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ORIENTATIONS

Toward a Queer Phenomenology

Sara Ahmed

What does it mean to be oriented? How is it that we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn? If we know where we are, when we turn this way or that, then we are oriented. We have our bearings. We know what to do to get to this place or to that. To be oriented is also to be oriented toward certain objects, those that help us find our way. These are the objects we recognize, such that when we face them, we know which way we are facing. They gather on the ground and also create a ground on which we can gather. Yet objects gather quite differently, creating different grounds. What difference does it make what we are oriented toward?

My interest in this broad question of orientation is motivated by an interest in the specific question of sexual orientation. What does it mean for sexuality to be lived as oriented? What difference does it make what or who we are oriented toward in the very direction of our desire? If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence, of how we inhabit spaces, and who or what we inhabit spaces with. After all, queer geographers have shown us how spaces are sexualized.¹ If we foreground the concept of “orientation,” then we can retheorize this sexualization of space as well as the spatiality of sexual desire. What would it mean for queer studies if we were to pose the question of the orientation of sexual orientation as a phenomenological question?

This article takes up the concept of orientation to put queer studies into a closer dialogue with phenomenology. I offer an approach to how bodies take shape through tending toward objects that are reachable, which are available within the bodily horizon. Such an approach is informed by my engagement with phenomenology, though it is not properly phenomenological; one suspects that a queer phenomenology might enjoy this failure to be proper. Still, you might ask, as oth-

ers have, why start with such an engagement? I start here in part because phenomenology makes orientation central in the very argument that consciousness is always directed toward objects and hence is always worldly, situated, and embodied. Given this, phenomenology emphasizes the lived experience of inhabiting a body, or what Edmund Husserl calls “the living body” (*Leib*).² Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as phenomenology emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready to hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.

A queer phenomenology might turn to phenomenology by asking not only about the concept of orientation *in* phenomenology, but also about the orientation *of* phenomenology. This article hence considers the significance of the objects that appear in phenomenological writing, as orientation devices. At the same time, to queer phenomenology is also to offer a queer phenomenology. In other words, queer does not have a relation of exteriority to that with which it comes into contact. A queer phenomenology might find what is queer within phenomenology and use that queerness to make some rather different points. Phenomenology, after all, is full of queer moments, moments of disorientation, which involve not only “the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our own contingency and the horror with which it fills us.”³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives an account of how these moments are overcome, as bodies are reoriented in the “becoming vertical” of perspective.⁴ A queer phenomenology might involve a different orientation toward such moments. It might even find joy and excitement in the horror.

In offering a queer phenomenology, I am indebted to the work of feminist scholars who have engaged creatively and critically with the phenomenological tradition. This includes feminist philosophers of the body such as Sandra Bartky, Judith Butler, Rosalyn Diprose, Elizabeth Grosz, Iris Marion Young, and Gail Weiss.⁵ Through the corpus of this work, I have learned to think about not only how phenomenology might universalize from a specific bodily dwelling but also what follows “creatively” from such a critique, in the sense of what that critique allows us to think and to do. Feminist philosophers have shown us how social differences are effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others and have emphasized the intercorporeal aspects of bodily dwelling.

In considering the oriented nature of such dwelling points, my aim in this article is not to prescribe what form a queer phenomenology should take. Other people will stage this encounter from quite different starting points. After all, both queer studies and phenomenology involve diverse intellectual and political histo-

ries, which cannot be stabilized as objects that can then be given to the other. My task instead is to work from the concept of orientation as it has been elaborated within phenomenology and to make that concept itself the site of an encounter. What happens if we start from this point?

Orientations

If we start with the point of orientations, we find that orientations are about starting points. As Husserl describes in the second volume of *Ideas*:

If we consider the characteristic way in which the Body presents itself and do the same for things, then we find the following situation: each Ego has its own domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives the things in a certain orientation. The things appear and do so from this or that side, and in this mode of appearing is included irrevocably a relation to a here and its basic directions.⁶

Orientations are about how we begin, how we proceed from here. Husserl relates the questions of this or that side to the point of here, which he also describes as the zero point of orientation, the point from which the world unfolds and which makes what is “there” over “there.” It is from this point that the differences between this side and that side matter. It is also only given that we are here at this point, that near and far are lived as relative markers of distance. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann also describe orientation as a question of one’s starting point: “The place in which I find myself, my actual ‘here,’ is the starting point for my orientation in space.”⁷ The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the here of the body and the where of its dwelling.

At what point does the world unfold? Or at what point does Husserl’s world unfold? Let us start where he starts, in his first volume of *Ideas*, which is with the world as it is given “from the natural standpoint.” Such a world is the world that I am in, where things take place around me, and are placed around me: “I am aware of a world, spread out in space endlessly.”⁸ Phenomenology asks us to be aware of the “what” that is around. After all, if consciousness is intentional, then we are not only directed toward objects, but those objects also take us in a certain direction. The world that is around has already taken certain shapes, as the very form of what is more and less familiar.

For me real objects are there, definite, more or less familiar, agreeing with what is actually perceived without being themselves perceived or even intu-

itively present. I can let my attention wander from the writing-table I have just seen or observed, through the unseen portions of the room behind my back to the veranda, into the garden, to the children in the summer-house, and so forth, to all the objects concerning which I precisely “know” that they are there and yonder in my immediate co-perceived surroundings. (101)

The familiar world begins with the writing table, which is in the room: we can name this room as Husserl’s study, as the room in which he writes. It is from *here* that the world unfolds. He begins with the writing table and then turns to other parts of this room, those which are, as it were, behind him. We are reminded that what he can see in the first place depends on which way he is facing. The things behind him are also behind the table that he faces: it is self-evident that he has his back to what is behind him. A queer phenomenology, I wonder, might be one that faces the back, which looks “behind” phenomenology, which hesitates at the sight of the philosopher’s back. So having begun here, with what is in front of his front and behind his back, Husserl then turns to other spaces, which he describes as rooms and which he “knows” are there. These are spaces insofar as they are already given to him as places by memory. These other rooms are co-perceived: they are not singled out; and they do not have his attention, even when he evokes them for the reader. They are made available to us only as background features of this domestic landscape.

In Husserl’s writing the familiar slides into the familial; the home is a family home, a residence inhabited by children. They are in the summer house, he tells us. The children evoke the familial only through being “yonder,” being at a distance from the philosopher who in writing about them is doing his work. They are outside the house, yet part of its interior, near the veranda, which marks the edge, a line between what is inside and what is outside. In a way, the children who are yonder point to what is made available through memory or even habitual knowledge: they are sensed as being there, behind him, even if they are not seen by him at this moment in time. The family home provides, as it were, the background against which an object (the writing table) appears in the present, in front of him. The family home is only ever co-perceived, and allows the philosopher to do his work.

By reading the objects that appear in Husserl’s writing, we get a sense of how being directed toward some objects and not others involves a more general orientation toward the world. The objects that we direct our attention toward reveal the direction we have taken in life. If we face this way or that, then other

things, and indeed spaces, are relegated to the background; they are only ever co-perceived. Being oriented toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background but also might depend *on the work done to keep his desk clear*, that is, the domestic work that might be necessary for Husserl to turn the table into a philosophical object. Some things are relegated to the background to sustain a certain direction, in other words, to keep attention on the what that is faced. Perception involves such acts of relegation that are forgotten in the very preoccupation with what it is that we face.

We can pose some simple questions: Who faces the writing table? Does the writing table have a face, which points toward some bodies rather than others? When reading Husserl, one could think of other writers who have written about writing. Consider Adrienne Rich's account of the process of writing:

From the fifties and early sixties, I remember a cycle. It began when I had picked up a book or began trying to write a letter. . . . The child (or children) might be absorbed in busyness, in his own dream world; but as soon as he felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys. And I would feel his wants at such a moment as fraudulent, as an attempt more-over to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself.⁹

We can see from the point of view of the mother, who is also a writer, a poet, and a philosopher, that giving attention to the objects of writing, facing those objects, becomes impossible: the children, even if they are behind you, literally pull you away. This loss of time for writing feels like a loss of your own time, as you are returned to the work of giving your attention to the children. We could point here to the political economy of attention: there is an uneven distribution of attention time among those who arrive at the writing table, which affects what they can do once they arrive (and of course, many do not even make it). For some, having time for writing, which means time to face the objects on which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available, given the ongoing labor of other attachments. So whether we can sustain our orientation toward the writing table depends on other social orientations, which affect what we can face at any given moment in time.

We can consider perhaps how one's background affects what it is that comes into view, as well as how the background is what allows what comes into view to be viewed. In *Ideas*, the relegation of unseen portions and the rooms to background, as the fringe of the familiar, is followed by a second act of relegation.

For although Husserl directs our attention to these other rooms, even if only as the background to his writing table, he also suggests that phenomenology must “bracket” or “put out of action” what is given, what is made available by ordinary perception.¹⁰ If phenomenology is to see the table, he suggests, it must see without the natural attitude, which keeps us within the more and less familiar. By putting aside what is familiar, the world that unfolds from the writing table, Husserl begins again and reorients our attention to the table as that which is seen:

I close my eyes. The other senses are inactive in relation to the table. I have now no perception of it. I open my eyes and the perception returns. The perception? Let us be more accurate. Under no circumstances does it return to me individually the same. *Only the table is the same*, known as identical through the synthetic consciousness, which connects the new experience with the recollection. The perceived thing can be, without being perceived, without my being aware of it even as a potential only (in the way of actuality, as previously described) and perhaps even without itself changing at all. But the perception itself is what it is within the steady flow of consciousness, and is itself constantly in flux; the perceptual now is ever passing over into the adjacent consciousness of the just-past, a new now simultaneously gleams forth, and so on.¹¹

This argument suggests the table as object is given, as the same, as a givenness that holds or is shaped by the flow of perception. Indeed, this is precisely Husserl's point: the object is intended through perception. As Robert Sokolowski describes: “When we perceive an object, we do not just have a flow of profiles, a series of impressions; in and through them all, we have one and the same object given to us, and the identity of the object is intended and given.”¹² Given this, the story of the sameness of the object involves the specter of absence and nonpresence. For despite the self-sameness of the object, I do not see it as the self-same. I never see it as such; what it is cannot be apprehended, as I cannot view the table from all points of view at once. The necessity of moving around the object, to capture more than its profile, shows that the other sides of the object are unavailable to me at the point from which it is viewed, which is why it must be intended.

Husserl then makes what is an extraordinary claim: only the table remains the same. The table is the only thing that keeps its place in the flow of perception. I want to make a rather queer connection between Husserl's thesis of intentionality and the concept of “the behind.” Husserl points to the spectrality of sameness: if the table is the same, it is only given that we have conjured its missing sides. We

could translate this as: if the table is the same, it is only given we have conjured its behind. What is behind the object for me is not only its missing side, but also its historicity, the conditions of its arrival.

Husserl suggests that inhabiting the familiar makes things into backgrounds for action: they are there, but they are there in such a way that I do not see them. The background is a “dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality.”¹³ Rather than thinking of this table as being *in* the background, or the background being *around* the table, I want us to consider how the table itself may *have* a background. We can recall the different meanings of the word *background*. A background can refer to the “ground or parts situated in the rear” (such as the rooms in the back of the house) or to the portions of the picture represented at a distance, which in turn allows what is in the foreground to acquire the shape that it does, as a figure or object. Both of these meanings point to the spatiality of the background. We can also think of background as having a temporal dimension. When we tell a story about someone, for instance, we might give information about their background: this meaning would be about what is behind, where “what is behind” refers to what is in the past, or what happened “before.” We might speak also of family background, which would refer not just to an individual’s past but to other kinds of histories, which shape an individual’s arrival into the world, and through which the family itself becomes a social given. Indeed, events can have backgrounds: a background can be what explains the conditions of emergence or an arrival of something as the thing that it appears to be in the present.

So if phenomenology is to attend to the background, it might do so by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness, which is after all the presentation of a side. If we do not see (but intend) the behind of the object, we might also not see (but intend) its background in this temporal sense. To see what the “natural attitude” has in its sight, we need to face an object’s background, redefined as not only the conditions for the emergence of the object (we might ask: how did it arrive?) but also the act of perceiving the object, which depends on the arrival of the body that perceives. The arrivals must coincide if the object is to be faced. The background to perception involves such intertwining histories of arrival, which would explain how Husserl got near enough to his table for it to become both the object on which he writes and the object around which his phenomenology is written. After all, phenomenology has its own background, its own conditions for emergence, which might include the very matter of the table.

Bodily Orientations

We can stay with the matter of the table. We already know how Husserl's attention wanders: from the writing table, and only then toward other spaces, the darkness of the room's unseen portions. What he sees is shaped by a direction he has already taken, a direction that shapes what is available to him, in the sense of what he faces and what he can reach. What is in front of him also shapes what is behind him, what is available as the background to his vision. So his gaze might fall on the paper, given that he is sitting at the writing table and not at another kind of table, such as the kitchen table.¹⁴ Such other tables would not, perhaps, be the right kinds of tables for the making of philosophy. The writing table might be the table for him, the one that would provide the right kind of horizontal surface for the philosopher. As Ann Banfield observes in her wonderful book *The Phantom Table*: "Tables and chairs, things nearest to hand for the sedentary philosopher, who comes to occupy chairs of philosophy, are the furniture of that 'room of one's own' from which the real world is observed."¹⁵ Tables are near to hand, along with chairs, as the furniture that secures the very place of philosophy. The use of tables shows us the very orientation of philosophy in part by showing us what is proximate to the philosopher's body, or what the philosopher comes into contact with.

In other words, we are oriented toward objects as things we "do things" with. It is no accident that Martin Heidegger poses this question of occupation, of what it is that we do, by turning to the table. In *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Heidegger contrasts two ways of describing tables. In the first model, the table is encountered as "a thing in space—as a spatial thing."¹⁶ He evokes Husserl's description of "the table" for sure, though Husserl is not named at least at this point. As Heidegger puts it, "Aspects show themselves and open up in ever new ways as we walk around the thing" (68). Heidegger suggests that this description is inaccurate not because it is false (the table might after all appear in this way) but because it does not describe how the significance of such things is not simply "in" the thing but a "characteristic of being" (67–68). For Heidegger what makes the table what it is, and not something else, is what the table allows us to do. What follows is one of the richest phenomenological descriptions of the table as it is experienced from the viewpoints of those who share the space of its dwelling:

What is there in *the* room there at home is *the* table (not "a" table among many other tables in other rooms and houses) at which one sits *in order* to write, have a meal, sew, or play. Everyone sees this right away, e.g. during a visit: it is a writing table, a dining table, a sewing table—such is the pri-

mary way in which it is being encountered in itself. This characteristic of “in order to do something” is not merely imposed on the table by relating and assimilating it to something else which it is not. (69)

In other words, what we do with the table, or what the table allows us to do, is essential to the table. So we do things “on the table,” which is what makes the table what it is and take shape in the way that it does. *The table is assembled around the support it gives.* It provides a surface to gather around: Heidegger describes “my wife” sitting at the table and reading, and “the boys” busying themselves at the table. The “in order to” structure of the table, in other words, means that the people who are at the table are also part of what makes the table be itself. Doing things at the table is what makes the table itself and not some other thing. We might note that what bodies do at the table involves gendered forms of occupation.

Given this, how the table matters relates to not only how it arrives but what it allows us to do. When Husserl brackets the writing table and sees the table, he is bracketing his own occupation, or what it is that he does on the table. Such action involves the intimate co-dwelling of bodies and objects. This is not to say that bodies are simply objects alongside other objects, given they are the point from which the world unfolds. As Merleau-Ponty shows, the body is not “merely an object in the world,” rather “it is our point of view in the world.”¹⁷ In the second volume of *Ideas*, Husserl attends to this body, what he calls the lived body, and to the intimacy of touch. The table returns, as one would expect. And yet, what a different table we find if we reach for it differently. In this moment, it is the hands rather than the eyes that reach the table: “My hand is lying on the table. I experience the table as something solid, cold, smooth.”¹⁸ Husserl conveys the proximity between bodies and objects, as things that become more than matter insofar as they can be sensed and touched, insofar as they make and leave impressions. Bodies are “something touching which is touched.”¹⁹

Phenomenology hence shows how objects and others have already left their impressions on the skin surface. The tactile object is what is near me or what is within my reach. In being touched, the object does not stand apart; it is felt by the skin and even on the skin. In other words, we perceive the object as an object, as something that has integrity and is in space, only by haunting that very space, by coinhabiting space, such that the boundary between the coinhabitants of space does not hold. The skin connects as well as contains. The nonopposition between the bodies that move around objects, and objects around which bodies move, shows us how orientations involve at least a two-way approach, or the “more than one” of an encounter. Orientations are tactile and they involve more than

one skin surface: in approaching this or that table, we are also approached by the table, which touches us when we touch it: as Husserl shows us, the table might be cold and smooth, and the quality of its surface can be felt only once I have ceased to stand apart from it. Neither the object nor the body have integrity in the sense of being the same thing with and without each other. Bodies as well as objects take shape through being oriented toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the cohabitation or sharing of space.

Bodies are hence shaped by contact with objects and others, with “what” is near enough to be reached. They may even take shape through such contact or take the shape of that contact. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do and in turn affects what bodies can do. The nearness of the philosopher to his paper, his ink, and his table is not simply about where he does his work, and the spaces he inhabits, as if the “where” could be separated from what he does. The “what” that he does is what puts certain objects within reach. Orientations are about the directions we take that put some things and not others in our reach.

We can stay with the example of the table. As an object it also provides a space, which itself is the space for action, for certain kinds of work. As we know, Husserl’s table in the first volume of *Ideas* is the writing table, and his orientation toward this table, and not others, shows the orientation of his philosophy, even at the very moment this table disappears. Around the table, a horizon or fringe of perception is “dimly” apprehended. The horizon is what is “around,” as the body does its work. As Don Ihde puts it, “Horizons belong to the boundaries of the experienced environmental field. Like the ‘edges’ of the visual field, they situate what is explicitly present, while in phenomena itself, horizons recede.”²⁰ The horizon is not an object that I apprehend: I do not see it. The horizon is what gives objects their contours and even allows such objects to be reached. The objects are within my horizon; it is the act of reaching “toward them” that makes them available as objects for me. The bodily horizon shows the “line” that bodies can reach toward, what is reachable, by also marking what they cannot reach. The horizon marks the edge of what can be reached by the body. The body becomes present as a body, with surfaces and boundaries, in the showing of the limits of what it can do.

Phenomenology helps us explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures. Both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, after all, describe bodily horizons as “sedimented histories.”²¹ This model of history as bodily sedimentation has been taken up by social theorists as well as philosophers. For Pierre Bourdieu, such histories are described as the *habitus*, as “systems of durable, transposable, dispositions,”²² which integrate past experiences through the very “matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions”

that are necessary to accomplish “infinitely diversified tasks” (83). For Judith Butler, it is precisely how phenomenology exposes the sedimentation of history in the repetition of bodily action that makes it a useful resource for feminism.²³ What bodies “tend to do” are effects of histories rather than being originary.

We could say that history “happens” in the very repetition of gestures, which is what gives bodies their dispositions or tendencies. We might note here that the labor of such repetition disappears through labor: if we work hard at something, then it seems “effortless.” This paradox—with effort it becomes effortless—is precisely what makes history disappear in the moment of its enactment. The repetition of work is what makes the signs of work disappear. It is important that we think not only about what is repeated, but also about how the repetition of actions takes us in certain directions. We are also orientating ourselves toward some objects more than others, including physical objects (the different kinds of tables), but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgment, and objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives. I might orient myself around writing, for instance, not simply as a certain kind of work (although it is that, and it requires certain objects for it to be possible) but also as a goal: writing becomes something that I aspire to, even as an identity (becoming a writer). So the object we aim for, which we have in our view, also comes into our view, through being held in place as that which we seek to be: the action searches for identity as the mark of attainment (the writer becomes a writer through writing). We can ask what kinds of objects bodies tend toward in their tendencies, as well as how such tendencies shape what bodies tend toward.

Bodies hence acquire orientation by repeating some actions over others, as actions that have certain objects in view, whether they are the physical objects required to do the work (the writing table, the pen, the keyboard) or the ideal objects that one identifies with. The nearness of such objects, their availability within my bodily horizon, is not casual: it is not just that I find them there, like that. Bodies tend toward some objects more than others, given their tendencies. These tendencies are not originary; they are effects of the repetition of “tending toward.”

Becoming Straight

What then does it mean to be oriented sexually? We might suggest first that such orientations take time. We can paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir by starting with the following point: “One is not born, but becomes straight.”²⁴ What does it mean to posit straightness as about becoming rather than being? That such a question

is askable reminds us that we should not approach the question of orientation simply as a spatial question. We might note here that dwelling refers not only to the process of coming to reside, or what Heidegger calls “making room,”²⁵ but also to time: to dwell on something is to linger, or even to delay or postpone. If orientation is a matter of how we reside or how we clear space that is familiar, then orientations also take time. Orientations allow us to take up space insofar as they take time. Even when orientations seem to be about which way we are facing in the present, they also point us toward the future. The hope of changing directions is always that we do not know where some paths may take us: risking departure from the straight and narrow, makes new futures possible, which might involve going astray, getting lost, or even becoming queer.

The temporality of orientation reminds us that orientations are effects of what we tend toward, where the “toward” marks a space and time that is almost, but not quite, available in the present. In the case of sexual orientation, it is not then simply that we have it. To become straight means not only that we have to turn toward the objects given to us by heterosexual culture but also that we must turn away from objects that take us off this line. The queer subject within straight culture hence deviates and is made socially present as a deviant. What is present to us in the present is not casual: as I have suggested, we do not just acquire our orientations because we find things here or there. Rather, certain objects are available to us because of lines that we have already taken: our life courses follow a certain sequence, which is also a matter of following a direction or of being directed in a certain way (birth, childhood, adolescence, marriage, reproduction, death), as Judith Halberstam has shown us in her reflections on the “temporality” of the family and the expenditure of family time.²⁶ The concept of orientations allows us to expose how life gets directed through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. Such points accumulate, creating the impression of a straight line. To follow such a line might be a way to become straight, by not deviating at any point.

The relationship between following a line and the conditions for the emergence of lines is often ambiguous. Which one comes first? I have always been struck by the phrase “a path well trodden.” A path is made by repeatedly passing over ground. We can see the path as a trace of past journeys, made out of footprints, traces of feet that tread and in treading create a line on the ground. When people stop treading, the path may disappear. When we see the line of the ground

before us, we tend to walk on it, as a path clears the way. So we walk on the path as it is before us, but it is only before us as an effect of being walked upon. A paradox of the footprint emerges. Lines are both created by being followed and are followed by being created. The lines that direct us, as lines of thought as well as lines of motion, are in this way performative: they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions, of routes and paths taken, but they are also created as an effect of this repetition. To say that lines are performative is to say that we find our way, we know which direction we face, only as an effect of work, which is often hidden from view. So in following the directions, I arrive, as if by magic.

Directions are then about the magic of arrival. In a way, the work of arrival is forgotten in the very feeling that the arrival is magic. The work involves following directions; we arrive when we have followed them properly: bad readings just will not get us there. Following lines also involves forms of social investment. Such investments promise return (if we follow this line, then this or that will follow), which might sustain the very will to keep going. Through such investments in the promise of return, subjects reproduce the lines that they follow. Considering the politics of the straight line helps us rethink the relationship between inheritance (the lines that are given as our point of arrival into familial and social space) and reproduction (the demand that we return the gift of the line by extending that line). It is not automatic that we reproduce what we inherit or that we always convert our inheritance into possessions. We must pay attention to the pressure to make such conversions. We can recall here the different meanings of the word *pressure*: the social pressure to follow a certain course, to live a certain kind of life, and even to reproduce that life, can feel like a physical press on the surface of the body, which creates its own impressions for sure. We are pressed into lines, just as lines are the accumulation of such moments of pressure, or what we can call “stress points.”

I want to consider the stress or work of becoming straight by telling an anecdote. I am seated again at a table. This time it is the dining table, a table around which a “we” gathers. Such tables function quite differently to the writing table: not only because they support a different kind of action but also because they point toward collective gatherings; they depart from the solitary world of the writer. The dining table is a table around which bodies cohere through the mediation of its surface, sharing the food and drink that is on the table. This role of the table as mediating between bodies around it to form a gathering is described by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition*: “To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it.”²⁷ Gatherings are not neutral, but directive. In gathering we may be required to follow specific lines. If families

and other social groups gather around tables, what does this gathering do? What directions do we take when we gather in this way?

So yes, I am seated at a table, and the family gathers around it. We are eating and talking and doing the work of family, as the work of domesticity that tends toward bodies. My sister makes a comment, which pulls me out of this mode of domestic inhabitation. She says: "Look, there's a little John and a little Mark." She laughs, pointing. John and Mark are the names of my sisters' husbands and their children's fathers. We look, and we see the boys as little versions of their fathers.

On hearing the utterance, we all follow her hand, which points toward its object. So by following the direction of her hand, we turn to face the object of her utterance: two little boys sitting side by side, near the table, on the lawn. We are directed by gestures, which means we give our attention to the same object; my sister's pointing is also a gift, which makes the object shared. Everyone laughs at the comment. So yes, we see two sons as little versions of their fathers, and the effect is both serious and comical. One darker and one fairer boy, one darker and one fairer husband. The difference between the boys becomes a shared inheritance, as if the difference is established by following the paternal line. In such gatherings, family gatherings, shared laughter, which is often about returning laughter with laughter, involves sharing a direction, or following a line. The repetition of such gestures makes a point, as a point that creates its impressions, for those seated at the table.

This example encourages me to rethink the work of the straight line. It shows us the relation between two lines, the vertical and horizontal lines of conventional genealogy. Let us think about the family tree, which is made out of the vertical lines that "show" the blood tie, the line of descent that connects parents and children, and the horizontal lines that show the tie between husband and wife and between siblings.²⁸ The hope of the family tree, otherwise known as the wish for reproduction, is that the vertical line will produce a horizontal line, from which further vertical lines will be drawn. The point where the lines meet is after all the very point of reproduction.

The utterance "Look, there's a little John and a little Mark" expressed this hope as a wish by drawing a line from father to son. The boy appears in line by being seen as reproducing the father's image and is even imagined as a point in another line, one that has yet to be formed, insofar as he may become a father to future sons. Such a narrative of becoming father means the boy's future is already imagined as following the father's direction: such a direction requires forming a horizontal line (marriage) from which future vertical lines will follow. One can

think of such an utterance as performing the work of alignment: the utterance positions the child as the not-yet adult, by aligning sex (the male body) and gender (the masculine character) with sexual orientation (the heterosexual future). Through the utterance, these not-yet-but-to-be subjects are brought into line, by being given a future in line with the family line. What intrigues me here is not so much how sex, gender, and sexual orientation can get out of line, which they certainly can and do, but how they are kept in line, often through force, such that any nonalignment produces a queer effect.

We can reconsider how one becomes straight by reflecting on how an orientation, as a direction (taken) toward objects and others, is made compulsory, recalling Rich's model of "compulsory heterosexuality."²⁹ Subjects are required to tend toward some objects and not others, as a condition of familial as well as social love. For the boy, to follow the family line, he "must" orient himself toward women as loved objects. For the girl, to follow the family line, she "must" take men as loved objects. It is the presumption that the child must inherit the life of the parent that requires the child to follow the heterosexual line.

Of course, when we inherit, we also inherit the proximity of certain objects, as that which is available to us, as given within the family home. These objects are not only material: they may be values, capital, aspirations, projects, and styles. Insofar as we inherit that which is near enough to be available at home, we also inherit orientations, that is, we inherit the nearness of certain objects more than others, which means we inherit ways of inhabiting and extending into space. The very requirement that the child follow a parental line puts some objects and not others in reach. So the child tends toward that which is near enough, whereby nearness or proximity is what already "resides" at home. Having tended toward what is within reach, the child acquires its tendencies, which in turn bring the child into line. Bodies become straight by tending toward straight objects, such that they acquire their tendencies, as an effect of this tending toward. Sexual orientations are also performative: in directing one's desire toward some others, and not other others, bodies in turn acquire their shapes.

The objects that are near enough can be described as heterosexual objects, within the conventional family home. As Butler argues, "Heterosexual genders form themselves through the renunciation of the *possibility* of homosexuality, as a foreclosure *which produces a field of heterosexual objects* at the same time as it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love."³⁰ We can see from this example that the nearness of love objects is not casual: we do not just find objects there, like that. The very requirement that the child follow a parental line puts some objects and not others in reach. Compulsory heterosexuality pro-

duces a “field of heterosexual objects” by the very requirement that the subject give up the possibility of other love objects.

It is interesting to speculate what Butler might mean by “the field of heterosexual objects.” How would such objects come into view through acts of foreclosure? We might consider the significance of the term *field*. Defined as an open or cleared ground, a field that contains objects would hence refer us to how certain objects are made available by clearing, through the delimitation of space as a space for some things rather than others, where things might include actions (doing things). Heterosexuality in a way becomes a field, a space that gives ground to, or even grounds, heterosexual action through the renunciation of what it is not, and also by the production of what it is. As Michel Foucault showed us so powerfully, “there is an incitement to discourse,” where objects are spoken and made real through the very demand to give them a form, rather than through prohibition.³¹ Or we might say that both demands and prohibitions are generative; they create objects and worlds. Heterosexuality is not then simply in objects, as if it could be a property of objects, and it is not simply about love objects or about delimiting who is available to love, although such objects do matter. Nor would heterosexual objects simply refer to objects that depict heterosexuality as a social and sexual good, although such objects also do matter. Rather, heterosexuality would be an effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, of how objects are arranged to create a background.

We can return to Husserl and his table. Recall that Husserl turns toward his writing table, as that which he faces, which in turn puts other things behind him. In turning toward the writing table, some other things also come into view, as things in the background around the object: they are the inkwell, the pencil, and so forth. These objects are near what he faces, though they do not quite have his attention. The nearness of such objects is a matter of coincidence; their arrivals have to be timed in a certain way, although it is no coincidence that they are what he sees. The action (writing) is what brings things near other things at the same time that the action (writing) is dependent on the nearness of things. What is at stake here is not only the relation between the body and “what” is near, but also the relation between the things that are near.³² That the inkwell is on the table, for instance, has something to do with the fact that the inkwell and the table point in the same direction. Orientations are binding as they bind objects together. What puts objects near depends on histories, on how things arrive, and on how they gather in their very availability as things to do things with.

The field of heterosexual objects is produced as an effect of repeating a certain direction, which takes shape as “the background” and which might be

personalized as “my background,” as that which allows me to arrive and to do things. So yes, I think of my family home. Certain objects stand out; they have my attention. I think again of the kitchen and of the dining room. Each room contains a table around which the family gathers: one for casual eating, one for more formal occasions. The kitchen table is light wood, covered by a plastic cloth. Around it, we gather, every morning and evening. We all have our own place. Mine is the end of the table opposite my father. My sisters are both to my left, my mother to my right. Each time, we gather in this way, as if the arrangement is securing more than our place. For me, inhabiting the family is about taking up a place already given. I slide into my seat and take up this place.

The dining room table takes the form of the room. It is a formal table, with dark and polished wood. It is covered with a lace tablecloth, which covers the wood, but only just, so the dark wood is visible underneath. We use this table when guests visit. Shaped by what we do with it, the table takes shape through what we do: it is less marked, as it is used less. Its polished surfaces reflect to ourselves and to others the “reflection” of the family, the family as image and as imagined. The impression of the table shows us that the family is on show. The room always feels cold and dark. And empty. And yet, it is full of objects. Behind the table, if you are facing the room from the open door, is the sideboard. On it, objects gather. One object stands out, and comes to mind. It is a fondue set. I do not ever remember using that set. But it is an object that matters, somehow. It was a wedding gift. It is a gift given to mark the occasion of marriage, the public event that entails giving the heterosexual couple gifts, which gives the woman as a gift to the man, and even gives the couple as a gift to others, those who act as witnesses to the gifts given.³³ This object acquires its force, through this relay of gifts, which gives form to the couple or which makes the couple a given and a gift.

And then, covering the walls, are photographs. The wedding photograph has the prime position. Underneath are the family pictures, some formal (taken by photographers), others more casual. Everywhere I turn, even in the failure of memory, reminds me how the family home puts objects on display that measure sociality in terms of the heterosexual gift. That these objects are on display, that they make visible a fantasy of a good life, depends on returning such a direction with a “yes,” or even with gestures of love, or witnessing these objects as one’s own field of preferred intimacy. Such objects do not simply record or transmit a life; they demand a return. Not only do they demand a return, but there is also a demand that we return to them, by embracing such objects as embodiments of our own histories, as the gift of our own lives. The nearness of such objects (tables, fondue sets, photographs) takes us back, to the family background, as well as side-

ways, through the proximity each has to the other, as what the family takes place around. They gather, as family gatherings. They gather on tables, and on other objects with horizontal surfaces, which clear the ground.

In the conventional family home what appears requires following a certain line, the family line that directs our gaze. The heterosexual couple becomes a point along this line, which is given to the child as its inheritance or background. The background then is not simply “behind” the child: it is what the child is asked to aspire “toward.” The background, given in this way, can orient us toward the future: it is where the child is asked to direct its desire by accepting the family line as its own inheritance. There is pressure to inherit this line, a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care, which pushes the child along specific paths. We do not know what we could become without these points of pressure, which insist that happiness will follow if we do this or we do that. And yet, these places where we are under pressure do not always mean we stay on line; at certain points, we can refuse the inheritance, points that are often lived as breaking points. We do not always know what breaks at these points.

Heterosexuality is not then simply an orientation *toward* others, it is also something that we are oriented *around*, even if it disappears from view. It is not that the heterosexual subject has to turn away from queer objects in accepting heterosexuality as a parental gift: compulsory heterosexuality makes such a turning unnecessary (although becoming straight can be lived as a turning away). Queer objects, which do not allow the subject to approximate the form of the heterosexual couple, may not even get near enough to “come into view” as possible objects to be directed toward. The body acts on what is within reach, which extends the reach of this body yet keeps other objects out of reach.

Queer Slants

We can see that the tending toward certain objects and not others produces what we could call “straight tendencies,” a way to act in the world that presumes the heterosexual couple as a social gift. Such tendencies enable action, in the sense that they allow the straight body, and the heterosexual couple, to extend into space. The queer body becomes from this viewing point a failed orientation: the queer body does not extend into such space, as that space extends the form of the heterosexual couple. The queer couple in straight space might look like they are slanting, or oblique. The queer bodies, if they gather around the table, might even seem out of line. What happens if we consider the queer potential of the oblique?

It is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty gives an account of the world becoming oblique:

If we so contrive it that a subject sees the room in which he is, only through a mirror which reflects it at an angle at 45° to the vertical, the subject at first sees the room “slantwise.” A man walking about in it seems to lean to one side as he goes. A piece of cardboard falling down the door-frame looks to be falling obliquely. The general effect is “queer.”³⁴

So yes, in *Phenomenology of Perception* queer moments do happen, as moments when the world no longer seems the right way up. Things appear on a slant. They fall obliquely. Merleau-Ponty then asks how the subject’s relation to space is reoriented: “After a few minutes a sudden change occurs: the walls, the man walking around the room, and the line in which the cardboard falls become vertical” (289). This reorientation, which we can describe as the becoming vertical of perspective, means that the queer effect is overcome and objects in the world no longer appear as if they were off-center or slantwise. In other words, Merleau-Ponty considers how subjects straighten any queer effects and asks what this tendency to see straight suggests about the relationship between bodies and space. He answers this question with a model of space not as determined by objective coordinates (such that up and down exist independently of one’s bodily orientation) but as being shaped by the body’s purposefulness; the body does things, and space hence takes shape as a field of action: “What counts for the orientation of my spectacle is not my body as it in fact is, as a thing in objective space, but as a system of possible actions, a virtual body with its phenomenal ‘place’ defined by its task and situation. My body is wherever there is something to be done” (291).

By implication, the queer moment, in which objects appear slantwise, and the vertical and horizontal axes appear out of line, must be overcome not because such moments contradict laws that govern objective space but because they block bodily action: they inhibit the body, such that it ceases to extend into phenomenal space. So although Merleau-Ponty is tempted to say that the “vertical is the direction represented by the symmetry of the axis of the body” (291), his phenomenology instead embraces a model of bodily space, in which spatial lines line up only as effects of bodily actions on and in the world. In other words, the body straightens its view, in order to extend into space.

One might be tempted, in light of Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of such queer moments, to reconsider the relation between the normative and the vertical axis. The normative can be considered an effect of repeating bodily actions over time,

which produces what I have called the bodily horizon, a space for action, which puts some objects and not others in reach. The normative dimension can be re-described in terms of the straight body, a body that appears in line. Things seem straight (on the vertical axis) when they are in line, which means when they are aligned with other lines. Rather than presuming the vertical line is simply given, we would see the vertical line as an effect of this process of alignment. Think of tracing paper. Its lines disappear when they are aligned with the lines of the paper that has been traced: you simply see one set of lines. If all lines are traces of other lines, then this alignment depends on straightening devices, which keep things in line, in part by holding things in place. Lines disappear through such alignments, so when things come out of line with each other the effect is “wonky.”

In other words, for things to line up, queer or wonky moments are corrected. We could describe heteronormativity as a straightening device, which rereads the “slant” of queer desire. There is another anecdote that comes to mind. I arrive home. I park my car and walk toward the front door. A neighbor calls out to me. She mumbles some words, which I cannot hear, and then asks: “Is that your sister, or your husband?” I don’t answer and rush into the house. It is, one has to say, quite an extraordinary utterance. There are two women, living together, a couple of people alone in a house. The first question reads the two women as sisters, as placed alongside each other on a horizontal line. By seeing the relationship as one of siblings, the question constructs the women as alike, as being like sisters. In this way, the reading both avoids the possibility of lesbianism and also stands in for it, insofar as it repeats, in a different form, the construction of lesbian couples as siblings: lesbians are sometimes represented as if they have a family resemblance. The fantasy of the likeness of sisters (which is a fantasy in the sense that we search for likeness as a sign of a tie) takes the place of another fantasy, that of lesbians as being alike.

But the move from the first question to the second question, without any pause or without waiting for an answer, is really quite extraordinary. If not sister, then husband. The second term rescues the speaker by positing the partner not as female (which even in the form of the sibling risks exposure of what does not get named), but as male. The figure of “my husband” operates as a legitimate sexual other, a partner with a public face. Of course, I could be making my own assumptions in offering this reading. The question could have been a more playful one, in which “husband” was not necessarily a reference to “male”: that is, “the husband” could refer to the butch lover. The butch lover would be visible in this address only insofar as she took the place of the husband. Either way, the utterance rereads the oblique form of the lesbian couple, in the way that straightens that form, such

that it even appears straight. Indeed, it is not even that the utterances move from a queer angle to a straight line. The sequence of the utterances offers two readings of the lesbian couple, both of which function as straightening devices: if not sisters, then husband and wife. The lesbian couple in effect disappears, and I of course make my exit. We can see how it is the ordinary work of perception that straightens the queer effect: in a blink, the slant of lesbian desire is straightened up.

We could consider, then, how orientations are straightening devices. They are not simply an effect of what it is the bodies do but are the point of alignment between spaces and bodies. In other words, spaces are oriented around the straight body, which allows that body to extend into space. As Gill Valentine puts it, “Repetitive performances of hegemonic asymmetrical gender identities and heterosexual desires congeal over time to produce the appearance that the street is normally a heterosexual space.”³⁵ Spaces become straight, which allow straight bodies to extend into them, such that the vertical axis appears in line with the axis of the body. Orientations involve such points of alignment.

This is why orientations matter. Some critics have suggested that we replace the term *sexual orientation* with the term *sexuality* because the former is too centered on the relation between desire and its object: “The term sexuality is used here rather than orientation because it implies autonomy and fluidity rather than being oriented towards one sex.”³⁶ I would say that being oriented in different ways does matter, precisely because of how spaces are already oriented, which makes some bodies feel in place, or at home, and not others. Orientations affect what bodies can do: it is not that the object causes desire but that in desiring certain objects, other things follow, given how the social is already arranged. It does make a difference for women to be sexually oriented toward women, in a way that is not just about one’s relation to an object of desire. In other words, the choice of one’s object of desire makes a difference to other things we do. In a way, I am suggesting that the object in sexual object choice is sticky: other things “stick” when we orient ourselves toward objects, especially if such orientations do not follow the straight line.

To move one’s sexual orientation from straight to lesbian, for example, requires reinhabiting one’s body, given that one’s body no longer extends the space or even skin of the social. Given this, the sex of one’s object choice is not simply *about* the object even when desire is directed toward that object: it affects what we can do, where we can go, how we are perceived, and so on. These differences in how one directs desire, as well as how one is faced by others, can move us and hence affect even the most deeply ingrained patterns of relating to others. This is not to say that moving one’s sexual orientation means that we transcend, or break

with, our histories: it is to say that a shift in sexual orientation is not livable simply as a continuation of a line, as such orientations affect other things that bodies do.

We can turn to Teresa de Lauretis's distinction between lesbians who "were always that way" and those who "become lesbians." This does not mean that those who were always "that way" do not have to become lesbians; they might just become lesbians in a different way. While lesbians might have different temporal relations to becoming lesbians, even lesbians who feel they were always "that way" still have to become lesbians, which means gathering such tendencies into specific social and sexual forms. Such a gathering requires, as de Lauretis suggests, a "habit-change":³⁷ it requires a reorientation of one's body, such that other objects, those not reachable on the vertical and horizontal lines of conventional genealogy, can be reached. So it takes time and work to inhabit a lesbian body; the act of tending toward other women has to be repeated, often in the face of hostility and discrimination, to gather such tendencies into a sustainable form. As such, lesbian tendencies do not have an origin that can be identified as outside the contact we have with others, as a contact that both shapes our tendencies and gives them their shape.

In other words, one has to go to another side, perhaps even to what is behind, to reach points that do not accumulate as a straight line. Lesbian desires move us sideways: one object might put another in reach, as we come into contact with different bodies and worlds. This contact involves following rather different lines of connection, association, and even exchange, as these lines are often invisible to others. It is not surprising that becoming a lesbian can feel like a whole world gets opened up.

Lesbian desire can hence be rethought as a space for action, a way to extend differently into space through tending toward "other women." As Elspeth Probyn describes, desire is "productive, it is what oils the skin of the social."³⁸ Desire is, after all, what moves us closer to bodies. Or, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests, "Sexual relations are contiguous with and a part of relations—the relations of the writer to pen and paper, the body-builder to weights, the bureaucrat to files."³⁹ The intimacy of contact shapes bodies as they orient toward each other, doing different kinds of work. In being oriented toward other women, lesbian desires also bring objects near, including sexual objects, as well as other kinds of objects, which might not have otherwise been reachable within the body horizon of the social. Lesbian desires enact the coming-out story as a story of "coming to," of arriving near other bodies, as a contact that makes a story and opens up other ways of facing the world. Lesbian desires create spaces, often temporary spaces that come and go with the coming and going of the bodies that inhabit them.

There is something already queer about the fleeting points of lesbian existence. Indeed, we can think here about the alternative forms of world making within queer cultures and how they draw different kinds of lines, which do not aim to keep things in their places. As Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner suggest, the “queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projecting horizons, typifying examples, alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.”⁴⁰ It is important that we do not idealize queer worlds or simply locate them in an alternative space. After all, if the spaces we occupy are fleeting, if they follow us when we come and go, then this is as much a sign of how heterosexuality shapes the contours of inhabitable or livable space as it is about the promise of queer. It is because this world is already in place that queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting. Our response need not be to search for permanence but to listen to the sound of the “what” that fleets.

The “what” that fleets is the very point of disorientation. Is this also the point of intersection between queer and phenomenology? It is worth noting here that I have been using *queer* in at least two senses and have at times slid from one sense to the other. I have used it to describe what is oblique or off-line or even just plain wonky. I have also used the term to describe nonstraight sexual practices—in particular lesbianism—as a form of social and sexual contact. I think it is important to retain both meanings of the word *queer*, which after all are historically related even if irreducible to each other. This means recalling what makes specific sexualities describable as queer in the first place: that is, that they are seen as odd, bent, twisted. The root of the word *queer* is from the Greek for cross, oblique, adverse.⁴¹ The word might allow us to “twist” between sexual and social registers, without flattening them or reducing them to a single line. Although we risk losing the specificity of queer as a commitment to a life of sexual deviation, we would also sustain the significance of deviation in what makes queer lives queer.

To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things. The effects of such disturbance are uneven, given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living—certain times, spaces, and directions. It is important to make the oblique angles of queer do this work, even if it risks placing different kinds of queer effects alongside each other. Michael Moon’s description of sexual disorientation as a series of “uncanny effects” is useful here.⁴² If the sexual involves the contingency of bodies coming into contact with other bodies, then sexual disorientation slides quickly into social disorientation, as a disorientation in how things are arranged. The effects are indeed uncanny: what is familiar, what is passed over in the veil of its familiarity, becomes rather strange.

We can return to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. He relates the distinction between "straight" and "oblique" to the distinction between "distance" and "proximity." Such categories are meaningful only in relation to phenomenal or oriented space. Merleau-Ponty suggests that distance functions like the oblique, as a way to transform the relationship between the body and the object it perceives. As he puts it:

We "have" the retreating object, we never cease to "hold it" and to have a grasp on it, and the increasing distance is not, as breadth appears to be, an augmenting externality: it expresses merely that the thing is beginning to slip away from the grasp of our gaze and is less allied to it. Distance is what distinguishes this loose and approximate grip from the complete grasp which is proximity. We shall define it then as we defined "straight" and "oblique" above, in terms of the situation of the object in relation to our power of grasping it.⁴³

Distance is here the expression of a certain loss, of the loss of grip over an object that is already within reach, that is able to be lost only insofar as it is within my horizon. Distance is lived as the "slipping away" of the reachable, in other words, as the moment in which what is within reach threatens to become unreachable. Following Merleau-Ponty's analogy between the distant and the oblique, we can say that the queer object, the one out of line, on a slant, the odd and strange one, is hence encountered as slipping away, as threatening to become out of reach.

The question is less what is a queer orientation than how we are oriented toward queer moments when objects slip. A queer phenomenology might involve an orientation toward what slips, which allows what slips to pass, in the unknowable length of its duration. In other words, a queer phenomenology would function as a disorientation device; it would not overcome the disalignment of the horizontal and vertical axis, allowing the oblique to open another angle on the world. If queer is also an orientation toward queer, a way to approach what is retreating, then what is queer might slide between sexual orientation and other kinds of orientation. Queer would become a matter of how one approaches the object that slips away, a way to inhabit the world at the point at which things fleet.

Yet I have suggested that queer unfolds from specific points, from the life-world of those who do not or cannot inhabit the contours of heterosexual space. After all, some of us, more than others, look wonky. Some people have suggested that I have overemphasized this latter point and have risked presuming that queer

moments “reside” with those who do not practice heterosexuality. Someone said to me, well, but lesbians and gays have “their lines too,” their ways of keeping things straight. Another person said to me that lesbians and gays can be “just as conservative.” I would insist that queer describes a sexual as well as political orientation and that to lose sight of the sexual specificity of queer would also be to overlook how compulsory heterosexuality shapes what coheres as given and the effects of this coherence on those who refuse to follow this line. As Leo Bersani argues, we do not have to presume the referentiality of queer or stabilize queer as an identity category to explore how the sexual specificity of being queer matters.⁴⁴ To be at an oblique angle to what coheres matters, where the point of this coherence unfolds as the gift of the straight line.

But the suggestion that you can have a “nonhetero” sexual orientation and be straight in other respects speaks a certain truth. It is possible to live on an oblique angle and follow straight lines. After all, conservative homosexuals have called for lesbians and gays to support the straight line, by pledging allegiance to the very form of the family, even when they cannot inhabit that form without a queer effect. Lisa Duggan and Judith Halberstam have offered us compelling critiques of a new “homonormativity.”⁴⁵ As Duggan describes, a heteronormative politics “does not contest dominant heteronormative institutions but *upholds and sustains them*.”⁴⁶

We could think of this in terms of assimilation, as a politics of following the straight line even as a deviant body. Homonormativity would straighten up queer effects, by following the lines given as the accumulation of “points” (where you get points for arriving at different points on the line: marriage, children, and so on). For instance, as Butler argues, gay marriage can extend rather than challenge the conservatism of marriage.⁴⁷ Such a politics would extend the straight line to some queers, those who can inhabit the forms of marriage and family, which keeps other queers, those whose lives are lived for different points, off-line. Lee Edelman calls such a politics a “reproductive futurism,” which works to “affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of the Child.”⁴⁸

We are right to be critical of such a conservative sexual politics, which supports the very lines that make some lives unlivable. Oddly enough, this gay conservatism has also returned us to the table. Bruce Bawer argues in *A Place at the Table* that gays and lesbians should desire to join the big table rather than have a “little table” of our own.⁴⁹ In his critique of the queer desire to embrace the nonnormative, Bawer suggests of the hypothetical gay man:

He doesn't *want* to be assimilated. He enjoys his exclusion. He feels comfortable at his little table. Or at least he thinks he does. But does he? What is it, after all, that ties him to his little table—that drove him, in other words, into a marginal existence? Ultimately, it's prejudice. Liberated from that prejudice, would he still want to sit at his little table? Perhaps, and perhaps not. Certainly most homosexuals don't want to be relegated to that little table. We grew up at the big table: we're at home there. We want to stay there.⁵⁰

Bawer also describes a queer desire for little tables as the “ethos of multiculturalism,” where “each accredited victim group” is given their own table (210). It is interesting to note here that the big table evokes the family table (where we grew up) and also society itself as a “single big table” (210). Bawer's rejection of queer subcultures hence calls for a return to the family table, as the presumed ground for social existence. To join this table enacts the desire for assimilation: both in the sense of becoming a part of the family and becoming like the family, which is itself predicted on likeness (being with as being like). What is at stake in this desire to be placed at the table?

We could agree with Bawer that a queer politics is not about new tables, whatever their sizes. After all, to set up new tables would leave the big table in its place. We might even agree that the point of gay and lesbian politics might be to arrive at this table, as the table around which a family gathers, producing the very effect of social coherence. But such an arrival cannot simply be a matter of being given a place at the table, as if it were family prejudice that prevents us from taking that place. Despite Bawer's emphasis on “being at home” at the big table, the book is full of examples of being rejected from the table, including from the different kinds of tables that organize the sociality of straight weddings.⁵¹ The desire to join the table is a desire to inhabit the very place of this rejection. As Douglas Crimp has shown, the act of following straight lines as bodies that are at least in some ways sexually deviant is melancholic: you are identifying precisely with what repudiates you.⁵² Such forms of following do not simply accumulate as points on a straight line. We can certainly consider that when queer bodies do join the family table, the table does not stay in place. Queer bodies are out of place in certain family gatherings, which is what produces, in the first place, a queer effect. The table might even become wonky.

After all, this desire to support straight lines and the forms they elevate into moral and social ideals (such as marriage and family life) will be rejected by those whose bodies can and do line up with the straight line, which is not,

of course, all straight bodies.⁵³ In other words, it is hardly likely that attempts to follow the straight line as gays and lesbians will earn you too many points. To point to such rejection is not then to say that homonormativity is the condition for emergence for a new angle on queer politics (though it could be). It is to say that inhabiting forms that do not extend your shape can produce queer effects, even when you think you are “lining up.” There is hope in such failure, even if we reject publicly (as we must) this sexual as well as social conservatism.

In calling for a politics that involves disorientation, it is important not to make disorientation an obligation or responsibility for those who identify as queer. In the first place, this demands too much (for some, a lifelong commitment to deviation is not psychologically or materially possible or sustainable, even if their desires are rather oblique), but it also “forgives” too much, by letting those who are straight stay on their lines. It is not up to queers to disorient straights, although of course disorientation might still happen, and we do “do” this work. Disorientation would not be a politics of the will, but an effect of how we do politics, which in turn is shaped by a prior matter—simply, how we live.

After all, it is possible to follow certain lines (such as the family line) as a disorientation device, as a way to experience the pleasures of deviation. For some, for instance, the very act of describing queer gatherings as family gatherings is to have joy in the uncanny effect of a familiar form becoming strange. The point of the following is not to pledge allegiance to the familiar but to make the “familiar” strange, or even to allow what has been overlooked, which has been treated as furniture, to dance with renewed life. Some deviations involve acts of following, but use the same “points” for different effects. This is what Kath Weston’s ethnographic studies of queer kinship show us. As she says: “Far from viewing families we choose as imitations or derivatives of family ties created elsewhere in their society, many lesbians and gay men alluded to the difficulty and excitement of constructing kinship in the *absence* of what they called ‘models.’”⁵⁴

A queer politics does involve a commitment to a certain way of inhabiting the world, even if it is not grounded in a commitment to deviation. As Halberstam puts it, queer might begin with “the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing.”⁵⁵ In a way, we can bring Weston and Halberstam together by suggesting that queer lives are about the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child rearing, whereby “not following” involves disorientation; it makes things oblique, which in turn opens up another way to inhabit those forms.

If orientations point us to the future, to what we are moving toward, then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions, of finding other paths,

perhaps those that do not clear a common ground, where we can find hope in what goes astray. Looking back is what keeps open the possibility of going astray. We look back, we go behind; we conjure what is missing from the face. This backward glance also means an openness to the future, as the imperfect translation of what is behind us. As a result, I would not argue that queer has “no future” as Edelman suggests—though I understand and appreciate this impulse to “give” the future to those who demand to inherit the earth, rather than aiming for a share in this inheritance. Instead, a queer politics would have hope, not even by having hope in the future (under the sentimental sign of the “not yet”) but because the lines that accumulate through repeated gestures, the lines that gather on skin, already take surprising forms. We have hope because what is behind us is also what allows other ways of gathering in time and space, of making lines that do not reproduce what we follow, but instead create new textures on the ground. It is interesting to note that in landscape architecture the term *desire lines* is used to describe unofficial paths, those marks left on the ground that show everyday comings and goings, where people deviate from the paths they are supposed to follow. Deviation leaves its own marks on the ground, which can even help generate alternative lines, which cross the ground in unexpected ways. Such lines are indeed traces of desire, where people have taken different routes to get to this point or that point. It is certainly desire that helps generate a queer landscape, shaped by the paths that we follow in deviating from the straight line.

Even if queer deviations shape the grounds we inhabit, we should still avoid making deviation into a ground for queer politics. To resist making deviation into a ground is not to say that it does not matter which lines we follow. It does matter. Some lines, as we know, are lines that accumulate privilege and are “returned” by recognition and reward. Other lines are seen as ways out of an ethical life, as deviations from the common good. Despite this, queer is not available as a line that we can follow, and if we took such a line, we would perform a certain injustice to those queers whose lives are lived for different points. For me, the important task is not so much finding a queer line but asking what our orientation toward queer moments of deviation will be. If the object slips away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, out of place, what will we do? If we feel oblique, where will we find support? A queer phenomenology would involve an orientation toward queer, a way to inhabit the world that gives “support” to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place. The table becomes queer when it provides such support.

Notes

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1. For examples of queer geography, see David Bell and Gill Valentine, eds., *Mapping Desires: Geographies of Sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1995); Frank Browning, *A Queer Geography* (New York: Noonday, 1998); and David Bell, ed., *Pleasure Zones: Bodies, Cities, Spaces* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001).
2. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 106–7.
3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 296.
4. “Becoming vertical” relates to an argument Merleau-Ponty makes in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (289).
5. See Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003); Elizabeth Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Gail Weiss, *Body Images: Embodiment as Intercorporeality* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
6. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1989), 165.
7. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-world*, trans. Richard M. Zaner and H. Tristram Engelhardt (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1974), 36.
8. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. Boyce Gibson (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969), 101.
9. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born* (London: Virago, 1991), 23. My thanks to Imogen Tyler who found this quote for me and encouraged me to think about how mothers might have a different relationship to writing tables and hence to the body of philosophy.
10. Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction*, 110.
11. *Ibid.*, 130.

12. Robert Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 20.
13. Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction*, 102.
14. It is worth recalling here the feminist press named Kitchen Table. We could say that the kitchen table provides the kind of surface on which women tend to work. To use the table that supports domestic work to do political work (including the work that makes explicit the politics of domestic work) is a reorientation device. The kitchen table supports feminist writing, and feminist books appear under its name.
15. Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell, and the Epistemology of Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 66. See also Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior: Four Writers and the Rooms That Shaped Them* (Routledge: New York, 2004), which gives an account of how the objects that surround writers, including the writing table, shape their worlds.
16. Martin Heidegger, *Ontology—the Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 68. I am grateful to Paul Harrison who directed me to *Ontology* and Heidegger's table, during a seminar I gave at Durham University in October 2005.
17. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, trans. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 5.
18. Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 153.
19. *Ibid.*, 155.
20. Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld: From Garden to Earth* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 114.
21. Anthony Steinbock, *Home and Beyond: Generative Philosophy after Husserl* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 36.
22. Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 72. It is useful to recall that *habitus* is used by Husserl to explore how habits are acquired and become customary (Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology*, 118). However, this term has entered social theory primarily via Bourdieu, augmenting what we could call a social or relational phenomenology.
23. Butler, "Performative Acts," 406.
24. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. H. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). In de Beauvoir's terms, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (295). Becoming woman is about taking up the embodied situation of being woman, which takes time, as a way of projecting oneself in the world. If one "becomes straight" then one "takes up" the embodied situation of being straight, which also takes time.
25. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1973), 146.

26. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 152–53.
27. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 53. Thanks to Elena Loizidou who encouraged me to reread what Arendt says about tables.
28. As Sarah Franklin has argued, the lines of genealogy are performative: through repetition, they create the very ties and connections, which then get lived as matters of course (“The Line and the Tie” [Seventh Annual Annette B. Weiner Memorial Lecture, New York University, April 6, 2005]).
29. Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 229.
30. Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 21; emphasis added.
31. Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 17–35.
32. Words, too, can be near other words. We know from psychoanalysis that the nearness of words is also not just casual: word to word (metonymy) and word for word (metaphor) depend on histories that stick and that take us backward as well as sideways. See chapter 2 of my book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004) for an analysis of “sticky signs” and in particular the sticky work of metonymy.
33. On the gendered nature of gift economies, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* (New York: Beacon, 1969); Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Towards a Political Economy of Sex,” in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975); and Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, trans. Carolyn Burke (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985).
34. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 289.
35. Gill Valentine, “(Re)Negotiating the Heterosexual Street: Lesbian Politics of Space,” in *BodySpace: Destabilizing Geographies of Gender and Sexuality*, ed. Nancy Duncan (London: Routledge, 1996), 150.
36. Baden Offard and Leon Cantrel, “Unfixated in a Fixated World: Identity, Sexuality, Race, and Culture,” in *Multicultural Queer: Australian Narratives*, ed. Peter A. Jackson and Gerard Sullivan (Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park, 1999), 218.
37. Teresa de Lauretis, *Practices of Love: Lesbian Sexuality and Perverse Desire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 300.
38. Elspeth Probyn, *Outside Belongings* (London: Routledge, 1996), 13.
39. Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion*, 181.
40. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” in *Publics and Counter-Publics*, by Michael Warner (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 198.

41. Fabio Cleto, "Introduction: Queering the Camp," in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 13.
42. Michael Moon, *A Small Boy and Others: Imitation and Initiation in American Culture from Henry James to Andy Warhol* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 16.
43. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 304–5.
44. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 16.
45. See Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston: Beacon, 2003); and Halberstam, *Queer Time*.
46. Duggan, *Twilight*, 50; emphasis added.
47. Judith Butler, "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2002): 18.
48. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 30.
49. See Bruce Bawer, *A Place at the Table: The Gay Individual in American Society* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984). Thanks to those who participated in the workshop on orientations at the Five College Women's Studies Research Center in October 2005, where I was informed about this book.
50. Bawer, *A Place at the Table*, 70.
51. In one instance Bawer describes how he and his partner were missing from the wedding photographs of the weddings they attended (*A Place at the Table*, 261). Weddings involve tables in this sense of being pictured (*tableau*). They also involve tables as items of furniture; tables have a crucial function in the wedding reception. Conventionally, a wedding places the bride and groom and their immediate family at the front table, and other tables face this table. The heterosexual couple becomes given by being given this place at the table, around which other tables gather. The point of the gathering is to witness their place at the table.
52. Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 6.
53. Of course, you can have a heterosexual orientation and not line up, in the sense that you may actively refuse that line (by refusing marriage, monogamy, or other ways of being straight) or in the sense that what you have behind you prohibits your capacity to move along the line (you may lack the resources necessary for approximating a social and moral ideal).
54. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 116. See also the chapter "Queer Feelings" in my book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*.
55. Halberstam, *Queer Time*, 5.