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QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY

Orientations, Objects, Others

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I consider how racism is an ongoing and unfinished history; how it works as a way of orientating bodies in specific directions, thereby affecting how they “take up” space. We “become” racialized in how we occupy space, just as space is, as it were, already occupied as an effect of racialization. I also address the question of how we can consider the orientations of bodies “at home” who do not inhabit whiteness, for which I draw on my own experience at home of being mixed race, with a white English mother and Pakistani father, and how this mixed genealogy shaped what objects for me are reachable. Being mixed might also involve a queer departure from the lines of conventional genealogy. Bodies that do not extend the whiteness of such spaces are “stopped,” which produces, we could say, disorienting effects.

If we think with and through orientation we might allow the moments of disorientation to gather, almost as if they are bodies around a different table. We might, in the gathering, face a different way. Queer objects might take us to the very limits of social gathering, even when they still gather us around, even when they still lead us to gather at a table. Indeed, to live out a politics of disorientation might be to sustain wonder about the very forms of social gathering.

CHAPTER 1 Orientations Toward Objects

In perception properly so-called, as an explicit awareness (*Gewahren*), I am turned towards the object, to the paper, for instance, I apprehend it as being this here and now. The apprehension is a singling out, every perceived object having a background in experience. Around and about the paper lie books, pencils, ink-well, and so forth, and these in a certain sense are also “perceived,” perceptually there, in the “field of intuition.”

Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*

Phenomenology is often characterized as a “turn toward” objects, which appear in their perceptual “thereness” as objects given to consciousness. Rather than consciousness being seen as directed toward itself, it is understood as having objects in its view—as being shaped by that which appears before it in “this here and now.” But in turning toward objects, what actually appears within phenomenological writing? If phenomenology apprehends what is given to consciousness, then what is given within the writing about that apprehension? Or, in simpler terms, what objects appear within phenomenology as objects that the reader, in turn, can apprehend?

In Husserl’s *Ideas* objects do appear for sure, though we cannot assume that they record an experience, in the sense that we cannot assume that Husserl saw or even “could see” the object at the moment of writing. As with much philosophy, the object appears in the language of “say” or “for instance”: that is, “say, I see this”; or “for instance, I see that.” Such words preface the example as illustration and not anecdote—the point is not whether or not this *really* happened. The object appears not as a thing to which we should, as readers, direct

our attention; it is not so much *a thing* as a way of saying something. And yet objects still become apprehended in the reading *as if* they were what Husserl was himself directed toward; the *as if* makes the objects matter not “in themselves,” or even “for themselves,” but as that which the writing is “around.” The objects do not take the shape of an event, in the sense of recording something that happens or is happening, even though they allow phenomenology to take the shape that it does.

And yet, as Husserl notes, the object that is “singled out,” or becomes available as a singular given, is “the paper,” earlier described as “this white paper” (116). The object is an object that one imagines “would have been” in front of Husserl in the moment of writing, or even that “must have been” before him if the writing were to be written. We know enough about the “timing” of Husserl’s writing to know, for instance, that what was in front of him was paper rather than a screen. Of course, the paper that Husserl might apprehend is not available to the reader. The paper can only be “missed” given that it is first apprehended as an object in the writing, which itself is dependent on the availability of paper. This paper weaves together the book I read *as* Husserl’s book, and it was not available or “thrown” into Husserl’s world as that which could appear to him. This paper, which was not given to him, must nevertheless be given in order for Husserl’s writing to be given to me. I read writing printed on paper, and *on* the paper I read *about* the paper that is apprehended by Husserl. The paper is also “in” the writing, and hence the writing is “around” the paper. Around the paper are other objects, which are not singled out and thus form the “background” against and through which the paper appears. These again are tools of writing: inkwell, books, and pencils. The field of background intuition, against which the object becomes posited as given (the paper) provides for Husserl the very “stuff” for writing, the very materials out of which his phenomenology is borne.

How does the “matter” of the paper matter? How does the orientation of the paper, which is “on” the writing table, also function as an orientation device, which both shows the “direction” of phenomenology and also takes it in a certain direction? In this chapter I explore the concept of orientation by engaging with the work on objects by Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, as well as Marx. By reflecting specifically on “the table” as an object that matters within phenomenology, I also offer an account of gender as orientated. My aim is not to develop a phenomenology of sexual difference, as this

has already convincingly been offered by feminist philosophers (see Beauvoir 1989; Young 1990, 2005; Heinämaa 2003; Fisher and Embree 2000). Instead, by showing how phenomenology faces a certain direction, which depends on the relegation of other “things” to the background, I consider how phenomenology may be gendered as a form of occupation.

Objects of Perception

The radical claim that phenomenology inherits from Franz Brentano’s psychology is that consciousness is intentional: it is directed toward something. This claim immediately links the question of the object with that of orientation. First, consciousness itself is directed or orientated toward objects, which is what gives consciousness its “worldly” dimension. If consciousness is about how we perceive the world “around” us, then consciousness is also embodied, sensitive, and situated. This thesis does not simply function as a general thesis, but can also help show us how bodies are directed in some ways and not others, as a way of inhabiting or dwelling in the world.

We are turned toward things. Such things make an impression upon us. We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us, insofar as we share a residence with them. Perception hence involves orientation; what is perceived depends on where we are located, which gives us a certain take on things. Merleau-Ponty makes this point directly when he suggests that “the word perception indicates a direction rather than a primitive function” (1962: 12). Perception is a way of facing something. I can perceive an object only insofar as my orientation allows me to see it (it must be near enough to me, which in turn means that I must be near enough to it), and in seeing it, in this way or that, it becomes an “it,” which means I have already taken an orientation toward it. The object is an effect of towardness; it is the thing toward which I am directed and which in being posited as a thing, as being something or another for me, takes me in some directions rather than others.

For example, say I perceive something before me. In perceiving the object as an object, I perceive the object *in a certain way*, as being some kind of thing. Perceiving an object involves a way of apprehending that object. So it is not just that consciousness is directed toward objects, but also that I take different directions toward objects: I might like them, admire them, hate them, and so on. In perceiving them in this way or that, I also take a position upon them,

which in turns gives me a position. I might perceive an object as beautiful, for instance. Such a perception affects what I do: if I have this impression, then I might pick up the object, or get closer to it, and even press it nearer to me. Orientations involve directions toward objects that affect what we do, and how we inhabit space. We move toward and away from objects depending on how we are moved by them. For Husserl, the interpretation of the object as having this or that property is a secondary act involving what he calls a “twofold directedness” (1969: 122).¹ First, I am directed toward an object (I face it), and then I take a direction toward it (for instance, I might or might not admire it). While directionality might be twofold, this “twofoldness” does not necessarily involve a sequence in time: in seeing the object I already apprehend it in a certain way, as a concrete “it” that has qualities that might attract or repel me, or even leave me indifferent, which might affect how “it” enters my view and whether it stays in view or passes from view.² Turning toward an object turns “me” in this way or that, even if that “turn” does not involve a conscious act of interpretation or judgment.

We might ask, then, which way does Husserl turn? If Husserl turns toward certain objects in his writing, then what does this tell us *in turn* about his phenomenology? 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 we are “in,” as the world that takes place around us: “I am aware of a world, spread out in space endlessly” (1969: 101). This world is not simply spread out; rather, it has already taken certain shapes, which are the very form of what is “more and less” familiar: As Husserl states: “For me real objects are there, definite, more or less familiar, agreeing with what is actually perceived without being themselves perceived or even intuitively present. I can let my attention wander from the writing-table I have just seen and 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 or 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 the room, those that are, as it were, behind him. To make this turn, we might suppose that he would have to turn around if he is to

face what is behind him. But, of course, Husserl does not need to turn around as he “knows” what is behind him. And yet his mind wanders, as if thoughts are actions that demand that he turn around to face or “attend” to what is behind him. The verb “wander” helps us track the significance of “attention” as a mode of “turning toward.” To “wander” can mean to ramble without certain course, to go aimlessly, to take one direction without intention or control, to stray from a path, or even to deviate in conduct or belief. So Husserl in attending to what is behind him is deviating from his proper course. The behind is here the “point” of deviation, such that when Husserl considers what is behind his back, he is turning his attention away from what he faces.

We are reminded that what we can see in the first place depends on which way we are facing. What gets our attention depends too on which direction we are facing. The things that are behind Husserl are also behind the table that he faces: it is “self-evident” that he has his back to what is behind him. We might even say that it is the behind that converts “the back” into the background. 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. 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 insofar as they are already given to him as places by memory. These other rooms are co-perceived: that is, 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.

Husserl’s writing makes an impression on me when he offers this glimpse of the domesticity of his world. How I long for him to dwell there by lingering on the folds of the materials that surround him. How I long to hear about the objects that gather around him, as “things” he does “things” with. This is not a desire for biography, or even for an impossible intimacy with a writer who is no longer with us. This is, rather, a desire to read about the particularity of the objects that gather around the writer. It is also a desire to imagine philosophy as beginning here, with the pen and the paper, and with the body of the philosopher, who writes insofar as he is “at home” and insofar as home provides a space in which he does his work.

Yes, we are invited, at least temporarily, to imagine the world that is his home; to give it a face and a form. I see his desk in the corner. I see him at his

desk—leaning, writing, pressing pen to paper, creating the lines that make these impressions available to me. I see a leather chair to one side. I have such an image, such an impression already in mind. The study, the room dedicated to writing or other forms of contemplation, conjures up such a vivid image of a masculine domain at the front of the house. I imagine the furniture (dark, polished), the materials (leather, wood), and the feel of the room (serious, intense), even though I know I do not and will not know how he arranged his room. His words help to create these impressions. But my impression of this study does not begin with the words written on this paper. My impressions are affected by other books I have read in my own literary genealogy, especially nineteenth-century women's writing, which is saturated with images of domestic space. The study, the parlor, the kitchen: these rooms provide the settings for drama; they are where things happen.

The family home provides, as it were, the background against which an object (the writing table) appears in the present, in front of Husserl. The family home is thus only ever *co-perceived*, and allows the philosopher to do his work. This familiar place, the family home, is also a practical world: "Things in their immediacy stand there as objects to be used, the 'table with its books,' the 'glass to drink from,' the 'vase,' the 'piano,' and so forth" (1969: 103). If Husserl is facing the writing table, then this "direction" also shows us the nature of the work that he does for a living. It is the table, with its books, which first gets his attention. As Diana Fuss reminds us, "the theatre of composition is not an empty space but a place animated by the artefacts, momentos, machines, books, and furniture that frame any intellectual labour" (2004: 1).

The objects that first appear as the "more and less familiar" function as signs of orientation: being orientated toward the writing table might ensure that you inhabit certain rooms and not others, and that you do some things rather than others. In the following sections I will take up the significance of this example in terms of "doing things" and "inhabiting spaces." Being orientated 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 the desk clear*. The desk that is clear is one that is ready for writing. One might even consider the domestic work that must have taken place for Husserl to turn to the writing table, and to be writing on the table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention. We can draw here on the long history of feminist scholarship about the politics of housework: about the ways in which women, as wives and

servants, do the work required to keep such spaces available for men and the work they do (Gilman 2002).³ To sustain an orientation toward the writing table might depend on such work, while it erases the signs of that work, as signs of dependence. In Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro's critique of the town house, they note how its interior design "reflected the internal hierarchy of the bourgeois family with the public 'masculine' domain at the front of the house, and the private 'feminine' domain confined to the rear" (1990: 7). What is behind Husserl's back, what he does not face, might be the back of the house—the feminine space dedicated to the work of care, cleaning, and reproduction. Such work is often experienced as "the lack of spare time" (Davies 2001: 141); for example, the lack of time for oneself or for contemplation. To what extent does philosophy depend on the concealment of domestic labor and of the labor time that it takes to reproduce the very "materials" of home?

It is interesting to note, for instance, that in Husserl's writing, the familiar slides into the familial; the home is a family home as a residence that is inhabited by children. They are in the summer house, he tells us. The children evoke the familial only through being "yonder"—through being at a distance from the philosopher who in writing "about" them is doing his work. They are outside the house yet also 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 children might be in the background because others (wives, mothers, nannies) care for them. They do not distract him from his work.

We can think, in other words, of the background not simply in terms of what is around what we face, as the "dimly perceived," but as produced by acts of relegation: some things are relegated to the background in order *to sustain* a certain direction; in other words, in order to keep attention on what is faced. Perception involves such acts of relegation that are forgotten in the very pre-occupation with what it is that is faced. We can pose a simple question: Who faces the writing table? Does the writing table have a face, which points it toward some bodies rather than others? If such acts of facing depend on relegating the children or other dependants to the background, then the answer to this question would not simply involve a biographical approach, but would consider how other forms of social orientation affect how bodies

arrive at the table. One could read Husserl alongside other writers who have written about writing. Let's consider Adrienne Rich's account of writing a letter: "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 moreover to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself" (Rich 1991: 23).⁴

We can see from the point of view of this 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. Attention involves a political economy, or an uneven distribution of attention time between 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 upon which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available given the ongoing labor of other attachments, which literally pull you away. So whether we can sustain our orientation toward the writing table depends on other orientations, which affect what we can face at any given moment in time.

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. Other objects, and indeed spaces, are relegated to the background; they are only ever co-perceived. This relegation of unseen portions and the rooms to the background, as the fringe of the familiar, which is not the object of attention, 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 aside what is given, what is made available by ordinary perception. If phenomenology is to see the table, he suggests, it must see "without" the natural attitude, which keeps us within the familiar—indeed, within the space already "decided" as "being" the family home.

So this turn toward objects within phenomenology (which as we see is about some objects and not others) is not about the characteristics of such objects, which we can define in terms of type, the kind of objects they are, or their function, which names not only the "tendency" of the objects, what they do, but also what they allow us to do: the paper (what I write on), the pencil (what I write with), and so on. The social and familiar character of objects is "bracketed" by Husserl, as what is posited by the natural attitude, the attitude that in turn is inherited by psychologism and that takes for granted what is given to the subject as given (Husserl 1969: 16). The natural attitude does not "see the world," as it takes for granted what appears; what appears quickly disappears under the blanket of the familiar. In such a world, everything is orientated around me, as being available and familiar to me (Schutz and Luckmann 1974: 4). To see the paper, for instance, as simply the material that is available to write upon (the paper is white paper, even blank paper, as that which is *ready* for me to write upon), would not be to perceive the paper *as an object*. Phenomenology, in Husserl's formulation, can only come into being as a first philosophy, if it suspends all that gathers together as a natural attitude, not through Cartesian doubt but through a way of perceiving the world "as if" one did not assume its existence as taking some forms rather than others (1969: 107–10). If the objects of phenomenology are domesticated objects—that is, objects one imagines as "being available" within the familiar space provided by the home—then the domesticity of the setting is not allowed to reveal itself. Or, if signs of domesticity appear then, they also quickly disappear, and seemingly must do so if phenomenology is to do its work.

This domestic world, which surrounds the philosopher as he moves his attention "backward" from the space in which he writes, must be "put aside," or even "put to one side," in his turn toward objects as objects of perception. It is this world, which is familiar to him, that is given in the form of familiarity. What does it mean to assume that bracketing can "transcend" the familiar world of experience? Perhaps to bracket does not mean to transcend, even if we put something aside. We remain reliant on what we put in brackets; indeed, the activity of bracketing may sustain the fantasy that "what we put aside" can be transcended in the first place.⁵ The act of "putting aside" might also confirm the fantasy of a subject who is transcendent, who places himself above the contingent world of social matter, a world that differentiates objects and subjects according to how they already appear. We could question not only

the formal aspects of the bracket (which creates the fantasy that we can do without what we put to one side), but also with the content of what is bracketed, with "what" is "put aside."⁶ What is "put aside," we might say, is the very space of the familiar, which is also what clears the philosopher's table and allows him to do his work.

The objects that appear within phenomenology also disappear in the "passing over" of what is given as familiar (the paper is first named, and then would become something other than *that* as if it were *that* then I would be writing on the paper, rather than seeing it). This disappearance of familiar objects might make more than the object disappear. The writer who does the work of philosophy might disappear, if we are to erase the signs of "where" it is that he works. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the masculinity of philosophy is evidenced in the disappearance of the subject under the sign of the universal (Bordo 1987; Irigaray 1974; Braidotti 1991). The masculinity might also be evident in the disappearance of the materiality of objects, in the bracketing of the materials out of which, as well as upon which, philosophy writes itself, as a way of apprehending the world.

We could call this the fantasy of a "paperless" philosophy, a philosophy that is not dependent on the materials upon which it is written. As Audre Lorde reflects, "A room of one's own may be a necessity for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a type writer and plenty of time" (1984: 116). The fantasy of a paperless philosophy can be understood as crucial not only to the gendered nature of the occupation of philosophy but also to the disappearance of political economy, of the "materials" of philosophy as well as its dependence on forms of labor, both domestic and otherwise. In other words, the labor of writing might disappear along with the paper. The paper here matters, both as the object upon which writing is written, but also as the condition of possibility for that work. If the suspension of the natural attitude, which sees itself as seeing beyond the familiar, or even seeing through it, involves *putting the paper aside*, then it might involve the concealment of the labor of philosophy, as well as the labor that allows philosophy to take up the time that it does. Rather than the familiar being posited as that which must be suspended in order to see, we might consider what "it" is that we "overlook" when we reside within the familiar.⁷ We would look, then, at what we do with things, how the arrival of things may be shaped by the work that we do, rather than put aside what it is that we do.

Let us return to the table. Husserl begins again by taking up the matter of the table. He has put aside the knowing glance of the natural attitude, which would see the table as a writing table, in this room, in this house, in this world. How does the object appear when it is no longer familiar? As he puts it: "We start by taking an example. Keeping this table steadily in view as I go round it, changing my position in space all the time, I have continually the consciousness of the bodily presence out there of this one and the self-same table, which in itself remains unchanged throughout" (1969: 130).

We can see here how Husserl turns to "the table" as an object by looking at it rather than over it. The writing table, if we are to follow this line, would not be seen (even if we face it, it is in the background as what is more and less familiar). For Husserl, then to see the table means to *lose sight of its function*. The bracket means "this table" becomes "the table." By beginning with the table, on its own, as it were, the object then appears self-same. It is not that the object's self-sameness is available at first sight. Husserl moves around the table, changing his position. For such movement to be possible, consciousness must flow: we must not be interrupted by other matters. This flow of consciousness is made possible by having the time and space to attend to the table. Putting that point to one side (we can labor points, too, after all), we might follow his gaze. Apprehending the table as an object means that I must walk around it and approach it as if I had not encountered it before; seeing it *as an object* means not describing the table as occupying a familial order, as the writing table, or any other kind of table. Such biographical or practical knowledge must be bracketed, which Husserl describes as "*to put out of action*" (1969: 110). And in the bracketing, I do not see the table as my field of action but rather see it as an object, *as if* I did not already know it or even know what I do with it. I do not see "it" in one look, but only as a series of profiles of "it," which nevertheless allow me to posit "it" as more than what I see in any one look. As Husserl elaborates:

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, 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. (130; emphasis added)

This argument suggests that 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” (2000: 20). The “intending” of the object through which it becomes more than just one impression involves, in Husserl’s terms, synthetic consciousness—that is, the connection of the new impression with what has gone before, in the very form of an active “re-collection” or synthesis. Significantly, the object becomes an object of perception only given the work of recollection, such that the “new” exists in relation to *what is already gathered by consciousness*: each impression is linked to the other, so that the object becomes more than the profile that is available in any moment.

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 object is unavailable to me, which is why it must be intended. It is a table, so I am hardly surprised to walk around, and from each view, to see a profile that matches what I expect to see. It might have four legs, or a wooden top—all of the things I would expect it to have if it is a table.

The table’s sameness can only be intended. Husserl then makes what is an extraordinary claim: *only the table remains the same*. This is, in part, extraordinary given the implication that all other things fluctuate. The table is the only thing that keeps its place in the flow of perception. This already makes the table a rather queer object (as I will explore in the conclusion of this book). We can take what is powerful about Husserl’s thesis of intentionality and suggest that the sameness of the table is spectral: the table is only the same given that we have conjured its missing sides. Or, we can even say that we have *conjured its behind*. I want to relate what is “missed” when we “miss” the table to the spectral-

ity of history, what we miss may be behind the table in another sense: what is behind the table is what must have already taken place for the table to arrive.

Objects That Arrive

As noted above, phenomenology for Husserl means apprehending the object as if it were unfamiliar, so that we can attend to the flow of perception itself. What this flow of perception shows is the partiality of absence as well as presence: what we do not see (say, the back or side of the object), is hidden from view and can only be intended. The partiality of perception is not only about what is not in view (say, the front and the back of the object), but also what is “around” it, which we can describe as the background. The figure “figures” insofar as the background both is and is not in view. We single out this object only by pushing other objects to the edges or “fringes” of vision.

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 don’t see them. The background is a “*dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality*” (1969: 102). We can thus see that although Husserl faces his writing table, this does not mean the table is perceived as an object. Even though the table is before him, it might also be in the background. We might not even “see” the writing table when we write upon it. My argument in the previous section hence needs some qualification: even when Husserl faces the writing table, it does not necessarily follow that the table is “in front” of him. What we face can also be part of the background, suggesting that the background may include more and less proximate objects. It is not incidental that when Husserl brings “the table” to the front that the writing table disappears. Being orientated toward the writing table might even provide the condition of possibility for its disappearance.

Husserl’s approach to the background as what is “unseen” in its “thereness” or “familiarity” is extremely useful, even if he puts the familiar to one side. It allows us to consider how the familiar takes shape by being unnoticed. I want here to extend his model by thinking about the “background” of the writing table in another sense. Husserl considers how this table might be *in* the background, as well as the background that is *around* the table, when “it” comes into view. I want to consider how the table itself may *have* a background. The background would be understood as that which must take place in order for

something to appear. 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.⁸ When we tell a story about someone, for instance, we might give information about their background: this meaning of "background" 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 the past of an individual but also to other kinds of histories, which shape an individual's arrival into the world, and through which "the family" itself becomes a social given (see chapter 2). Indeed, events can have backgrounds: a background is 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. If we do not see (but intend) the back of the object, we might also not see (but intend) its background in this temporal sense. In order to see what the "natural attitude" has in its sight, we need to face the background of an object, redefined as the conditions for the emergence not only of the object (we might ask: How did it arrive?), as well as the act of perceiving the object, which depends on the arrival of the body that perceives. The background to perception might involve such intertwining histories of arrival, which would explain how Husserl got near enough to his table for it to become not only the object on which he writes, but also 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.

So how does the object arrive into one's field of vision? What is behind its arrival? Such a question implies that the "availability" of objects is an effect of actions, which are not necessarily perceivable on the surface of the object. The question is not a simple one; it cannot be answered by providing a biography of the object as if the object had an independent existence from the "points" at which they are viewed. Despite this, objects move in and out of view such that they do have an existence that is more than how they present or reveal them-

selves. As Arjun Appadurai suggests, "We have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories" (1988: 5). If phenomenology turns us toward things, in terms of how they reveal themselves in the present, then we may also need to "follow" such things around. We may need to supplement phenomenology with an "ethnography of things." The question of where an object "goes" would not then vacate the position of subjects, those to whom they present themselves as a figure, or background within familiar forms of the social. The story of the object's travel would involve "co-perception," to use Husserl's term. So our question, as an "ethno-phenomenological" one, would be: How did I or we arrive at the point where it is possible to witness the arrival of the object? How is the arrival a form of witnessing in which "what arrives" becomes a "what" only in the event of being apprehended as a "what"?

At least two entities have to arrive to create an encounter, a "bringing forth" in the sense of an occupation. So, this table and Husserl have to "co-incide," for him to write his philosophy about "the table." The dash in "co-incidence" must be highlighted here to avoid turning the shared arrival into a matter of chance. To "co-incide" suggests how different things happen at the same moment, a happening that bring things near to other things, whereby the nearness shapes the shape of each thing. Simultaneous arrivals are not necessarily a matter of chance; arrivals are determined, at least in a certain way, as a determination that might determine what gets near, even if it does not decide what happens *once we are near*. If being near to this or that object is not a matter of chance, what happens in the "now" of this nearness remains open, in the sense that we don't always know things affect each other, or how we will be affected by things (Deleuze 1992: 627).⁹

So, we can ask: How did the table arrive at the point, where Husserl could face the paper that is on it? How did he arrive at the table as the tool that "brings forth" his philosophy and is itself "brought forth" as the very materials on which his philosophy is written? How is the object, in Derrida's term, an "arrivant"? For Derrida, the arrivant signifies the "perhaps" of the "what arrives?" As he puts it: "What is going to come, *perhaps*, is not only this or that; it is at last the thought of the *perhaps* itself. The *arrivant* will arrive *perhaps*, for one must never be sure when it comes to *arrive*; but the *arrivant* could also be the *perhaps* itself, the unheard of, totally new experience of the *perhaps*" (1997: 29, see also Derrida 1994b: 33-34). To say the object is an arrivant is to signal not only that it is nearby but also that its nearness is not simply given.

The "bringing forth" of the object involves, for sure, its arrival; in coming into being it comes "here," near enough to me, or to you, as it must do if it is to be seen as this or that object. Nothing is not brought forth "without" coming to reside somewhere, where the somewhere (say, the house, the room, or the skin) shapes the surface of "what" it "is" that is brought forth. In "having arrived" how does the object become "what," where "what" is open to the "perhaps" of the future?

Heidegger turns to the etymology of the object when he considers how the object "is" insofar as "it is thrown." The word "thrown" risks turning the arrival of the object into an event, a happening, which is here insofar as it is "now." Lefebvre offers a critique of Heidegger's concept of "thrownness," which understands production as "causing to appear" (1991: 122). I would also suggest that the arrival of an object does not just happen in a moment; it is not that the object "makes an appearance," even though we can be thrown by an object's appearance. An arrival takes time, and the time that it takes shapes "what" it is that arrives. The object could even be described as the transformation of time into form, which itself could be redefined as the "direction" of matter. What arrives not only depends on time, but is shaped by the conditions of its arrival, by how it came to get here. Think of a sticky object; what it picks up on its surface "shows" where it has traveled and what it has come into contact with. You bring your past encounters with you when you arrive. In this sense an arrival has not simply happened; an arrival points toward a future that might or "perhaps" will happen, given that we don't always know in advance "what" we will come into contact with when we follow this or that line. At the same time, the arrival only becomes an arrival insofar as it has happened; and the object may "appear" only as an effect of work that has already taken place.

Our question could be reformulated as: What work goes into the making of things, such that they take form as this or that thing? Marxism provides a philosophy for rethinking the object as not only in history, but as an effect of history. The Marxian critique of German idealism begins after all with a critique of the idea that the object is "in the present," or that the object is "before me." As Marx and Engels put it, in their critique of Feuerbach:

He does not see how the sensuous world around him is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry, and of the state of society; and indeed, in the sense that it is a historical product, and the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on

the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its intercourse, modifying its social system according to its changed needs. Even the objects of the simplest "sensuous certainty" are only given him through social demands, industry and commercial intercourse. The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit-trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by *commerce* into our zone, and therefore only *by* this action of a definite society in a definite age it has become "sensuous certainty" for Feuerbach. (1975: 170)

If phenomenologists were simply to "look at" the object that they face, then they would be erasing the "signs" of history. They would apprehend the object as simply there, as given in its sensuous certainty rather than as "having got here," an arrival that is at once the way in which objects are binding and how they assume a social form. So objects (such as the cherry tree) are "transplanted." They take the shape of a social action, which is forgotten in the givenness of the object. The temporality of "what comes before" is erased in the experience of the object as "what is before" in the spatial sense. For Marx and Engels, actions are generational and intergenerational (the point is not about individual action). What passes through history is not only the work done by generations, but the "sedimentation" of that work is the condition of arrival for future generations. Objects take the shape of this history; objects "have value" and they take shape through labor. They are formed out of labor, but they also "take the form" of that labor. What Marxism lets us do is to rearticulate the historicity of furniture, among other things.¹⁰ History cannot simply be perceived on the surface of the object, even if how objects surface or take shape is an effect of such histories. In other words, history cannot simply be turned into something that is given in its sensuous certainty, as if it could be a property of an object.

If idealism takes the object as given, then it fails to account for its conditions of arrival, which are not simply given. Idealism is the philosophical counterpart to what Marx would later describe as commodity fetishism. I want to suggest that it is not just commodities that are fetishized: objects that I perceive as objects, as having properties of their own, as it were, are produced through the process of fetishism. The object is "brought forth" as a thing that is "itself" only insofar as it is cut off from its own arrival. So it becomes that which we have presented to us, only if we forget how it arrived, as a history that involves multiple forms of contact between others. Objects appear by being cut off from such histories of arrival, as histories that involve multiple genera-

tions, and the "work" of bodies, which is of course the work of some bodies more than others.

Let us turn to Marx's model of "commodity fetishism." In *Capital* he suggests that commodities are made up of two elements, "matter and labour," where labor is understood as "changing the form of matter" (1887: 50). The commodity is assumed to have value, or a life of its own, only if we forget the labor: "It becomes value only in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object" (57). The commodity, in other words, both transforms labor into an object and takes the very "form" of labor. Interestingly, Marx also uses the example of "the table" (although we don't know what kind of table he refers to). He suggests that the table is made from wood (which provides, as it were, the matter), and that the work of the table—the work that it takes to "make the table"—changes the form of the wood, even though the table "is" still made out of wood. As he states: "It is as clear as noon-day that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the material furnished by nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered by making a table out of it, for all that, the table continues to be that common every-day thing, wood. But, as soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent" (76).

The Marxian critique of commodity fetishism notably relies here on a distinction between matter and form, between the wood and the table. The "becoming table" of the wood is not the same as its commodification. The table has use value, even after it has transformed the "form" of the wood. The table can be used, and in being used the value of the table is not exchanged and made abstract. The table has use value until it is exchanged. One problem with this model is that the dynamism of "making form" is located in the transformation of nature into use value: we could also suggest that the "wood" (nature/matter) has acquired its form over time. Nature then would not be simply "there," waiting to be formed or to take form. Marx and Engel's earlier critique of idealism involves a more dynamic view of the "facts of matter": even the trees, which provide the wood, are themselves "brought forth" as effects of generational action. The wood is itself "formed matter" insofar as trees are not simply given but take shape as an effect of labor ("transplanted by commerce").¹¹ The orientation of this table, how it appears as a table for work, depends on these multiple histories of labor, redefined as matter taking form.¹²

It is not surprising that Derrida offers a critique of the Marxian distinction

between use value and exchange value (1994a: 149), by turning toward the table. As he suggests: "The table is familiar, too familiar." For Derrida, the table is not simply something we use: "The table has been worn down, exploited, overexploited, or else set aside and beside itself, no longer in use, in antique shops or auction rooms" (149). He thus suggests that "the table in use" is as metaphysical as "table as commodity": use value as well as exchange value involves fetishism (162). While I agree with this argument, we might note that for Marx the table in use is not simply: it involves the "trans-formation" of matter into form. Use value is hence not a simple matter for Marx, even if he locates the transcendental in the "queer" commodity.¹³

What a Marxist approach could allow us to do, if we extend Marx's critique of the commodity to the very matter of wood as well as the form of the table, is to consider the history of "what appears" and how it is shaped by histories of work. The commodity might be one moment in the "life history" or career of an object (Appadurai 1988: 17). The table as an object also moves around; it acquires new forms; it is put to different uses. For example, I buy the table (for this or that amount of money) as a table "for" writing. I have to bring it to the space where it will reside (the study, or the space marked out in a corner of another room). Others bring it for me: they transport the table. They bring it up the stairs. I wince as the edge of the table hits the wall, leaving a mark on both the wall and the table—which shows, too, what the table came into contact with during the time of its arrival. The table, having arrived, is nestled in the corner of the room. I use it as a writing desk. Having arrived, I turn to the table and sit on the chair which is placed alongside it. The chair allows me to reach the table, to cover it with my arms, and to write upon it. And yet, I am not sure what will happen to the table in the future. I could put the table to a different use (I could use it as a dining table if it is big enough "to support" this kind of action), or I could even forget about the table if I ceased to write, whereupon it might be "put aside" out of reach. The object is not reducible to the commodity, even when it is bought and sold: indeed, the object is not reducible to itself, which means it does not "have" an "itself" that is apart from its contact with others. The actions performed on the object (as well as with the object) shape the object. The object in turn affects what we do, as I will discuss in the section following.

Going back to the table, we would remember that the table was made by somebody; and that there is a history to its arrival, as a history of trans-

portation, which could be redescribed as a history of *changing hands*. As Igor Kopytoff puts it, we can have a cultural biography of things, which would show how “they are culturally redefined and put to use” (1988: 67).¹⁴ This table, you might say, has a story. What a story it could tell. What we need to recall is how the “thisness” of this table does not, as it were, belong to it: what is particular about this table, what we can tell through its biography, is also what allows us to tell a larger story: a story not only of “things” changing hands, but of how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labor of others.¹⁵

Such histories are not simply available *on* the surface of the object, apart from the scratches that might be left behind. Histories shape “what” surfaces: they are behind the arrival of “the what” that surfaces. Histories are in this sense spectral; just like Husserl’s “missing sides.” We do not know, of course, the story of Husserl’s table, how it arrived, or what happened to the table after he stopped writing. But having arrived, we can follow what the table allowed him to do by reading his philosophy as a philosophy that turns to the table. So even if the “thisness” of the table disappears in his work, we could allow its “thisness” to reappear by making this table “matter” in our reading.

Doing Things

The object has arrived. And, having arrived, what then does it do? I want to suggest that objects not only are shaped by work, but that they also take the shape of the work they do. To think about how objects are “occupied” we can begin by considering how we are busy “with” them. Whether we “take” up different objects depends on how we are already occupied and on the kind of work that we do. We say that we occupy space; that we have an occupation. We are occupied with objects, which present themselves as tools to extend “the reach” of our actions. We are occupied when we are busy. We are booked up; we are using up time when we are occupied with something. We might be preoccupied by something, which means we don’t notice something else. The word “occupy” allows us to link the question of inhabiting or residing within space; to work, or even to having an identity through work (an occupation); to time (to be occupied with); to holding something; and to taking possession of something *as* a thing. How are we occupied with objects? How does an occupation orientate us toward some objects and, in that towardness, to some ways of living over others? How does this orientation take up time as well as space?

It is no accident that Heidegger poses this question of occupation, of what it is that we do, by turning to the table. In *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity* (1999),¹⁶ Heidegger contrasts two ways of describing tables. In the first model, the table is encountered as “a thing in space—as a spatial thing” (68). Although Heidegger evokes Husserl’s description of “the table,” Husserl is not named, or at least not at this point. As Heidegger states: “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 rather 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.

The words by Heidegger that follow form one of the richest phenomenological descriptions of the table as it is experienced from the points of view 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 primary 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).¹⁷ In other words, what we do with the table, or what the table allows us to do, is essential to the table. The table provides a surface around which a family gathers: Heidegger describes his wife sitting at the table and reading, and “the boys” busying themselves at the table.¹⁸ 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 itself. Doing things “at” the table is what makes the table what it is and not some other thing.

We could perhaps then redescribe the table as a tool, as something we do something with. In *Being and Time* Heidegger offers us a powerful reading of tools as he does in his later work on technology. In the former, Heidegger considers the “pragmatic” character of things, which is obscured by the presentation of things as “mere things,” and he considers such things as forms of equipment. As he suggests, “In our dealings, we come across equipment for writing, sewing, working, transportation” (1973: 97). In ordering his phenomenology around equipment, Heidegger departs from Husserl by suggesting that the pragmatic orientation of things is associated within their being, or what he

describes as the “equipmentality” of objects. Equipmentality is about what “things” or “objects” allow bodies to do: they have an “in-order-to” structure, which assigns or refers to something. So what makes the object “itself” is what it allows us to do, and that “doing” takes the object out of itself and makes it “point” toward something, whether that something is an action or other objects. So the writing table is Husserl’s equipment: it “points toward” writing as well as to other objects, which gather around writing as tools that allow this kind of work: the inkwell, pencils, and so on. The writing table might also point toward the writing body, as that which becomes “itself” once it “takes up” the equipment and “takes up” time and space, in doing the work that the equipment allows the body to do.

What objects do is what brings them forth in the shape they have. The wheel can roll, the desk can hold a computer, the pen can write, the jug can pour. The use of “can” here might help remind us that “usefulness” is not merely instrumental but is about capacities that are open to the future. The capacity is not so much “in” the tool, but depends on how the tool is taken up or “put to use.” Heidegger makes exactly this point in his later work on technology. It is not just that the object tends toward something, where the tendency supports an action, but that the shape of the object is itself shaped by the work for which it is intended. For Heidegger, the thing “is not merely an aggregate of traits, nor an accumulation of properties by which the aggregate arises,” rather it “is that around which the properties have been assembled” (1975: 22–23). We can see in this model of property as assemblage, how the thing becomes something that “has” properties. The thing would be a thing insofar as it is being used as the thing that it was brought into the world to be: “The peasant woman wears her shoes in the field. *Only here are they what they are*” (33).

Technology does not simply refer to objects that we use to extend capacities for action. Technology (or *techne*) becomes instead the process of “bringing forth” or, as Heidegger states, “to make something appear, within what is present, as this or as that, in this way or that way” (159). The object is an effect of “bringing forth,” where the “bringing forth” is a question of the determination of form: the object itself has been shaped for something, *which means it takes the shape of what it is for*. The object is not just material, although it is material: the object is matter given some form or another where the form “intends” toward something. The table has a horizontal surface, which “supports” the action for which it is intended. This “tending toward” is what

shapes its form, which then allows us to recognize the object as this object and not another. Form takes shape through the “direction” of matter toward an action. 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.*

And yet, objects do not only do what we intend them to do. Heidegger differentiates between using something and perceiving something, which he describes in terms of grasping that something thematically (98). The example he uses is the hammer. When the hammer hammers, then it is “ready-to-hand.” The nearness of the hammer, the fact that it is available to me, is linked to its usefulness; it is near as it enables me to perform a specific kind of work. Such “ready-to-hand-ness” is interesting to Heidegger, insofar as it is something to do with what the hammer “is.” Indeed, Heidegger suggests that the object as practice, as something we do something with, involves “*its own kind of sight*” (99) which is a different sight than looking at the hammer as if it were not something that simply hammered. Heidegger thus suggests that when the ready-to-hand is not “handy,” we see it differently; it becomes “present-to-hand.” So the hammer breaks, and it is not that I no longer see what the object really is (for it “is” a hammer), but that I see it in a different way, as something that does not move toward something: “When equipment cannot be used, this implies the constitutive assignment of the ‘in-order-to’ to a ‘toward-this’ has been disturbed . . . But when an assignment has been disturbed—when something is unusable for some purpose—then the assignment becomes explicit” (105). What difference does this “making explicit” make? Heidegger moves on:

The entity which is held in our fore-having—for instance, the hammer—is proximally ready-to-hand as equipment. If this entity becomes the “object” of an assertion, then as soon as we begin this assertion, there is already a change over in the fore-having. Something *ready-to-hand with which* we have to do or perform something, turns into something “*about which*” the assertion that points it out is made. Our fore-sight is aimed at something present-to-hand in what is ready-to-hand. Both *by* and *for* this way of looking at it [*Hin-sicht*], the ready-to-hand becomes veiled as ready-to-hand. Within this discovering of presence-at-hand, which is at the same time a covering up of readiness-to-hand, something present-at-hand which we encounter is given a definite character in its Being-present-at-hand-in-such-and-such-a-manner. Only now are we given any access to *properties* or the like. (200)

So it is when the hammer is broken, or when I cannot use it, that I become aware of the hammer as an object-in-itself, rather than as object, which refers beyond itself to an action that I intend to perform. So at this moment of "failure" the hammer is perceived as having properties; as being, for instance, "too heavy." The hammer ceases to be a means to do something (where the object is the action) and becomes the object that we attend to, or are concerned with. While this model does not designate the usefulness of objects, and their familiarity as functional things as "the natural attitude," which must be bracketed by phenomenology, it does distinguish between using something and perceiving something, although use is given its own kind of sight.

What is being revealed when technologies are no longer ready for action? For Heidegger, it is properties that are revealed. He suggests that when the hammer ceases to hammer, that is, we cease to be able to hammer with it, then we become aware of it as having a specific form: "The hammer is too heavy." In other words, we only feel the heaviness of the hammer at the moment in which we cannot use the hammer to perform the action: when the hammer does not hammer. But clearly this propositional statement about the hammer—"The hammer is too heavy"—is still a statement that "points" toward what the hammer "should" do. In other words, the heaviness of the hammer *still refers to the action that the hammer itself directs us toward*. The hammer is too heavy for what? It is too heavy to hammer "with," after all. The "too heavy" suggests that the hammer does not allow me to hammer. The judgment about the hammer, which gives it a property as being this or that kind of thing, still perceives the hammer in terms of what it can or should do, even in the moment of the failure of the hammer to perform its action.

So when something is no longer ready for action it does follow that we have access to its properties, as if they are independent of the histories of action that bring such objects forth, as the "what" that is near. This is not to say that it does not make a difference to how we perceive things when those things are and are not "put to use." Rather, it is to say that the failure of things to be put to use does not mean an access to properties of things that are independent of their use. Indeed, we might want to question the presumption that things have properties, which do not point toward their "assignment" in a familiar and social order.

So what does it mean to say that an object fails to do the work for which it was intended? This failure might not simply be a question of the object itself

failing. For the hammer might be too heavy for you to use but perfectly adequate for me. A hammer might be broken and not enable me to do one thing, but it could still let me do something else. Failure, which is about the loss of the capacity to perform an action for which the object was intended is not a property of an object (though it tends to be attributed in this way and there is no doubt that *things can go wrong*), but rather of the failure of an object to extend a body, which we can define in terms of the extension of bodily capacities to perform actions. The body cannot extend itself through the object in a way that was intended, although of course "intention" should not then become a presumed property of things (a child who picks up the broken hammer and begins to play a game is still doing something). The experience of this "nonextension" might then lead to "the object" *being attributed* with properties, qualities and values. In other words, what is at stake in moments of failure is not so much access to properties but attributions of properties, which become a matter of how we *approach* the object. So if I state, "The hammer is too heavy," then I mean, "The hammer is too heavy for me to hammer with." The moment of "non-use" is the moment in which the object is attributed as having properties, and it is the same moment in which objects may be judged insofar as they are inadequate to a task, the moment when we "blame the tool."¹⁹

Let us return now to the table. The table has a certain form, as we know. It is made of something (perhaps wood). The matter and the form of the table are dependent on histories of labor, which are congealed in and as the very "thing" of the table. The table is an effect of work, and it also points to work in the very form that it takes. Different tables have different functions: we do things with them by performing actions upon them. If our object is a writing table, then our table is specifically adapted for convenience in writing or reading, perhaps something made with a sloping top and generally fitted drawer and compartments. The word table, we might note, is derived from the Latin *tabula*, which primarily means a "board," especially one used for games or for writing. In its earliest English usages, "table" meant a "surface," in particular a "surface for writing," before the "table" became the name of the familiar article of furniture that we could describe as an "object with a horizontal surface." The shape of the table depends at least to some extent on what it allows us to do: the horizontal surface should be at the height appropriate for its work. The writing table is higher than the coffee table, for instance, as a

difference determined in part by function, or by what each table is being asked to do. A coffee table at the height of my waist would amount to a failed orientation, as I could not extend myself through it, by using it as something on which to place my coffee cup while I am sitting down on the sofa. The table is both an effect of work and also what allows us to work: whether the table "works" depends upon whether we can do, when we make use of the table, the work we intend to do.

The failure of objects to work could be described as a question of fit: it would be the failure of subjects and objects to work together. So the appropriateness of the height of the table is itself dependent on the body that uses it: Husserl's table could be too high or too low for me, depending on our differences of height. Husserl's writing table would work for him only if it were placed in a way that enabled him to write. If this table does not work for me, I would "turn toward" it a different way. I might then attribute my failure to write to the table, such that it becomes the cause of the failure. Such a turning would be felt as a frustration, through which the table might be perceived as "too this or too that," or even as a bad object. The perception of the object as having qualities is not then a perception of what is proper to the object. The failure would be the failure of the object to enable the action with which it is identified. The table is "too high," which means I cannot write at the table: the "tooness" refers not to the table's presence for itself but to how it is or is not ready for me.

I am not suggesting here that the objects do not have properties that may be revealed when they are put into action (a "putting into" that can also involve the failure to act). Objects do have qualities that make them tangible in the present. But these characteristics are not simply "in" the objects but instead are about how the objects work and are worked on by others. The example of the hammer that is too heavy or the table that is too high shows us how the position of the object, and indeed the qualities perceived in an object as given, refer us to the relations between objects and the subjects that make use of them. This does not vacate or empty the object as "just" a vehicle for subjects. Those qualities only come to matter in terms of how the objects and subjects work together; they cannot be assigned to the subject or object, although in everyday experience such assignments do happen. Failure can of course be attributed to subjects as well as to objects: the subject can turn away from the object and toward itself. I could say, for example, I am too short for this table,

as well as this table is too high for me. To orientate oneself can mean to adjust one's position, or another's position, such that we are "facing" the right direction: we know where we are through how we position ourselves in relation to others. Work also involves adjustments: we might move this way or that, so we can work with this or that object: work involves a direction toward the object, which then works for us. The failure of work is not, then, "in" the thing or "in" the person but rather is about whether the person and the thing face each other *in the right way*.

When things are orientated they are facing the right way: in other words, the objects around the body allow the body itself to be extended. When things are orientated, we are occupied and busy. The "point" of this occupation might even make the face of the object recede from view. Occupation is hence not just about "any body," for an object tends toward some bodies more than others, depending on "the tendencies" of bodies. Objects may even take the shape of the bodies for whom they are "intended," in what it is that they allow a body to do. The writing table thus "tends toward" the writer. An action is possible when the body and the object "fit." So it is not simply that some bodies and tools *happen* to generate specific actions. Objects, as well as spaces, are made for some kinds of bodies more than others. Objects are made to size as well as made to order: while they come in a range of sizes, the sizes also presume certain kinds of bodies as having "sizes" that will "match." In this way, bodies and their objects tend toward each other; they are orientated toward each other, and are shaped by this orientation. When orientation "works," we are occupied. The failure of something to work is a matter of a *failed orientation*: a tool is used by a body for which it was not intended, or a body uses a tool that does not extend its capacity for action.

Inhabiting Spaces

How do bodies "matter" in what objects do? To consider this question we can return to the table. We already know how Husserl's attention wanders: from the writing table and only then toward other spaces: the darkness of the unseen portions of the room. 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 he faces also shapes what is behind him, and what is available as the background to his vision. So his gaze might fall on

the paper, which is on the table, given that he is sitting at the desk, the writing table, and not at another kind of table, such as the kitchen table. Such other tables would not, perhaps, be the “right” kind 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. Such a table in turn would face him; as the writing table it would face the one who writes. There are also objects that gather around the scene of writing, as “would be” tools of the philosopher, and these objects are “within sight” for the philosopher, and perhaps must be, if philosophy is to endure. So the philosopher faces these objects, more than others, in the labor of doing philosophy, even if the approach taken makes the objects disappear.

I have suggested that the orientation of objects is shaped by what objects allow me to do. In this way an object is what an action is directed toward. In this section, I want to consider how actions take place in space. Clearly, action depends on the object being near enough: “I see it only if it is within the radius of my action” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 7). At the same time, while objects have to be near enough to complete specific actions, such actions are what bring objects near to me. So, you can only write on the writing table if the table is within reach, but the reachability of the table might be an effect of what you already do for a living. It exists for you insofar as it is near. In other words, the nearness of certain objects is an effect of the work the body does, and the work the body does is what makes certain objects near. Action depends on how we reside in space with objects: what Husserl was to call in his later work, “the near sphere” and the “core sphere” as “the sphere of things which I can reach” (2002: 149).

The relation between action and space is hence crucial. It is not simply that we act in space; spatial relations between subjects and others are produced through actions, which make some things available to be reached. Or, as Lefebvre suggests: “Activity in space is restricted by that space; space ‘decides’ what actually may occur, but even this ‘decision’ has limits placed upon it” (1991: 143). So the space of the study is shaped by a decision (that this room is *for this kind of work*), which itself then “shapes” what actions “happen” in that space. The question of action is a question then of how we inhabit space. Given this, action involves the intimate co-dwelling of bodies and objects. This is not to say that bodies are simply objects alongside other objects. As Merleau-Ponty shows us, bodies are “not the same” as other kinds of objects

precisely given their different relation to space. The body, he suggests, is “no longer merely an object in the world,” rather “it is our point of view in the world” (1964: 5). Returning to Husserl’s table, we can consider how the body moves around the object; and that very motility is remarkable in its difference from *that which it moves around*. As Merleau-Ponty suggests: “We grasp external spaces through our bodily situation. A ‘corporeal’ or postural schema gives us a global, practical and implicit notion of the relation between our body and things, and our hold on them. A system of possible movements, or ‘motor projects’ radiates from us to the environment. Our body is not in space like things; it inhabits or haunts space. It implies itself to space like a hand to an instrument and when we wish to move about we do not move the body as we move an object” (5).

The language here implies that bodies provide us with a tool, as that through which we “hold” or “grasp” onto things, but elsewhere Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body is not itself an instrument but a form of expression, a making visible of our intentions (1964: 5). What makes bodies different is how they inhabit space: space is not a container for the body; it does not contain the body as if the body were “in it.” Rather bodies are submerged, such that they become the space they inhabit; in taking up space, bodies move through space and are affected by the “where” of that movement. It is through this movement that the surface of spaces as well as bodies takes shape. Recalling Husserl, his encounter with the table involves moving around it. Of course, bodies are not the only kinds of objects that move. But when they move, we move. The table would become available to me, within my reach, only insofar as my bodily posture orientates me toward it and even spreads over it. The profile of the table is shaped by the profile of the body, even if that profile “disappears” from view.

Of course, when Husserl “grasps” his table from the series of impressions, as being more than what he sees at any point in time, it is his “eyes” that are doing the work: he “closes his eyes” and “opens his eyes” (1969: 130). The object’s partiality is seen, even if the object is unavailable in a single sight. Interestingly, in the second volume of *Ideas* Husserl attends to the lived body (*Leib*) and to the intimacy of touch.²⁰ The table returns, as we 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" (1989: 153). 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 impressions. Bodies are "something touching which is touched" (155). The locations of sensation on the skin surface shows that the sensation is not "in" the object or the body but instead takes shape as an effect of their encounter. As Rosalyn Diprose suggests, the world described by phenomenology is an "interworld," or an "open circuit" between the perceiving body and its world (2002: 102).

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; that is, by co-inhabiting space such that the boundary between the co-inhabitants 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.²¹ Orientations are tactile and they involve more than one skin surface: we, in approaching this or that table, 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 only be felt once I have ceased to stand apart from it. This body with this table is a different body than it would be without it. And, the table is a different table when it is with me than it would be without me. Neither the object nor the body have integrity in the sense of being "the same thing" with and without others. Bodies as well as objects take shape through being orientated toward each other, as an orientation that may be experienced as the co-habitation or sharing of space.²²

Bodies are hence shaped by contact with objects and with others, with "what" is near enough to be reached. Bodies may even take shape through such contact, or take the shape of that contact. What gets near is both shaped by what bodies do, which in turn affects what bodies can do. Paul Schilder's work on body image places an emphasis on how bodies are shaped by what is and is not brought near to them. As he suggests: "The space around the body-image may either bring the objects nearer to the body or the body nearer to the objects. The emotional configuration determines the distance of objects from

the body" (1950: 216). Bringing objects near to bodies, which also brings bodies near to objects, involves acts of perception about "what" can be brought near to me. For instance, 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 nearness of such objects is required by his work, which is also "what" he does for a living. So the objects are near as the instruments of philosophy, which shape the kind of body that philosophy acquires as well as the body of the philosopher.

We can continue 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 that "this" table disappears.²³ Around the table a horizon or fringe of perception is "dimly" apprehended. When Husserl writes, the writing table itself may only be dimly perceived. The horizon is what is "around" as the body does its work. As Don Ihde notes: "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" (1990: 114). The horizon is not an object that I apprehend: I do not see it. The horizon is what gives objects their contours, and it even allows such objects to be reached. Objects are objects insofar as they are within my horizon; it is in the act of reaching "toward them" that makes them available as objects for me. The bodily horizon shows what bodies can reach toward by establishing a line beyond which 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 showing the "limits" of what it can do.

We might think that we reach for whatever comes into view. And yet, what "comes into" view, or what is within our horizon, is not a matter simply of what we find here or there, or even where we find ourselves as we move here or there. What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations that we have already taken. Some objects don't even become objects of perception, as the body does not move toward them: they are "beyond the horizon" of the body, and thus out of reach. The surfaces of bodies are shaped by what is reachable. Indeed, the history of bodies can be rewritten as the history of the reachable.

Orientations are about the direction we take that puts some things and not others in our reach. So the object, which is apprehending only by exceeding my gaze, can be apprehended only insofar as it has come to be available to me: its reachability is not simply a matter of its place or location (the white paper on the table, for instance), but instead is shaped by the orientations I have taken that mean I face some ways more than others (toward this kind of table, which marks out the space I tend to inhabit).

Phenomenology helps us to 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” (see Steinbock 1995: 36). This model of history as bodily sedimentation has been taken up by social theorists; for Pierre Bourdieu, for example, such histories are described as the *habitus*, as “systems of durable, transposable, dispositions” (1977: 72) which integrate past experiences through the very “*matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions*” that are necessary to accomplish “infinitely diversified tasks” (83).²⁴ 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 (1997a: 406). 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 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 the work is what makes the 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 not only physical objects (the different kinds of tables) but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgment, as well as objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives. I might “orientate” 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 we seek to be: the action searches for identity as the mark of attainment (the writer “becomes” a

writer through the work of 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.

Of course, I too am working on a table, though for me the kitchen table as much as the writing table provides the setting for action: for cooking, eating, as well as writing. I have a study space and I work on a table in that space. As I type this now, I am using a keyboard placed on a computer table that resides in the study, which as noted above is a space that has been set aside for this kind of work. This particular table is designed for the computer, and for working on the computer. I fit into this space in a certain way by sitting on the chair, which is before the table. Objects and bodies “work together” as spaces for action; so here I type as I face this object, and it is what I am working on. I am touching the object, as well as the keyboard, and I am aware of it, as a sensuous given that is available for me. In repeating the work of typing, my body also feels a certain way. My neck gets sore, and I stretch to ease the discomfort. I pull my shoulders back every now and then as the posture I assume (a bad posture I am sure) is a huddle: I huddle over the table as I repeat the action (the banging of keys with the tips of my fingers); the action shapes me and leaves its impression, through bodily sensations, prickly feelings on the skin surface, and the more intense experience of discomfort. I write, and in performing this work I might yet become my object—become a writer, with a writer’s body, and a writer’s tendencies (the sore neck, the sore shoulders, are sure signs of having done this kind of work).

Repetitive strain injury (RSI) can be understood as the effect of such repetition: we repeat some actions, sometimes over and over again, and this is partly about the nature of the work we might do. Our body takes the shape of this repetition; *we get stuck in certain alignments as an effect of this work*. For instance, my right ring finger has acquired the shape of its own work: the constant use of a pen, in writing, has created a lump, which is the shape that is shaped by the work of this repetition; my finger almost looks “as if” it has the shape of a pen as an impression upon it. The object on which and through which I work hence leaves its impression: the action, as intending, as well as tending toward the object, shapes my body in this way and that. The work of repetition is not neutral work; *it orients the body in some ways rather than others*. The lump on my finger is a sure sign of an orientation I have taken, not just toward the pen-object, or the keyboard, but also toward the world, as someone

who does a certain kind of work for a living. Husserl's writing also "shows" his orientation: the tables that appear first are the writing tables, as proper objects of philosophy, which itself is shaped by the orientations taken toward its objects, as objects of thought. Orientations shape what bodies do, while bodies are shaped by orientations they already have, as effects of the work that must take place for a body to arrive where it does.

Bodies hence acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions over others, as actions that have certain "objects" in view, whether they are 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*. Rather, the nearness of such objects is a sign of an orientation I have already taken toward the world as an orientation that shapes what we call, inadequately, "character." Bodies tend toward some objects more than others given their tendencies. These tendencies are not originary but instead are effects of the repetition of the "tending toward." I will discuss in the next chapter the paradoxical temporality of such tendencies in relation to sexual orientation; here it will suffice to say that it makes sense to consider how bodies come to "have" certain orientations over time and that they come to be shaped by taking some directions rather than others and toward some objects rather than others.

The field of positive action, of what this or that body does do, also defines a field of inaction, of actions that are possible but that are not taken up, or even actions that are not possible because of what has been taken up. Such histories of action or "take up" shape the bodily horizon of bodies. Spaces are not only inhabited by bodies that "do things," but what bodies "do" leads them to inhabit some spaces more than others. If spaces extend bodies, then we could say that spaces also extend the shape of the bodies that "tend" to inhabit them. So, for instance, if the action of writing is associated with the masculine body, then it is this body that tends to inhabit the space for writing. The space for writing—say, the study—then tends to extend such bodies and may even take their shape. Gender becomes naturalized as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces partly through the "loop" of this repetition, which leads bodies in some directions more than others as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns.

Here again we can return to the table—to the writing table, more specifi-

cally. In a way, the writing table waits for the body of the writer. In waiting for the writer the table waits for some bodies more than others. This waiting "orientates" the table to a specific kind of body, the body that would "take up" writing. I have already described such a body as a masculine body by evoking the gendered form of its occupation. Now, clearly, gender is not "in" the table or necessarily "in" the body that turns to the table. Gender is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another. We might note, for instance, in Heidegger's *Ontology* (1999) that the table as a thing on which we do things allows for different ways of being occupied. So Heidegger writes on the table, his wife sews, and his children play. What we do on the table is also about being given a place within a familiar order (as I explore in the next chapter). Bodies are shaped by the work they do on the table, where work involves gendered forms of occupation.

In light of this we can consider Charlotte Perkin Gilman's work on the "home," where she speaks of the shaping of women's bodies through how they inhabit domestic interiors. As she notes: "See it in furnishing. A stone or block of wood to sit on, a hide to lie on, a shelf to put the food on. See that block of wood change under your eyes and crawl up history on its forthcoming legs—a stool, a chair, a sofa, a settee, and now the endless ranks of sittable furniture wherewith we fill the home to keep ourselves from the floor withal . . . If you are confined at home you cannot walk much—therefore you must sit—especially if your task is a stationary one. So, to the home-bound woman came much sitting, and much sitting called for ever softer seats" (2002: 27–28). Gilman is writing here specifically about furnishings in the Orient, and she contrasts the soft bodies and chairs of this imagined interior with the domestic interiors in the West, which give women more mobility. I will take up the matter of orientalism in chapter 3; suffice to say here that Gilman shows us how orientations involve inhabiting certain bodily positions: sitting, walking, lying down, and so on. Such forms of occupation or of being occupied shape the furniture: the chairs become soft to provide seating for the body that sits. In turn, the body becomes soft as it occupies the soft seat, taking up the space made available by the seat. Such positions become habitual: they are repeated, and in being repeated they shape the body and what it can do. The more the body sits, the more it tends to be seated.

The point is simple: what we "do do" affects what we "can do." This is not

to argue that “doing” simply restricts capacities. In contrast, what we “do do” opens up and expands some capacities, as an “expansion” in certain directions that in turn might restrict what you can do in others. A case in point would be “handedness”: the more we use one side of the body, the harder it is to use the other side. As Robert Hertz suggests, the cultural preference for the right side means that the “left hand is repressed and kept inactive” (1973: 5) and the right hand is given “more intensive work,” which “favours its development” (4). We acquire our tendencies as an effect of the direction of energy to this or that side. The more we work certain parts of the body, such as this or that muscle, the more work they can do. At the same time, the less we work other muscles, then the less they can do. So if gender shapes what we “do do,” then it shapes what we can do. Gender could thus be described as a bodily orientation, a way in which bodies get directed by their actions over time.

It is worth noting here that Iris Marion Young’s phenomenological model of female embodiment places a key emphasis on the role of orientation. Indeed, Young argues that gender differences *are* differences in orientation. As she suggests, “even in the most simple body orientations of men and women as they sit, stand, and walk, we can observe a typical difference in body style and extension” (2005: 32). This is not to say that orientations are themselves simply given, or that they “cause” such differences. Rather, orientations are both an effect of such differences as well as a mechanism for their reproduction. Young suggests that women have an “inhibited intentionality” in part because they do not get behind their bodies, as women see their bodies as “objects” as well as “capacities” (35). So becoming a woman means “throwing like a girl.” Women may throw objects, and are thrown by objects, in such a way that they take up less space. To put it simply, we acquire the shape of how we throw, as well as what we do. Or as Linda McDowell and Jo Sharpe suggest: “The body, its size, shape, gestures, the very space it takes up, those masculine and feminine norms which mean that men sprawl and women don’t; the differences in physicality that construct and reflect gender norms create ways of being in space” (1997: 203).

Gender is an effect of the kinds of work that bodies do, which in turn “directs” those bodies, affecting what they “can do.” At the same time, it is not always decided which bodies inhabit which spaces, even when spaces extend the form of some bodies and not others. Julia Wardhaugh argues that there is an increasing “recognition that rooms or spaces in the family home are not

effectively gendered even when they are designed to meet the requirements of men or women (for example, the height of kitchen benches). Rather it is the activities that are performed in these spaces at given times and in given relationship contexts that reflect and/or subvert ideas about gender” (1999: 92). In other words, even if what we “do do” affects what we “can do,” other things remain possible. For instance, bodies can take up spaces that do not extend their shape, which can in turn work to “reorientate” bodies and space. In the following two chapters I will discuss failed orientations as the “queer effect” of oblique or diagonal lines, created by bodies out of place. Here I wish simply to say that when women write, when they take up space as writers, their bodies in turn acquire new shapes, even if the effect is no longer quite so queer.

As Virginia Woolf shows us in *A Room of One’s Own*, for women to claim a space to write is a political act. Of course, there are women who write. We know this. Women have taken up spaces orientated toward writing. And yet, the woman writer remains just that: the woman writer, deviating from the somatic norm of “the writer,” as such. We know too that there are women philosophers, and how they still cause trouble as “bodies out of place” in the “home” of philosophy, which itself is shaped by taking some bodies and not others as its somatic norm (Alcoff 1999). So what happens when the woman philosopher takes up her pen? What happens when the study is not reproduced as a masculine domain by the collective repetition of such moments of deviation?

Tables might even appear differently if we follow such moments of deviation and the lines they create. For Virginia Woolf, the table appears with her writing on it, as a feminist message inscribed on paper: “I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people’s hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters Women and Fiction and no more” (1991: 24). The table is not simply what Woolf faces but is also the “site” upon which she makes her feminist point: that we cannot address the question of women and fiction without asking the prior question of whether women have space to write. It is worth recalling here the feminist publisher named Kitchen Table press. 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.

If making a feminist point returns us to the table, then the terms of its appearance will be different. It might be that quite a different table comes into view. In Iris Marion Young's *On Female Body Experience* the table arrives into her writing in the following way: "The nick on the table here happened during that argument with my daughter" (2005: 159). Here, the table records the intimacy of the relationship between mother and daughter; such intimacies, as the surfacing of conflict, are neither "put to one side" nor take place "on another side" of the table.²⁵ Tables for feminist philosophers might not bracket or put aside the intimacy of familial attachments; such intimacies are at the front; they are "on the table" rather than behind it. We might even say that feminist tables are shaped by such attachments; such attachments shape the surface of tables and how tables surface in feminist writing.

Of course, the woman philosopher still has to arrive, to get near enough to the writing table. It takes time, this arrival into the "scene" of writing, just as it takes time and work to keep one's attention on the writing table. Such an arrival is dependent on contact with others, and even *access* to the "occupation of writing," which itself is shaped by political economies as well as personal biographies. And yet, she arrives.²⁶ Having arrived, she might do a different kind of work given that she may not put these other attachments "behind" her.

So, yes, we can remember that some spaces are already occupied. They even take the shape of the bodies that occupy them. Bodies also take the shape of the spaces they occupy and of the work they do. And yet sometimes we reach what is not expected. A space, however occupied, is taken up by somebody else. When bodies take up spaces that they were not intended to inhabit, something other than the reproduction of the facts of the matter happens. The hope that reproduction fails is the hope for new impressions, for new lines to emerge, new objects, or even new bodies, which gather, in gathering around this table. The "new" would not involve the loss of the background. Indeed, for bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not already at home, where they are not "in place," involves hard work; indeed, it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape. Having arrived, such bodies in turn might acquire new shapes. And spaces in turn acquire new bodies. So, yes, we should celebrate such arrivals. The "new" is what is possible when what is behind us, our background, does not simply ground us or keep us

in place, but allows us to move and allows us to follow something other than the lines that we have already taken. Yes, women philosophers do gather and have gathered, creating their impressions. Our task is to recall their histories of their arrival, and how this history opens up spaces for others that have yet to be cleared.

The background to the object, which allows it to be put to work, depends upon work that is repeated over time that is often "hidden from view." Perhaps where Husserl's gaze fails to wander is into other spaces, such as the space of the kitchen—that is, as spaces that are often associated with the "work" that tends toward the body in terms of caring for it and sustaining it. Does Husserl's gaze avoid wandering there insofar as those spaces are shaped by concealed labor; as the labor that gives him the capacity to "think" about the writing table? In a way, a queer phenomenology is involved in the project of "turning the tables" on phenomenology by turning toward other kinds of tables. Turning the tables would also allow us to return, a loving return we might even say, to the objects that already appear within phenomenology, such as Husserl's table, now so worn. Such tables, when turned, would come to life as something to think "with" as well as "on."

What lines, we might ask, will cover the page when the woman philosopher inhabits the space by the writing table and takes up her pen? And, yes, what happens when I take up my space, by writing on the table about the table, nestled in the corner of the room? What happens, when I write about writing, when I write about the tables that appear as objects within phenomenology? It is no accident that I am writing about how such objects matter. I turn back toward my table, and begin writing again.

CHAPTER 2 Sexual Orientation

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."

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

In Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, queer moments do happen. These are moments in the text where the world no longer appears "the right way up." By discussing a number of spatial experiments that "contrive" a situation so that a subject does not see straight, Merleau-Ponty asks how the subject's relation to space is reorientated: "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" (2002: 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 are "off center" or "slantwise." In other words, Merleau-Ponty considers how subjects "straighten" any queer effects and he asks what this tendency to "see straight" suggests about the relationship between bodies and space. He answers this question not with a model of space as determined by objective coordinates (such that "up" and "down" exist independently of one's bodily orientation), but as being shaped by the purposefulness of the body; the body does things, and space thus 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. As I discussed in chapter 1, the normative can be considered an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time, which produces what we can call the bodily horizon, a space for action, *which puts some objects and not others in reach*. The normative dimension can be redescribed 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: when the lines on the tracing paper are aligned with the lines of the paper that has been traced, then the lines of the tracing paper disappear: you can simply see one set of lines. If lines are traces of other lines, then this alignment depends on straightening devices that keep things in line, in part by "holding" things in place. Lines disappear through such processes of alignment, so that when even one thing comes "out of line" with another thing, the "general effect," is "wonky" or even "queer."

The vertical axis is itself an effect of being "in line," when the line taken by the body corresponds with other lines that are already given. The vertical is hence normative; it is shaped by the repetition of bodily and social actions over time. The body that is "in line" is one that can extend into space, at the same time that such spaces are effects of retracing those lines, which is another way of describing "extension." Things as well as bodies appear "the right way up" when they are "in line," which makes any moment in which phenomenal space

does "line up" seem rather "queer." Importantly, when one thing is "out of line," then it is not just that thing that appears oblique but the world itself might appear on a slant, which disorients the picture and even unseats the body. If we consider how space appears along the lines of the vertical axis, then we can begin to see how orientations of the body shape not just what objects are reachable, but also the "angle" on which they are reached. Things look right when they approach us from the right angle.

Of course, when Merleau-Ponty discusses queer effects he is not considering "queer" as a sexual orientation—but we can. We can turn to the etymology of the word "queer," which comes from the Indo-European word "twist." Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a "straight line," a sexuality that is bent and crooked (Cleto 2002: 13). The spatiality of this term is not incidental. Sexuality itself can be considered a spatial formation not only in the sense that bodies inhabit sexual spaces (Bell and Valentine 1995), but also in the sense that bodies are sexualized through how they inhabit space. The body orients itself in space, for instance, by differentiating between "left" and "right," "up" and "down," and "near" and "far," *and this orientation is crucial to the sexualization of bodies*.¹ Phenomenology helps us to consider how sexuality involves ways of inhabiting and being inhabited by space.

It is important to note that Merleau-Ponty reflects on sexuality in *Phenomenology of Perception* by suggesting that sexuality is not a distinct domain that can be separated from bodily experience in general. As he states: "In so far as a man's sexual history provides a key to life, it is because in his sexuality is his projected manner of being toward the world, that is, toward time and other men" (183). For Merleau-Ponty, the sexual body is one that shows the orientation of the body as an "object that is *sensitive* to all the rest" (183), a body that feels the nearness of the objects with which it coexists. Judith Butler (1989) offers an important critique of Merleau-Ponty's model of sexuality by showing how it presumes a general or universal orientation toward the world. At the same time that we acknowledge this risk of universalism, we could queer Merleau-Ponty's "sensitive body," or even suggest that such a body is already queer in its sensitivity "to all the rest." Merleau-Ponty's model of sexuality as a form of bodily projection might help show how orientations "exceed" the objects they are directed toward, becoming ways of inhabiting and coexisting in the world. If we presume that sexuality is crucial to bodily orientation, to

how we inhabit spaces, then the differences between how we are orientated sexually are not only a matter of "which" objects we are orientated toward, but also how we extend through our bodies into the world. Sexuality would not be seen as determined only by object choice, but as involving differences in one's very relation to the world—that is, in how one "faces" the world or is directed toward it. Or rather, we could say that orientations toward sexual objects affect other things that we do, such that different orientations, different ways of directing one's desires, means inhabiting different worlds.

In this chapter, I want to formulate a "queer phenomenology" by rethinking the spatiality of sexual orientation. In the existing literature on sexuality, phenomenology has been adopted as a perspective mainly in order to bring into the theoretical frame the everyday experiences of sexual subjects. As Lisabeth During and Terri Fealy state: "To claim phenomenology for lesbian and gay theory we need to begin with the everyday experience of homosexual subjects, to consider their situation in the world and their relations to others" (1997: 121).² While this work is crucial, I also want to work with phenomenology in order to "queer" how we approach sexual orientation by rethinking the "orientation" in "sexual orientation." In other words, I want to offer a phenomenological approach to the very question of what it means to "orientate" oneself sexually toward some others and not other others. A queer phenomenology might offer an approach to sexual orientation by rethinking how the bodily direction "toward" objects shapes the surfaces of bodily and social space.

Between Lines

It is worth reflecting on the very term "sexual orientation." This term has its own genealogy within sexology, and has gradually replaced earlier terms, such as inversion and sexual preference. Sexual orientation is often described in terms of the sex of one's object choice: whether that sex is the "same sex" or "other sex," such that, according to Janis Bohan, "one's sexual orientation is defined by the sex (same or other) of the people to whom one is emotionally and sexually attracted" (1996: xvi). Here, sexuality is understood in terms of "having" an orientation, which itself is understood as being "directed" in one way or another. The "two sex" model quickly converts into a model of two orientations: straight or queer, whereby "queer" becomes an "umbrella" term for all nonstraight and nonnormative sexualities (Jagose 1996: 1).³

Importantly, sexual orientation comes to be understood as integral to the subject, as a matter of its identity. Historians of sex have shown us that the idea of "having" a sexual orientation, where "having" is translated into a form of being, is a modern idea (Foucault 1990; Weeks 1985; Halperin 1990). As Weeks describes: "the idea that there is such a person as a 'homosexual' (or indeed a heterosexual) is a relatively recent phenomenon" (1985: 6). Week's positing of the figure of the homosexual alongside the bracketed figure of the heterosexual is crucial. The emergence of the idea of "sexual orientation" does not position the figures of the homosexual and heterosexual in a relation of equivalence. Rather, it is the homosexual who is constituted as having an "orientation": the heterosexual would be presumed to be neutral. The emergence of the term "sexual orientation" coincides with the production of "the homosexual" as a type of person who "deviates" from what is neutral. Or, as Foucault famously states in his work on the history of sexuality, modern sexology transforms so-called deviant sexual practices (such as sodomy) from a "temporary aberration" into a "species" (1990: 43).

If sexual orientation becomes a matter of being, then "being" itself becomes (sexually) orientated. What does it mean to think of "being orientated?" This question demands that we consider the "orientation" in "sexual orientation" as having its own history. As I showed in chapter 1, the term "orientation" is itself a spatial term: it points to how one is placed in relation to objects in the sense of "the direction" one has and takes toward objects. Within sexuality studies there has been surprisingly little discussion on the spatiality of the term "orientation," although the spatiality of other terms, such as queer, has been noted (see Cleto 2002: 13; Sedgwick 1993: xii; Probyn 1996: 14). One exception, however, is provided by the work of Rictor Norton, who discusses the term "orientation" at length. As he states: "Because the term 'orientation' is now common in legal and psychiatric discourses, we think of it as a scientific word. But of course it is merely a directional metaphor drawn from magnetism and navigation, which has gradually superseded the directional metaphors used prior to the 1970s: inclination, deviant, pervert, invert, taste, tendency, bent, drive. Sexual love is often expressed in terms of directional metaphors. For example, the direction of Cupid's arrow darts toward the object of desire" (2002: 1).

What difference does it make if we bring the "directionality" of sexual orientation into our view? The transformation of sexual orientation into "a species" involves the translation of "direction" into identity. If sexual orienta-

tion is understood as something one "has," such that one "is" what one "has," then what one "is" becomes defined in terms of the direction of one's desire, as an attraction that pulls one toward others. Or you could say that with sexual orientation, direction "follows" the line of desire, like the direction of arrows toward the loved object. So sexual desire orientates the subject toward some others (and by implication not other others) by establishing a line or direction. Sexual orientation involves following different lines insofar as the others that desire is directed toward are already constructed as the "same sex," or the "other sex." It is not simply the object that determines the "direction" of one's desire; rather the direction one takes makes some others available as objects to be desired. Being directed toward the same sex or the other sex becomes seen as moving along different lines.

In being straight, for example, one's desire follows a straight line, which is presumed to lead toward the "other sex," as if that is the "point" of the line. The queer orientation might not simply be directed toward the "same sex," but would be seen as not following the straight line. We can see this distinction operating in the early writings of the sexologist Havelock Ellis. His model of sexual inversion has been crucial, and was taken up by Freud, in his later work on sexuality. For Ellis, sexual inversion is certainly about the "direction" of what he calls the sexual instinct.⁴ As he states: "When the sexual instinct is directed towards persons of the same sex we are in the presence of an aberration variously seen as 'sexual inversion' . . . as opposed to normal heterosexuality" (1940: 188). Here, the "direction" of instinct or desire toward "the same sex" is an "aberration." An aberration can refer to "the act of wandering from the usual way or normal course," or even to a "deviation from truth or moral rectitude." The same-sex orientation thus deviates or is off course: by following this orientation, we leave the "usual way or normal course." Conversely, heterosexual desire is understood as "on line," as not only straight, but also as right and normal, while other lines are drawn as simply "not following" this line and hence as being "off line" in the very direction of their desire.

The normalization of heterosexuality as an orientation toward "the other sex" can be redescribed in terms of the requirement to follow a straight line, whereby straightness gets attached to other values including decent, conventional, direct, and honest. The naturalization of heterosexuality involves the presumption that there is a straight line that leads each sex toward the other

sex, and that "this line of desire" is "in line" with one's sex. The alignment of sex with orientation goes as follows: being a man would mean desiring a woman, and being a woman would mean desiring a man (Butler 1997b: 23). The line of straight orientation takes the subject toward what it "is not" and what it "is not" then confirms what it "is." For Ellis, the bodies of each sex are "directed" toward the other, *as if by design*. For instance, he describes vaginal fluid as "facilitating the entrance of the male organ" (1940: 17). We could recall the feminist critique of how women's bodies are perceived as "containers" or as vessels that are "ready" to be filled by men (Irigaray 1985; Dworkin 1987). The woman's body becomes the tool in which the man "extends himself." The naturalization of heterosexuality as a line that directs bodies depends on the construction of women's bodies as being "made" for men, such that women's sexuality is seen as directed toward men. In other words, the signs of women's desire, such as becoming wet, are read as "pointing" toward men and even toward "occupation" by men. I will return to this issue when considering what it means for heterosexuality to be a "compulsory orientation."

So queer or inverted desires are off the track of normal development, where one uses sex for different points by not following what is taken to be the "point" of sexual readiness. As Ellis notes, homosexuality "is the most clearly defined of all sexual deviations, for it presents an impulse which is completely and fundamentally transformed from the normal object to an object which is normally outside the sphere of sexual desire, and yet possesses all the attributes which in other respects appeal to human affection" (1940: 188). While same-sex desire has the attributes of heterosexual desire, it moves toward an object that is "normally outside the sphere" of that desire. In other words, it reaches objects that are not continuous with the line of normal sexual subjectivity.

The discontinuity of queer desires can be explained in terms of objects that are not points on the straight line: the subject has to go "off line" to reach such objects. To go "off line" is to turn toward "one's own sex" and away from "the other sex." To turn away from "the other sex" is also to leave the straight line. And yet turning toward one's sex is read as the act of threatening to put one's sex into question. Ellis's (1975: 94) own reading of inversion in women as produced by congenital masculinity is a way of bringing queer desire back in line: if the inverted woman is really a man, then she, of course, follows the straight line toward what she is not (the feminine woman). So the question is not only how queer desire is read as off line, but also how queer desire has been

read in order to bring such desire back into line, which is directed by desire for the "other sex," or for what we are "not." Such readings function as "straightening devices" that follow the straight line or even "can only see straight," given how they conflate this line with what is right, good, or normal.

The straight reading, in other words, "corrects" the slantwise direction of queer desire. In order to examine the significance of how we read the queer slant, I want to reread Freud's analysis of a case of homosexuality in a woman. This case has elsewhere been brilliantly described and critiqued in lesbian and queer criticism (Roof 1991; O'Connor and Ryan 1993; Merck 1993; Fuss 1993; de Lauretis 1994; Jagose 2002). However, I think reading this case for how it "directs" desire according to different lines will offer a different "angle" on Freud's methodology for reading homosexual desire. Freud's method of reading is, after all, about going backward: he looks *through* the case for earlier signs to explain the acquisition of the queer tendency; or, in his words, "We trace the development from its final outcome backwards" (1955: 167).⁵ Indeed, psychoanalysis not only goes back, it is an approach that gives attention to what is "behind." This emphasis on the behind might be what makes psychoanalysis appealing for some queer readers. We can ask: What does going back do? Freud suggests that, from this "backward" perspective, "the chain of events appears continuous" (167). Such a backward reading presumes that the story of sexuality follows a line, even if Freud earlier admits to the limits of what he calls "a linear presentation" and can't help but to digress himself (1955: 160). We could, of course, read here for the "points" of digression, which is what Teresa de Lauretis does so powerfully in recuperating a Freudian model of perversion. At the same time, it remains important to read along the lines as a way of reading for what goes astray. In reading backward, Freud is not simply "finding a line" but also reading "for a line." But what if we read between his lines?

In "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," Freud begins with an exchange: the case itself arises from an exchange. The object of the exchange is the case: the case is "about" homosexuality in a woman, and it rests on reading the case of a homosexual woman. The woman enters the narrative as the object who belongs to a family, to whom her desire represents a problem or crisis that needs to be resolved: "A beautiful and clever girl of eighteen, belonging to a family of good standing, had aroused displeasure and concern in her parents by the devoted adoration with which she pursued a certain 'society lady' who was about ten years older than herself" (1955: 147).

The entry of the case into the case tells us a lot. Immediately, the woman is "referred back" to her family by being seen as belonging to them, and she is represented as the source of displeasure. In other words, the case "assigns" the woman with a meaning by assigning her to the family. The displeasure that engenders the case is associated with the threat that her desire poses to the family's good standing: the case becomes a case as it brings the family's standing into disrepute. Rather than reading this case as being about an explanation of homosexuality in a woman, we could read it as a family case, as being "about" how family love requires "following" a certain direction, or even having a certain orientation. The trouble posed by this case would be readable, then, in terms of the threat that homosexuality poses to the continuation of the family line, as a line of descent. Rather than being a romantic love story, this would be a story about family love, a love that is elevated as an ideal that can only be "returned" by heterosexual love.

We can even say that the case of homosexuality challenges the "ego ideal" of the family. In *Group Psychology*, Freud offers a theory of how love is crucial to the formation of group identities. While maintaining that the aim of love is "sexual union," Freud argues that other loves, while diverted from this aim, share the same libidinal energy that pushes the subject toward the loved object (1922: 38). For Freud, the bond within a group relies on the transference of love to the leader, whereby the transference becomes the "common quality" of the group (66). Another way of saying this would be to claim that groups are formed through their shared orientation toward an object. More specifically, groups are formed when "*individuals . . . have substituted one and the same object for their ego ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego*" (80). Freud does not quite consider the family as a group along these lines, however. Rather, the family is the primary and intimate space in which libidinal energies are shaped, through identification with or desire for the mother and father, which are then displaced onto other social forms.⁶ Yet, we could consider the family as an artificial social group in the way described above: to become loyal to the family, one has identified one's ego ideal with an object, or "*the family*" becomes the object that is put in the place of the ego ideal. The imagined thing called "the family" is, of course, associated with the body of the father: his body is metonymically associated with the body of the family, just as the "leader" is associated with "society." So identification with the father (the wish for his love) becomes an allegiance to the form of the family in the sense of the desire to continue its "line," whereby such allegiance is also to

be aligned with others, or even to "side" with others, who have also taken "the family" as their ego ideal.

Homosexual desire in a woman becomes "a case" insofar as it challenges the family line and the image that the family has of itself—or what we would call its "reputation," which is at once an image that is directed toward others and dependent upon others, on the viewing point of "good society." In causing a scandal, the woman "aroused her father's suspicion and anger" (1955: 148). The scandal of the case is that the woman acts in a way that is "quite neglectful of her reputation" (148), which is to say that she does not put the family and its reputation in its rightful place, a failure that is primarily described as *an injury to the father*. To put this simply, the woman does not take the family's ego ideal as her own. It is this neglect that ensures the exchange: the woman is handed over by the father to "the physician" who is entrusted "with the task of bringing *their* daughter *back* to a normal state of mind" (149; emphasis added). The exchange of the woman between men is here set up in terms of bringing her around, or bringing her "back in line" with the family: taking the family as one's love object would be to have a life that "follows" the family line by living according to points that are continuous. In other words, to be "in line" is to direct one's desires toward marriage and reproduction; to direct one's desires toward the reproduction of the family line.

This is already a rather queer reading: the drama of identification and desire would conventionally be read in terms of the child's relation to the mother and father, as the "points" of sexual difference, rather than to the imagined entity of "the family." In my reading, identification would be with the family and with the father insofar as he embodies the family, rather than with the father or mother as subjects on either side of the imaginary line that divides the sexes. In other words, identification would not necessarily be determined by the axis of gender, but would be about values and qualities that are attributed to the figure of the father and, through him, the family form (the social good). To identify with the family would be to wish for its approval (to become a good subject) and thus to desire what "the family" desires: the reproduction of its line. Straight orientations for women in this reading would mean identifying with the family by taking men as objects of desire ("tending toward" men); rather than identifying with the mother and desiring the father, where other men are substitutes for him.

It is crucial that the woman who provides the case is presented as "happy" with her sexuality: "She did not try to deceive me by saying that she felt any

urgent need to be freed from her homosexuality" (1955: 153). On the contrary, as Freud himself states, "she could not conceive of any other way of being in love" (153). The woman does, however, express to Freud a therapeutic desire: not a desire to redirect her sexual orientation but the desire not to be the cause of grief to her parents (153). In other words, for the daughter, being the source of injury is itself "painful." Such pain could be read as a bodily identification with the parents: the homosexual daughter might even take on the ego ideal of the family, insofar as her pain puts her affectively "in line" with the grief of the family, even though she simultaneously resists following that ideal in the direction of her desire. She both desires what is off the family line and feels pain for the way that desire becomes the origin of familial hurt. In other words, her pain is caused not by the failure to follow the family line (which would make her pain closer to shame), but by witnessing "the grief" that this queer departure causes for others. It is the intimacy of this pain and grief, as the "point" at which bad feelings meet, that reminds us how queer lives do not simply transcend the lines they do not follow, as such lines are also the accumulation of points of attachment.

Freud's own reading hence tries to "explain" this manifestation of queer desire in which even grief seems misdirected. Although he challenges the sexological model of the congenital invert by suggesting that psychical and physical hermaphroditism do not coincide (154), he reads the case as an example of inversion by noting "her facial features were sharp rather than soft and girlish"; her "acuteness of comprehension and her lucid objectivity," and her "preference for being the lover rather than the beloved" (154). All of these "attributes" are read as signs of masculinity. For Freud the lover is always masculine, as the figure that embodies the masculinity of the libido. We can recall Freud's initial description of the homosexual woman "pursuing" her beloved: this description immediately "sees" her *as* the masculine lover in pursuit of the feminine loved object. Here Freud again "straightens" queer desire by rereading that desire in terms of being directed toward "the other sex."⁷

Freud's explanation of homosexuality in the woman relies on directional metaphors. For example, consider the following description:

The explanation is as follows. It was just when the girl was experiencing the revival of her infantile Oedipus complex at puberty that she suffered her great disappointment. She became keenly conscious of the wish to have a child, and a male one; that what she desired was her *father's* child as an image of *him*, her

consciousness was not allowed to know. And what happened next? It was not *she* who bore the child, but her unconsciously hated rival, her mother. Furiously resentful and embittered, she turned away from her father and from men altogether. After this first great reverse she forswore her womanhood and sought another goal for her libido. (157)

We might be tempted to offer a different "slant" to Freud's reading here. For Freud, the girl's desire for the father's child is a displacement of her desire for the father: the child is already seen as "an image of *him*." This desire is thwarted and leads to an act of rebellion. Homosexual women are read as suffering from disappointment as well as rage; their desire to reproduce the father's line is disappointed, which creates anger and leads to the departure from the family line (or "turning away" from men). We might be tempted to read this account of the girl's original desire differently—that is, as the desire to give the father what he desires (his own image). Her desire, in other words, "follows the direction" of the father's desire. It is the father's desire that shapes the direction of the story. This story could be read as about the father's desire to reproduce his own image, which is the desire that in "turn" produces homosexual desire as a personal and social injury. Perhaps this "disappointment," which converts swiftly to rage, does not describe the experience of the queer daughter, but rather that of the straight father as well as the other straight subjects who occupy his place.

What is at stake in Freud's "explanation," in which lesbian desire is read as a rejection of men caused by disappointment, is partly Freud's own desire for truth, his own "pursuit" of the case. As the one who is in pursuit, Freud is in the position of the lover who searches for how "others" turn from "the straight and narrow," whereby that turning is seen as turning away from "the other sex." This metaphor of "turning away" suggests that queer desire becomes a form of "derailment," of making the wrong turn. If the "straight line" is the "right turn," then it might operate as a psychoanalytic wish rather than what is "discovered" as a truth within the reading. In Freud's interpretation, the woman's wish to have the father's child is disappointed, which leads her to turn away from the father and from men in general.⁸ This reading places lesbian desire as a compensation for the failure of a heterosexual wish. As Judith Roof argues, "lesbian sexuality is defined as a male derivative, a product or an affirmation to of failed incestuous desire for the father" (1991: 203). Such desires, which are "off line," are therefore seen as caused by the failure of a wish. We could also

read the narrative in terms of Freud's identification with the father and with the father's desire. Indeed, the story of the father's desire, and his feeling of injury at the failure of its return, could be reread as the story of psychoanalysis. If we see Freud's desire as the one that engenders the narrative, then we can offer a different reading of what is disappointing about the case. It is Freud's own wish for a straight line that leads to the disappointment of the narrative: in other words, the line marks the wish for heterosexuality rather than operating as a heterosexual wish. Freud wishes for the continuation of the father's line, for the reproduction of the family, which he projects onto the homosexual woman; it is his wish that she wishes for "an image of *him*," which means he reads her queer tendencies only as a confirmation of her wish (she "tends toward" women as an effect of disappointment). In other words, Freud wishes that this case will allow him to reproduce his own image. His reading of queer love as caused by the failure of the father to return her love (to have a child "in his image") could be read as a form of wish fulfillment, a wish that she "really" wished for him.

It is thus not surprising that Freud recovers from his disappointment by rereading the case in terms of homosexual desire as desire for "the other sex." If she has "turned away" from men, then she has also turned into one: "She changed into a man and took her mother in place of her father as the object of love" (158). The turning that "turns" the body away from the "other sex" is reread as a turning into "the other sex." The woman identifies with the father, and loves the mother, which means she threatens to turn into him, by taking his place. Despite his recuperation of the queer aberration, the wandering away from the straight line, Freud's own wish becomes a kind of death wish: in refusing to desire men, the woman also refuses his desire to reproduce the ideal image of the father: she does not wish to have "an image of *him*," and even threatens to take his place (Freud 1955: 157). The threat of queer is a "death threat": *queer desires threaten to discontinue the father's line*. To bring such queer desire in line is to continue the father's line, and indeed the line of psychoanalysis itself.

Of course, in Freud's work there are many different lines about sexuality. It is clear, for instance, in his later essays on sexuality that he explicitly rejects the idea that the sexual instinct is directed exclusively toward specific objects: he suggests that the sexual instinct has the "freedom to range equally over male and female objects" (1977: 57), and indeed he rejects the view that homosexuals can be separated off "from the rest of mankind as a group of a special charac-

ter" (56). As Teresa de Lauretis (1994) emphasises, Freud considers how heterosexual and homosexual orientations involve a restriction of object choice that requires explanation. At one level, the model of perversion offered in his work, with its spatial grounding, sustains a line between normal and deviant sexualities. Freud defines perversion as "relating to the sexual aim" that occurs when "there is an extension in an anatomical sense beyond the regions of the body that are displayed for sexual union" or "there is a lingering over intermediate relations to the sexual object," which "should normally travel rapidly on the path toward the final sexual aim" (1977: 62). Insofar as a point deviates from this straight line toward heterosexual union, then we are making a perverse point. This point makes the line itself rather perverse. For Freud, "every internal or external factor that hinders or postpones the attainment of the normal sexual aim . . . will evidently lend support to the tendency to linger over the preparatory activities" (68).

Perversion is also a spatial term, which can refer to the willful determination to counter or go against orthodoxy, but also to what is wayward and thus "turned away from what is right, good, and proper." For some queer theorists, this is what makes "the perverse" a useful starting point for thinking about the "disorientations" of queer, and how it can contest not only heteronormative assumptions, but also social conventions and orthodoxies in general.⁹ As Mandy Merck has argued, perversion describes not just deviant sexuality but also a "broader opposition to what is expected or accepted" (1993: 2) or even a "defection from doctrine" (3). It is worth, then, rereading the "perverted" as that which "turns astray" or moves off the straight line. The straight line would be that which moves *without any deviation* toward the "point" of heterosexual union or sexual coupling: any acts that postpone the heterosexual union are perverse, which thus includes heterosexual practices that are not "aimed" toward penetration of the vagina by the penis. The postponement or "delay" threatens the line of heterosexuality, insofar as it risks "uncoupling" desire and reproduction; the point of the straight line, one might speculate, is the reproduction of "the father's image." Importantly, Freud differentiates neurosis from perversion, and he even suggests that neurosis is the negative of perversion (1977: 80). That is, neurosis is caused by blocking "abnormal sexual feelings," including "queer" feelings toward "the same sex." As a result, for Freud the "achievement" of heterosexuality is often at the cost of neurosis. The sexual aim might "naturally" tend toward heterosexual union in this

model, but Freud also suggests that the tendency of desire *not* to be directed toward this aim cannot be negated without psychic loss: it is the heterosexual who blocks homosexual feeling, and other perverse forms of desire, who risks becoming neurotic.

Is it here that Freud is seeking to "unblock" his own wish for the straight line? As he puts it, "One of the tasks implicit in object choice is that it should *find its way* to the opposite sex. This, as we know, is not achieved without a certain amount of fumbling" (1977: 152; emphasis added). It is at this point of fumbling that things can happen. It is at the point when Freud himself "fumbles" and loses his way that we can begin to see that the "straight line" is *what shapes the very tendency to go astray*. What is astray does not lead us back to the straight line, but shows us what is lost by following that line.

Becoming Straight

I begin here by paraphrasing Simone de Beauvoir: "One is not born, but becomes straight." What does it mean to posit straightness as about becoming rather than being? We have already seen how Freud reads for the straight line by recuperating queer desire as the displacement of grief and rage about the failure of a heterosexual wish to be granted. To read queer desire in these terms is to bring what is "slantwise" back into line. The family line is reproduced at the moment it is threatened. Already we can see that the "straight line" is achieved through work, which rereads moments of deviation from the family line as signs of the failure of the homosexual subject to "find its way." The homosexual subject, in other words, gets read as having got lost on the way "toward" the "other sex."

That the subject "becomes straight" as an effect of work could be described as a social constructionist view of sexual orientation rather than an essentialist one (Jagose 1996: 8). However, I would not define my argument quite in these terms. This is partly because the debate has allowed the question of sexual orientation to be framed as either a matter of choice (we "choose" to be gay or straight) or biology (where the "biological" is read as a line that is already drawn, as a line of nature), mainly by opponents of queer theory (see LeVay 1996). Of course, social construction is not about choice,¹⁰ and when it is defined in terms of choice it loses most of its rigor or explanatory force. But for me the word "construction," even when defined in nonvoluntaristic terms,

does not quite explain the ways in which sexual orientation can be felt as inherent and bodily or even as essential. It does not explain how orientations can feel "as if" they come from inside and move us out toward objects and others. For instance, Janis Bohan argues in favor of the term "sexual orientation" rather than "sexual preference" because "the usage is intended to convey that LGB [lesbian, gay, and bisexual] identity is not (simply) a preference but *is as much a given as handedness*" (1996: 4; emphasis added). She suggests that many people experience their sexuality "as intrinsic and as fixed and permanent" (229). So we need to produce explanations of how orientations can operate simultaneously as effects and be lived or experienced as if they are originary or a matter of how one's body inhabits the world, by being orientated toward one side, like being right or left handed. One might note here how "handedness" is also perceived to be about direction: to be left or right handed is to favor one side of the body or another.¹¹ Such directions are effects of how bodies get directed. Understanding the processes of "becoming straight" would be to appreciate how sexual orientations feel as if they are intrinsic to being in the world, and how bodies "extend" into space by being directed in this way or that, where "this" and "that" are felt as being on one side or another of a dividing line.

I want to consider the work of "becoming straight" by telling two anecdotes. Both involve tables. This time it is not the writing table that comes into view but the dining table. The dining table is a table around which a "we" gathers. Such tables function quite differently from the writing table: not only because they support a different kind of action, but also because they point toward collective gatherings; that is, they deviate from the solitary world of the writer. The dining table is a table around which bodies gather, cohering as a group 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 that gather around 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" (1958: 53).¹² What passes on the table establishes lines of connection between those that gather, while the table itself "supports" the act of passing things around.¹³

Janet Carsten, in her volume *After Kinship*, explores the table as a kinship object, focusing specifically on the kitchen table: "My own powerful 'house

memories' focus on a large kitchen table at which not only cooking and eating but also most family discussions, communal homework, and many games took place" (2004: 31). The kitchen table "supports" the family gathering by providing a surface "on" which "we" can do things. The shared orientation toward the table allows the family to cohere as a group, even when we do different things "at" the table. It is interesting to note that Hannah Arendt suggests that the disappearance of the table would mean the loss of such sociality—when people do not gather or feel "part" of a gathering: "The weirdness of this situation resembles a spiritualistic séance where a number of people gathered around a table might suddenly, through some magic trick, see the table vanish from their midst, so that two persons sitting opposite each other would no longer be separated but also would be entirely unrelated to each other by anything tangible" (1958: 54). The table here is something "tangible" that makes a sense of relatedness possible. Tables, when used in this way, are kinship objects: we relate to other relatives through the mediation of the table. We could even say that the table becomes a relative. The loss of the table would be the loss of a "tangible" connection. Arendt would clearly mourn the loss of the table, as such a loss would make social gathering impossible. And yet we must ask: What is the "point" of such gathering? The table in its very function as a kinship object might enable forms of gathering that direct us in specific ways or that make some things possible and not others. Gatherings, in other words, 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, by gathering "around" the table?

So, I am seated at a table. It is the dining table and the family gathers around it. The table provides the scene for this family gathering: 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 is a little John and a little Mark!" She laughs, pointing. John and Mark are the names of my sisters' partners and their children's fathers. We look, and we see the boys as small versions of their fathers.

Upon hearing her remark our eyes follow her hand, which points in the direction 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: if we follow the point, it means we give our attention to the same object. The point is also a gift, which makes the object "shared." Everyone laughs at the comment: we see the two sons as small versions of their fathers, and the effect is both serious and comical. One darker boy and one fairer; one darker partner and one fairer. The difference between the boys becomes a shared inheritance, as if the difference is established by following the paternal line. In such family gatherings, the event of 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 who are seated at the table. The laughter is a "yes," even if it is uttered with discomfort in accepting the terms of this inheritance.

Another scene from another time: away from home, my partner and I are on holiday on a resort on an island. Mealtimes bring everyone together. We enter the dining room, where we face many tables placed alongside each other. Table after table ready for action, waiting for bodies who arrive to take up their space, to be seated. In taking up space, I am taken back. I face what seems like a shocking image. In front of me, on the tables, couples are seated. Table after table, couple after couple, taking the same form: one man sitting by one woman around a "round table," facing each other "over" the table. Of course, I "know" this image—it is a familiar one, after all. But I am shocked by the sheer force of the regularity of that which is familiar: how each table presents the same form of sociality as the form of the heterosexual couple. How is it possible, with all that is possible, that the same form is repeated again and again? How does the openness of the future get closed down into so little in the present?

We sit down. I look down, acutely aware of inhabiting a form that is not the same as that repeated along the line of the tables, although of course my partner and I remain in line insofar as we are a couple. The wrong kind of couple, however—it has to be said. Being out of line can be uncomfortable. We know this. This case of discomfort is enabled by a sense of wonder. Rather than just seeing the familiar, which of course means that it passes from view, I felt wonder and surprise at the regularity of its form, as the form of what arrived at the table, as forms that get repeated, again and again, until they are "forgotten" and simply become forms of life. To wonder is to remember the forgetting and to see the repetition of form as the "taking form" of the famil-

iar.¹⁴ It is hard to know why it is that we can be "shocked" by what passes by us as familiar.

These two examples from my experience encourage me to rethink the work of the "straight line." In these anecdotes we have a relation between two lines, the vertical and the horizontal lines of conventional genealogy. Consider 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.¹⁵ 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 utterance, "Look, there is a little John and a little Mark!" expresses 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 future for the boy is already imagined as following the direction of the father: 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 utterances position 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 that is "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,"¹⁶ which they certainly can and do "do," but how they are kept in line, often through force, such that any nonalignment produces a queer effect.

The scene at the resort transformed this temporal sequencing, this horizon of social reproduction, which we could also describe as the intergenerational work of family history, into a social form, frozen in the present, as bodies that simply "gather" around tables. In other words, the horizontal line just appears, as the "affinity" of the couple, by being cut off from the vertical line, which reproduces the very form of the couple as the "ground" for future coupling. The word "affinity," after all, does not just refer to "relationship by marriage," which by definition are the relationships that are not blood ties (consanguinity), but also to "resemblance or similarity," and even to "a natural or

chemical attraction," as "the force attracting atoms to each other and binding them together in a molecule." The affinity of the couple form is socially binding: premised as it is on resemblance and on the "naturalness" of the direction of desire, which produce the couple as an entity, as a "social one" (from two).¹⁷ The image of couples as "twos" that become "ones," which flashes before us in the present, is an effect of the work that brings the future subject into line, and as another point on the vertical line. In other words, the heterosexual couples who gather around the table could be understood as "arrivants" in the terms I discussed in the previous chapter; it has taken time and work to achieve this form, even if that work disappears in the familiarity and "oneness" of the form itself. To see the couple form in its "sensuous certainty" (Marx and Engels 1975: 170) as an "object" that can be perceived, would be not to see how this form arrives as an effect of intergenerational work.¹⁸

It is crucial that we understand the historicity that is both concealed and revealed by the repetition of this couple form as that which gathers around the table. In order to do this, I would suggest that we consider heterosexuality as a compulsory orientation. Adrienne Rich's pathbreaking work on "compulsory heterosexuality" is useful here. Rich discusses heterosexuality as a set of institutional practices that require men and women to be heterosexual. As she comments: "A feminist critique of compulsory heterosexuality for women is long overdue" (1993: 229). For something to be required is, of course, "evidence" that it is not necessary or inevitable. Heterosexuality is compulsory precisely insofar as it is not prescribed by nature: the heterosexual couple is "instituted" as the form of sociality through force. As Rich argues: "Some of the forms by which male power manifests itself are more easily recognizable as enforcing heterosexuality on women than are others. Yet each one I have listed adds to the cluster of forces within which women have been convinced that marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives" (234; see also Wittig 1992: xiii).

This enforcement does not mean that women are "victims" of heterosexuality (though they can be), rather it means that to become a subject under the law one is made subject to the law that decides what forms lives must take in order to count as lives "worth living." To be subjected is in this way to "become straight," to be brought under the rule of law. After all, the naturalization of heterosexuality involves the naturalization of heterosexuality as an orientation toward the "other sex." Rich shows this by quoting a scientist who states:

"Biologically men only have one innate orientation—a sexual one that draws them to women—while women have two innate orientations, sexual one toward men and reproductive one toward their young" (cited in Rich 1993: 228). Indeed, orientation is a powerful technology insofar as it constructs desire as a magnetic field: it can imply that we were drawn to certain objects and others *as if* by a force of nature: so women are women insofar as they are orientated toward men and children. The fantasy of a natural orientation is an orientation device that organizes worlds around the form of the heterosexual couple, as if it were from this "point" that the world unfolds. Here I can return to my critique of Ellis in the previous section, where he reads women's sexual arousal as "pointing" to men in the sense of preparing the woman's body for penetration by the penis: he sees, in other words, women's bodies as directed toward heterosexual coupling. Here is a fantasy of the natural fit between men and women's bodies, as if "they were made for each other" in the sense of being directed toward the other, or even ready-to-hand, for each other. The very idea that bodies "have" a natural orientation is exposed as fantasy in the necessity of the enforcement of that orientation, or its maintenance as a social requirement for intelligible subjectivity.

We can reconsider how one "becomes straight" by reflecting on how an orientation, as a direction (taken) toward objects and others, is made compulsory. In other words, 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" orientate 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. Inheritance is usually presented as a social good: we inherit our parent's assets, after all, and if we inherit their debts then this is a sign of bad parenting and a threat to the line of descent. When parents imagine the life they would like for their child, they are also imagining what they will "give" to the child as a gift that becomes socially binding. As Judith Halberstam suggests: "The time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties one generation to the next" (2005: 5).

We saw in Freud's narrative how heterosexuality can function as the most intimate and deadly of parental gifts. The gift, when given, demands a return. As Marcel Mauss shows, the gift is "in theory" voluntary, but in reality it is

"given and received under obligation" (1969: 1).¹⁹ As he asks: "What force is there in the thing given which compels the recipient to make a return?" (1). The force is not, certainly, "in" the thing; it is an effect of how the thing circulates and returns. The demand for return acquires force, while the return accumulates "the force" of the gift. We might note, however, that the demand to return the gift does not return to the not-yet subject, whose debt cannot be paid back. The failure of return extends the investment. So the gift, when given, produces the one who has received the gift as indebted and demands its endless return. Heterosexuality is imagined as the future of the child insofar as heterosexuality is idealized as a social gift and even as the gift of life itself. The gift becomes an inheritance: what is already given or even pre-given.²⁰ Heterosexuality becomes a social as well as familial inheritance through the endless requirement that the child repay the debt of life with its life. The child who refuses the gift thus becomes seen as a bad debt, as being ungrateful, as the origin of bad feeling.

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. The paradox of this temporality helps explain how orientations are effects of work, at the same time as they feel "as if" they were like "handedness," as a way of being in the body, by being directed in some ways more than others. Bodies become straight by tending toward straight objects, such that they acquire their "direction" and even their tendencies as an effect of this "tending toward." Sexual orientations are also performative: in directing one's desire toward certain others and not other others, bodies in turn acquire their shape.

The objects that are "near enough" can be described as heterosexual objects within the conventional family home. As Judith Butler argues, "Heterosexual genders form themselves through the renunciation of the *possibility* of homo-

sexuality, 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" (1997b: 21; emphasis added). 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 produces 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 Judith 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." A field can be defined as an open or cleared ground. A field of objects would hence refer 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 (1990: 17–35). 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 the delimitation of "who" is available to love, although such objects do matter. And neither does "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, how objects are arranged to create a background. Following Husserl, we could say that heterosexuality functions as a background, as that which is behind actions that are repeated over time and with force, and that insofar as it is behind does not come into view.

So, again, we can return to Husserl and his table. Recall that Husserl turns toward his writing table as that which he faces, which is what makes other things behind him. In turning toward the writing table, other things—the inkwell, the pencil, and so forth—come into view as things in the background "around" the object.²¹ These objects are "near" what Husserl faces, though

they do not have his attention. The nearness of such objects is a matter of "coincidence"—their arrival has 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. That the inkwell is "on" the table, for instance, has something to do with the fact that both it and the table point in the same direction. The nearness of the objects to each other is because they tend toward a shared action. Objects might be near other objects as signs of orientation, which shapes the arrangements of objects, thereby creating the shape of their gathering. Orientations are binding as they bind objects together. The move from object to object is shaped by perception—the gaze that turns to an object, brings other objects into view, even if they are only dimly perceived—as well as by how orientations make things near, which affects what can be perceived.²² As I demonstrated in chapter 1, nearness is not then simply a matter of "what" is perceived. The nearness of objects to each other comes to be lived as what is already given, as a matter of how the domestic is arranged. 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 the repetition of a certain direction, which takes shape as "the background" and which might be personalized as "my background" or as that which allows me to arrive and to do things. In reference to thinking about my family home, such acts of thinking do feel like a "going back," or like a "coming back" to the "going back." Such lines recede through memory. Certain objects stand out, even come out, and they have my attention. I think again of the kitchen and of the dining room. Each of these rooms contains a table around which the family gathers: one for casual eating, one for more formal occasions. The kitchen table is made of light-colored wood and is covered by a plastic cloth. Around it we gather every morning and evening. Each of us has 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. I feel out of place in this place, but these feelings are pushed to one side. We can consider

how families are often about taking sides (one side of the table or another) and how this demand "to side" requires putting other things aside. A "side" refers to "surfaces or lines bounding a thing," or to "regions or directions with reference to a central line, space or point," as well as to the event of supporting or opposing an argument. It is interesting to note here that genealogy has been understood in terms of sides: the maternal and paternal are two "sides" in the line of descent.²³ A question that interests me is how certain directions, and by implication relations of proximity or nearness, are read as forms of social and political allegiance. How does the family require us to "take sides," to give allegiance to its form by taking up a side, and what is put aside when we take sides? We can only answer such a question by perceiving how family gatherings "direct" our attention.

The table in the formal room takes the form of the room. It is a formal table with dark and polished wood. A lace tablecloth covers the wood—but only barely so, and glimpses of the dark wood can be seen underneath. We use this table when we have guests. The table is shaped by what we do with it, and it takes shape through what we do: this table is less marked, as it is used less. Its polished surfaces reflect to us 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, dark, and empty; and yet, it is full of objects. When one faces the room from the door, behind the table is the sideboard. On it objects gather. One object, a fondue set, stands out. I don't ever remember using it, but it is an object that matters somehow. It was a wedding gift—a gift given to mark the occasion of marriage. The public event of marriage entails giving gifts to the heterosexual couple, giving the woman as a gift to the man, and even giving the couple as a gift to others, to those who act as witnesses to the gifts given.²⁴ This object acquires its force, through this relay of gifts given: it is not just that it arrives here, as a gift, but that in arriving it makes visible the other gifts that give the form of the couple its "sensuous certainty."

And then, covering the walls, are photographs. The wedding photograph. Underneath are the family pictures, some formal (taken by photographers) and others more casual. The photographs are objects on the wall. They turn the wall into an object, something to be apprehended; something other than the edge of the room. And yet the wall in its turn disappears as an edge insofar as we apprehend the objects on its surface. Everywhere I turn, even in the

failure of memory, reminds me of 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. There is a demand that we return to them by embracing them as embodiments of our own history, as the gift of life. The nearness of such objects (tables, fondue sets, photographs) takes us back to the family background, as well as sideways, 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 face of what appears, we must ask what disappears. 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 orientate 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 us 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 don't always mean we stay on line; at certain points we can refuse the inheritance—at points that are often lived as "breaking points." We do not always know what breaks at these points.

Such a line, after all, does not tell us the whole story. We need to ask what gets put aside, or put to one side, in the telling of the family story. What gets put aside, or put to one side, does not come after the event but rather shapes the line, allowing it to acquire its force. The family pictures picture the family, often as happy (the bodies that gather smile, as if the smile were the point of the gathering). At the same time, the pictures put aside what does not follow this line, those feelings that do not cohere as a smile. This "not," as Judith Butler (1993) reminds us, also generates a line.

Heterosexuality is not then simply an orientation toward others, it is also

something that we are orientated around,²⁵ 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. I think Judith Butler (1997b) is right to suggest that heteronormativity demands that the loss of queer love must not be grieved: such loss might not even be admitted as loss, as the possibility of such love is out of reach. Queer objects are not "close enough" to the family line in order to be seen as objects to be lost. The body acts upon what is nearby or at hand, and then gets shaped by its directions toward such objects, which keeps other objects beyond the bodily horizon of the straight subject.

We could even argue that compulsory heterosexuality is a form of *RSI*. Compulsory heterosexuality shapes what bodies can do. Bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force. Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted: they get twisted into shapes that enable some action *only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action*. Compulsory heterosexuality diminishes the very capacity of bodies to reach what is off the straight line. It shapes which bodies one "can" legitimately approach as would-be lovers and which one cannot. In shaping one's approach to others, compulsory heterosexuality also shapes one's own body *as a congealed history of past approaches*. Hence, the failure to orient oneself "toward" the ideal sexual object affects how we live in the world; such a failure is read as a refusal to reproduce and therefore as a threat to the social ordering of life itself. The queer child can only, in this wish for the straight line, be read as the source of injury: a sign of the failure to repay the debt of life by becoming straight.

We can see that the "tending toward" certain objects and not others (though these are not necessarily rejected, they might not get near enough) produces what we could call "straight tendencies"—that is, a way of acting 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 hence look as if they are “slanting” or are oblique.²⁶ The queer bodies, which gather around the table, are out of line. This is not to say queer bodies are inactive; as I will argue in the next section, queer desire “acts” by bringing other objects closer, those that would not be allowed “near” by straight ways of orientating the body.

What we need to examine, then, is how heterosexual bodies “extend” into spaces, as those spaces *have taken form by taking on their form*. Spaces can hence extend into bodies, just as bodies extend into space. As Gill Valentine states: “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” (1996: 150; see also Duncan 1996: 137). Spaces and bodies become straight as an effect of repetition. That is, the repetition of actions, which tends toward some objects, shapes the “surface” of spaces. 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. As I pointed out in chapter 1, the repetition of actions (as a tending toward certain objects) shapes the contours of the body. Our body takes the shape of this repetition; *we get stuck in certain alignments as an effect of this work*. Given this, the work of ordinary perception, which straightens up anything queer or oblique, is not simply about correcting what is out of line. Rather, things might seem oblique in the first place only insofar as they do not follow the line of that which is already given, or that which has already extended in space by being directed in some ways rather than others. Spaces as well as bodies are the effects of such straightening devices.

Contingent Lesbians

I have suggested that Freud’s case of homosexuality in a woman should be read as a family case, as being about the demand that the daughter return family love by reproducing the line of the father. Indeed, I have linked the compulsion to become straight to the work of genealogy, which connects the line of descent between parents and children with the affinity of the heterosexual couple, as the meeting point between the vertical and horizontal lines of the family tree. In redirecting our attention away from the “deviant figure” of the

homosexual woman, it might seem that I have wandered off my own track. In this section, I want to explore “same sex” orientation between women and to reflect on the directionality of this desire, which was after all the desire that compelled my own desire to write about orientations in the first place.

In this section, I want to introduce the figure of the “contingent lesbian.” By “contingent lesbian” I am alluding in part to one of Freud’s categories, the “contingent invert,” which is one of three categories of inversion, along with “the absolute invert” and “the amphigenic invert” (1977: 47). Freud describes the “contingent invert” as follows: “Under certain external conditions—of which inaccessibility of any normal sexual object and imitation are the chief—they are capable of taking as their sexual object someone of their own sex” (47). We can see from this description that the “contingent invert” is a deeply heterosexist formulation: this argument is premised on the presumption that the invert is “not really” inverted, and that she “turns” to “her own sex” only because of a failure to access a “normal sexual object.” This model is close to the stereotype of the lesbian as the one who “can’t get a man,” and it recalls Ellis’s description of the inverted feminine lesbian who is the absolute invert’s beloved: “They are not usually attractive to the average man” (1975: 87). This familiar representation of the contingent lesbian as being “unattractive” to men again associates lesbianism with the disappointment of not being the object of men’s desire.

I want to challenge the heteronormativity of the category “contingent invert/lesbian” by using this figure to do a different kind of work. What does it mean to posit the lesbian as contingent? Wouldn’t she be a rather odd figure? We can draw on Judith Butler’s rather humorous reflection on going “off to Yale to be a lesbian,” even though she already “was one.” Rather than seeing lesbianism as something that one already is, Butler shows how “naming” oneself as a lesbian is also to make oneself a lesbian “in some more thorough and totalizing way, at least for the time being” (1991: 18). So it is not that one is simply a lesbian before the very moment in which one speaks of oneself as “being” a lesbian, at the same time that it is not that one is “not” a lesbian before that act of naming. Naming oneself as a lesbian is thus an effect of being a lesbian (in a certain way), which itself produces the effect of being a lesbian (in another way). After all, declaring oneself to be a lesbian is not what makes one experience lesbian desire: tending toward women as objects of desire is what compels such a risky action of self-naming in the first place. If lesbianism

were generated by the word "lesbian," then a lesbian politics might be easier: it would just be a matter of spreading the word! If we *become* lesbians, then lesbian tendencies and even tendencies not only preexist that act of becoming, they are also what would move women toward the very name "lesbian" in the first place. Such tendencies can be blocked as well as acted upon: compulsory heterosexuality could even be described as a block.

We know that (luckily) compulsory heterosexuality doesn't always work. We need to ask how lesbian tendencies shape and are shaped by how bodies extend into worlds; and how even if this desire does not simply reside within the lesbian body, how such desire comes to be felt "as if" it were a natural force, which is compelling enough to resist the force of compulsory heterosexuality. Why does feeling desire for a woman as a woman feel as if it happens to the body, as if this body and that body were "just" drawn to each other? Stories of lesbian desire are often about the pull of attraction: for instance, Joan Nestle talks about being drawn to butches: "I can spot a butch thirty feet away and still feel the thrill of her power" (1987: 100). Accounting for the "pull" of lesbian desire is important. I hope to show how the contingent lesbian is one who is shaped by the pull of her desire, which puts her in contact with others and with objects that are off the vertical line. We become lesbians in the proximity of what pulls.

This idea of "contact sexuality," or of becoming lesbian through contact with lesbians,²⁷ can be used to deauthenticate such orientations as "less real." For instance, in Ellis's account of contingent inverts, he suggests that "there is reason to believe that some event, or special environment, in early life had more or less influence in turning the sexual instinct into homosexual channels" (1975: 108). Looking for circumstances to explain such a "channel" implies that the channel is a deviation that would not *otherwise* have taken place, such that if this or that event had not happened we would have remained "on course."²⁸ In a way, I want to suggest that there is some "truth" to this idea: we might become lesbians because of the contact we have with others as well as objects, as a contact that shapes our orientations toward the world and gives them their shape.

This statement can only work to challenge heterosexism if we also recognize that heterosexuality is a form of "contact sexuality": straight orientations are shaped by contact with others who are constructed as reachable as love objects by the lines of social and familial inheritance. The "contingent heterosexual" disappears only when we forget that heterosexuality also needs to be

explained and is also shaped by contact with others. Indeed, I have suggested that compulsory heterosexuality functions as a background to social action by delimiting who is available to love or "who" we come into contact "with." The contingency of heterosexuality is forgotten in the very "sensuous certainty" of the heterosexual couple.

And yet, it is not simply that the "lesbian couple" makes contact. It is also the case that "lesbian contact" is read in ways that realign the oblique lines of lesbian desire with the straight line. We have noted how this happens through examining Freud's reading of homosexual desire. It is important to extend my analysis to show how straight readings are "directed" toward lesbians in ways that affect how we inhabit space or how space impresses upon our bodies.

Another anecdote comes to mind here. I arrive home, park my car, and walk toward the front door. A neighbor calls out to me. I look up somewhat nervously because I have yet to establish "good relations" with the neighbors. I haven't lived in this place very long and the semipublic of the street does not yet feel easy. The neighbor mumbles some words, which I cannot hear, and then asks: "Is that your sister, or your husband?" I rush into the house without offering a response. The neighbor's utterance is quite extraordinary. There are two women, living together, a couple of people alone in a house. So what do you see?

The first question reads the two women as sisters, as placed alongside each other along a horizontal line. By seeing the relationship as one of siblings rather than as a sexual relation, 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, but in a different form, the construction of lesbian couples as siblings: lesbians are sometimes represented "as if" they could be sisters *because* of their "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 biological tie) takes the place of another fantasy, that of the lesbian couple as being alike, and as "so" alike that they even threaten to merge into one body. I told this anecdote at a conference once, and another woman said: "But that is amazing, you're a different race!" While I wouldn't put it quite like that, the comment spoke to me. Seeing "us" as alike meant "*overlooking*" *signs of difference*, even if such differences are not something that bodies simply have in the form of possessions.

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 question 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, "the other half," a sexual 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 appears straight. Indeed, it is not even that the utterance moves from a queer angle to a straight line. The sequence of the utterance 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 return to my opening quote from Merleau-Ponty: it is the ordinary work of perception that straightens the queer effect: *in a blink, the slant of lesbian desire is straightened up*.

This anecdote is a reminder that how lesbians are read often seeks to align their desire with the line of the heterosexual couple or even the family line. The disappearance of lesbian desire simultaneously involves the erasure of signs of difference. When lesbians are represented as desiring in a way that is out of line, such desire is often seen as inauthentic or lacking in the presumed absence of "difference." That lesbian desire is usually described as "same sex desire" (i.e., *homosexual*) works in very specific ways. This association between homosexuality and sameness is crucial to the pathologizing of homosexuality as a perversion that leads the body astray. This idea—that lesbians desire "the same (sex)" by desiring women—needs to be contested. As O'Connor and Ryan argue: "Another way in which gender can be interpreted too literally is that it becomes the defining feature of lesbian relationships. The charge that homosexual relationships 'deny difference' is a familiar one. Some psychoanalysts see the sameness of gender as in itself a barrier to 'real' sexual desire, as meaning that such relationships are inevitably narcissistic and deny difference" (1993: 190). In other words, women desiring women does not mean that they desire the same: sameness as well as difference is invented as fantasy (Phillips 1997: 159). The very idea of women desiring women because of "sameness" relies on a fantasy that women are "the same."

Such a fantasy is also played out in the psychoanalytic approaches to "lesbian merger"—in the idea that women, when they tend toward each other as objects of desire, tend to lose any sense of difference.²⁹ As Beverly Burch argues: "The traditional psychoanalytic explanation of merger in lesbian couples is based on assumptions of pathology: homosexuality is 'arrested development,' or a lack of personal boundaries, as a result of early childhood deficits" (1997: 93). We can see this in the work of Margaret Nichols, who describes the tendency "for female-to-female pairings to be close and intimate, sometimes to a pathological excess" (1995: 396–97). She further suggests that "in a merged relationship, only one entity exists, not two" (1995: 398). Such a fantasy of lesbian merger might even function as a case of countertransference: a desire to merge with the lesbian, to incorporate her force, to undo the threat she poses to the line that is assumed both to divide the sexes and to lead each to the other. The threat of merger is attributed to the same-sex couple rather than to the heterosexual couple in part as a response to the presumption that "difference," described in terms of opposition, keeps each sex in line. Furthermore, the idea that without men women would merge, constructs women as lacking only insofar as it elevates the concepts of separation and autonomy that secure the masculine and heteronormative subject as a social and bodily ideal.

The fantasy that shapes this line of argument is that heterosexuality involves love for difference, and that such love is ethical in its opening to difference and even the other (see Warner 1990: 19; Ahmed 2004a). The heterosexual subject "lines up" by being one sex (identification) and having the other (desire). I have already contested this assumption by suggesting that compulsion toward heterosexual intimacy produces social and familial resemblance. We can question the assumption that desire requires "signs" of difference, as something that each body must "have" in relation to "another." Some have argued that we should eroticize sameness "on different lines" as a way of contesting the equation of desire and difference (Bersani 1995). I would suggest that the very distinction of same/difference can be questioned, especially insofar as the distinction rests on differences that are presumed to be inherent to bodily form and to how bodies have already cohered.

Within sexology the idea that desire requires signs of difference has been taken for granted. For example, Ellis argues that "even in inversion the imperative need for a certain sexual opposition—the longing for something which the lover *does not himself possess*—still rules on full force" (1975: 120, emphasis added). We could note, first, that difference becomes desirable only given a

fantasy of possession: that there are things we possess and other things we do not, such that those that are "not" can be possessed to complete one's possessions. In a way, the desire for the "not" sustains this fantasy of possession, of sexual orientation as a relation of "having," even if one "has" what one is "not," this "has" extends what one "is."

It is within this context that Ellis interprets what we now call butch-femme as an attempt to create differences through the adoption of masculine and feminine roles (1940: 120). It is useful to recall his insistence on sexual difference as the origin of desire. For the notion of butch-femme has been the site of an intergenerational conflict within lesbian feminism as well as between lesbian feminist and queer politics (see Nestle 1987: 543–45; Munt 1998b: 2; Roof 1991: 249; Case 1993; Grosz 1995: 152; Newton 2000: 64). The lesbian feminist critique of butch-femme (as assimilating to the model of heterosexuality as male-female) has been interpreted by queer theorists as "antisex" and as a form of class prejudice against working-class lesbians, for whom "butch-femme" bar culture was and is a meaningful lived reality (see Nestle 1987). And yet if we recall the sexological model, which sees the necessity of butch-femme in the "absence" of (sexual) difference between women, we can see the basis of the lesbian feminist critique. The critique of butch-femme was a critique of the ideological position that assumes lesbians have to create a line that they do not "naturally" have, in order to create difference and experience desire.

In light of this history, I would argue that lesbian feminists were right to make the critique, but they *misrecognized the object of their critique* in the bodies of butch and femme lesbians. The critique should be framed as a critique of the assumption that butch-femme is *necessary* for lesbian desire. One would imagine from reading Joan Nestle's work that lesbian feminists invented the idea that butch-femme were "phony heterosexual replicas" (1997: 100).³⁰ However, they did not: this reading of butch-femme (problematically defined in terms of the congenital/absolute and the contingent invert) was part of the sexological tradition that lesbian feminists took the risk to engage with. To critique the sexological model of butch-femme as necessary for lesbian desire was a generous act. Of course, the queer reading of butch-femme as not being a copy of masculine-feminine—as not following how the straight line divides bodies—is vital (Butler 1991: 22). Butch-femme is not a copy of a real thing that resides elsewhere, but rather is a serious space for erotic play and performance. I would like to imagine that the lesbian feminist critique and the queer

reading can share the same sexual and political horizon, and to do so I suggest that butch and femme are for lesbians erotic possibilities that can generate new lines of desire only when they are just that: possibilities rather than requirements.

After all, the idea that lesbian desire requires a line-between butch and femme was the subject of internal critique within butch-femme cultures. Within novels and other accounts of lesbian bar culture in the United States, for instance, butch-femme couplings not only provide "complex erotic and social statements" (Nestle 1987: 100), they are also depicted as potentially restrictive social and sexual forms. In Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*, the transgender butch hero Jess reacts with a bodily horror when her butch friend comes out as having a butch lover: "The more I thought about the two of them being lovers, the more it upset me. It was like two guys. Well, two gay guys would be all right. But two butches? Who was the femme in bed?" (2003: 202). In Lee Lynch's *The Swashbuckler*, the butch hero Frenchy cannot deal with her desire for another butch, Mercedes: "Maybe this Mercedes could change her tune, because she, Frenchy, couldn't be attracted to a butch" (1985: 45). That butch-to-butch desire can feel so impossible, as if it would leave the butch body with nothing to do, nearly severs friendships, relationships, and community within these novels. This is not to critique butch-femme as an illegitimate form of erotic coupling (though it might serve as a caution to avoid any idealization of one form of sexual contact over another), but to show how drawing "a dividing line," can *in its turn* make other forms of sexual desire unlivable, even if that line does not follow the straight line.

Significantly, Ellis also mentions "race" as another sign of difference "used" by lesbians to generate desire.³¹ In one footnote, he states that he has been told that "in American prisons, lesbian relationships between white and black women are common" (1975: 120). He uses this example to support the thesis that lesbians have to invent difference in order to desire each other. We can, of course, point to the invented nature of all differences, including the differences that are created by the line that divides the sexes. But what is needed is an even more fundamental critique of the idea that difference only takes a morphological form (race/sex) and that such morphology is, as it were, given to the world. A phenomenology of race and sex shows us how bodies become racialized and sexualized in how they "extend" into space: differences are shaped in how we take up space, or how we orient ourselves toward objects and others

(see also chapter 3). As such, lesbian desire, the contact between lesbian bodies, involves differences, which take shape through contact and are shaped by past contact with others. Lesbians also have different points of arrival, different ways of inhabiting the world. Lesbian desire is directed toward other women, and it is "given" this direction that such desire encounters difference. Other women, whatever our differences, are other than oneself; in directing one's desire toward another woman, one is directing one's desire toward a body that is other than one's body. Indeed, as Luce Irigaray's work (1985) shows us, the idea of sexes as "opposites" is what makes heterosexuality as it is conventionally described—itsself the negation of the alterity of (other) women. Lesbian contact opens up erotic possibilities for women by this refusal to follow the straight line, which requires that we "take sides" by being on one side or another of a dividing line.

We can turn to Teresa de Lauretis's (1994: xlv) distinction between lesbians who "were always that way," and those who "become lesbians." This does not mean that those who "were always that way" don't 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 a "habit-change," to borrow a term from Teresa de Lauretis (1994: 300): it requires a reorientation of one's body such that other objects, those that are not reachable on the vertical and horizontal lines of straight culture, can be reached.³² The work of reorientation needs to be made visible as a form of work.

Or we could say that orientations too involve work, as a work that is hidden until orientations no longer work. 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. As Baden Offord and Leon Cantrell note: "The term sexuality is used here rather than orientation because it implies autonomy and fluidity rather than being oriented toward one sex" (1999: 218).³³ I would say that being orientated in different ways matters precisely insofar as such orientations shape what bodies do: it is not that the "object" causes desire, but that in desiring certain objects *other things follow*, given how the familial and the social are already arranged. It does "make a difference" for women to be sexually orientated 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 that we do. In a way I am suggesting that the object in sexual object choice is sticky: other things "stick" when we orientate ourselves toward objects, especially if such orientations do not follow the family or social line.

It matters, then, how one is orientated sexually; being queer matters, too, even if being queer is not reducible to objects or bad object choices. One queer academic once suggested that the idea that the sex of the love object makes a difference is as "silly" as the idea that it makes a difference what kind of commodity one buys from the supermarket. She further implied that "changing the sex" of one's love object will not make a difference as one's own psychic histories do not, as it were, depend on that sex. Such an argument relies on a weak analogy, as if people "switch" orientations like they might switch brands. As I have suggested, it can take a lot of work to shift one's orientation, whether sexual or otherwise. Such work is necessary precisely given how some orientations become socially given by being repeated over time, as a repetition that is often hidden from view. 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 the 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.

One example that comes to mind returns us to the ease with which heterosexual bodies can inhabit public space. When I inhabited a heterosexual world (by coinhabiting with another body, which meant inhabiting the social form of a good couple) and had accepted my inheritance through what I did with that body, my relation to public space was in some ways at least quite easy.³⁴ I would kiss and hold hands with a lover without thinking, without hesitation. I would not notice other forms of intimacy, even when on display. Such intimacies were in the background as it were, as a mode of facing and being faced. In a lesbian relationship I have had to reinhabit space, in part by learning how to be more cautious and by seeing what before was in the background, *as bodies and things gathered in specific ways*. For me, this has felt like inhabiting a new body, as it puts some things "out of reach" that I didn't even notice when

they were in reach. In a way, my body now extends less easily into space. I hesitate, as I notice what is in front of me. The hesitation does not “stop” there but has redirected my bodily relation to the world, and has even given the world a new shape.

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 an old line, as such orientations affect other things that bodies do. After all, if heterosexuality is compulsory, then even the positive movement of lesbian desire remains shaped by this compulsion, which reads the expression of such desire as social and familial injury, or even as the misdirection of grief and loss. Dealing with homophobia, as well as the orientation of the world “around” heterosexuality, shapes the forms of lesbian contact as a contact that is often concealed within public culture. To act on lesbian desire is a way of reorientating one’s relation not just toward sexual others, but also to a world that has already “decided” how bodies should be orientated in the first place.

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. Lesbian tendencies are affected by a combination of elements or happenings that are impossible to represent in the present and that enable us in “becoming lesbians” to get off line and be open to possibilities that are not available, or are even made impossible, by the very line that divides the sexes and orients each toward “the other.” In order to think about lesbian tendencies—and how lesbians “tend toward” other lesbians in what could be described as the pleasures of repetition—we can explore the way in which lesbian desire is shaped by contact with others, and the way that desire enables points of connection that are discontinuous with the straight line.

Lesbian desire can be rethought as a space for action, a way of extending differently into space through tending toward “other women.” This makes “becoming lesbian” a very social experience and allows us to rethink desire as a form of action that shapes bodies and worlds. Sally Munt, for instance, suggests that “desire is implicated in all aspects of living a lesbian life: it is the fuel of our existence, a movement of promise” (1998a: 10). Elspeth Probyn de-

scribes desire as “productive, it is what oils the lines of the social” (1996: 13). Desire is, after all, what moves us closer to bodies. To state the obvious: lesbian desire puts women into closer “contact” with women. As Elizabeth Grosz suggests, “Sexual relations are contiguous with and a part of other relations—the relations of the writer to pen and paper, the body-builder to weights, the bureaucrat to files” (1995: 181). The intimacy of contact shapes bodies as they orientate toward each other doing different kinds of work. In being orientated toward other women, lesbian desires also bring certain objects near, including sexual objects as well as other kinds of objects, *that might not have otherwise been reachable within the body horizon of the social*.

Lesbian contact slides between forms of social and sexual proximity. The argument that lesbian contact is “more than sexual” can be seen to imply an “antisex” or “antierotic” stance, or a return to the notion of “woman-identification” or even the lesbian continuum.³⁵ I agree with Teresa de Lauretis (1994:190–98) that these ideas, which are beautifully formulated in Adrienne Rich’s work, underplay the sexual aspects of lesbianism insofar as they presume that women identifying with each other, without sexual contact, can be points on the same (oblique or diagonal) line of lesbian desire. At the same time, however, we don’t have to take the “sex” out of lesbianism to argue that lesbian sociality tends toward other women in ways that are more than sexual, or even more than solely about desire. Lesbian bonds can involve orientations that are about shared struggles, common grounds, and mutual aspirations, as bonds that are created through the lived experiences of being “off line” and “out of line.” To be orientated sexually toward women as women affects other things that we do.

It is in this sense that I am arguing that lesbian desire is contingent as a way of reflecting on the relation between sexual and social contact. It is useful to recall that the word “contingent” has the same root in Latin as the word “contact” (*contingere*: *com-*, with, *tangere*, to touch). Contingency is linked in this way to the sociality of being “with” others, to getting close enough to touch. To begin to think of lesbianism as contingent is to suggest not only that we become lesbians but also that such becoming is not lonely; it is always directed toward others, however imagined.

Lesbian contact hence involves social and bodily action (see Hart 1990); it involves a different way of extending the body in the world through reorientating one’s relation to others. The figure of the lesbian reader might be useful

here. Again, it is a familiar story, but familiarity is worth telling. When I “became a lesbian” I began reading avidly. I read all the novels I could get my hands on. When I first read *The Well of Loneliness*, which I read after having read much-later works, I was surprised by how much it moved me; this book is alluded to in many of the later novels not only as “the lesbian bible” (as a novel that acquires its sociality by being passed around, by *changing hands*), but also as a rather depressing story. The novel tells the story of Stephen Gordon, who is described throughout the novel as an invert, whose life hurtles towards the “tragic and miserable ending” that seems to be the only available plot for inversion (Hall 1982: 411). As we know from reading Ellis and Freud, inversion was used as a way of interpreting lesbian sexuality (if she desires women, she must be a man). Given this, the invert both stands for and stands in for the figure of the lesbian, a way of presenting her that also erases her, which is not to say that we should assume the invert can only signify in this way.³⁶ Throughout the novel, Stephen has a series of tragic and doomed love affairs, ending with her relationship with Mary Lewellyn, described as “the child, the friend, the beloved” (303). The novel does not give us a happy ending, and this seems partly its point: Stephen gives up Mary as a way of relieving her from the burden of their love. Stephen imagines saying to Mary: “I am one of those whom God marked on the forehead. Like Cain, I am marked and blemished. If you come to me, Mary, the world will abhor you, will persecute you, will call you unclean. Our love may be faithful even unto death and beyond—yet the world will call it unclean.” (303)

It is a story of doomed love, unhappiness, and shame. I was very struck by the title. It seems to “point” to the loneliness of the lesbian life, where the lesbian is “on her own,” cut off from the family, and where her body is lived as an injury to others, which is “conscious of feeling all wrong.” (17) And yet, what is compelling about this book is how loneliness allows the body to extend differently into the world, a body that is alone in this cramped space of the family, which puts some objects and not others in reach, is also a body that reaches out towards others that can be glimpsed as just about on the horizon. When Stephen and Mary arrive at a party, this is just what they find: it is a queer gathering, with others who share the signs of inversion, a “very strange company” (356). It is not that such gatherings are happy: indeed, the novel describes one bar as “that meeting-place of the most miserable of all those who comprised the miserable army” (393). And yet this sharing of misery does

something, and it is contrasted to the “happiness” of those in the straight world, who do not think to think about those who are “deprived of all sympathy” (395). Happiness for some involves persecution for others; it is not simply that this happiness produces a social wrong, but it might even be dependent upon it. The unhappiness of the deviant performs its own claim for justice. While we should take care not to create a romance out of such unhappiness, we can note that not only does it expose injustice, but it can also allow those who deviate to find each other, as bodies who do not or cannot follow the lines that are assumed to lead to happy endings. So although the novel seems to point to the burden of being inverted, perverted or simply led astray, it also shows how the “negated” life stills gets us somewhere, through the very turn towards others who are also seen as outside the contours of a good life.

You might search for others who share your points of deviation, or you might simply arrive in spaces (clubs, bars, houses, streets, rooms) where welcome shadows fall and linger, indicating that others too have arrived. You might wonder at the coincidence of these arrivals, of how it is that you find yourself inhabiting such spaces. As Judith Schuyf puts it, “yet here we find already a sense of the social: the company of like others—not just a ‘special friend’—was essential to a lesbian’s life.” (1992: 53) It is the very social and existential experience of loneliness that compels the lesbian body to extend into other kinds of space, where there are others who return one’s desire. What is compelling, then, is how this story of the loneliness of lesbian desire searches for a different form of sociality, a space in which the lesbian body can extend itself, as a body that gets near other bodies, which tends towards others who are alike only insofar as they also deviate and pervert the lines of desire.

The sociality of lesbian desire is shaped by contact with the heteronormative, even if this contact does not “explain” such desire. We could think of this “contact zone” of lesbian desire not as a fantasy of likeness (of finding others who are “like me”), but as opening up lines of connection between bodies that are drawn to each other in the repetition of this tendency to deviate from the straight line. 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 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 lines that are often invisible to

others. Lesbian desires create spaces, often temporary spaces that come and go with the coming and going of the bodies that inhabit them. The points of this existence don't easily accumulate as lines, or if they do, they might leave different impressions on the ground.

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. 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" (2005: 198). 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 given that the straight world is already in place and that queer moments, where things come out of line, are fleeting. Our response need not be to search for permanence, as Berlant and Warner show us in their work, but to listen to the sound of "the what" that fleets.

I have shown how ordinary perception corrects that which does not "line up," including the fleeting signs of lesbian desire. This is why lesbian desires are already queer before, as it were, queer happens: given the orientation of the world around heterosexuality, and given the homosociality of this world (see Sedgwick 1985), women desiring women can be one of the most oblique and queer forms of social and sexual contact. Such queer contact might take us back to what is queer about Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and the "sensitivity" of the body of his work and in his work. What is queer is never, after all, exterior to its object. If Merleau-Ponty accounts for how things get straightened up, then he also accounts for how things become queer, or how "the straight" might even depend on "queer slants" to appear as straight. Indeed, in Merleau-Ponty's writing bodies are already rather queer. In *The Visible and Invisible*, he offers us a reflection on touch and on forms of contact between bodies as well as between bodies and the world. As he states: "My hand, while it is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things it touches" (1968: 133) What touches is touched, and yet "the toucher" and "the touched" do not ever reach each other; they do not merge to become one.

This model of touch shows how bodies reach other bodies, and how this "reaching" is already felt on the surface of the skin. And yet, I have suggested that not all bodies are within reach. Touch also involves an economy: a differentiation between those who can and cannot be reached.³⁷ Touch then opens bodies to some bodies and not others. Queer orientations are those that put within reach bodies that have been made unreachable by the lines of conventional genealogy. Queer orientations might be those that don't line up, which by seeing the world "slantwise" allow other objects to come into view. A queer orientation might be one that does not overcome what is "off line," and hence *acts out of line with others*. It is no accident that queer orientations have been described by Foucault and others as orientations that follow a diagonal line, which cut across "slantwise" the vertical and horizontal lines of conventional genealogy (Bell and Binnie 2000: 133), perhaps even challenging the "becoming vertical" of ordinary perception.

For lesbians, inhabiting the queer slant may be a matter of everyday negotiation. This is not about the romance of being off line or the joy of radical politics (though it can be), but rather the everyday work of dealing with the perceptions of others, with the "straightening devices" and the violence that might follow when such perceptions congeal into social forms. In such loving and living we learn to feel the oblique in the slant of its slant as another kind of gift. We would not aim to overcome the disorientation of the queer moment, but instead inhabit the intensity of its moment. Yes, we are hailed; we are straightened as we direct our desires as women toward women. For a lesbian queer politics, the hope is to reinhabit the moment after such hailing: such a politics would not overcome the force of the vertical, or ask us to live our lives as if such lines do not open and close spaces for action. Instead, we hear the hail, and even feel its force on the surface of the skin, but we do not turn around, even when those words are directed toward us. Having not turned around, who knows where we might turn. Not turning also affects what we can do. The contingency of lesbian desire makes things happen.