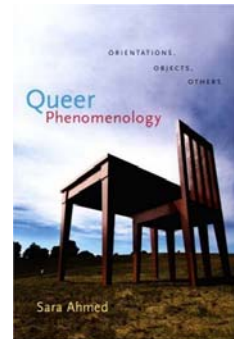


A Review of Sara Ahmed's Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others

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In her powerfully articulated book, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Sara Ahmed foregrounds the concept of *orientation* in the context of a new field of inquiry for both queer studies and phenomenological research. In her previous works, such as *Difference That Matters: Feminist Theory and Postmodernism* (1998), *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (2000), and *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), we find an insistence on situating the problem(atic)s of non-normative bodies and subjectivities in the intersections of race, gender and sexuality in different cultural sites and spaces. In doing so, Ahmed makes creative uses of bodies of knowledge from post-colonialism and critical race studies, as well as feminist and queer studies. This insistence has a sense of urgency or necessity for Ahmed, a White-European/Middle Eastern-Asian mix queer woman who has migrated between different countries and cultural locations. Her interdisciplinary scholarship has always generated a unique and productive discourse for the theorization of difference and what it means to “live it” in everyday-life situations. This book is no exception.

Ahmed begins this intellectual journey by asking what it means to be orientated, toward and against objects in worlds, for queer life. In the introduction, she states, “If orientation is a matter of how we reside in space, then sexual orientation might also be a matter of residence; of how we inhabit spaces as well as “who” or “what” we inhabit spaces with” (p. 1). In other words, Ahmed’s agenda here is to “pose the question of ‘the orientation’ of ‘sexual orientation’ as a phenomenological question” (p. 1) to “offer a new way of thinking about the spatiality of sexuality, gender, and race” (p. 4). With this question, Ahmed articulates how bodies are turned toward the objects around them, and how this “direction” matters in understanding orientation, as it is taken up in chapter one. Using Husserl’s metaphor of table, Ahmed demonstrates how we perceive worlds in relation to the “proximity” between body and objects through action. Sitting at a writing table, with a pen in hand, and perhaps a table lamp, we are engaged in a certain type of work. Thus, this space makes “certain things, not others, available” to us (p. 14). These objects are gathered in this space by us, while they create the space where our bodies inhabit. Our action, or intentionality, then, creates lines of direction that shape our perception and how

we orientate ourselves toward the objects. A dinner table, which we gather and are gathered around, creates different kinds of orientation and lines of direction for our bodies than does a writing table. Thus, this orientation and the lines of direction are certainly not “neutral” or “originary” or, as Ahmed describes, “*it is not just that I find them there, like that*. Rather, the nearness of objects is a sign of an orientation” (emphasis by Ahmed, p. 58). It is in this recursive relationship between repetitive actions and our orientation toward the objects that “something queer happens” (Britzman, 1999).

What if our orientation turns our bodies toward the objects that are not supposed to be there? What happens when our bodies are not “in line” with the lines of direction? These are the questions that lead the analysis of sexual orientation and the hetero-normalization of bodies in chapter two. In a queer perspective, homosexuality exists against the background of normative (hetero) sexual practice, and it is the homosexual subject that is thought of as having an orientation (we do not often hear of someone having a “heterosexual orientation”). In other words, heterosexual orientation and the “straight” lines of direction that the orientation creates are not visible to us, causing us to believe that it is “natural” or “the norm,” which makes bodies that are not “in line” deviant. Ahmed traces these normalizing effects of heterosexual orientation back to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis case of homosexuality. Freud explains how a young woman’s attraction toward another, older woman is a result of her disappointment of not having borne the child of her father—explained by the oedipal complex—which causes her to turn away from men and brought great pain to her family. In order to satisfy her libido, the young woman decides to become a man. Ahmed’s queer reading of Freud’s text reveals how the straight lines of direction are at work, as follows: (1) one’s sexuality is always directed toward the other sex; and (2) the line of family—or the blood of father—must be carried down to the next generation. Ahmed calls these hidden processes “compulsory heterosexuality” (p. 84), or “straightening devices” (p. 92) and further explores the sociality and the historicity of one’s “becoming straight.”

Here, Ahmed engages in a discussion with Judith Butler, whom she quotes: “Heterosexual genders form themselves through the renunciation of the *possibilities* of homosexuality, as a foreclosure *which produces a field of heterosexual objects* at the same time as it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love” (p. 87, emphasis by Ahmed). This field of heterosexuality is created through repetitive actions that turn our bodies in a certain direction. This argument reminds us of what Butler articulates as “repetitive performativity” (Butler, 1993) but with a phenomenological twist. Through reflecting on experiences in her own family home, Ahmed demonstrates how bodies take the shape against the prescribed background over time: how they sat at the dinner table, the photographs of generations of family members on the wall, all pointing toward the direction of heterosexual lines. Through acting and living on these lines, bodies are shaped in *particular* forms that “enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action” (p. 91). Just as our act of writing creates our orientation toward the writing table and other gathered objects, the internalized societal norms and actions orientate our bodies toward heterosexual objects, which then create a field where certain objects are pulled closer, while other objects become non-perceivable. How, then, do bodies come to have queer orientation against such a hegemonic force?

But a careful reader would point out that compulsory heterosexuality sometimes fails to regulate our bodies. New lines of direction are formed when bodies make contact with the object that is not supposed be there: another queer body, another “contingent lesbian” (p. 107). Contingency, Ahmed points out, shares the same root with a Latin word for “contact.” Pulled by desire, a body leaves the grid of heterosexual lines. Consequently, the body requires a reorientation through gathering and bringing closer other objects that are otherwise not visible or reachable in the field of heterosexuality. In other words, a body needs contacts with other objects to shift its orientation, to become a lesbian. Of course, these possibilities are not free from injuries. Others’ perception and the straightening devices are constantly working to pull bodies that wander off line back in to the field of heterosexual objects. In the end of the chapter, we hear Ahmed’s inspiring voice that speaks to queer bodies, warning against interpellation:

Yes, we are hailed; we are straightened as we direct our desire as women toward women. For a lesbian queer politics, the hope is to reinhabit the moment after such hailing...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 (p.107).

In chapter three, Ahmed “queers” the concept of race using queer phenomenology in order to analyze the ways in which racialization and racism affect bodies, and how bodies inhabit social space. Drawing on Edward Said’s conceptualization of “Orient”, Ahmed argues that the very notion of “orientation” has a colonial underlying; that Orient (non-Europe) only exists in the gaze of Occident (Europe) toward what is east to the West. This repeated towardness—facing the same direction—over time forms not only a social world, but also affects how bodies are racialized, taking the shape of “the same/white” or “not the same/non-white”. Ahmed then makes an effective use of the concepts of straight lines and compulsory heterosexuality formulated in the previous chapters, to demonstrate how the reproduction of whiteness is achieved through a particular kind of orientation, an orientation that puts “white” objects closer, while excluding others in the field. However, just as queer moments happen in sexual orientation, there can be things that are “out of line” in white orientation. Ahmed situates this argument within her family home. Growing up as a child of a white, English mother and a brown, Pakistani father, she was surrounded by the objects that had different proximities and alignments; some objects were more in line with the white family line and some were inherited along the non-white lines. The impossibility of following either lines—white or non-white—leads Ahmed to consider possibilities of queering one’s own racial orientation that would “take the very ‘affects’ of mixing, or coming into contact with things that reside on different lines, as opening up new kinds of connection.” (p. 154-155). Similar to the closing in chapter two, Ahmed calls out for those with queer orientation to resist the works of “whitening” devices and to make collective efforts toward “a world that is not orientated around whiteness.”

In conclusion, Ahmed states: “The question is not so much finding a queer line but rather asking what our orientation toward queer moments of deviation will be. If the objects slip away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, or out of place, what will we do?” (p. 179).

Queer phenomenology enables us to see how our actions shape our bodies and our orientation toward the objects we work with. In the process, we become aware of other objects that might have been erased before our eyes. It is not to say that queer orientation should replace other orientations. However, with this awareness, we could consider different lines that lead our bodies to different objects. As articulated throughout the book, different objects gather on different grounds, and we are gathered around those objects. Perhaps it is an ethical problem: when we experience disorientation, before quickly pushing the strange object out of sight so we can orientate ourselves again, we must know that there is an opportunity for learning—of self, others and worlds—that we could not see before.

This is a very ambitious project and at times Ahmed's ideas are left under-articulated. One such missed point is where the process of "becoming lesbian" is explained. Ahmed's description of contingent sexual orientation, or forming of an orientation, seems somewhat unproblematic, leaving the issue of subjection in the formation of a subject. As Michel Foucault suggested—and Judith Butler extensively elaborated—power is indeed the very condition of the subject formation and the direction of desire. Perhaps a discussion of this forming effect of power could further complicate and sophisticate our understanding of the relationship between orientation and subjectivity.

While the text is rich and dense in its theoretical discussion, Ahmed's language is surprisingly accessible and cautiously intimate. Drawing on the works of a wide range of thinkers, Ahmed establishes multiple connections and points of conversation between the theories and does so with an astute clarity. Students of both phenomenology and queer studies, or anyone in search of a new theoretical framework for non-normative bodies and subjects, are guaranteed to benefit from reading this truly novel work.

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