

MARGARET MAYHEW

discomforting delights

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*Queer Phenomenology: Orientations,
Objects, Others*

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The title of Sarah Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* hints at the ambiguity of the word *queer*, which she deploys with considerable measure and potency throughout the book. The subtitle—*Orientations, Objects, Others*—maps out her discursive field, which offers an erudite and lucid engagement with theories of sexual subjectivity and racial politics, and how they intersect with the straightened neutrality of the white male subject of western philosophy. *Queer Phenomenology* does not only concern itself with the queering of the phenomenological writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Edmund Husserl, nor is it confined to exploring a phenomenology of queer sexual identities and politics. However, the latter approach is one of the most potent interventions of the book, as Ahmed manages to tackle the often problematic entanglements of queer theory with questions of ontology, which are often cited as ethnocentric if not deterministic. *Queer Phenomenology* approaches queerness not as a condition of being, but specifically as phenomenology, a means of experiencing the world that is both destabilising and optimistic. Ahmed plays on the ambiguity of the word *queer*, as referring to that which is awry or unusual, as well as so-called deviant sexualities, deploying a queering approach with careful and considerate re-readings of a considerable variety of literature on the nature of being, of becoming and of spatialisation.

Ahmed doesn't restrain from exploring the ambiguous queerness of phenomenology, and takes the defamiliarising aspect of close examination of objects, space and the embodied subject as her starting point—that phenomenology

is itself a little disconcerting, if not adamantly queer. Chapter Two, 'Sexual Orientation', starts with a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's description of the disconcerting effect of oblique perception, as *queer*. Whereas Merleau-Ponty's queer moment is rectified by returning his head to the vertical, Ahmed uses the point of deviation to question why his spatial metaphor should be based on a 'straight' grid of verticality and horizontally in the first place. Playing on the ambiguity of 'queer' as referring to a general oddness, or being 'out of line', and the more contemporary use in reference to sexuality, Ahmed remains at the point of deviation, developing a spatial metaphor for the straightening imperatives of heteronormativity, and how queer desires and behaviours become enshrined as deviant. To prove her point, Ahmed examines why in sexology, queer sexualities have come to be described as *orientations*. Reviewing works of Freud and Havelock-Ellis on lesbianism, Ahmed explores heterosexuality as a process of intergenerational work. Heterosexuality is not given or assumed, but is articulated as a form of social inheritance, of intergenerational investment, and as a deeply complex set of affective processes that imbricate the queer subject within their linear structures, as much as they excise, or silence the queer desires, moments or possibilities that do occur within heterosexual society. This spatial metaphor of sexuality as a series of lines, of directives, deviations and crossings allows the complex sociality of queer subjectivity to be addressed with considerable sensitivity.

Ahmed deploys feminist and queer readings of Freud's writings on lesbians, in order to

articulate Freud's own tacit imperatives of straightening deviancy by narrating it as a reflection, or deflection of heterosexual desire. By articulating Freudian diagnosis as a straightening device, Ahmed develops a spatial model for how discourses shape space and straighten the subjects within it, to remain within the vertical lineages of families. Using her personal account, she traces the specifically painful links that queer subjects have to social networks of heteronormativity, particularly within families of origin. Specifically, she describes the desire for reciprocation, for effective participation within the social contract of the family, to extend its heterosexist lineage as a significant affect which conflicts with queer desires. Ahmed's work on the spatialisation of queerness is developed into a lucid exploration of queer ontology in her discussion of Havelock Ellis and his category of contingent lesbian. By exploring the etymology of *contingent*, as linked to *contact*, Ahmed manages to negotiate the ambiguous discursive tension between homosexuality as 'innate' or as 'contagious'. By focusing on the production and reproduction of heterosexuality, within the vertical and horizontal lineages of hetero-normative spaces such as the heterosexual family, Ahmed develops a model of subject formation as governed by proximity and contact. She argues that hetero-normative space acts to keep subjects in line, and to separate possible contact that could be 'queer'. While queer moments can and do happen within heterosexual society, hetero-normative space exerts a straightening pressure on them, silencing queer subjects, holding them apart, in order to minimise contact that is not 'straight'.

By holding queer subjects out of reach of each other, heteronormativity reproduces itself as the only space where subjects can feel comfortable, upright, and socially mobile. The force of heteronormativity as a dominant social matrix structures shows how forms of deviation become ignored or recuperated, but also how they develop into sites of resistance and contestation, and how queer moments can develop into trajectories, networks and affiliations.

Queer Phenomenology functions not just as a description, but in its phrasing evokes a descriptive appellation. Like saying 'good day' or 'bad dog', as a statement, *queer phenomenology* functions to hail phenomenology as a rather queer subject. The device of hailing is not only a reference to Judith Butler's work on interpellation, but serves in Ahmed's analysis of the phenomenological experience of racism. Citing Frantz Fanon's description of being hailed 'Look, a Negro!'¹ as disruptive, disorienting, and disintegrating of his own sense of self, Ahmed develops a picture of space that is constantly mapped and remapped and negotiated by the racially marked bodies that occupy it. Like heteronormativity, whiteness striates space between zones of movement and association and zones where bodies identified as racially marked or coloured are restricted, or confined within certain discourses or stereotypes, functioning as objects of racist discourse or sites for the fantastic projections of otherness. Referring to Edward Said's work on orientalism, on the construction of and fascination with a racially marked 'other' by imperial Europe, Ahmed describes this orientation towards 'the orient' or

the 'other' as implicitly involving turning away from the tacitly unmarked and unspoken ground of 'whiteness'. However, the processes of orientation, of turning towards the orient, of hailing and reaching and repudiating the other, themselves involve a circular movement around the unmarked condition, and this circular movement, directed outwards, is what generates and reinforces whiteness as a distinct space.

Ahmed's point is not that space is somehow given, or external to the bodies that occupy it. Her argument is that space permeates bodies, is within bodies, is marked by and marks bodies. This allows for an elegant elucidation of how racial identity involves a continuous and ambiguous negotiation of embodiment, movement and fitting in, with one's own body and the bodies around. This view of 'white space' as a permeable within and between bodies, explains how it is that some 'coloured' bodies can 'fit in', and others not. And how at certain points, certain times, coloured bodies that do 'fit in', suddenly become marked, and how sometimes, certain bodies, that are ostensibly white, can also provide a poor fit. Ahmed's emphasis and personal narratives of miscegenation provide a powerful queering point for the discursive basis of racial difference. Bodies are recognised as 'coloured' not only by pigment, but also by names, clothing and context. Hailing, or interpellation, becomes the condition under which bodies come to exist as racialised, and uncomfortable.

Ahmed repeatedly evokes the boundaries of the body as porous and extendable. Within this work, the body is no longer contained by

its skin, but the skin becomes a means of extending, shaping and striating space around it. The surface effect of skin, its texture and colour, are evoked as the legible artefacts of a much thicker and expansive set of bodily extensions. Arguing that identity and resemblance are produced by proximity, not heredity, Ahmed develops a model of space that is shaped by the subjects within it, which in turn acts to shape other subjects, by allowing them to conform and sink within it as comfortable subjects, or to rub against it, to be an ill fit, to be at odds with their environs and to agitate against it. Ahmed's agitated subject, the poor fit, who is oblique and uncomfortable, is motile, disruptive, disturbing, to the space around and others within it. Thus queerness is articulated as a form of contagion, and a spatial change, by its very ontology. To be queer is to be oblique, and to be oblique in a straight world is to be uncomfortable, and to be uncomfortable is to be agitated, to move and touch and disrupt the space and bodies around. This idea of the queer subject as a poor fit provides an effective elucidation of the contingency of queerness, and the ongoing tensions within queer politics over charges of recuperation and straightness. One is 'queer' where one is uncomfortable, which Ahmed describes optimistically as the source of change and pleasure:

Every experience I have had of pleasure and excitement about a world opening up has begun with such ordinary feelings of discomfort, of not quite fitting in a chair, of becoming unseated, of being left holding onto the ground. (154)

Ahmed's distinction between motility (an idiosyncratic directionless movement) and mobility (movement as a progression) allows her to articulate the differences between identity-based politics of assimilation, and those of agitation, disruption and change. It also allows her to move beyond deployments of queerness as a form of ontology, into exploration of how queerness works almost as a deontology. Her use of *queer* as a metaphor allows for an articulation of how intersectionality works as a strategy for articulating how different forms of marking or marginalisation operate to produce marginalisation as a phenomenology. Identity is no longer a result of structural lines of power, demarcating the racially oppressed subject from the queer subject or the female subject, but a means of striating various spaces in which the experiences of (queer) desire, of (racialised) embodiment and of (female) gendering are uncomfortable, hindering, disorienting, and hopefully mobilising.

The back cover describes the work as *groundbreaking*, which is a rather disconcerting term, given Ahmed's emphasis on spatial metaphors, and how ontology can be rethought in relation to a reorientation of the existing ground of socially mediated selves, rather than a discovery of new ground. Indeed the word, *groundbreaking*, evokes images of breaking up ground, of plough marks, furrows or trenches—a set of distinctly linear associations, implying direction, purpose and anticipation of a defined future. This is certainly not the impression I gained from this work. I'm not sure if Ahmed's project is concerned with breaking new ground, as much of the book involves a

re-reading of existing work. The idea of breaking ground, or pushing frontiers of existing thought, also has an affinity with metaphors of colonial expansion, a project at odds with much of Ahmed's writing. Even in its relation to the existing *ground* of phenomenology and the ontological emphasis of theories and politics of social identity, her project is less one of deconstruction, than of reorientation and realignment. This is not to deny the potency of the project of defamiliarisation that is at the heart of the work. Ahmed brings theories into new alignments, and the book opens up new forms in which to re-imagine and reinhabit the existing territories of subjectivity, politics and embodied geography.

I think a better description would be ground shaking. The book is disorienting in a good way. It invites the reader to be shaken, disoriented, to question our selves and our position and it evokes the power and necessity of disorientation as a source of movement and challenge. Ahmed doesn't seem to insist that we deny the positions we currently occupy, or to move on, but to reorient ourselves. Like earthly tremors, *queer phenomenology* facilitates the formation of lines and fissures along the spaces of our existence, as events that open up new connections, rather than points in lines that bind us to existing structures and spaces in which living obliquely is made uncomfortable, if not impossible.

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She holds degrees in Science, Visual Arts and Art History, and has lectured, exhibited and performed in relation to queer and feminist identity politics since 1993.

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1. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, Pluto Press, London, 1986, p. 112 (in Ahmed p. 110).