

## Diversifying Syllabi 2017 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

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**Article/Essay Title:** “Sexual Orientation” (Ch. 2 of *Queer Phenomenology*)

**Author:** Sara Ahmed

**Readability:** Easy/Moderate/**Difficult**

Ahmed’s writing is suggestive and thought-provoking, but the connections between ideas or sections are not always perspicuous. In addition, she uses some technical language from psychoanalysis and phenomenology that may require careful definition.

**Thesis:** “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” (68)

Ahmed offers associations and arguments connecting the metaphor of being directionally oriented (especially sexually oriented) to formation of the self through repetition, ‘learning to become straight,’ the ways that physical living spaces are shaped by—and themselves make open possibilities for—the sexualities of the people in them, and the various ‘straightening’ readings of queerness offered by Freud and other philosophers.

She challenges and complicates the “born this way” narrative used by, for, and against queer folks.

### **Key Definitions:**

- **Orientation**—A spatial metaphor referring to one’s tendencies that establish one’s starting position, proximity to objects, people, and activities, direction of movement, objects of desire, ease in moving through a given space, and more
- **Queer**—off the normative line or slanted; an entity that does not follow the orientation that dominantly structures the space

### **Brief Summary:**

I judged it best to suggest portions of this essay that can be taken individually, depending on the focus of the course, as the chapter as a whole is quite long and the connections between sections are subtle. The whole chapter is unsuitable for an introductory level philosophy course, except perhaps with extended time to spend in preparation and clarification.

### **pp.65-68: Basics of understanding space as purposeful**

Summarizes Merleau-Ponty’s concept of an orientation and of space as a field of action and possibilities for action, not mere physical location. Also includes Merleau-Ponty’s views on sexual orientation, highlighting some ways they may be inadequate.

### **pp.68-79: Sexology, Lines as pointing toward objects of desire**

Discusses common ways of conceptualizing sexuality in the field of sexology and Freudian psychoanalysis. Ahmed highlights the ways that straight sexuality is assumed to be the neutral,

normative straight line pointing the direction of what should be desired, against which skewed or queer sexualities stand out. She argues that even when people acknowledge queer sexuality, they often try to force it back into the line by questioning the sex of the queer person (e.g. “If she is attracted to other women, it must be because she’s more masculine”, thus forcing her back on to the line of men pointing toward women in a straight line).

**pp.72-79: A reading of Freud on Women’s Homosexuality**

Detailed discussion of Freud’s analysis of the case of a homosexual woman. Ahmed highlights the language of the woman being ‘off the line’ to illustrate how the spatial concept of a sexual orientation is used to read a situation in practice. Then she undercuts Freud’s analysis by showing how it can illuminate how the *family* of the woman is beginning to slide off the normative line, not necessarily the woman.

**pp.79-85: Becoming Straight (in the context of family)**

Ahmed usefully summarizes two approaches to sexual orientation: framed as biological or as a choice, but argues for a third option: socially conditioned, but not a matter of individual free choice (79-80, see also 100).

**She provides two very concrete and helpful examples of straight family spaces, oriented around dinner tables. These will likely be very useful for students.** She also draws connections to Husserl’s work.

Ahmed argues that heterosexuality is a compulsory orientation, by which she means that it is “not prescribed by nature”(84) and “subjects are *required* to ‘tend toward’ some objects and not others as a condition of familial as well as social love” (85).

**pp.85-92: Genealogy, inheritance, orientation establishing proximity/ease, and straight objects**

In this section, Ahmed continues to draw out connections to the spatial term ‘orientation’, arguing that the inheritance of a heterosexual family—the continuation of itself—is not open to off-line children. She highlights how being oriented in a particular way puts certain objects (like procreation of a child) in close proximity to one, while others create distance and difficulty. She also, again, highlights some concrete examples of objects that are created in straight spaces as straight objects (86-87).

Straight or queer objects are not just the people who function as love objects, nor do these properties inhere in physical objects themselves. Instead, “heterosexuality would be an effect of how objects gather to clear a ground, how objects are arranged to create a background” (87).

**pp. 92-100: Contingency, images of lesbian desire for sameness and difference**

Freud created the image of a contingently lesbian woman, one who wouldn’t be one otherwise, but has not been able to attract men. Ahmed argues that this construction is heterosexist, but then uses it to bring out the shared experience and “pull” among people who are similarly resistant to and unsettled from the compulsory line. She nicely uses this construction to explain both the “natural,” non-volitional aspect of the way lesbians experience desire toward other women, and also the power in choosing to identify with the term ‘lesbian.’

Another concrete example on pp.95-96.

Ahmed also challenges the notion of sameness that is assumed to be involved in homosexual desire (it's more of the sameness of both being off the normative line than a narcissistic sameness), and the difference in butch-femme relationships (it's not a reinstatement of straight relationships, as that's just a straightening way to put it back on the line).

### **pp.100-107: The work and possibilities of lesbian orientations**

Orientations take work; one becomes one's orientation through repeated contact with the structure of the social world and one's body, either resisting it or becoming what is compulsory. "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" (102).

She identifies the sociality opened up by being together with others who are similarly off the normative line as challenging but full of potential:

"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...and the violence that might follow...In such loving and living we learn to feel the oblique in the slant of its slant as another kind of gift...Having not turned [onto the line], who knows where we might turn...The contingency of lesbian desire makes things happen" (107).

### **Possible Applications:**

Phenomenology, Existentialism, Sexuality and Sex, European Philosophy, Freud and Psychoanalysis, Self/Identity, Mutual Recognition

### **Complementary Texts/Resources:**

- Judith Butler
- Haslanger on social construction
- Merleau-Ponty on the inhabited body
- Husserl table passage
- Marie Draz – Born this way: Decolonizing gender
- Selections from the Argonauts by Maggie Nelson
- Christina Gupta on compulsory sexuality
- Foucault on homosexuality
- Ladelle McPorter
- Ellen Feeter – Family Bonds
- "Far From the Tree"
- Matteo Mameli – Mindreading, Mindshaping, and Evolution
- Foucault on family and how family is the site of discipline

**Possible Class Activities:**

Lady gaga, glee, talking about the born this way narrative, brainstorming “straightening” devices.