Rosi, and Stevens 2018). Furthermore, by foregrounding how legal categorizations affect intersubjective spaces, I aim to highlight ‘the shared dependencies and vulnerable intimacies between mother and child’ (Horton 2009). This perspective on an intimately experienced bond prioritises the existential and moral consequences (Willen 2014) of migration trajectories and navigations of citizenship. I thus bring together literature from the corpus of citizenship and critical migration studies and combine it with approaches stemming from the field of phenomenological anthropology.

In this article, motherhood is approached as a legal category, having resulted from giving birth, involving maternal rights and the mother’s custody of her child (Papadaki 2017). This legal category and corresponding rights are revocable and entangled with other rights and legal statuses. Furthermore, following Joseph (1993), motherhood is perceived as a relationship that is defined by relative fluid boundaries of the self, connectivity, and relationality. Joseph (1994) argues that it was common in the Lebanese families she engaged with during ethnographic research in the 1970s that people were intimately connected with the self of another ‘such that the security, identity, integrity, dignity, and self-worth of one is tied to the actions of others’. Moreover, I am inspired by Willen (2014) who stresses that in the relationship with their children, migrant mothers may find ‘a small zone of familiarity, comfort, meaning, and safety’ vis-à-vis the challenges of living in illegality. Yet, at the same time, I am aware that this relationship might be loaded with guilt and self-loathing, deeply haunted by the consequences of living in legal precarity, especially in contexts of extended separation (Longman, De Graeve, and Brouckaert 2013; Horton 2009, see also Suerbaum 2022b).

With its interest in the lived experiences of migrant motherhood, I accordingly follow a lived citizenship approach that centres on the everyday and traces how citizenship is ‘constituted at the intersection of relationships with significant and strange others’ (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020, 717). With its focus on day-to-day experiences, lived citizenship is often not a linear, ordered process but rather an experience marked by interruptions and ordinary emergencies, particularly in precarious contexts (Pascucci 2016). The approach attempts to pay tribute to the emotions associated with citizenship (Kallio, Wood, and Häkli 2020, 718). Studying how feelings attach themselves to citizenship involves an analysis of their uneven distribution ‘across gendered, racialised, sexualised, classed bodies’ (Fortier 2016, 1041). Thus, this article starts from the premise that social positioning defines access to the state and to citizenship (Werbner 1998, 7). Moreover, it is productive to regard citizenship as ‘simultaneously constituted through encounters with law and daily life’ (Staeheli et al. 2012, 630). This perception foregrounds the relevance of norms and systems of rules as well as how citizenship struggles ‘draw on a range of resources and claims beyond the law’ (ibid., 640). Furthermore, there is an
embodied dimension to struggles over citizenship and belonging, which Beasley and Beasley and Bacchi (2012, 107) seek to capture with the term ‘social flesh’, highlighting in particular the relevance of human embodied interdependence and interconnection. Mattes and Lang (2021) propose the term ‘embodied belonging’ to connect ‘social, moral, and political-legal aspects of belonging with its affective and sensorial dimensions’ (ibid., 4) showing how particular social conditions are inscribed in human bodies. They highlight how political and moral exclusion deprives people of the right to belong, causing declining well-being, changing self-conceptions and practices (ibid., 12).

Ultimately, the direct connection between mothering practices and navigations of citizenship becomes apparent when we consider a mother’s hopes for her daughter’s life, her orientation towards the future and ‘not-yet fulfilled promises’ (Khosravi 2017, 17) as ‘acts of citizenship’ (Isin and Nielsen 2008). The mother’s care for her child can be read as ‘embody[ing] an argument what a good life is and how such a good life comes into being’ (Povinelli 2011, 160) and this article traces the mother’s struggle to materialize this good life in and beyond Germany.

**Methods and context**

I met Reem in January 2018 when I was conducting ethnographic research in a refugee shelter, a legal-advice centre and in a project for migrant mothers with their children for sixteen months in two phases between December 2017 and March 2020. I engaged in participant observation, casual conversations, semi-structured interviews, and the collection of life stories. Most conversations and interviews took place in Arabic or English, a few occurred in German.

Forty-nine migrants with various legal statuses, mostly from the Arab world, the African continent and Afghanistan, participated in this research project. Most of them had arrived in Germany between 2015 and 2017. Among the group of migrants were twenty-two mothers. As for my encounters with Reem, I was present during several of her appointments with NGOs and the foreigners’ registration office, I visited her in her shared flat, and met her in cafés and public spaces. When she left Germany for another country, we stayed in touch via social media. Given the detailed description of her legal case that I provide in this article, Reem asked me to use pseudonyms and disguise as many identifying details as possible, such as place of origin and current whereabouts.

Being an (expectant) mother while conducting ethnographic research affected my encounters with Reem and other research partners significantly. Undertaking the role of a mother shapes interactions and relationships between researcher and participants (Dreby and Brown 2013). Indeed, topics pertaining to our experiences of motherhood and childrearing were recurring elements of my conversations with most migrant women including Reem. Nevertheless, while we occupied the same social role, this did not mean that our experiences as mothers were similar. In fact, motherhood for Reem and other migrant women was deeply marked and shaped by their limited legal protection, financial constraints, and uncertain future perspectives. In contrast, I, as a German white woman, embodied and brought to research encounters aspects and privileges of white, middle class motherhood (see also Suerbaum 2022b).
**Not fitting legal categories**

On a cold winter day in 2018, I was asked by one of the organizations with which I volunteered to accompany a woman to the local office of the social service. When I met them, Reem appeared thin, worn-out, sad and tired, and her daughter, Layla did not speak to me and barely made eye contact. She stayed close to her mother all the time. During the meeting with a social worker and after we had left the office together, I got a first impression of her situation: Reem was a woman in her thirties from an East African country. She had married a cousin and followed him to an Eastern European country where he lived and worked as a doctor. He held citizenship in that country and because of their marriage she received a permanent residence permit. She stayed with him for seven years and gave birth to their daughter, who also got citizenship in the East European country. Reem did not speak the local language, had only a few social contacts there, and did not work as a pharmacist despite her degree from her home country. She described the relationship with her husband as abusive, however, she insisted that he had never hurt Layla. When her husband began beating her in front of Layla, Reem ran away, taking their daughter with her. She came to Germany, applied for asylum, and was moved to a refugee shelter. When reaching out for help in a legal advice centre, Reem was informed that her application was most likely to be denied. If she insisted on the asylum application, she and her daughter would be sent back to the Eastern European country. Holding residency rights in that country, she was considered an EU migrant rather than an asylum seeker in Germany. Thus, Reem decided to stop the asylum process. When explaining to me her legal situation, she told me:

I stopped the process because it is legal that I live in Germany. I don’t need permission to live here. If I had continued the asylum application process, Germany would have sent me back to [the Eastern European country] and ask it to be responsible in accordance with the Dublin agreement.

Indeed, since she held a residence permit from an Eastern European country and this was the country of her first entry to Europe, it is considered responsible in dealing with the application for international protection, in accordance with the Dublin Regulation. Furthermore, Germany perceives the country of her former residence as a ‘safe third country’, which means that Reem would not be able to receive international protection in Germany. Her application would have been rejected, and a transfer to the Eastern European country would have been ordered. The granting of refugee protection in cases in which persecution emanates from an individual, as in this case, has for a long time been rare. Only in recent decades, has it been acknowledged that private persecution can become a ground for refugee protection, if there is no adequate protection in the country of origin (Frei 2018).

Reem’s decision to stop the asylum process because of its unlikely success caused extreme and immediate precarity. With the termination of her asylum request, the responsibility of the Berlin regional authority for refugee affairs, which provides asylum seekers with shelter and basic financial support in the time of the asylum process, came to an abrupt end. As the mother of a child with citizenship from an EU country and holder of a residence permit in that country, Reem had the right to reside in another EU member state for up to three months. However, if she wanted to stay longer, she would need to be
employed or self-employed in the respective host member state (Poptcheva 2014, 6). As an unemployed EU citizen one is only entitled to freedom of movement within the EU if there is sufficient protection through health insurance and one has sufficient means of subsistence (see § 4 FreizügG/EU). Hence, it is not only the asylum law that is insufficient to capture and respond to Reem’s situation, but the right to free movement for EU-citizens is also not applicable. Reem falls through the cracks of the law. In her words:

I really tried to seek asylum but they advised me to withdraw my application because I have residency in [an Eastern European country] which allows me to stay in Germany. Layla holds citizenship in [an Eastern European country]. That’s why Jobcenter didn’t help us. It doesn’t help someone from Europe. It helps only the refugees and this was a big problem before I found a job.

As the spouse and mother of EU-citizens and without work, Reem was not entitled to receive social benefits for the first five years of her stay in Germany (see § 7 Abs. 1 Satz 2 SGB II). She was merely eligible for supplementary benefits which meant that she could only receive financial support from Jobcenter – an entity in Germany responsible to provide social support for unemployed people, those who work but cannot cover their basic living costs, and recognized refugees – if she became economically active in Germany. In any case, Jobcenter usually does not provide shelter for clients. The particular entanglement of her personal status as a married mother, her political-legal status as an EU-resident, and economic status as an unemployed woman with care responsibilities determined Reem’s possibilities to approach the welfare state and consequently to settle in Germany.

With the termination of her asylum request, Reem could no longer stay in the refugee shelter and was threatened of being homeless and without financial means. On the day of our first meeting. Reem was only a few days away from the date her stay in the refugee shelter would terminate. Given the prospect of being homeless, Reem could barely sleep, was in a constant panic, felt extreme guilt about her daughter, and thought about giving up and returning to her husband. She needed pills to fall asleep and described herself as ‘extremely worried and fearful’ and ‘constantly afraid to lose her daughter’. In my presence, she repeatedly asked the social service case worker: ‘What are my rights? When am I allowed to call the police? How can I save my daughter and myself?’. Reem’s encounter with, and disappointment in, the law left her with a sense of existential uncertainty.

In order to stay in Germany and receive minimal social benefits as an EU-migrant, Reem needed to accept any kind of work as fast as possible. However, even though she had studied pharmacy, it was far from easy to find employment. Retrospectively, Reem described that one of the main obstacles she faced was that she did not have daycare for Layla.

When I came to Germany, I was alone and Layla was very young. There was no one with whom I could leave her to go to work. I waited until she grew a bit older and went to school. Then, I could find a part-time job. I couldn’t find a full-time job because there was no one who could look after Layla after school. Later on, we had the problem of getting German residency. I was told that one of the conditions of getting German residency is to have a full-time job.
It was a combination of her personal, economic and political status and the legal categorization she experienced which created an immediate threat of homelessness, impoverishment, and a feeling of deep insecurity.

In the past decades, immigration selection criteria in global northern states prefer migrants ‘who can serve neoliberal regimes of capital accumulation and forms of social life that valorise entrepreneurship, individual responsibility, privatizations, and reduced or non-existent social spending’ (Luibhéid 2013, 28). Thus, citizenship is reduced to the individual’s civic duty to minimize their burden on society and to become ‘an entrepreneur of her/himself’ (Ong 2003, 12). ‘Good’ citizenship and moral worth have come to be related to being economically self-reliant (Erel 2011). Ideals of citizenship that privilege neoliberal forms of subjectivity and consequent policies and regulations create cases of failure as the other of the ‘good citizen’ (Anderson 2013). Migrants’ worthiness is intimately linked to this image of the ‘good citizen’ and includes civic performances of economic, cultural, linguistic, ideological and religious deservingness (Borrelli 2020, 6). Reem does not meet the standards of ‘good citizenship’ as a single mother who is unable to engage in ‘real work’, due to the care commitments she has for her child. This is closely related to a lack of recognizing unpaid care work as actual labour and contribution to society (Fuller, Kershaw, and Pulkinham 2008, 158). Ultimately, Reem’s case shows that ‘debates around reproductive merit and race, border protection, and immigration cannot be read separately from one another’ (Ramsay 2016, 330).

Eventually, once Layla went to school, Reem picked up part-time work in a logistics company. It was with vehemence and a sense of pride that she described her position as a worker in Germany:

I paid the rent by myself. I didn’t receive money from Jobcenter. I was working and paying taxes and insurances and I wasn’t a burden on Germany. I provided for myself.

Clearly, the discourses surrounding migration policies, which demand economic utility from migrants in return for legal inclusion, deeply informed Reem’s thinking and acting. Being able to conform, at least partially, to the image of the ‘good citizen’ gave Reem a sense of satisfaction and pride. Reem was not the only migrant who emphasized on her economic utility to Germany in conversations with me: I realized that, apart from proving that one was not a liability for Germany, becoming active in the labour market or preparing one’s entry into the labour market were strategies to moderate a life full of contingencies (Suerbaum 2021).

**Relatedness and citizenship**

The birth of a child has legal consequences and affects a migrant mother’s relationship with the state (Shandy 2008, 813). While a successful asylum claim is a status women acquire for themselves, residency through childbearing is derivative, in need of regular renewal, and at risk of being lost (Luibhéid 2013, 78). It was because of the intimate ties (Luibhéid, Rosi, and Stevens 2018) to her husband and child that Reem was constituted in Germany as a particular kind of citizen. In fact, through her intimate ties, Reem experienced ‘both the inclusive and exclusive face of citizenship’ (Bonjour and de Hart
2021, 3), since she was simultaneously perceived as belonging as the mother of an EU citizen, and unworthy of full inclusion because of her role as an unemployed single mother with care responsibilities.

As outlined above, her position as an EU migrant and mother to an EU citizen rather than as refugee had various disadvantages. Once, when we talked about the differences between the refugee label and its consequences vis-à-vis the categorization as an EU migrant, Reem said: ‘refugees who have a degree in pharmacy have an easy time in Germany. They are put on the right track and the German courses are paid for them’. Reem referred to the integration and language courses that are free of charge for asylum seekers in Germany who receive asylum, refugee protection or subsidiary status. They are also entitled to measures supporting their entrance into the labour market (Will 2018). Compared to their situation, Reem felt disadvantaged and alone on her journey into the German labour market and eventually picked up work in a logistics company unrelated to her educational background.

At the same time, however, being an EU migrant also had positive aspects, in Reem’s eyes. Once, I accompanied her and her daughter to the foreigners’ registration office to reschedule an appointment. Reem informed me proudly that we would have to go to the fourth floor where matters of EU citizens were administered. In the lower floors, issues of asylum seekers and refugees were dealt with and this was where, according to Reem, ‘the treatment was very bad’, because the Germans preferred EU citizens over any other group of foreigners. Showing the ambivalence she felt about categories and labels, Reem ascribed value to an EU-migration background compared to refugee status. She showed her awareness that labels and categories signify the individual’s worth in a given context and justify differential treatment (see also Farinha, this volume).

Another time the question of classification came to the fore was when Reem remembered how, upon her arrival in Germany, other asylum seekers advised her to burn their passports and papers and claim in front of the German authorities that she and her daughter were refugees directly arriving from their home country in East Africa, and how she refused:

I can’t imagine deleting who I am, where I have been and what I worked for. My degree and my daughter are the most important parts of my life. I don’t want to destroy my daughter’s future. She can easily stay in Europe and live a good life here.

Reem and other migrants were aware of the legal complexity that defined their cases and they knew that they could strategize to an extent regarding the documents they obtained, hid or presented (see also Richter-Devroe, this volume). However, Reem did not have the flexibility and room to navigate radically, because of her position as a mother caught up in kin relations, duties, and legal responsibilities. Her capacity to respond to the legal system was defined by her non-singular relational subjectivity. Thus, the meanings of citizenship and legal status and the day-to-day life conditions stemming from legal status regulations were mediated and experienced through the relationship to her daughter. Especially after having moved on from Germany to a country in the Arab world, what dominated Reem’s thoughts was the value of her daughter’s citizenship in an EU country:

The decision of leaving Germany was not good because Layla’s future as an EU citizen is there and not here in the third world countries. From all perspectives, health, education, entertainment, everything is better in Germany.
What attaches itself to citizenship for Reem is hope for a stable future for her daughter and an evaluation of living conditions in different parts of the world. Thus, citizenship becomes a promise (Fortier 2016) and an orientation towards the future (Khosravi 2017, 17) deeply entangled with a mother’s hope and desire to realize the best life possible for her daughter. Reem navigates, assesses and evaluates and this process is predominantly defined by her position as a mother and what she perceives as her motherly responsibilities.

**Encountering racism**

After the closure of her asylum claim, Reem found temporary shelter in a women’s refuge which gave her a period of ease and relaxation. However, after a few months, Reem was told that she could not stay in the women’s refuge – an institution for women who face threats to their lives. Even though the head of the refuge acknowledged that Reem was in need of help, her case was not classified as ‘severe enough’, since it was not considered life threatening. When I asked Reem, after she shared with me the devastating news, why she did not push to be treated as a vulnerable case, by emphasizing on the fact that she was a single mother without income in Germany being confronted with the threat of homelessness, she insisted that she was not a single mother because she still shared custody with Layla’s father. She told me firmly: ‘When they asked if her father gives her money every month, I said: “yes, he does and he also visits her once per month”’. In fact, Reem made sure that Layla did not lose contact to her father and did not bear him a grudge. She wanted to keep his image in her daughter’s eyes intact for as long as possible and organized monthly meetings of father and daughter. Eventually, after an incident that Reem never explained in full detail, she was given notice that she had three days to leave the women’s refuge for violating the strict house rules. This meant that she was again close to homelessness. In the turmoil that defined the last days of her stay in the women’s refuge, she felt treated unfairly by the refuge’s staff, searched in panic for a temporary solution to avoid homelessness, and eventually contacted her husband who transferred money to her so that she could sublet a room for a couple of months. After a short stay in a shared student flat in the summer of 2018, Reem and her daughter moved into a shared flat provided by an NGO that supports women in troubled times.

Looking back at her life in Germany, Reem described the inability to find a flat as one of the main reasons that eventually motivated her to leave: ‘We suffered from being between shelters. It wasn’t a healthy environment to raise a child. This was one of the reasons why I left Germany’. As a migrant woman with child-care responsibilities, Reem was confronted with the ‘existential experience of contested temporal being, in which a person cannot reconcile the contemporary circumstances of their life with their aspirations for, and sense of, the future’ (Ramsay 2020, 388). Given the urgency of being faced with almost immediate homelessness, it was not only the future that concerned and deeply scared Reem, in fact, her and her daughter’s lives had become rooted in an extremely insecure present and it was barely possible to think and plan beyond the daily struggle of finding temporary shelter.
It was not only the issue of finding long-term, stable and affordable accommodation that bothered Reem, another recurrent problem that defined her life in Germany was racism. Reflecting on her experiences as a Black, Muslim woman, she said shortly before she decided to leave in summer 2019:

One problem I face is racism against Muslims and people with dark skin. The law is good and it protects us. However, the society is full of hatred and psychological diseases. And this makes the decision to leave Germany easy.

Apart from being a main motivator to imagining a life outside of Germany, racism, discrimination and xenophobia affected her childrearing practices. Reem was a pious woman who prayed regularly and observed Ramadan. Nevertheless, she stopped wearing the veil in Germany and wore a plain hat instead. She clearly did not feel comfortable without the veil and mentioned repeatedly that she wished to be able to wear what would make her feel good. It disturbed her ability to raise her daughter in accordance with her values, since Reem believed that she had to be a role model for her daughter and that children would only adhere to certain rules and morals if they saw their parents living them, too. However, after having experienced several racist attacks in the streets, she exchanged the veil for a hat hoping that she would be left in peace if she could not be directly read as a Muslim. It was her main fear that Layla might suffer when seeing her mother being attacked and helpless. Reem had to weigh between two unfavourable situations: turning away from the religious education she would like to provide to her daughter and potential exposure to racist attacks in front of her child. Identifying another coping strategy against racism, she expressed the wish to enrol in a German course, since she believed that knowing German would reduce the hostility towards her. She also wanted to learn karate and asked where and how she could sign up for classes. Towards the end of her stay in Germany, I noticed that Reem had adopted an additional coping mechanism: she kept walks outside to an absolute minimum and only left the flat for work or if she needed to drop or pick up Layla. As it is the case for Feldman-Savelsberg’s (2016, 165) interlocutors in Germany – Cameroonian migrant mothers – daily experiences of different forms of discriminations, such as stares and comments, take their toll on the women’s emotional and practical lives. In such a climate, creating a sense of self-esteem in children can be read as resisting racism, an aspect of political engagement, and as citizenship practices (Erel 2011).

Apart from the public sphere, Reem also described her encounters with the German bureaucracy as inherently defined by racism:

Racism put more pressure on me, especially in the foreigners’ registration office. They treat foreigners as if they are not humans. They put more psychological pressure on us. And we are already stressed with troubles and have enough of them. Going to the foreigners’ registration office was a big tragedy and most of the time I came back crying the whole day. And once I kept crying for one week because of the bad treatment I had experienced there. Most of the employees in the German authorities are racist. I think they employ racist people on purpose so foreigners give up and leave Germany.”

Racialization is institutionalized in migration regimes through laws and states’ treatment of migrants (Erel and Reynolds 2018; Luibhédí 2013). In particular, immigration law enforcement is deeply informed by racial prejudice and privilege (Gazzotti 2021, 278). In migrants’ contact with migration regimes, the role of immigration bureaucrats is crucial:
they are the ‘implementers of the politics of belonging’ (Pellander 2021) and give the state a face. Encounters with bureaucrats can evoke deeply emotional responses, as Reem described. In fact, ‘race is made “real”’ (Nayak 2017, 289) during Reem’s appointments at the foreigners’ registration office and caused strong bodily reactions. In her contact with the German immigration authorities, Reem felt ‘the emotional weight of [her] categorical location’ (Bonilla-Silva 2019).

The ‘diffuse shadow of the state’ (Feldman-Savelsberg 2016) was not only palpable in the form of racist encounters in the foreigners’ registration office, but also affected Reem’s parenting practices. During one of our first meetings, she stopped me in the middle of the street, after her daughter had begged for a lemonade and Reem had finally given in, and asked: ‘do you know this office that takes away children?’, referring to the youth welfare office in Germany. Continuing with our walk, Reem gave context to her concerned question: Layla had explicit wishes and food choices and Reem did not always want to give in. She felt that it was part of her duty as a mother to educate her child and teach her that she could not get everything she saw in a shop and that she should eat healthy food. However, at the same time, she was uncertain as to whether this parenting style was acceptable in Germany. She was terrified that the youth welfare office could take away her daughter and her ideas about this state authority were fuelled by other migrant women’s stories. Several scholars have centred on the fear of disciplinary action by the state among racialized immigrants and refugees (Ramsay 2017b; Feldman-Savelsberg 2016; Horton 2009). Horton (2009) show how standards of children’s health and hygiene become a matter of citizenship and exclusion based on parents’ assumed foreignness, backwardness, irresponsibility and lack of self-governance. The relationship between parents and children becomes the battleground on which a parent’s otherness is judged (see also Suerbaum 2022b). This has also been pointed out by Ramsay (2017b), who stresses that African refugee mothers resettled in Australia needed to prove their deservingness ‘through adherence to implicit and explicit expectations of behaviour’. Reem feared that she misunderstood these expectations, did not interpret German approaches to childrearing correctly, and that it could have the consequence of state interference, if she kept raising her daughter in the way she saw fit. Indeed, child welfare systems not only serve to protect the welfare of children, but also function ‘to govern women to conform to expectations of, and anxieties over, white neoliberal motherhood’ (Ramsay 2016, 320). Motherhood is thus turned into a ‘disciplining institution of biopolitics’ through which the potential and ability of integration is judged (Ramsay 2017b, 766).

The responsibility for Layla in a life full of uncertainty evoked in Reem immense anxieties and feelings of guilt. She was always worried about her daughter, was continuously haunted by remorse, and wondered whether she made the right decision for Layla. She agonized over the question whether she should go back to the country of her former residence in order to provide a stable environment for her daughter in which she could be in close contact with her father. In fact, the impulse to give up and return to Layla’s father came with every challenge Reem faced revealing her willingness to put Layla’s well-being above her own wishes and desires. The intensity of worries for her daughter and the form of symbiotic relationship she had with her came to the fore when she told me once how she usually developed a fever when her daughter got ill. Another time Reem put her close relationship with Layla into words, when she confessed that she needed help with her upbringing. Layla was extremely shy and did not talk to anyone in
Germany and Reem believed that this was because of the omnipresence she had in her daughter’s life: ‘She sleeps when I sleep, she wakes up when I wake up, she is sad when she sees me sad and happy when I am happy’. While Willen (2014) celebrates the choice of a mother to lead a life that is purposely not guided by negative emotions, because of her daughter’s presence, despite the challenges she faces in her daily life as an unauthorized migrant in Israel, she reflects less on feelings of insecurity about one’s choices, anxieties, and self-loathing that can accompany such a struggle, as I observed in Reem’s thinking and acting as a mother. Realizing the best possible life for her daughter now and in the future included constant reflection and questioning of the decisions she had made in the past. Reem’s worries about her daughter’s well-being and behaviour show how the child’s experience of citizenship in the form of a ‘continuous feedback loop’ (Horton 2009) intersubjectively shapes and guides Reem’s perception and decisions.

Negotiating belonging with and without citizenship

It was in the spring of 2019 that Reem decided to visit her parents in her home country for the first time in eight years. Upon her return to Germany a month later, she recounted:

the people in [my home country] told me: “you look so weak and tired. You look like someone who escaped from war and yet you are coming for a visit to a war-torn country from Germany – a country everyone dreams of”.

Reem’s family and relatives reflected to her that her body showed the marks and signs of her struggle for a stable life in Germany. Her legal status and its consequences can thus be understood as engraining themselves in her body, thus becoming the medium expressing her social distress (Bendixsen 2020, 496). Apart from her relatives’ concerns about her bodily appearance, Reem remembered that during the trip to her homeland she felt a sense of self-worth again. This sense materialized during a visit to a restaurant with her relatives. Reem’s aunt requested reseating four times. When Reem expressed her surprise, her aunt responded that this was her country and that she had the right to do whatever she wanted. While experiencing and observing belonging and entitlement during her stay in her home country, Reem commiserated with the many refugees from neighbouring countries whom she recognized in her surroundings.

I saw the fear in their eyes when they were working for [the people in my home country]. They live and work in a country that is not theirs. In this moment, I felt thankful that I still had a home country. Others don’t have that privilege anymore. Even if my country is poor, there is a place that I can call home, where I have all the rights, and no one can send me away.

The way she spoke about her home country shows what Reem missed in Germany: self-confidence, fearlessness, a sense of belonging and the knowledge that she had the right to stay and to do what she saw fit in the public sphere. These feelings attached themselves to citizenship in a context Reem called home but were absent, and merely something longed for, in Germany. There was an embodied experience of absence in Germany that caused Reem’s visible fatigue and exhaustion. In contrast, being in her home country revitalized a sense of embodied belonging (Mattes and Lang 2021).
Shortly after her return to Germany, Reem received the news that her brother in her home country passed away unexpectedly. She felt that problems were piling up in front of her: her flatmate had made trouble and threatened to kill her in front of her daughter, and because of her grief for her brother she was unable to work, sleep or eat and got a sick note from a doctor, which caused problems with her employer. Moreover, a man she had met on a bus had begun stalking her. This man had presented himself as an experienced migrant who had knowledge of bureaucratic processes in Germany. Initially, Reem had been thankful for his support in dealing with the German authorities and had gladly opened up. Finally, she still felt challenged raising her daughter alone. Layla was still reluctant to speak to others and had problems at school. Reem, due to her lack of German skills, was unable to help her, engage with her teachers, and supervise her homework. Additionally, Reem feared that being in Germany meant that she could not avoid exposing Layla to ‘the wrong people’. She noticed that Layla was close with the flatmate that had caused trouble and because of living what she considered an unstable life in Germany, Reem worried that Layla felt attracted to ‘people with a bad character’.

Being confronted with a plethora of challenges, she started to consider moving to a country in the Arab world together with her parents where they could live from the income they would receive from renting out their flat in their home country, while Reem could study for a master's degree and start working as a pharmacist. Her parents would be able to help her in raising her daughter. Yet, Reem felt paralysed and unable to make this decision. On the one hand, she wanted Layla to graduate from school in Germany, because she hoped that this would give her the chance to study at a German university one day. On the other hand, however, Reem feared that her unstable and insecure life in Germany had a negative impact on Layla's childhood. Eventually, in the summer of 2019, Reem informed me that she had made a decision: she, Layla and her parents would move together to a country in the Arab world.

Only then, after she had decided to leave Germany, did she feel that some things were about to fall into place: Because she had worked in Germany, she was eligible for financial support from Jobcenter which had been denied to her at the beginning of her stay. She received a back payment of child allowance. Moreover, she was about to get a document to access state-subsidized housing which meant she would be able to move out of the shared flat provided by the NGO. Furthermore, she had met a man she liked. Given the new stability she sensed right before her departure from Germany and the fear of yet another move into the unknown, she felt that she could only leave by giving herself a safety net: if things would not work out for her and Layla at her next destination, she would come back to Germany within six months before her permanent EU residence would terminate. Reem’s efforts to create strategies, signposts and safety nets shows the level of uncertainty she was dealing with in the German system as a single migrant mother. At the same time, it indicates the level of responsibility she had to handle and the knowledge that such a decision would have life-long implications for her and for Layla’s life.
Conclusion

This article centred on a woman’s migration experience in Germany and the effects of her legal categorization. It prioritized the woman’s intimate ties to her daughter showing, on the one hand, how motherhood defines the woman’s legal and migration trajectory and, on the other hand, how mothering practices and the relationship with the daughter are affected by the mother’s struggle to belong. I argue that through the relationship with the child, the day-to-day reflection of their situation and well-being in Germany, and the striving to materialize a settled, stable life, the mother engages in navigations of citizenship. The mother’s reluctance, ambivalence, and the ubiquitous back and forth of her thoughts reveal that navigating an unstable terrain, in her case, excluding legal and bureaucratic inscriptions and their consequences, is neither linear nor getting easier with time. It remains an utterly demanding, ongoing process violating intimate interconnectedness and embodied belonging.

In this article, citizenship has proved to have various meanings, associations and affects. For instance, EU citizenship is taken to guarantee a good future for the child, yet, it is also a concrete hindrance and burden for the family’s presence in Germany where they are ineligible for welfare benefits after their arrival. Furthermore, citizenship is a concrete, palpable force; yet, it is also an unnamed background noise creating a particular atmosphere, that is, ease and comfort in the woman’s home country and uncertainty and stress in Germany. Navigating citizenship proves to have an embodied dimension, since the struggle to belong causes different somatic and emotional reactions, changing behaviour and self-consciousness. Encounters with racialization processes are tangible and visceral aspects of the embodied dimension of navigations of citizenship.

The woman’s perceptions and practices of motherhood define her migration trajectory. Her worries, fears and ideas of ‘good mothering’ encourage and often dominate her decision-making processes. Moreover, it is the daughter’s experience of citizenship that intersubjectively shapes the mother’s perceptions and strategies. Witnessing the woman’s navigation of citizenship, the relationship to her child can be read as a life buoy, a map and a fixed star stabilizing, securing, directing and leading her negotiations of belonging. Yet, tracing this woman’s experiences as a migrant mother in Germany also shows that being in relation with significant others can easily transform into a troubled sea or a rough wind, challenging and complicating smooth navigation. Ultimately, Reem’s journey and experiences show that legal categories of citizenship produce contrasting affects and that the ambivalences of citizenship and legal categorizations are experienced tangibly in relations, that is, in the intersubjective bond to significant others.

Notes

1. The same fieldwork formed the basis for (Suerbaum 2021, 2022a, 2022b).
2. Regulation (EU) No 604/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013, Article 12.
3. The law defines a ‘safe country of origin’ as a country in which it can be assumed, because of the democratic system and the general political situation, that governmental persecution is not expected and that the state is able to protect an individual from non-state persecution (BAMF).
4. International asylum law leaves it ambiguous as to whether women comprise a persecuted ‘social group’ in states where law enforcement fails to act in cases of domestic violence (see Mullally 2011).

5. Certain policies in Germany seek to protect (expectant) mothers, such as accordance of maternity protection (Mutterschutz) and the issuing of a temporary suspension of deportation for illegalized migrants in this period (see Suerbaum 2021; Castañeda 2010; 2008). To my knowledge, Reem did not benefit from policies and regulations pertaining to her situation as a mother.

6. While asylum seekers who receive asylum, refugee protection and subsidiary status are indeed supervised and advised during their regular appointments with Jobcenter, this does not mean however that they can enter the German labour market easily. The validation process for foreign qualifications can be lengthy, since foreigners might need to obtain national licences (e.g. if they want to work as medical doctors and teachers), and they need to have strong language skills (Mozetič 2018).

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