

New Materialisms

Ontology, Agency, and Politics

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Orientations Matter

This essay attempts to show why and how orientations matter. To say orientations matter affects how we think “matter.” Orientations might shape how matter “matters.” If matter is affected by orientations, by the ways in which bodies are directed toward things, it follows that matter is dynamic, unstable, and contingent. What matters is itself an effect of proximities: we are touched by what comes near, just as what comes near is affected by directions we have already taken. Orientations are how the world acquires a certain shape through contact between bodies that are not in a relation of exteriority. In thinking the dynamism of matter, this essay joins a body of scholarship that has been called by the editors of this volume a “critical materialism.” I would nonetheless resist calling my own contribution a “new” materialism inasmuch as my own work draws on, and is indebted to, earlier feminist engagements with phenomenology that were undertaken during the period of “the cultural turn.” These phenomenological engagements belie the claim made by some recent materialist critics to the effect that, during this period, matter was the only thing that did not matter.¹

Orientations matter. Let’s say I am oriented toward writing. This means writing would be something that mattered, as well as something I do. To sustain such an orientation would mean certain objects must be avail-

able to me (tables, computers, pens, paper). Orientations shape how the world coheres around me. Orientations affect what is near or proximate to the body, those objects that we do things with.

Orientations thus “matter” in both senses of the word “matter.” First, orientations matter in the simple sense that orientations are significant and important. To be oriented in a certain way is how certain things come to be significant, come to be objects *for me*. Such orientations are not only personal. Spaces too are oriented in the sense that certain bodies are “in place” in this or that place. The study might be oriented around the writer, who is then “in place” in the study. To say spaces are oriented around certain bodies is to show how some bodies will be more “in place” than others.

Orientations also matter in the second sense of being about physical or corporeal substance. Orientations shape the corporeal substance of bodies and whatever occupies space. Orientations affect how subjects and objects materialize or come to take shape in the way that they do. The writer writes, and the labor of writing shapes the surface of the writer’s body. The objects used for writing are shaped by the intention to write; they are assembled around the support they give. Orientations are about how matter surfaces by being directed in one way or another.

In this essay, I take “the table” as my primary object for thinking about how orientations matter. Why tables? Tables matter, you could say, as objects we do things on. We could describe the table as an “on” device; the table provides a surface on which we place things as well as do things. If we do things on tables, then tables are effects of what we do. To explore how tables function as orientation devices, I will bring together Marxism and phenomenology. My aim is to consider how the materialization of bodies involves forms of labor that disappear in the familiarity or “givenness” of objects such as tables. My analysis of how orientations matter will thus combine historical materialism with a materialism of the body.

Starting Points

If we start with the point of orientations, we find that orientations are about starting points. As Husserl describes in the second volume of *Ideas*: “If we consider the characteristic way in which the Body presents itself and do the same for things, then we find the following situation: each Ego has

its own domain of perceptual things and necessarily perceives the things in a certain orientation. The things that appear do so from this or that side, and in this mode of appearing is included irrevocably a relation to a here and its basic directions.²² Orientations are about how we begin, how we proceed from “here.” Husserl relates the questions of “this or that side” to the point of “here,” which he also describes as the zero-point of orientation, the point from which the world unfolds and which makes what is “there” over “there.” It is also given that we are “here” only at this point, that near and far are lived as relative markers of distance. Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann also describe orientation as a question of one’s starting point: “The place in which I find myself, my actual ‘here,’ is the starting point for my orientation in space.”²³ The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the “here” of the body and the “where” of its dwelling.

At what point does the world unfold? Or at what point does Husserl’s world unfold? Let’s start where he starts, in his first volume of *Ideas*, which is with the world as it is given “from the natural standpoint.” Such a world is the world that we are “in” as the world that takes place around me: “I am aware of a world, spread out in space endlessly.”²⁴ This world is not simply spread out; it has already taken certain shapes, which are the very form of what is “more and less” familiar:

For me real objects are there, definite, more or less familiar, agreeing with what is actually perceived without being themselves perceived or even intuitively present. I can let my attention wander from the writing-table I have just seen or observed, through the unseen portions of the room behind my back to the veranda into the garden, to the children in the summer house, and so forth, to all the objects concerning which I precisely “know” that they are there and yonder in my immediate co-perceived surroundings.⁵

The familiar world begins with the writing table, which is in the room: we can name this room as Husserl’s study, as the room in which he writes. *It is from here that the world unfolds.* He begins with the writing table, and then turns to other parts of the room, those which are, as it were, behind him. We are reminded that what we can see in the first place depends on which way we are facing. Having begun here, with what is in front of his front and behind his back, Husserl then turns to other spaces, which he de-

scribes as rooms, and which he knows are there insofar as they are already given to him as places by memory. These other rooms are coperceived: they are not singled out; and they do not have his attention.

By noticing the objects that appear in Husserl’s writing, we get a sense of how being directed toward some objects and not others involves a more general orientation toward the world. The philosopher is oriented toward the writing table, as the object on which writing happens, which means keeping other things and rooms relegated to the background. After all, it is not surprising that philosophy is full of tables. As Ann Banfield observes in her wonderful book *The Phantom Table*: “Tables and chairs, things nearest to hand for the sedentary philosopher, who comes to occupy chairs of philosophy, are the furniture of that ‘room of one’s own’ from which the real world is observed.”²⁶ Tables are “near to hand” along with chairs as the furniture that secures the very “place” of philosophy. The use of tables shows us the very orientation of philosophy in part by showing us what is proximate to the body of the philosopher or what the philosopher comes into contact with.

Even if Husserl’s writing table first appears as being in front of him, it does not necessarily keep its place. For Husserl suggests that phenomenology must “bracket” or put aside what is given, what is made available by ordinary perception. If phenomenology is to see the table, he suggests, it must see “without” the natural attitude, which keeps us within the familiar, and indeed, within the space already “decided” as “being” the family home. Phenomenology, in Husserl’s formulation, can come into being as a first philosophy only if it suspends all that gathers together as a natural attitude, not through Cartesian doubt but through a way of perceiving the world “as if” one did not assume its existence as taking some forms rather than others.⁷

So Husserl begins again by taking the table as an object that matters in a different way. How does the object appear when it is no longer familiar? As he describes: “We start by taking an example. Keeping this table steadily in view as I go round it, changing my position in space all the time, I have continually the consciousness of the bodily presence out there of this one and the self-same table, which in itself remains unchanged throughout” (vol. 1, 130). We can see here how Husserl turns to “the table” as an object by looking at it rather than over it. The bracketing means “this table” becomes “the table.” By beginning with the table, on its own, as it

were, the object appears self-same. It is not that the object's self-sameness is available at first sight. Husserl moves around the table, changing his position. For such movement to be possible, consciousness must flow: we must not be interrupted by other matters. As Husserl elaborates:

I close my eyes. The other senses are inactive in relation to the table. I have now no perception of it. I open my eyes and the perception returns. The perception? Let us be more accurate. Under no circumstances does it return to me individually the same. *Only the table is the same*, known as identical through the synthetic consciousness, which connects the new experience with the recollection. The perceived thing can be, without being perceived, without my being aware of it even as a potential only (in the way, actuality, as previously described) and perhaps even without itself changing at all. But the perception itself is what it is within the steady flow of consciousness, and is itself constantly in flux; the perceptual now is ever passing over into the adjacent consciousness of the just-past, a new now simultaneously gleams forth, and so on. (vol. 1, 130, emphasis added)

This argument suggests the table as object is given, as "the same," as a givenness which "holds" or is shaped by the "flow" of perception. This is precisely Husserl's point: the object is intended through perception. As Robert Sokolowski puts it, "When we perceive an object, we do not just have a flow of profiles, a series of impressions; in and through them all, we have one and the same object given to us, and the identity of the object is intended and given."⁸ Each new impression is connected with what has gone before, in the very form of an active "re-collection." Significantly, the object becomes an object of perception only given this work of recollection, such that the "new" exists in relation to what is already gathered by consciousness: each impression is linked to the other, so that the object becomes more than the profile that is available in any moment.

Given this, the sameness of the object involves the specter of absence and nonpresence. I do not see it as itself. I cannot view the table from all points of view at once. Given that the table's sameness can only be intended, Husserl makes what is an extraordinary claim: *Only the table remains the same*. The table is the only thing that keeps its place in the flow of perception. The sameness of the table is hence spectral. If the table is the same, it is only because we have conjured its missing sides. Or, we

can even say that we have conjured its behind. I want to relate what is "missed" when we "miss" the table to the spectrality of history, what we miss may be behind the table in another sense: what is behind the table is what must have already taken place for the table to arrive.

Backgrounds and Arrivals

As we have seen, phenomenology, for Husserl, means apprehending the object as if it was unfamiliar, so that we can attend to the flow of perception itself. What this flow of perception tells is the partiality of absence as well as presence: what we do not see (say, the back or side of the object) is hidden from view and can only be intended. We single out this object only by pushing other objects to the edges or "fringes" of vision.

Husserl suggests that inhabiting the familiar makes "things" into backgrounds for action: they are there, but they are there in such a way that I don't see them. The background is a "*dimly apprehended depth or fringe of indeterminate reality*."⁹ So although Husserl faces his writing table, it does not mean the table is singled out as an object. Even though the table is before him, it might also be in the background. My argument in the previous section needs some qualification: even when Husserl faces the writing table, it does not necessarily follow that the table is "in front" of him. What we face can also be part of the background, suggesting that the background may include more and less proximate objects. It is not accidental that when Husserl brings "the table" to the front, the writing table disappears. Being orientated toward the writing table might even provide the condition of possibility for its disappearance.

Husserl's approach to the background as what is "unseen" in its "there-ness" or "familiarity" allows us to consider how the familiar takes shape by being unnoticed. I want to extend his model by thinking about the "background" of the writing table in another sense. Husserl considers how this table might be *in* the background as well as the background that is *around* the table, when "it" comes into view. I want us to consider how the table itself may *have* a background. The background would be understood as that which must take place in order for something to arrive. We can recall the different meanings of the word "background." A background can refer to the ground or parts situated in the rear, or to the portions of the picture represented at a distance, which in turn allows what is "in" the foreground

to acquire the shape that it does. Both of these meanings point to the spatiality of the background. We can also think of the background as having a temporal dimension.¹⁰ When we tell a story about someone, for instance, we might give their background: this meaning of “background” would be about “what is behind,” where “what is behind” refers to what is in the past or what happened before. We might also speak of “family background,” which would refer not just to the past of an individual but to other kinds of histories which shape an individual’s arrival into the world and through which the family itself becomes a social given.

At least two entities have to arrive for there to be an encounter, a “bringing forth” in the sense of an occupation. So, this table and Husserl have to “co-incide” for him to write his philosophy about “the table.” We must remember not to forget the dash in “co-incident,” as such a forgetting would turn shared arrival into a matter of chance. To “co-incide” suggests how different things happen at the same moment, a happening which brings things near to other things, whereby the nearness shapes the shape of each thing. If being near to this or that object is not a matter of chance, what happens in the “now” of this nearness remains open, in the sense that we do not always know how things will affect each other, or how we will be affected by things.¹¹

So, if phenomenology is to attend to the background, it might do so by giving an account of the conditions of emergence for something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness. If we do not see (but intend) the behind of the object, we might also not see (but intend) its background in this temporal sense. We need to face the background of an object, redefined as the conditions for the emergence of not only the object (we might ask: how did it arrive?) but also the act of perceiving the object, which depends on the arrival of the body that perceives. The background to perception might involve such intertwining histories of arrival, which would explain how Husserl got near enough to his table, as the object that secures the very place of philosophy.

Marxism allows us to rethink the object as not only in history but as an effect of historical processes. The Marxian critique of German Idealism begins after all with a critique of the idea that the object is “in the present” or that the object is “before me.” As Marx and Engels describe, in their critique of Feuerbach:

He does not see how the sensuous world around him is, not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry, and of the state of society; and indeed, in the sense that it is a historical product, and the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its intercourse, modifying its social system, according to its changed needs. Even the objects of the simplest “sensuous certainty” are only given to him through social demands, industry and commercial intercourse. The cherry-tree, like almost all fruit trees, was, as is well known, only in a few centuries, transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by the action of a definite society in a definite age has it become “sensuous certainty” for Feuerbach.¹²

If we were simply to “look at” the object we face, then we would be erasing the “signs” of history. We would apprehend the object as simply there, as given in its sensuous certainty, rather than as “having got here,” an arrival which is how objects are binding and how they assume a social form. So objects (such as the cherry tree) are “transplanted.” They take shape through social action, through “the activity of a whole succession of generations,” which is forgotten when the object is apprehended as simply given.

What passes through history is not only the work done by generations but the “sedimentation” of that work as the condition of arrival for future generations. History cannot simply be perceived on the surface of the object, even if how objects surface or take shape is an effect of such histories. In other words, history cannot simply be turned into something that is given in its sensuous certainty, as if it were a property of an object.

If idealism takes the object as given, then it fails to account for its conditions of arrival, which are not simply given. Idealism is the philosophical counterpart to what Marx would later describe as commodity fetishism. In *Capital*, he suggests that commodities are made up of two elements, “matter and labour.”¹³ Labor is understood as “changing the form of matter” (50). The commodity is assumed to have value or a life of its own only if we forget this labor: “It becomes value only in its congealed state, when embodied in the form of some object” (57).

Marx uses the example of “the table” to suggest that the table is made

from wood (which provides, as it were, the matter) and that the work of the table, the work that it takes to “make the table,” changes the form of the wood, even though the table “is” still made out of wood. As he describes: “It is as clear as noon-day that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the material furnished by nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered by making a table out of it, for all that, the table continues to be that common every-day thing, wood. But, as soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent” (76). Noticeably, the Marxian critique of commodity fetishism relies here on a distinction between matter and form, between the wood and the table. The becoming-table of the wood is not the same as its commodification. The table has use-value, even after it has transformed the “form” of the wood. The table can be used, and in being used, the value of the table is not exchanged and made abstract. The table has use-value until it is exchanged. One problem with this model is that the dynamism of “making form” is located in the transformation of nature into use-value: we could also suggest that the “wood” (nature/matter) has acquired its form over time. Nature then would not be simply “there” waiting to be formed or to take form. Marx’s and Engel’s earlier critique of idealism involves a more dynamic view of the “facts of matter”: even the trees, which provide the wood, are themselves “brought forth” as effects of generational action. The wood is itself “formed matter” insofar as trees are not simply given, but take shape as an effect of labor (transplantation).¹⁴ The table is given only through these multiple histories of labor, redefined as matter taking form.¹⁵

It is not surprising that Jacques Derrida offers a critique of the Marxian distinction between use-value and exchange-value by turning toward the table. He suggests: “The table is familiar, too familiar.”¹⁶ For Derrida, the table is not simply something we use: “The table has been worn down, exploited, overexploited, or else set aside and beside itself, no longer in use, in antique shops or auction rooms” (149). He hence suggests that “the table in use” is as metaphysical as “table as commodity”: use-value as well as exchange-value involves fetishism (162). While I agree with this argument, we might note that for Marx the table in use is not simply inert or simply matter: it involves the “trans-formation” of matter into form. Use-value is hence not a simple matter for Marx even if he locates the transcendental in the commodity.

What a Marxist approach could allow us to do if we extend his critique of the commodity to the very matter of wood, as well as to the form of the table, is to consider the history of “what appears” as a dynamic history of things being moved around. The table certainly moves around. I buy the table (for this or that amount of money) as a table intended for writing. I have to bring it to the space where it will reside (the study or the space marked out in the corner of a room). Well, others bring it for me. I wince as the edge of the table hits the wall, leaving a mark on the wall, as well as a mark on the table, which shows what it came into contact with in the time of its arrival. The table, having arrived, is nestled in the corner of the room. I use it as a writing desk. And yet, I am not sure what will happen in the future. I could put this table to a different use (I could use it as a dining table if it is big enough “to support” this kind of action) or could even forget about the table if I ceased to write. Then, the table might be put aside or put to one side. The object is not reducible to the commodity, even when it is bought and sold. The object is not reducible to itself, which means it does not “have” an “itself” that is apart from its contact with others.

This table was made by somebody, and there is a history to its arrival, a history of transportation, which could be redescribed as a history of *changing hands*. As Igor Kopytoff puts it, we can have a cultural biography of things “as they move through different hands, contexts and uses.”¹⁷ This table, you might say, has a story. What a story it could tell. What we need to recall is how the “thisness” of this table does not, as it were, belong to it: what is particular about this table, what we can tell through its biography, is also what allows us to tell a larger story: a story not only of “things” changing hands but of how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labor of others.

Such histories are not simply available *on* the surface of the object, apart from the scratches that might be left behind, which could also be thought of as what’s left of the behind. Histories are hence spectral, just like Husserl’s “missing sides.” We do not know, of course, the story of Husserl’s table, how it arrived or what happened to the table after Husserl stopped writing. But having arrived, we can follow what the table allowed him to do by reading his philosophy as a philosophy that turns to the table. So even if the “thisness” of the table disappears in his work, we could allow its “thisness” to reappear by making this table matter in our reading.

Bodies Doing Things

The object has arrived. And, having arrived, what then does it do? I want to suggest that objects not only are shaped by work, but they also take the shape of the work they do. We can consider how objects are occupied, how we are busy with them. An occupation is what makes an object busy.

Heidegger poses this question of occupation by turning to the table. In *Ontology — The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, Heidegger contrasts two ways of describing tables.¹⁸ In the first model, the table is encountered as “a thing in space — as a spatial thing.”¹⁹ As Heidegger describes it: “Aspects show themselves and open up in ever new ways as we walk around the thing” (68). He suggests that the description of the table as a spatial thing is inaccurate not because it is false (the table might after all appear in this way) but because it fails to describe how the significance of the thing is not simply “in” it, but is rather a “characteristic of being” (67–68). For Heidegger what makes “the table” what it is and not something else is what the table allows us to do.

What follows is a rich phenomenological description of the table as it is experienced from the points of view of those who share the space of its dwelling:

What is there in *the* room there at home is *the* table (not “a” table among many other tables in other rooms and houses) at which one sits *in order to* write, have a meal, sew, or play. Everyone sees this right away, e.g. during a visit: it is a writing table, a dining table, a sewing table — such is the primary way in which it is being encountered in itself. This characteristic of “in order to do something” is not merely imposed on the table by relating and assimilating it to something else which it is not. (69)

In other words, what we do with the table or what the table allows us to do is essential to the table. The table provides a surface around which the family gathers. Heidegger describes his wife sitting at the table and reading and “the boys” busying themselves at the table. The table is assembled around the support it gives. The “in order to” structure of the table, in other words, means that those who are “at” the table are also part of what makes the table itself. Doing things “at” the table is what makes the table

what it is and not some other thing. So while bodies do things, things might also “do bodies.”

How do bodies “matter” in what objects do? Let’s consider Husserl’s table. It does not seem that Husserl is touched by his table. When Husserl “grasps” his table from the series of impressions as being more than what he sees at any point in time, it is his “eyes” that are doing the work. He “closes his eyes” and “opens his eyes.”²⁰ The object’s partiality is seen, even if the object is unavailable in a single sight.

In the second volume of *Ideas*, Husserl attends to the lived body (*Leib*) and to the intimacy of touch. The table returns, as one would expect. And yet, what a different table we find if we reach for it differently. Here, it is the hands rather than the eyes that reach the table: “My hand is lying on the table. I experience the table as something solid, cold, smooth” (vol. 2, 153). Husserl conveys the proximity between bodies and objects as things that matter insofar as they make and leave an impression. Bodies are “something touching which is touched” (vol. 2, 155). We touch things and are touched by things. In approaching the table, we are approached by the table. As Husserl shows, the table might be cold and smooth, but the quality of its surface can be felt only when I cease to stand apart from it. Bodies as well as objects take shape through being orientated toward each other, an orientation that may be experienced as the cohabitation or sharing of space.

We might think that we reach for all that simply comes into view. And yet, what “comes into” view or what is within our horizon is not simply a matter of what we find here or there, or even where we find ourselves, as we move here or there. What is reachable is determined precisely by orientations we have already taken. Some objects do not even become objects of perception since the body does not move toward them: they are “beyond the horizon” of the body, out of reach. Orientations are about the direction we take that puts some things and not others in our reach. So the object, which is apprehended only by exceeding my gaze, can be apprehended only insofar as it has come to be available to me: its reachability is not simply a matter of its place or location (the white paper on the table, for instance) but is shaped by the orientations I have taken that mean I face some ways more than others (toward this kind of table, which marks out the space I tend to inhabit).

Phenomenology helps us to explore how bodies are shaped by histories, which they perform in their comportment, their posture, and their gestures. Both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, after all, describe bodily horizons as “sedimented histories.”²¹ This model of history as bodily sedimentation has been taken up by social theorists as well as philosophers. For Pierre Bourdieu, such histories are described as the habitus, “systems of durable, transposable, dispositions” which integrate past experiences through the very “*matrix of perceptions, appreciations and actions*” that are necessary to accomplish “infinitely diversified tasks.”²² For Judith Butler, it is precisely how phenomenology exposes the “sedimentation” of history in the repetition of bodily action that makes it a useful resource for feminism.²³

We could say that history “happens” in the very repetition of gestures, which is what gives bodies their dispositions or tendencies. We might note here that the labor of such repetition disappears through labor: if we work hard at something, then it seems “effortless.” This paradox — with effort it becomes effortless — is precisely what makes history disappear in the moment of its enactment. The repetition of work is what makes the signs of work disappear. It is important that we think not only about *what* is repeated but also about how the repetition of actions takes us in certain directions: we are also orientating ourselves toward some objects more than others, including not only physical objects (the different kinds of tables) but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgment, or objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives. I might orient myself around writing, for instance, not simply as a certain kind of work (although it is that, and it requires certain objects for it to be possible) but also as a goal: writing becomes something that I aspire to, even as an identity (becoming a writer). So the object we aim for, *which we have in our view*, also comes into our view through being held in place as that which we seek to be: the action searches for identity as the mark of attainment (the writer “becomes” a writer through writing).

I too am working on a table, though for me, the kitchen table as much as the writing table provides the setting for action: for cooking, eating, as well as writing. I have a study space, and I work on a table in that space. I type this now, using a keyboard placed on a computer table, which resides in the study, as a space that has been set aside for this kind of work. As I type, I face the table, and it is what I am working on. I am touching the object as well as the keyboard and am aware of it as a sensuous given that is

available for me. In repeating the work of typing, my body comes to feel a certain way. My neck gets sore, and I stretch to ease the discomfort. I pull my shoulders back every now and then as the posture I assume (a bad posture I am sure) is a huddle: I huddle over the table as I repeat the action (the banging of keys with the tips of my fingers); the action shapes me, and it leaves its impression through bodily sensations, prickly feelings on the skin surface, and the more intense experience of discomfort. I write, and, in performing this work, I might yet become my object and become a writer, with a writer’s body and a writer’s tendencies (the sore neck and shoulders are sure signs of having done this kind of work).

Repetitive strain injury (RSI) can be understood as the effect of such repetition: we repeat some actions, sometimes over and over again, and this is partly about the nature of the work we might do. Our body takes the shape of this repetition; *we get stuck in certain alignments as an effect of this work*. For instance, my right ring finger has acquired the shape of its own work: the constant use of a pen, in writing, has created a lump, which is the shape that is shaped by the work of this repetition; my finger almost looks “as if” it has the shape of a pen as an impression upon it. The object leaves its impression: the action, as an intending as well as a tending toward the object, shapes my body in this way and that. The work of repetition is not neutral work; *it orients the body in some ways rather than others*. The lump on my finger is a sure sign of an orientation I have taken not just toward the pen-object or the keyboard but also to the world, as someone who does a certain kind of work for a living.

Bodies hence acquire orientation through the repetitions of some actions over others, as actions that have certain “objects” in view, whether they are physical objects required to do the work (the writing table, the pen, the keyboard) or the ideal objects that one identifies with. The nearness of such objects, their availability within my bodily horizon, is not casual: *it is not just that I find them there, like that*. Bodies tend toward some objects more than others given their tendencies. These tendencies are not ordinary but are effects of the repetition of the “tending toward.”

Over time, we acquire our tendencies, as the acquisition of what is given. Bodies could be described as “becoming given.” Orientations thus take time. If orientations are an effect of what we tend toward, then they point to the future, to what is not yet present. And yet, orientations are shaped by what is behind us, creating a loop between what is toward and

behind. In other words, we are directed by our background. Your point of arrival is your family background, and the family itself provides a background in which things happen and happen in a certain way. Doing things, as we have seen, is what gives objects a certain place. It is no accident that "the table" is an object around which the family gathers, doing the work of the family or even bringing the family into existence as an object that can be shared. In being given a place at the table, the family takes its place.

The table can thus be described as a kinship object.²⁴ The shared orientation toward the table allows the family to cohere as a group, even when we do different things "at" the table. So if our arrival is already an inheritance (which is what we mean when we speak so easily of the family background, which is what puts the family into the background), then we inherit the proximity of certain objects, as those things that are given to us within the family home. These objects are not only material: they may be values, capital, aspirations, projects, and styles. We inherit proximities. We inherit the nearness of some objects more than others; the background is what keeps certain things within 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.

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 orient us toward the future: it is where the child is asked to direct his or her desire by accepting the family line as his or her own inheritance. There is pressure to inherit this line, a pressure that can speak the language of love, happiness, and care. 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 do not always mean we stay on line; at certain points, we can refuse the inheritance, points that are often lived as "breaking points." We do not always know what breaks at these points.

Feminist Tables

I have suggested that bodies materialize; they acquire certain tendencies through proximity to objects whose nearness we have already inherited (the family background). The materialization of subjects is hence insepa-

rable from objects, which circulate as things to do things with. Let's return to Husserl's writing table. Recall that Husserl attends to the writing table, which becomes "the table" by keeping the domestic world behind him. This domestic world, which surrounds the philosopher, must be "put aside" or even "put to one side" in his turn toward objects *as* objects of perception. This disappearance of familiar objects might make more than the object disappear. The writer who does the work of philosophy might disappear if we were to erase the signs of "where" it is that he works. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the masculinity of philosophy is evidenced in the disappearance of the subject under the sign of the universal.²⁵ The masculinity might also be evident in the disappearance of the materiality of objects, in the bracketing of the materials out of which, as well as upon which, philosophy writes itself, as a way of apprehending the world.

We could call this the fantasy of a "paperless" philosophy, a philosophy that is not dependent on the materials upon which it is written. As Audre Lorde reflects, "A room of one's own may be necessary for writing prose, but so are reams of paper, a typewriter and plenty of time."²⁶ The fantasy of a paperless philosophy involves the disappearance of political economy, the "materials" of philosophy, as well as its dependence on forms of labor, both domestic and otherwise. In other words, the labor of writing might disappear along with the paper.

Being oriented toward the writing table not only relegates other rooms in the house to the background but might also depend *on the work done to keep the desk clear*. The desk that is clear is one that is ready for writing. One might even consider the domestic work that must have taken place for the philosopher to turn to the writing table, to be writing on the table, and to keep that table as the object of his attention. We can recall here the long history of feminist scholarship and activism on the politics of housework: about the ways in which women, as wives and servants, do the work required to keep such spaces available for men and the work they do. To sustain an orientation toward the writing table might depend on such work, while it erases the signs of that work as signs of its dependence. Such work is often experienced as "the lack of spare time,"²⁷ for example, the lack of time for oneself or for contemplation. Philosophy might even depend on the concealment of domestic labor and of the labor time that it takes to reproduce the very "materials" of home.

We can pose a simple question: who faces the writing table? Does the writing table have a face, which points it toward some bodies rather than others? Let's consider Adrienne Rich's account of writing a letter:

From the fifties and early sixties, I remember a cycle. It began when I had picked up a book or began trying to write a letter. . . . The child (or children) might be absorbed in busyness, in his own dream world; but as soon as he felt me gliding into a world which did not include him, he would come to pull at my hand, ask for help, punch at the typewriter keys. And I would feel his wants at such a moment as fraudulent, as an attempt moreover to defraud me of living even for fifteen minutes as myself.²⁸

We can see from the point of view of the mother, who is also a writer, poet, and philosopher, that giving attention to the objects of writing, facing those objects, becomes impossible: the children, even if they are behind you, literally pull you away. This loss of time for writing feels like a loss of your own time, as you are returned to the work of giving your attention to the children. One does not need to posit any essential difference to note that there is a political economy of attention: there is an uneven distribution of attention time among those who arrive at the writing table, which affects what they can do once they arrive (and of course, many do not even make it). For some, having time for writing, which means time to face the table upon which writing happens, becomes an orientation that is not available given the ongoing labor of other attachments, which literally pull them away. So whether we can sustain our orientation toward the writing table depends on other orientations, which affect what we can face at any given moment in time.

If orientations affect what bodies do, then they also affect how spaces take shape around certain bodies. The world takes shape by presuming certain bodies as given. If spaces extend bodies, then we could say that spaces extend the bodies that "tend" to inhabit them. So, for instance, if the action of writing is associated with the masculine body, then it is this body that tends to inhabit the space for writing. The space for writing, say, the study, then tends to extend such bodies and may even take their shape. Gender becomes naturalized as a property of bodies, objects, and spaces partly through the loop of this repetition, which leads bodies in some

directions more than others as if that direction came from within the body and explains which way it turns.

In a way, the writing table waits for the body of the writer. In waiting for the writer, the table waits for some bodies more than others. This waiting orients the table to a specific kind of body, the body that would "take up" writing. I have already described such a body as a masculine body, by evoking the gendered form of its occupation. Now clearly, gender is not "in" the table, or necessarily "in" the body that turns to the table. Gender is an effect of how bodies take objects up, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another. We might note for instance in Heidegger's *Ontology* that the table as a thing on which we do things allows for different ways of being occupied. So Heidegger writes on the table, his wife sews, and his children play. What we do on the table is also about being given a place within a familiar order. Bodies are shaped by the work they do on the table, where work involves gendered forms of occupation.

Consider Charlotte Perkins Gilman's early work on home, where she speaks of the shaping of women's bodies through the way they inhabit domestic interiors. As she puts it:

See it in furnishing. A stone or block of wood to sit on, a hide to lie on, a shelf to put your food on. See that block of wood change under your eyes and crawl up history on its forthcoming legs—a stool, a chair, a sofa, a settee, and now the endless ranks of sittable furniture wherewith we fill the home to keep ourselves from the floor withal. . . . If you are confined at home you cannot walk much—therefore you must sit—especially if your task is a stationary one. So, to the home-bound woman came much sitting, and much sitting called for ever softer seats.²⁹

Gilman is writing here specifically about furnishings in the Orient, and she contrasts the soft bodies and chairs of this imagined interior with the domestic interiors in the West, which give women more mobility. Gilman shows us how orientations involve inhabiting certain bodily positions: sitting, walking, lying down, and so on. Such forms of occupation or of being occupied shape the furniture: the chairs becomes soft, to provide seating for the body that sits. In turn, the body becomes soft, as it occupies the soft seat, taking up the space made available by the seat. Such positions

become habitual: they are repeated, and in being repeated, they shape the body and what it can do. The more the body sits, the more it tends to be seated.

What a simple point: what we “do do” affects what we “can do.” This is not to argue that “doing” simply restricts capacities. In contrast, what we “do do” opens up and expands some capacities, although an “expansion” in certain directions might in turn restrict what we can do in others. The more we work certain parts of the body, the more work they can do. At the same time, the less we work other parts, the less they can do. So if gender shapes what we “do do,” then it shapes what we can do.

It is worth noting that Iris Marion Young’s phenomenological model of female embodiment places a key emphasis on the role of orientation. Indeed, Young argues that gender differences *are* differences in orientation. As she suggests, “Even in the most simple body orientations of men and women as they sit, stand, and walk, we can observe a typical difference in body style and extension.”³⁰ This is not to say that orientations are themselves simply given, or that they “cause” such differences. Rather orientations are an effect of differences as well as a mechanism for their reproduction. Young suggests that women have an “inhibited intentionality” in part because they do not get behind their bodies since women see their bodies as “objects” as well as “capacities” (35). Women may throw objects and are thrown by objects in such a way that they take up less space. To put it simply, we acquire the shape of how we throw as well as what we do. Spaces in turn are shaped by the bodies that tend to inhabit them given their tendencies.

And yet, it is not always decided which bodies inhabit which spaces, even when spaces extend the form of some bodies and not others. Women “do things” by claiming spaces that have not historically belonged to them, including the spaces marked out for writing. As Virginia Woolf shows us in *A Room of One’s Own*, for women to claim a space to write is a political act. Of course, there are women who write. We know this. Women have taken up spaces orientated toward writing. And yet, the woman writer remains just that: the woman writer, deviating from the somatic norm of “the writer” as such. So what happens when the woman writer takes up her pen? What happens when the study is not reproduced as a masculine domain by the collective repetition of such moments of deviation?

Tables might even appear differently if we follow such moments of deviation and the lines they create. For Virginia Woolf, the table appears with her writing on it, as a feminist message inscribed on paper: “I must ask you to imagine a room, like many thousands, with a window looking across people’s hats and vans and motor-cars to other windows, and on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters Women and Fiction and no more.”³¹ The table is not simply what she faces but is the “site” upon which she makes her feminist point: that we cannot address the question of women and fiction without asking the prior question of whether women have space to write.

If making feminist points returns us to the table, then the terms of its appearance will be different. In Young’s *On Female Body Experience*, the table arrives into her writing in the following way: “The nick on the table here happened during that argument with my daughter” (159). Here the table records the intimacy of the relationship between mother and daughter; such intimacies are not “put to one side.” Tables for feminist writers might not bracket or put aside the intimacy of familial attachments. Such intimacies are at the front; they are “on the table” rather than behind it. We might even say that feminist tables are shaped by attachments, which affect the surfaces of tables and how tables surface in feminist writing.

Of course, feminist tables do not simply make gender the point of significance. Just recall the women of color press, *The Kitchen Table*. Such a press certainly uses the table to make a feminist point. The kitchen table provides the surface on which women tend to work. To use the table that supports domestic work to do political work (including the work that makes explicit the politics of domestic work) is a reorientation device. But such a description misses the point of this table.³² As a women of color press, *The Kitchen Table* reminds us that the work of the table involves racial and class-based divisions of labor. Middle-class white women could access the writing table, could turn their attention to this table, by relying on the domestic labor of black and working-class women. A feminist politics of the table cannot afford to lose sight of the political divisions between women who work. *The Kitchen Table* press, which Audre Lorde referred to as “The Table,”³³ was about generating a space for woman of color within feminism. The politics of the table turns us to the political necessity of clearing spaces in order that some bodies can work at the table. To arrive at the table takes time and requires painstaking labor for

those whose backgrounds mean that they do not inherit its place. It is through the labor of Black feminism that women of color can claim “the table” as their own.

So, yes, orientations matter. Those who are “out of place” have to secure a place that is not already given. Such work makes “the table” reappear as an object. The table becomes a disorientation device, making things lose their place, which means the loss of coherence of a certain world. Political work hence reshapes the very surfaces of bodies and worlds. Or we could say that bodies resurface when they turn the tables on the world that keeps things in place.

Notes

This essay is drawn from the first chapter of Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, and has been revised and adapted for this volume.

- 1 For an articulation of this idea, see Barad, “Posthumanist Performativity.” I have elsewhere questioned the way articulations of so-called new materialism have relied on a foundational gesture whereby they constitute earlier work (especially other feminist work) written during the “cultural turn” as against matter, and opposed to related tropes of materiality such as biology or the real. See Ahmed, “Imaginary Prohibitions.”
- 2 Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy, Second Book*, 165–66.
- 3 Schutz and Luckmann, *The Structure of the Lifeworld*, 36.
- 4 Husserl, *Ideas*, 101.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 66.
- 7 Husserl, *Ideas*, vol. 1, 107.
- 8 Sokolowski, *Introduction to Phenomenology*, 20.
- 9 Husserl, *Ideas*, vol. 1, 102.
- 10 Husserl attends to the temporality of the background via the notion of the “internal horizon,” which he develops throughout the corpus of his work. So the “now” of perception involves retention: it involves the “just past,” which is “before” the “now” but evoked as “before” only in the “now.” This reminds us that intentionality (to be directed toward something that does not reveal itself “at once”) involves a complex temporality, in which the present already exceeds itself: “Even if I stop at perception, I still have the full consciousness of the thing, just as I already have it at the first glance when I see it as this thing. In seeing I always ‘mean’ it with all the sides which are no way given to me, even in the form of the intuitive, anticipatory presentifications. Thus

every perception has, ‘for consciousness’ a horizon belonging to its object.” Husserl, *The Crisis of the European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 158. Phenomenology in its turn to the present of what we perceive does return us to what is “behind” in a temporal as well as spatial sense. For Husserl this is primarily described as “time consciousness,” but we can see an important connection between a phenomenology of perception and a more materialist conception of histories that are “behind” or even at the “back” of what is “presented” or in the present.

- 11 As Gilles Deleuze puts it, following Spinoza, “You do not know beforehand what a mind or body can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination.” See Deleuze, “Ethnology,” 627. We can add: we do not yet know what a writer can do, let alone the table, once they get near enough to each other. Yes, writing might happen. Or it might not. We don’t always know what will happen if writing does not happen: whether the “not” feels like a block, or whether it provides an empty space that appears as an invitation to fill with other things. You might doodle, creating some rather odd kind of impressions. And if writing is what happens, then we don’t know what lines will be created on the paper, which lies on the surface of the table, between skin and wood, or on whatever materials happen to come into contact. In due course, I will return to the “can do” and suggest that what bodies “do do” restricts capacities in the present even if it does not “decide” exactly what happens.
- 12 Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology, The Marx-Engels Reader*, 170.
- 13 Marx, *Capital* (Moscow, 1887), 50.
- 14 This is not to say that matter comes to matter only given the work of human labor. Such an argument would make the human *into the center of things*, as the absent presence around which all things were centered. Other kinds of labor shape how objects might come to surface in this way or that. Merleau-Ponty uses the example of a pebble and what makes a pebble a pebble. As he puts it, “Beyond a certain range of their changes, they would cease to be this pebble or this shell, they would even cease to be a pebble or a shell.” See Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 161. I have often been struck by pebble beaches, for instance, when I imagine how they are becoming sand but a becoming that is not available to consciousness or that has not arrived, in the present. The pebble becomes sand as an effect of time. The pebble could be seen as “becoming sand,” but we could not see this becoming simply on the surface of the pebble. We could even see sand as a “having been pebble,” but that would also point us beyond what is available in the present. What does time do, if not make available the possibility of seeing that which is not in view? Time is also occupied not only in the sense that we do something with it but also in how it is available to us through what we do. In time, the pebble may become sand; it ceases to have the characteristics that make it recogniz-

able as a pebble. But the pebble acquires its shape through contact; and it is this contact which reshapes the pebble such that it is becoming something "other" than what it is. Time "gives form," which suggests that "matter" is not inert or given but is always in a process of "materializing." The pebble is shaped by its contact with water, and the waves that pound it, which made it "it" (and not a rock), also shape its becoming something other than what it is in the present. The object assumes the form of contact, as a contact that takes place in time, but is also an effect of time. The arrival of the object takes time and involves contact with other objects, which keeps the future open to that which has yet to emerge.

- 15 It is important that we contest the matter / form hierarchy, which locates what is dynamic in form and leaves matter "for dead." As feminist philosophers have shown us, this binary is gendered: women have been associated with matter and men with form, such that masculinity becomes the gift of life by giving form to matter. See Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 172; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; and Grosz, *Space, Time and Perversion*, 121.
- 16 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 149.
- 17 Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things," 34.
- 18 I am very grateful to Paul Harrison who directed me towards *Ontology* and Heidegger's table during a seminar I gave at Durham University in October 2005, "Lines, Points and Other Impressions." In the first version of my chapter on phenomenology and tables in *Queer Phenomenology*, I relied on the example of the hammer offered in *Being and Time* and made my own connections between the hammer and the table. It was uncanny to discover that the example of the hammer in *Being and Time* was a substitute for the table in *Ontology*. As John Van Buren suggests in his translator's notes: "What had also dropped out was Heidegger's powerful fifteen-page phenomenological example of 'tarrying for a while' in his home, 'being-in-a-room' there, and the 'sewing of his wife', the 'playing of his children', his own 'writing', and their daily meals at the table in this room. This central example was replaced by 'the hammer', and what survived of it was a cursory mention of a 'table' in a 'room' with 'sewing' and 'writing' equipment on it." See Van Buren, "Translator's Notes" to Heidegger, *Ontology—The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, 92. How fitting that when I was writing about a hammer I was "really" writing about a table.
- 19 Heidegger, *Ontology*, 20.
- 20 Husserl, *Ideas*, vol. 1, 130.
- 21 For a discussion of this idea, see Steinbock, *Home and Beyond*, 36.
- 22 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 72, 83.
- 23 Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions," 406.
- 24 For a good discussion of house memories focusing on the kitchen table, see Carsten, *After Kinship*, 31.

- 25 See, for example, Bordo, *Flight to Objectivity*; and Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance*.
- 26 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 116.
- 27 Davies, "Responsibilities and Daily Life," 141.
- 28 Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 23.
- 29 Gilman, *The Home*, 27–28.
- 30 Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 32.
- 31 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 24.
- 32 Here, I am critiquing my own reading of The Kitchen Table in *Queer Phenomenology*, which uses this description and hence misses the importance of this press as a women of color press. See Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 61.
- 33 De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, 277.