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

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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 seems "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

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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 disorientates 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 orientates 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

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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]

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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-

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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

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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

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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).

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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

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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

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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

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> 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

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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-

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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

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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,

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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

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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 inhabitance. 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

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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-

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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

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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:

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"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

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"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 pregiven.[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-

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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

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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 tendings 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

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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

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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., *homo*sexual) 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."

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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

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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

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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 gays 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

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(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—itself 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

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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

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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-

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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

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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 belovéd" (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

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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

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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.

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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.

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