CONCLUSION Disorientation and Queer Objects

> The instability of levels produces not only the intellectual experience of disorder, but the vital experience of giddiness and nausea, which is the awareness of our own contingency and the horror with which it fills us.
>
> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation as a bodily feeling can be unsettling, and it can shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable. Such a feeling of shattering, or of being shattered, might persist and become a crisis. Or the feeling itself might pass as the ground returns or as we return to the ground. The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action. Or the hand might reach out and find nothing, and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air. The body in losing its support might then be lost, undone, thrown.

Sometimes, disorientation is an ordinary feeling, or even a feeling that comes and goes as we move around during the day. I think we can learn from such ordinary moments. Say, for example, that you are concentrating. You focus. What is before you becomes the world. The edges of that world disappear as you zoom in. The object—say the paper, and the thoughts that gather around the paper by gathering as lines on the paper—becomes what is given by losing its contours. The paper becomes worldly, which might even mean you lose sight of the table. Then, behind you, someone calls out your

name. As if by force of habit, you look up, you even turn around to face what is behind you. But as your bodily gestures move up, as you move around, you move out of the world, without simply falling into a new one. Such moments when you "switch" dimensions can be deeply disorientating. One moment does not follow another, as a sequence of spatial givens that unfolds as moments of time. They are moments in which you lose one perspective, but the "loss" itself is not empty or waiting; it is an object, thick with presence. You might even see black lines in front of your eyes as lines that block what is in front of you when you turn around. You experience the moment as loss, as the making present of something that is now absent (the presence of an absence). You blink, but it takes time for the world to acquire a new shape. You might even feel angry from being dislodged from the world you inhabited as a contourless world. You might even say to the person who addressed you with the frustrated reply of "What is it?" What is "it" that makes me lose what is before me?

Such moments of switching dimensions can be disorientating. If my project in this book has been to show how orientations are organized rather than casual, how they shape what becomes socially as well as bodily given, then how can we understand what it means to be disorientated? Is disorientation a bodily sign of "dis/organization," as the failure of an organization to hold things in place? What do such moments of disorientation tell us? What do they do, and what can we do with them? I want us to think about how queer politics might *involve* disorientation, without legislating disorientation as a politics. It is not that disorientation is always radical. Bodies that experience disorientation can be defensive, as they reach out for support or as they search for a place to reground and reorientate their relation to the world. So, too, the forms of politics that proceed from disorientation can be conservative, depending on the "aims" of their gestures, depending on how they seek to (re)ground themselves. And, for sure, bodies that experience being out of place might need to be orientated, to find a place where they feel comfortable and safe in the world. The point is not whether we experience disorientation (for we will, and we do), but how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is after all about how the things are "directed" and how they are shaped by the lines they follow. The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope.

I have noted that phenomenology is full of moments of disorientation. And yet, such moments are often moments that "point" toward becoming orientated. As noted earlier, Merleau-Ponty, following Husserl, suggests that the "I can" proceeds from overcoming disorientation, from reorienting the body so that the line of the body follows the vertical and horizontal axes. Such a body is one that is upright, straight, and in line. The straight body is not simply in a "neutral" position: or if it is the neutral position, then this alignment is only an effect of the repetition of past gestures, which give the body its contours and the "impression" of its skin. In a way, the utterance "I can" points to the future only insofar as it inherits the past, as the accumulation of what the body has already done, as well as what is "behind" the body, the conditions of its arrival. The body emerges from this history of doing, which is also a history of not doing, of paths not taken, which also involves the loss, impossible to know or to even register, of what might have followed from such paths. As such, the body is directed as a condition of its arrival, as a direction that gives the body its line. And yet we can still ask, what happens if the orientation of the body is not restored? What happens when disorientation cannot simply be overcome by the "force" of the vertical? What do we do, if disorientation itself becomes worldly or becomes what is given?

In a footnote to his text Merleau-Ponty refers to Stratton's *Vision without Inversion* in order to provide both an analysis of the way in which orientation happens as well as what happens when it fails to happen. As he states: "We remain physically upright not through the mechanism of the skeleton or even through the nervous regulation of muscular tone, but because we are caught up in a world. *If this involvement is seriously weakened, the body collapses and becomes once more an object*" (2002: 296; emphasis added). The "upright" body is involved in the world and acts on the world, or even "can act" insofar as it is already involved. The weakening of this involvement is what causes the body to collapse, and to become an object alongside other objects. In simple terms, disorientation involves becoming an object. It is from this point, the point at which the body becomes an object, that Fanon's phenomenology of the black body begins. By implication, we learn that disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis. This shows us how the world itself is more "involved" in some bodies than in others, as it takes such bodies as the contours of ordinary experience. It is not just that bodies are directed in specific ways, but that the world is shaped by the directions taken by some bodies more than others. It is

thus possible to talk about the white world, the straight world, as a world that takes the shape of the motility of certain skins.

From Fanon we learn about the experience of disorientation, as the experience of being an object among other objects, of being shattered, of being cut into pieces by the hostility of the white gaze. Disorientation can be a bodily feeling of losing one's place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body. Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach. At this moment of failure, such objects "point" somewhere else or they make what is "here" become strange. Bodies that do not follow the line of whiteness, for instance, might be "stopped" in their tracks, which does not simply stop one from getting somewhere, but changes one's relation to what is "here." When such lines block rather than enable action they become points that accumulate stress, or stress points. Bodies can even take the shape of such stress, as points of social and physical pressure that can be experienced as a physical press on the surface of the skin.

Furthermore, as I showed in chapter 3, an effect of being "out of place" is also to create disorientation in others: the body of color might disturb the picture—and do so simply as a result of being in spaces that are lived as white, spaces into which white bodies can sink. I suggested that white space (as a "habit space") is an effect of the accumulation of such gestures of sinking. It is interesting to note here that Jacques Rolland's description of seasickness as a disorientation uses the metaphor of sinking. As he states: "We have seasickness, because we are at sea, that is, off the coast, of which we have lost sight. That is, again, because the earth has gone, the same earth into which, ordinarily, we sink our feet in order for this position or stance to exist. Seasickness arrives once the loss of the earth is given" (2003: 17, see also Levinas 2003: 66–68). The ground into which we sink our feet is not neutral: it gives ground to some more than others. Disorientation occurs when we fail to sink into the ground, which means that the "ground" itself is disturbed, which also disturbs what gathers "on" the ground.

It is for this reason that disorientation can move around; it involves not only bodies becoming objects, but also the disorientation in how objects are gathered to create a ground, or to clear a space on the ground (the field). Here, in the conclusion to this volume, I explore the relation between the notion of

queer and the disorientation of objects. It is worth noting that throughout this book I have been using "queer" in at least two senses, and I have at times slid from one sense to the other. First, I have used "queer" as a way of describing what is "oblique" or "off line." This is why, in chapter 3, I described a mixed orientation, which unfolds from the gap between reception and possession, as offering a queer angle on the reproduction of whiteness. I also describe the presence of bodies of color in white spaces as disorienting: the proximity of such bodies out of place can work to make things seem "out of line," and can hence even work to "queer" space; people "blink" and do "double turns" when they encounter such bodies.

Second, I have used queer to describe specific sexual practices. Queer in this sense would refer to those who practice nonnormative sexualities (Jagose 1996), which as we know involves a personal and social commitment to living in an oblique world, or in a world that has an oblique angle in relation to that which is given. In chapter 2, notably, I discuss lesbianism as a queer form of social and sexual contact, which is queer perhaps even before "queer" gets taken up as a political orientation. I think it is important to retain both meanings of the word queer, which after all, are historically related even when we do not reduce them. This means recalling what makes specific sexualities describable as queer in the first place: that is, that they are seen as odd, bent, twisted. In a way, if we return to the root of the word "queer" (from the Greek for cross, oblique, adverse) we can see that the word itself "twists," with a twist that allows us to move between sexual and social registers, without flattening them or reducing them to a single line. Although this approach risks losing the specificity of queer as a commitment to a life of sexual deviation, it also sustains the significance of "deviation" in what makes queer lives queer.

To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things. As I have suggested, the effects of such a disturbance are uneven, precisely given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living—certain times, spaces, and directions. I have shown how the reproduction of things—of what is "before us"—is about what is assumed to be reachable at home, about what is gathered around as objects that can extend our reach. Heterosexuality as a compulsory orientation reproduces more than "itself": it is a mechanism for the reproduction of culture, or even of the "attributes" that are assumed to pass along a family line, such as whiteness. It is for this reason that queer as a sexual orientation "queers" more than sex, just as other kinds of queer effects can in

turn end up "queering" sex. It is important to make the oblique angle of queer do this work, even if it risks placing different kinds of queer effects alongside each other. Michael Moon's (1998: 16) approach to sexual disorientation as "uncanny effects" is a useful guide for us here. If the sexual involves the contingency of bodies coming into contact with other bodies, then sexual disorientation slides quickly into social disorientation, *as a disorientation in how things are arranged*. The effects are indeed uncanny: what is familiar, what is passed over in the veil of its familiarity, becomes rather strange.

In a way, it might be a queer encounter with existential phenomenology that helps us rethink how disorientation might begin with the strangeness of familiar objects. Think of Sartre's novel *Nausea* (1965). It is a rather queer novel, I would say, in the sense that it is a novel about "things" becoming oblique. *Nausea* could be described as a phenomenological description of disorientation, of a man losing his grip on the world. What is striking about this novel is how much the loss of grip is directed toward objects that gather around the narrator, a writer, as objects that come to "disturb" rather than extend human action. The narrator begins with the desire to describe such objects, and how they are given and arranged, as a way of describing queer effects: "I must say how I see this table, the street, people, my packet of tobacco, since *these* are the things which have changed" (9). Here again the table appears; it even comes first, as a sign of the orientation of writing. To write a story of disorientation begins with the table becoming queer. It is the things around him, gathered in the way that they are (as a horizon around the body, and the objects that are near enough, including the table), that reveals the disorientation in the order of things.

Disorientation could be described here as the "becoming oblique" of the world, a becoming that is at once interior and exterior, as that which is given, or as that which gives what is given its new angle. Whether the strangeness is in the object or in the body that is near the object remains a crucial question. It seems first that it is the narrator who is disorientated, that "things" have "slipped away" because he is slipping away or "losing his mind." If objects are the extensions of bodies, just as bodies are the incorporations of objects, how can we locate the queer moment in one or the other? Later in the novel, the "inside" and "outside" do not stay in place: "The Nausea isn't inside me: I can feel it *over there* on the wall, on the braces, everywhere around me. It is one with the café, it is I who am inside *it*" (35). Things become queer precisely

given how bodies are touched by objects, or by "something" that happens, where what is "over there" is also "in here," or even what I am "in." The story involves things becoming strange:

> Something has happened to me: I can't doubt that any more. It came as an illness does, not like an ordinary certainty, not like anything obvious. It installed itself cunningly, little by little; I felt a little strange, a little awkward, and that was all. . . . There is something new, for example, about my hands, a certain way of picking up my pipe or my fork. Or else it is the fork which has a certain way of getting itself picked up, I don't know. Just now, when I was on the point of coming into my room, I stopped short because I felt in my hand a cold object which attracted my attention by means of a sort of personality. I opened my hand and looked: I was simply holding the doorknob. (13)

We begin with the "me" as the place where something happens, a little strangeness or awkwardness that emerges over time, as if it has a life of its own. The becoming strange of the body does not stay with "me." For if it is my hands that are strange, then it is my hands as they express themselves in a gesture. Such gestures are the "point" where my hands meet with objects: where they cease to be apart; where they pick things up. So is it my hand or is it the fork that is different? What is so compelling to me about this account of "becoming queer" is how the strangeness that seems to reside somewhere between the body and its objects is also what brings these objects to life and makes them dance. So "the doorknob" when it is being what it is there to do (allowing us to open the door) is "just that." But when the doorknob is felt as something other than what is it supposed to do, then it comes to have a tangible quality as a "cold object," even one with a "personality." A cold object is one that gives us a sensation of being cold. When objects come to life, they leave their impressions.

In the first chapter, I evoked Marx's critique of German idealism for the very presumption that objects are simply before us, as things given in their "sensuous certainty." I would certainly not want to describe the queer object as that which becomes given in this way. Existential phenomenology shows us that the objects that are gathered as gatherings of history (domesticated objects, such as doorknobs, pens, knives, and forks that gather around, by supporting the actions of bodies) are in a certain way overlooked. What makes them historical is how they are "overlooked." Seeing such objects as if for the

first time (before this is a doorknob, how might I encounter it?) involves wonder, it allows the object to breathe not through a forgetting of its history but by allowing this history to come alive: How did you get here? How did I come to have you in my hand? How did we arrive at this place where such a handling is possible? How do you feel now that you are near? What does it do when I do this with you? To re-encounter objects as strange things is hence not to lose sight of their history but to refuse to make them history by losing sight. Such wonder directed at the objects that we face, as well as those that are behind us, does not involve bracketing out the familiar but rather allows the familiar to dance again with life.[1]

So what happens when the table dances? It is important to note that Marx describes the table as "turning" and even as "dancing"—as a dance that expresses the false life of the commodity rather than the breath of history: "In relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than 'table-turning' ever was" (1887: 76).[2] For Marx, when the table becomes a commodity it is endowed with agency, as if it has a life of its own. This life, we could say, is "stolen" from those who make the table, and from the very form of its "matter" (the wood). The dancing table would be a historical theft and a theft of history. We could approach the dancing table quite differently, if we see that the life of the table is "given" through this intimacy with other lives, rather than being a cut-off point. A table acquires a life through how it arrives, through what it comes into contact with, and the work that it allows us to do. Perhaps this life is a borrowed rather than stolen life, where the act of borrowing involves a pledge of return. The dancing table would be for sure a rather queer object: a queerness that does not reside "within" the table but registers how the table can impress upon us, and what we too can borrow from the contingency of its life.

In *Nausea*, objects become alive not by being endowed with qualities they do not have but through a contact with them as things that have been arranged in specific ways. Such contact is bodily: it is a touch that returns to the body, as the skin of the object "impresses" the skin of the body. The "touch" itself disorientates the body, so it loses its way. As the narrator states: "Objects ought not to *touch*, since they are not alive. You use them, you put them back in place, you live among them; they are useful, nothing more. I am afraid of entering in contact with them, just as if they were living animals. Now I see; I remember better what I felt the other day on the sea-shore when I was holding that

pebble. It was a sort of sweet disgust. How unpleasant it was! And it came from the pebble, I am sure of that, it passed from the pebble into my hands. Yes, that's exactly it: a sort of nausea in the hands" (22).[3] This way of coming into contact with objects involves disorientation: the touch of the thing that transmits some thing. The pebble becomes queer in such an encounter. What the story implies is that orientation is achieved through the loss of such physical proximity: things are kept in their place, which might be near me, but it is a nearness that does not threaten to get inside of me, or spill what is inside out.

This is how phenomenology offers a queer angle—by bringing objects to life in their "loss" of place, in the failure of gathering to keep things in their place. It is not surprising to me that it is the "hands" that emerge as crucial sites in stories of disorientation, and indeed as crucial to phenomenology in general. Hands hold things. They touch things. They let things go. And yet, what does it mean for nausea to be "in the hands"? For even if the hands displace the nausea from the "I" (the hands can easily be alien objects, along with doorknobs), the hands still return us to the "I," as what offers the handle of the story. Making nausea in the hands, rather than in the handled, reminds us that existential phenomenology writes "disorientation" as a preoccupation with the subject, as a way of returning to the question of one's being even if being itself is what is in question. So even if things matter in *Nausea* and come to matter as signs of life, how they matter still returns to the subject as a sign of his interiority, even if that interior is pushed out to the outer regions of the body—the regions that are closest to the matter.

How does this "matter" matter? It is crucial that "matter" does not become an object that we presume is absent or present: what matters is shaped by the directions taken that allow things to appear in a certain way. We can return to Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. He relates the distinction between "straight" and "oblique" to the distinction between "distance" and "proximity." Such categories are meaningful only in relation to phenomenal or orientated space. Merleau-Ponty suggests that distance functions like the oblique, as a way of transforming the relationship between the body and the object it perceives. As he states: "We 'have' the retreating object, we never cease to 'hold it' and to have a grasp on it, and the increasing distance is not, as breadth appears to be, an augmenting externality: it expresses merely that the thing is beginning to slip away from the grasp of our gaze and is less allied to it.

Distance is what distinguishes this loose and approximate grip from the complete grasp which is proximity. We shall define it then as we defined 'straight' and 'oblique' above, in terms of the situation of the object in relation to our power of grasping it" (2002: 304–5).

Distance is here the expression of a certain loss, of the loss of grip over an object *that is already within reach*, which is "losable" only insofar as it is within my horizon. Distance is lived as the "slipping away" of the reachable, in other words, as the moment in which what is within reach threatens to become out of reach. Merleau-Ponty, by proceeding with an analogy between the distant and the oblique, helps to show how the queer object might also be "slipping away." Here we recall my opening comments about the disorientation of switching dimensions: there is something about the loss of an object—"before" it has "gone," where the object can include simply what is "before us"—that disorientates and creates a new slant. The disorientation can persist if what retreats does not return, and something does not approach to take its place. Of course, what slips must first be proximate. It might not so much be that the object becomes queer when it slips, but that the proximity of what does not follow makes things slip. In other words, we might be speaking of the queer effects of certain gatherings, in which "things" appear to be oblique, to be "slipping away." Things can lose place alongside other things, or they can seem out of place in their place alongside other things. Disorientation involves contact with things, but a contact in which "things" slip as a proximity that does not hold things in place, thereby creating a feeling of distance.

It is interesting for me to note (again) that the object around which I have most gathered my thoughts has been the table. In a way, I have made the table a rather queer object by attending to it, by bringing an object that is often in the background to the front of my writing. To move the "behind" to the "front" can have a queer effect. In so doing I have made the table do a lot of work. We normally work "on" the table. The table exists as an "on" device: we do things "on" it rather than just "with" it. The "on" can mean contact with a supporting surface ("on the table"), which is usually horizontal, or it can simply mean proximity, situation, location, place. Some proximities exist to "support" actions—some surfaces are there to support. The work of support involves proximity, but it is also the ground for the experience of other proximities. As Levinas suggests in *Totality and Infinity*: "The bit of earth that supports me is not only my object; it *supports my experience of objects*" (1969: 138;

emphasis added). Like the ground "on" which we walk, the table supports an action and thus supports my experience of the objects (the pen, the inkwell, and so on), which it also supports. If the table were oblique, it might be that it would be less supportive. But queer tables aren't simply oblique ones (the writing desk, for instance, can have an oblique angle and still support my writing). What do queer tables support, or do tables become queer when they fail to support?

We could ask, for instance, whether queer tables are the tables around which queer bodies gather. It is certainly the case that tables can support queer gatherings: the times that we might gather around, eating, talking, loving, living, and creating the spaces and times for our attachments. Queers have their tables for sure. Stories of queer kinship will be full of tables. This does not necessarily mean that the table itself becomes a queer object, or that the table necessarily has a different "function" in queer gatherings. And yet, the table might still be the site upon which queer points can be made.

To make such a point would be to suggest that there is something rather queer about furniture. We might first think about furniture as specific kinds of objects: tables, chairs, lamps, beds, and so on. We furnish space with "movable objects." I have been struck by how movability is a condition of meaning for furniture. You can move the table, here, there, into the corner of the room; in a sense the purpose of the table relies on your capacity to move it around. I suggest in my introduction to this book that I have followed the table around; yet I think that is a misrecognition. Instead, the table follows you around. The table is an effect of what it is that you do. In a way, then, while you furnish a house (with tables and other things that matter), it is the house that furnishes you. Queer furnishing is not, therefore, such a surprising formulation: the word "furnish" is related to the word "perform" and thus relates to the very question of how things appear. Queer becomes a matter of how things appear, how they gather, how they perform, to create the edges of spaces and worlds.

The objects with which we furnish "rooms" or interior spaces are called furniture. If you go to a furniture shop, or a place that sells "home furnishings," the furniture typically will be on display room by room: bedroom furniture, living-room furniture, and so on. In this manner, the shop is selling a lifestyle by how the furniture is arranged. In advertisements for home furnishings we can see this style displayed as a body intimacy: the white hetero-

sexual couple and their children surround the furniture, and it is as if in having "it" you could be "like them." Furniture involves technologies of convention, producing arrangements as an arrangement of things: in the presumption that life should be organized in certain ways, in this space or that, for doing this or for doing that, where you find this or you find that. So, you will have a room in which you sleep, which will be your bedroom, which is where you will find the bed. Over and over again we see the repetition of this form, which "invites" one to inhabit spaces by following these lines. Furniture too is an orientation device, a way of directing life by deciding what we do with what and where, in the very gesture toward comfort, the promise of "that sinking feeling."

And yet, perhaps a different orientation toward furniture is possible. Consider the expression, "You treat me like furniture"—which usually means, "You don't notice me; you make me part of the background." So, if furniture is conventional and indeed directs the bodies that use it, then furniture often disappears from view; indeed, what makes furniture "furniture" is this tendency to disappear from view. A queer furnishing might be about making what is in the background, what is behind us, more available as "things" to "do" things with. Is the queer table simply one we notice, rather than simply the table that we do things "on"? Is a queer chair one that is not so comfortable, so we move around in it, trying to make the impression of our body reshape its form? The chair moves as I fidget. As soon as we notice the background, then objects come to life, which already makes things rather queer.

Where do we go when we notice how tables follow us around, and when they become, in this following, rather queer? Where does the table take us when it dances with renewed life? If we think of "queer tables" we might also turn to the piece titled "Tableau" by Countee Cullen, a black queer poet from the Harlem Renaissance. The French word *tableau* shares the same root as the English word "table"—both are from the Latin *tabula*, for board. Here the table is a picture, and the picture is rather queer:

TABLEAU

Locked arm in arm they cross the way,
The black boy and the white,
The golden splendor of the day,
The sable pride of night.
From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,

And here the fair folk talk,
Indignant that these two should dare
In unison to walk.
Oblivious to look and work
They pass, and see no wonder
That lightning brilliant as a sword
Should blaze the path of thunder.

A queer picture for sure; the proximity of the white boy and the black boy who walk alongside each other "in unison." They have crossed the color line, "locked arm in arm"; they have crossed the straight line, "locked arm in arm." These moments are the same moment: we can register the difference only by reimagining this cross as the point of intersection between different lines. The act of walking alongside each other, without wonder, and as if it were an ordinary path to take, is returned by gazes of indignation. The boys take a path that others do not follow. A path is cleared by their "besideness." Just that. Two bodies side by side. They pass by; they pass through. Perhaps this is a different kind of politics of sides: one is not asked to "take sides" when one is "beside"—one walks beside and alongside. That is enough to clear the ground. To walk "in unison," to be "arm in arm," requires work: one has to keep up. You walk together through such gestures of following, a following in which one is not left behind. Perhaps the simple gesture of bodies that keep up involves a radicalization of the side, when the beside becomes alongside, where one side is not "against" the other.

This is not just about any body, but specifically a black body and a white body. Two boys. It is the proximity of these bodies that produces a queer effect. So queer tables are not simply tables around which, or on which, we gather. Rather, queer tables and other queer objects support proximity between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet*. A queer object hence makes contact possible. Or, to be more precise, a queer object would have a surface that supports such contact. The contact is bodily, and it unsettles that line that divides spaces as worlds, thereby creating other kinds of connections where unexpected things can happen. If we notice only some arrivals (the arrival of those who are out of place), then it is also true that we only notice some forms of proximity, some forms of sexual and social contact that create new lines in the very moment they cross others. What happens when we follow such lines?

It is not, then, that queer "surfaces" through the failure to support, or that queer surfaces are not supportive. I suggest above that disorientation happens when the ground no longer supports an action. We lose ground, we lose our sense of how we stand; we might even lose our standing. It is not only that queer surfaces support action, but also that the action they support involves shifting grounds, or even clearing a new ground, which allow us to tread a different path. When we tread on paths that are less trodden, which we are not sure are paths at all (is it a path, or is the grass just a little bent?), *we might need even more support*. The queer table would here refer to all those ways in which queers find support for their actions, including our own bodies, and the bodies of other queers.[4] The queer picture on the table shows, I think, the potential of such supportive proximities to challenge the lines that are followed as matters of course. In refocusing our attention on proximity, on arms that are crossed with other arms, we are reminded of how queer engenders moments of contact; how we come into contact with other bodies to support the action of following paths that have not been cleared. We still have to follow others in making such paths. The queer body is not alone; queer does not reside in a body or an object, and is dependent on the mutuality of support.

What does it mean to think about the "nonresidence" of queer? We can consider the "affect" of disorientation. As I have suggested, for bodies that are out of place, in the spaces in which they gather, the experience can be disorientating. You can feel oblique, after all. You can feel odd, even disturbed. Experiences of migration, or of becoming estranged from the contours of life at home, can take this form. The angle at which we are placed gets in the way of inhabitance, even if it points toward inhabitance as its goal. At the same time, it is the proximity of bodies that produces disorientating effects, which, as it were, "disturb" the picture, or the objects that gather on the table, or the bodies that gather around the table as a shared object. Disorientation can move around, given that it does not reside in an object, affecting "what" is near enough to the place of disturbance. If, as James Aho suggests, "every lifeworld is a coherency of things" (1998: 11), then queer moments happen when things fail to cohere. In such moments of failure, when things do not stay in place or cohere as place, disorientation happens.

The question then becomes how we "face" or approach such moments of disorientation. In a way, we can return to the question of "facing" or of the approach we take to objects. It is interesting to note that for Merleau-Ponty

the object becomes oblique when it is "retreating." It is during this moment of retreat that the object "slips away." And yet, throughout this book, I have described objects as going in a different direction: *as approaching*. I have discussed the object's arrival as itself an effect of an approach, which makes the object "near enough." Of course, we still have to be facing an object to notice that it is retreating. We still have to face an object for the effect of the object to be "queer." What this suggests is that disorientation requires an act of facing, but it is a facing that also allows the object to slip away, or to become oblique.

We need to think, then, of the relationship between "the face" and the act of facing. Merleau-Ponty describes the face as orientated.[5] In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he states: "My gaze which moves over the face, and in doing so faces certain directions, does not recognize the face unless it comes up against its details in a certain irreversible order and that the very significance of the object—here the face and its expressions—must be linked to its orientation, as indeed is indicated by the French word *sens* (sense, significance, direction). To invert an object is to deprive it of its significance" (2002: 294). This model does seem to depend on the face as an object of knowledge, as something that "can" be recognized, as something that has a "right" way of being apprehended. But at another level, the face "matters" as it acquires significance through direction. In other words, the significance of the face is not simply "in" or "on" the face, but a question of *how we face the face*, or *how we are faced*.

What makes things "queer" for Merleau-Ponty is in that moment when they become distant, oblique, and "slip away." If the face of the table is orientated, if it acquires its significance in how it points to us, then the table disorientates when it no longer faces the right way. When the face is inverted, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, it is deprived of its significance. Perhaps a queer orientation would not see the inverted face as a deprivation, and would approach "the retreat" as an approach—not in the sense that what retreats will return but in the sense that in the retreat of an object a space is cleared for a new arrival. Or, if a face is inverted and becomes queer or deprived of its significance, then such a deprivation would not be livable simply as loss but as the potential for new lines, or for new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to read. Queer gatherings are lines that gather—on the face, or as bodies around the table—to form new patterns and new ways of making sense. The question then becomes not so much what is a queer orientation, but how we are orientated toward queer moments when objects slip. Do we retain

our hold of these objects by bringing them back "in line"? Or do we let them go, allowing them to acquire new shapes and directions? A queer phenomenology might involve an orientation toward what slips, which allows what slips to pass through, in the unknowable length of its duration. In other words, a queer phenomenology would function as a disorientation device; it would not overcome the "disalignment" of the horizontal and vertical axes, allowing the oblique to open up another angle on the world.

If queer is also (in effect) an orientation toward queer, a way of approaching what is retreating, then what is queer might slide between sexual orientation and other kinds of orientation. Queer would become a matter of how one approaches the object that slips away—as a way of inhabiting the world at the point in which things fleet. And yet, I have suggested that queer unfolds from specific points, from the lifeworld of those who do not or cannot inhabit the contours of heterosexual space. After all, some of us more than others look "wonky," living lives that are full of fleeting points. Some people have suggested to me that I have overemphasised this latter point, and in so doing have risked presuming that the queer moments "reside" with those who do not practice heterosexuality. A person said to me, but lesbians and gays have "their lines too," their ways of keeping things straight. Another person said that lesbians and gays can be "just as conservative." I would insist that queer describes a sexual as well as political orientation, and that to lose sight of the sexual specificity of queer would also be to "overlook" how compulsory heterosexuality shapes what coheres as given, and the effects of this coherence on those who refuse to be compelled. As Leo Bersani argues, we do not have to presume the referentiality of queer, or stabilize queer as an identity category, to explore how the sexual specificity of being queer matters (1995: 71–76). To be at an oblique angle to what coheres does matter, where the "point" of this coherence unfolds as the gift of the straight line.

And yet, the suggestion that one can have a "nonhetero" sexual orientation and be straight "in other respects" speaks a certain truth. It is possible to live on an oblique angle, and follow straight lines. After all, conservative homosexuals have called for lesbians and gays to support the straight line by pledging allegiance to the very form of the family, even when they cannot inhabit that form without a queer effect. Lisa Duggan (2003) and Judith Halberstam (2005) have also offered compelling critiques of a new "homonormativity." As Duggan describes, "it is a politics that does not contest dominant hetero-

normative assumptions and institutions, but *upholds and sustains them*" (50; emphasis added).

We could think of this in terms of assimilation, as a politics of following the straight line even as a deviant body. Homonormativity would straighten up queer effects by following the lines that are given as the accumulation of "points" (where you "get points" for arriving at different points on the line: marriage, children, and so on). For instance, as Judith Butler argues, gay marriage can extend rather than challenge the conservatism of marriage (2002: 18). Such a politics would "extend" the straight line to some queers, those who can inhabit the forms of marriage and family, which would keep other queers, those whose lives are lived for different points, "off line." Lee Edelman calls such a politics a "reproductive futurism," which works to "affirm a structure, to authenticate social order, which it then intends to transmit to the future in the form of the Child" (2004: 30). This version of gay politics would ask us to reproduce that which we do not follow, by speaking in the name of a future as an inheritance that we did not receive: we would try and be as straight as we could be, as if we could convert what we did not receive into a possession.

We are right to be critical of such a conservative sexual politics, which "supports" the very lines that make some lives unlivable. Oddly enough, this gay conservatism has also returned us to the table. Bruce Bawer argues in *A Place at the Table* (1994) that gays and lesbians should desire to join the big table rather than have "a little table of our own."[6] In his critique of the queer desire to embrace the nonnormative, Bawer states the following: "He doesn't *want* to be assimilated. He enjoys his exclusion. He feels comfortable at his little table. Or at least he thinks he does. But does he? What is it, after all, that ties him to his little table—that drove him, in other words, into a marginal existence? Ultimately, it's prejudice. Liberated from that prejudice, would he still want to sit at his little table? Perhaps, and perhaps not. Certainly most homosexuals don't want to be relegated to that little table. We grew up at the big table: we're at home there. We want to stay there" (1994: 70). Bawer also describes a queer desire for "little tables" as the "ethos of multiculturalism," where "each accredited victim group" is given their own table (1994: 210). It is interesting to note here that the "big table" evokes the family table (where we "grew up"), and also "society" itself as a "single big table." Bawer's rejection of queer "subcultures" hence calls for a return to the family table, as the presumed ground for social existence. To join this table enacts the desire for assimilation:

in the sense of becoming a "part" of the family but also becoming like the family, which is itself predicated on likeness. What is at stake in this desire to be placed at the table?

We could agree with Bawer that a queer politics is not about laying new tables, whatever their size. After all, to set up new tables would leave the "big table" in its place. We might even agree that the "point" of gay and lesbian politics might be to arrive at this table, as the table around which a family gathers, producing the very effect of social coherence. But such an arrival cannot simply be a matter of being given a place at the table, as if it were "family prejudice" that prevents us from taking that place. After all, despite Bawer's emphasis on "being at home" at the big table, his book is full of examples of being rejected from the table, including from the different kinds of tables that organize the sociality of straight weddings (Bawer 1994: 261).[7] The desire to join the table is a desire to inhabit the very "place" of this rejection. As Douglas Crimp (2002: 6) has shown, the act of following straight lines as bodies that are at least in some ways sexually deviant is melancholic: you are identifying precisely with what repudiates you. Such forms of following do not simply accumulate as points on a straight line. We can certainly consider that when queer bodies do "join" the family table, then the table does not stay in place. Queer bodies are out of place in certain family gatherings, which is what produces, in the first place, a queer effect. The table might even become wonky.

After all, this very desire to "support" straight lines, and the forms they elevate into moral and social ideals (such as marriage and family life) will be rejected by those whose bodies can and do "line up" with the straight line, which is not, of course, all straight bodies.[8] In other words, it is hardly likely that attempts to follow the straight line as gays and lesbians will get you too many points. To point to such rejection is not, then, to say that homonormativity is the condition for an emergence of a new angle on queer politics (though it could be). Instead, it is to say that inhabiting forms that do not extend your shape can produce queer effects, even when you think you are "lining up." There is hope in such failure, even if we reject publicly (as we must) this sexual as well as social conservatism.

At the same time, to conserve and to deviate are not simply available as political choices. It is important, for instance, that we avoid assuming that "deviation" is always on "the side" of the progressive. Indeed, if the com-

pulsion to deviate from the straight line was to become "a line" in queer politics, then this itself could have a straightening effect. I have often wondered whether recent work on queer shame risks drawing such a line. I admire Eve Sedgwick's (2003) refusal of the discourse of queer pride. She suggests instead that shame is the primary queer affect because it embraces the "not"; it embraces its own negation from the sphere of ordinary culture. But I am not sure how it is possible to embrace the negative without turning it into a positive. To say "yes" to the "no" is still a "yes." To embrace or affirm the experience of shame, for instance, sounds very much like taking a pride in one's shame—a conversion of bad feeling into good feeling (see Ahmed 2005).[9] What does it mean for this "yes" to be inaugurated as the proper signifier of queer politics? Does this, in the end, create a line around queer, by asking "others" to repeat that "yes," by embracing their rejection (the "no") from straight culture?

Such a "yes" is not available to everyone, even to all sexual deviants, given how we are shaped by the multiple histories of our arrival. Some might feel compelled to follow the lines before them, even if their desires are off line. Of course, to live according to certain lines does involve a certain kind of commitment to those lines: one's actions are behind them. But it does not necessarily mean an assimilation in the terms described above: the points of deviation might, instead, be hidden. Not all queers can be "out" in their deviation. For queers of other colors, being "out" already means something different, given that what is "out and about" is orientated around whiteness. At the same time, of course, not all queers even have the choice of staying "in": for some, one's body is enough to keep one out (of line). Some butch lesbians, for instance, just have to open the front door to be out: getting out is being out. Yet, for others, there are ways of staying in, even when one gets out.

We could consider "the closet" itself as an orientation device, a way of inhabiting the world or of being at home in the world. The closet returns us to the question of queer furnishings, and how they too are orientation devices. The closet provides a way of staying in. Orientations would be about the terms upon which moments of deviation are let "out" or kept "in," thereby creating lines between public and private spaces. If the closeted queer appears straight, then we might have to get into the closet, or go under the table to reach the points of deviation. In other words, while the closet may seem a betrayal of queer (by containing what is queer at home) it is just as possible to be queer at

home, or even to queer the closet. After all, closets still "make room" or clear spaces, in which there are things left for bodies to do.

Indeed, I am suggesting here that for some queers, at least, homes are already rather queer spaces, and they are full of the potential to experience the joy of deviant desires. As Gayatri Gopinath suggests, in the postcolonial home, sex might happen "in the house," locating "female same-sex desire and pleasure firmly within the confines of the home and 'the domestic' rather than a safe elsewhere" (2005, 153). To queer homes is also to expose how "homes," as spaces of apparent intimacy and desire, are full of rather mixed and oblique objects. It is also to suggest that the intimacy of the home is what connects the home to other, more public, spaces. If homes are queer then they are also diasporic, shaped by the "entanglement of genealogies of dispersion with those of 'staying put'" (Brah 1996: 16). Within homes, objects gather: such objects arrive and they have their own horizons, which "point" toward different worlds—even if this "point" does not make such worlds within reach. The point of the intersection between queer and diaspora might precisely be to show how the "where" of queer is shaped by other worldly horizons—by histories of capital, empire, and nation—which give queer bodies different points of access to such worlds, and which make different objects reachable, whether at home or away.

After all, if there are different ways of following lines, there are also different ways of deviating from them, as deviations that might come "out" at different points. I suggested in the introduction to this book that to follow a line is to become invested in that line, and also to be committed to "where" it will take us. We do not stay apart from the lines we follow, even if we take the line as a strategy, which we hope to keep apart from our identity (where one might say: "I do" this, but "I am" not that which "I do"). The act of following still shapes what it is that we "do do," and hence what we "can do." And yet, there are different kinds of investment and commitment. For some, following certain straight lines might be lived as a pledge of allegiance on moral and political grounds to "what" that line leads to. But for others, certain lines might be followed because of a lack of resources to support a life of deviation, because of commitments they have already made, or because the experience of disorientation is simply too shattering to endure. For example, as I suggest in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004a), some lesbians and gay men may need access to heterosexual kinship networks in order to survive, which might

mean appearing to live a certain kind of life, one that even seems "straight" to other queers.

In calling for a politics that involves disorientation, which registers that disorientation shatters our involvement in a world, it is important not to make disorientation an obligation or a responsibility for those who identify as queer. This position demands too much (for some, a life-long commitment to deviation is not psychically or materially possible or sustainable, even if their desires are rather oblique), but it also "forgives" too much by letting those who are straight stay on their line. It is not up to queers to disorientate straights, just as it is not up to bodies of color to do the work of antiracism, although of course disorientation might still happen and we do "do" this work. Disorientation, then, would not be a politics of the will but an effect of how we do politics, which in turn is shaped by the prior matter of simply how we live.

After all, it is possible to follow certain lines (such as the line of the family) as a disorientation device, as a way of experiencing the pleasures of deviation. For some queers, for instance, the very act of describing queer gatherings as family gatherings is to have joy in the uncanny effect of a familiar form becoming strange. The point of following is not to pledge allegiance to the familiar, but to make that "familiar" strange, or even to allow that which has been overlooked—which has been treated as furniture—to dance with renewed life. Some deviations involve acts of following, but use the same "points" for different effects. This is what Kath Weston's ethnographic studies of queer kinship show us. As she notes: "Far from viewing families we choose as imitations or derivatives of family ties created elsewhere in society, many lesbians and gay men alluded to the difficulty and excitement of constructing kinship in the *absence* of what they called 'models' " (1991: 116; see also Weston 1995).

A queer politics does involve a commitment to a certain way of inhabiting the world, even if it is not "grounded" in a commitment to deviation. Queer lives would not follow the scripts of convention. Or as Judith Halberstam notes, queer might begin with "the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing" (2005: 65). The "conventions" take the white heterosexual couple as their social ideal. If we see the failure to sink into the chairs of convention as a political gift, then other things might happen. In a way, we can bring Weston and Halberstam together by suggesting that queer lives are about the potentiality of not following certain conventional scripts of family, inheritance, and child

rearing, whereby "not following" involves disorientation: it makes things oblique.

What kind of commitment would a queer commitment be? If anything, I would see queer as a commitment to an opening up of what counts as a life worth living, or what Judith Butler might call a "liveable life" (2004: xv). It would be a commitment not to presume that lives have to follow certain lines in order to count as lives, rather than being a commitment to a line of deviation. I share Lisa Duggan's enthusiasm for queer as "the democratic diversity of proliferating forms of sexual dissonance" (2003: 65). Such proliferating forms would not necessarily be recognizable; rather, they would be forms of sociality as well as sexuality that are not available as lines to be followed, although they might emerge from the lines that already gather, and even have already gathered us around. We might, then, face the objects that retreat, and become strange in the face of their retreat, with a sense of hope. In facing what retreats with hope, such a queer politics would also look back to the conditions of arrival. We look back, in other words, as a refusal to inherit, as a refusal that is a condition for the arrival of queer. To inherit the past in this world for queers would be to inherit one's own disappearance. After all, as a mixed-race queer the choice is not either to become white and straight or to disappear. This is a choice between two different kinds of death. The task is to trace the lines for a different genealogy, one that would embrace the failure to inherit the family line as the condition of possibility for another way of dwelling in the world.

If orientations point us to the future, to what we are moving toward, then they also keep open the possibility of changing directions and of finding other paths, perhaps those that do not clear a common ground, where we can respond with joy to what goes astray. So, in looking back we also look a different way; looking back still involves facing—it even involves an open face. Looking back is what keeps open the possibility of going astray. This glance also means an openness to the future, as the imperfect translation of what is behind us. As a result, I would not argue that queer has "no future" as Lee Edelmen (2004) suggests—though I understand and appreciate this impulse to "give" the future to those who demand to inherit the earth, rather than aim for a share in this inheritance. Instead, a queer politics would have hope, not even by having hope in the future (under the sentimental sign of the "not yet"), but because the lines that accumulate through the repetition of gestures, the lines that

gather on skin, already take surprising forms. We have hope because what is behind us is also what allows other ways of gathering in time and space, of making lines that do not reproduce what we follow but instead create wrinkles in the earth.

To resist an impulse to make deviation a ground for queer politics is not, then, to say that it does not matter which lines we follow. It does matter. Some lines, as we know, are lines that accumulate privilege and are "returned" by recognition and reward. Other lines are seen as ways out of an ethical life, as deviations from the common good. Despite this, queer is not available as a line that we can follow, and if we took such a line we would perform a certain injustice to those queers whose lives are lived for different points. For me, 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 object slips away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, or out of place, what will we do? If we feel oblique, where will we find support? A queer phenomenology would involve an orientation toward queer, a way of inhabiting the world by giving "support" to those whose lives and loves make them appear oblique, strange, and out of place. Queer gatherings, where the objects we face "slip away," are disorientating. For me, the table is just such a supporting device for queer gatherings, which is what makes the table itself a rather queer device. It is hence not surprising that a queer phenomenology, one that is orientated toward queer, will be full of tables. It is also not surprising that such tables will be full—inhabited by those who in gathering around have already made a rather queer impression.