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# A Critique of Queer Phenomenology: Gender and the Sexual

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**ABSTRACT**
This article critiques Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology in light of psychoanalytic theory of sexuality. I argue that there is a conspicuous absence of the unconscious, sexuality, and fantasy in Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. I turn to the work of Jean Laplanche both to address this absence and to argue for a theory of the formation of sexuality and gender that is not exhausted by the phenomenal world.

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed (2006) accounts for the formation of sexual orientation and gender through queer phenomenology. According to Ahmed, sexual orientation and gender are ways of taking up space. She argues that because the way in which we take up space is determined by dominant social norms, subjects are required to tend toward heterosexual objects and to reproduce heterosexuality. A heterosexual orientation is "in line" with dominant and compulsive heterosexual norms. Thus, a queer orientation is a disorientation, or being out of line with the heterosexual path that we are forced to reproduce. Sexuality and gender, for her, are formed either as a result of societal pressure or through accidental disorientations.

In developing her phenomenological account of sexual orientation she engages with Freud following traditional feminist critiques of psychoanalysis. Specifically, she argues that Freud's reading of homosexuality does not see, and reproduces, patriarchal social forces in the formation and normalization of sexuality. As a result, for Ahmed, Freud sees heterosexuality as the normal behavior and homosexuality as a problem insofar as it challenges heteronormativity.

Ahmed's project is crucial because it elaborates the centrality of space in gender and sexual orientation. But I argue that Ahmed's engagement with psychoanalysis has two principal shortcomings. First, by making heterosexuality the basis of her theory—the norm from which queerness is a deviation—Ahmed makes the very mistake that she claims is Freud's. Her critique of Freud leads to a more limited and rigid account of sexuality. Freud's theory of the unconscious affirms that sexuality cannot "diverge" because it is never fundamentally "normal" or "set." Sexuality is always "neurotic" and "pathogenic" despite social forces that attempt to normalize it and make it conform to reality as we know it. For example, Freud is not concerned with how a woman should be, but how women come to be. Put simply, conformity to "normal" expressions of sexuality and gender is not the goal of psychoanalysis.

Second, and relatedly, Ahmed's critique that Freud is blind to normalizing social forces and a patriarchal reality reveals that her conception of the phenomenal world is devoid of the core of Freud's theory—the unconscious. Ahmed's theory of sexual orientation is restricted to the phenomenal world; it is an object-oriented theory that overlooks the unconscious and is limited to conscious mental processes and social forces. She renders sexual desire transparent through, and synonymous with, sexual practices and gender expressions. As a result, Ahmed misses that the psychoanalytic theory of sexuality and the unconscious is neither purely social nor purely biological. The laws of the unconscious in Freud's work point to a socialized formation of sexuality. In fact, expressions of sexual desire or femininity and masculinity are, at least in part, a product of repression through

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a protest against social norms first encountered in the family. Because the unconscious is not a mysterious force separate from our social reality, it must be accounted for in theories of sexuality.

To show what is at stake when an account of sexuality and gender presupposes heterosexuality and loses sight of the unconscious, this article critiques queer phenomenology in light of Jean Laplanche's psychoanalytic theory of sexuality. By giving us tools to think the formation of sexuality and gender not exhausted by the phenomenal world, Laplanche allows us to see the conspicuous absence of the unconscious, sexuality, and fantasy in Ahmed's work. For Ahmed, non-heterosexuality is a resistance to the compulsion to conform to heterosexuality. For psychoanalysis, on the other hand, sexuality and gender are always a site of conflict and tension. Thus, resistance is always present in the formation of sexuality and gender. Because sexuality is inseparable from the unconscious, resistance is not only possible, but in the center of sexual and gender formation as such. An account of sexuality and gender that takes the unconscious seriously does not presuppose one form of desire or orientation; it breaks the distinction between biology and society, a distinction that threatens to erase sexuality entirely.

## Queer phenomenology

In *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Sara Ahmed takes up the question of backgrounds and orientation to propose a new understanding of the spatiality of sexuality and gender. She turns to phenomenology to give an account of orientation as central to the lived experience of the body (Ahmed, 2006). Drawing on the work of Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, she conceives of backgrounds as present-absences: They are there in such a way that they do not appear. In being-there, the background is at once familiar and unseen (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 37–38). The background "explains the conditions of emergence or an arrival of something as the thing that it appears to be in the present" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 38). That is, orientations are not arbitrary; rather, what constitutes the foreground and background in our orientations is expressive of larger social and political structures. Thus, she understands backgrounds as "that which must take place in order for something to appear … So, if phenomenology is to attend to the background, it might do so by giving an account of the conditions of emergence of something, which would not necessarily be available in how that thing presents itself to consciousness" (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 37–38). Attention to the background is an essential methodological step for queering phenomenology. Queer phenomenology turns to the background to account for the ways in which sexed, gendered, and raced bodies take up space and the ways in which space is itself gendered, raced, and sexual.

For Ahmed orientation is a residing in space. To be oriented is to be turned toward certain objects or people that help us find our path. We are oriented if we know where we are even when we turn. We are oriented if we have a dwelling or a home that anchors us. She claims that the family provides orienting figures and the background against which people and objects appear. For example, in the case of children, it is familial adults that serve as orienting figures. These orienting figures render the feeling of "home" possible and determine what is within and without reach. Objects within reach can be literal objects—the particular toys, books, even genders that are near or far from the child—or possibilities—the way in which what is reachable as a literal object comes to shape who we become. If orientation denotes the way in which we take up space, then sexual orientation, for Ahmed, is also a matter of residence, a matter "of how we inhabit spaces as well as 'who' or 'what' we inhabit spaces with" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 1). What objects and people we are oriented toward come to determine our sexuality and gender possibilities.

For Ahmed, space is not something we simply are in but also our very skin upon which objects press and leave imprints. Thus, she argues that we can rethink the phenomenality of space through orientation by analyzing "how space is dependent on bodily inhabitance" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 6). Orientation allows us to maneuver in space and situate ourselves in relation to the present others. Our being in space, however, also determines the reproduction of or possible changes to that space. This play between ourselves and space ultimately marks who we become. Thus, if space, along with

its orienting figures, determines what is "reachable" and possible, this also includes our gender and expressions of sexuality:

> For instance, if the action of writing is associated with the masculine body, then it is this body that tends to inhabit the space of 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. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 58)

The formation of gender and sexuality, for Ahmed, is intimately related to the way in which we inhabit space. She writes: "Gender is an effect of how bodies take up objects, which involves how they occupy space by being occupied in one way or another" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 59).

Because space is neither exterior to the body nor merely a container for the body, it sets out the conditions and limitations for sexuality and gender. More importantly, for Ahmed, our orientations in space have lines that demarcate "normal" and "abnormal" paths. Ahmed identifies the normal path as the one that conforms to familial and societal expectations. Thus, for her, the straight child is the child that stays in line. "The very requirement that the child follow a parental line puts some objects and not others in reach. So the child tends towards that which is near enough, whereby nearness or proximity is what already 'resides' at home" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 86). Staying in line, for Ahmed, already orients the child toward "normal" ways of living and normative expressions of sexuality and gender:

> The lines that allow us to find our way, those that are "in front" of us, also make certain things, and not others, available. When we follow specific lines, some things become reachable and others remain or even become out of reach. Such exclusions—the constitution of a field of unreachable objects—are the indirect consequences of following lines that are before us; we do not have to consciously exclude those things that are not "on line." The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there. (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 14–15)

What is reachable and unreachable determines "masculinities" and "femininities" that are possible. Because the most common family structure is heterosexual, the most normalized orientation for Ahmed is the heterosexual orientation. If sexual orientation is about the lines we follow, to be heterosexual is to be "normal" and to follow the "normal" course of things.

According to Ahmed, to follow the line or to lead a heterosexual life is to follow a pre-given and imposed orientation. Following Adrienne Rich, Ahmed argues that heterosexuality is a compulsory orientation: "We can consider how one 'becomes straight' by reflecting on how an orientation, as direction (taken) toward objects and others, is made compulsory. In other words, subjects are *required* to 'tend toward' some objects and not others as a condition of familial as well as social love" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 85, italics in original). Heterosexuality functions as a background that orients our future and directs our desires. Compulsory heterosexuality, for Ahmed, diminishes the possibility for bodies to access what is off the straight line (Ahmed, 2006, p. 91). Straight bodies make the spaces they inhabit straight by reproducing compulsory heterosexuality.

Even though heterosexuality is compulsory, it is not the only form of sexuality. As Ahmed writes, "(Luckily) compulsory heterosexuality doesn't always work" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 94). Heterosexuality is an orientation in line with the dominant social and familial expectations. Non-heterosexuality is made possible through accidents that introduce new objects and, thus, new reachable paths. For Ahmed, these accidents are moments of disorientation that force us to reorient ourselves. "Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 160). The possibility for non-heterosexual forms of life exists in these moments of disorientation, of being out of place, or of being out of line. Queerness, for Ahmed, is being out of line and engaging in nonnormative sexual practices. To be queer and to dwell in moments of disorientation as queer moments is to disrupt the order of things and challenge heteronormativity. Though Ahmed claims that not all disorientations are subversive, queerness retains a subversive character because it disturbs the normal orientation of things. In fact, she insists on the importance of retaining a meaning of the word queer that points to non-heterosexuality as off, odd, or twisted. "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" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 161). Queerness is subversive by virtue of accidental disorientations that deviate from the straight line.

Queer phenomenology addresses space as the history of what is reachable and unreachable to analyze what disappears in the name of heterosexual exposure. Ahmed turns to Karl Marx to argue that "history cannot simply be turned into something that is given in its sensuous certainty, as if it could be a property of an object" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 41). She claims that we must not simply account for how something appears but for the history of the way in which something comes to appear. Compulsory sexuality makes certain objects appear at the expense of possible non-heterosexual orientations.

Although *Queer Phenomenology* is a critical project that examines sexuality and gender through a phenomenological lens, in what follows I demonstrate that Ahmed limits sexuality and gender to observable practices. The lines we follow, and hence the lives we live, determine our sexuality. One is heterosexual if one acts as a heterosexual. For example, if your father is a part of a heterosexual partnership, he must be straight by virtue of having reproduced a heterosexual structure or family. Ahmed's phenomenological account of sexuality renders all sexuality transparent. Even though Ahmed claims to be concerned with more than mere appearances, she ends up reducing sexual orientation to appearance because she loses sight of the unconscious. Ahmed's queering of phenomenology shows that, for her, phenomenology is an adequate methodology to account for sexual orientation. Her reliance on psychoanalysis and direct engagement with Freud, however, suggest that nonphenomenological psychoanalytic elements must be considered in an analysis of sexuality and gender. The nature of the subject itself demands the consideration of the unconscious. However, Ahmed engages with psychoanalysis throughout *Queer Phenomenology* with no mention of the unconscious.

This article argues that queer phenomenology, as articulated by Ahmed, cannot account for the formation of gender and sexuality precisely because her starting point is (an unaccounted-for) heterosexuality. Because Ahmed presupposes heterosexuality, she makes it the foundation against which non-heterosexual orientations are formed. As a result, non-heterosexual orientations are rendered contingent on accidents if they are not themselves accidents.

## Gender–sex–sexual

To analyze the consequences of a queer theory that does not account for the formation of sexuality, does not address the unconscious, and presupposes heterosexuality, I turn to the work of Jean Laplanche. I rely on his work because, similarly to Ahmed, he argues that the child finds itself in an already sexualized space. For him, although space is sexual and the child is sexual by virtue of being born into that space, sexuality and gender are not endogenous.[1] He argues that gender "is usually twofold, masculine/feminine, but it is not so by nature" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 201). Gender, for Laplanche, is constituted through the behavior, attachment, and relations of others (who have an already formed unconscious) with the child (who has an already assigned gender on the basis of others). For him, the assignment of gender "is a complex set of acts that extends into the meaningful language and behaviors of the environment" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 213). The identification and representations of the body should not be held as two different processes; they are two entangled processes since communication occurs as a part of the attachment between the adult others and the child. Thus, even though space is always already sexual for both Ahmed and Laplanche, it is so for different reasons. According to Laplanche, space is sexual because (i) sexuality is formed through the instantaneous attachment of the child to the other and (ii) the communication between adults and the child is infiltrated by the unconscious fantasies of the adults.

[1]It is important to note that Laplanche marks his departure from Freud through his theoretical separation from the Oedipus Complex. He argues that there is more to identification than the Oedipus Complex through which one parent becomes the sexual object and the other becomes the rival: "The sexual is the unconscious residue of the repression/symbolization of gender by sex" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 202). The identification of the child with the parental other has to do with the way in which others embody femininity or masculinity as their gender. Thus, for Laplanche, gender precedes sex but not the development of sexuality and its organization.

First, for Laplanche, the formation of sexuality is always dependent on the instantaneous attachment to others. Laplanche argues that with the abandonment of seduction theory, Freud abandoned the priority of the adult other as a fully formed subject in the constitution of the child's psyche.[2] Laplanche maintains that seduction is not a singular event but an anthropological situation that describes the transmission of messages impregnated with sexual signification from an adult, with a fully formed unconscious, to the child, without a formed unconscious. Thus, he revises Freud's metapsychology by formulating a general theory of seduction that is centered on the other.

The adult–child pair should not be understood in terms of succession. Rather, the child finds itself always already in the presence of adult others (Laplanche, 2007, p. 212). In "Gender, Sex, and the Sexual," Laplanche claims that these others, and their confusing adult world, are overwhelmingly big in relation to the small helpless child.[3] This relation between the child and the adult is asymmetrical. The child receives definitions of the self, aspirations, expectations, and demands about how to be or not to be, but, unlike the adult, the child receives these definitions in a world beyond its grasp.

For Laplanche, sexuality not only arises from the child's asymmetrical relation to others, but from and in relation to particular interactions with the bodies of caregivers. The breast, or its substitute, as Laplanche explains in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, leads to nourishment and pleasure, on the one hand, and to sexuality and stimulation, on the other (Laplanche, 1985, p. 17). The breast, as an agent of nourishment and fantasy, both feeds and excites (Laplanche, 1999, p. 131). In this process, the foreign entity of sexual excitation is introduced to the child. In fact, the drive itself is a perversion or "deviation from instinct" (Laplanche, 1985, p. 23). Here, perversion does not presuppose a specific path from which perversion is a mere deviation. Rather, Laplanche claims that in Freud's *Three Essays*, "the whole of sexuality, or at least the whole of infantile sexuality, ends up by becoming perversion" (Laplanche, 1985, p. 23). In other words, the instinct "as a vital function" is perverted by sexuality.

In Laplanche's general seduction theory, the adult–child relationship is not confined to the vital function of the transfer of nourishment; it includes the sexual fantasies of the adult.[4] Laplanche reminds us that the parent is a fully formed adult with an unconscious and fantasies: "For it is, in fact, too often forgotten when we speak of the mother–child relation or of the parent–child relation that the parents themselves had their own parents" (Laplanche, 1985, p. 45). He writes: "The first gestures of a mother towards her child are necessarily impregnated with sexuality" (Laplanche, 1985, p. 33). Alongside the act of nourishment that solidifies adult–child bonds, fantasy plays a crucial role. That is because even fantasies have psychic reality. The fantasmatic is the excess that spills into the adult–infant relation Specifically, messages of care, such as feeding, carry unconscious sexual excitations and fantasies.[5]

For Laplanche, "sexuality breaks out, in the human child, through *deviation from* and *autoerotic reversal of* the vital processes" (Laplanche, 1985, p. 48, italics in original). These two sides, "the autoerotic internalization" and the "constitution of the 'alien internal entity' (the fantasy), the perpetual source of the sexual drive," constitute a single process (Laplanche, 1985, p. 48).. But at the same time,

[2]Freud's theory of seduction (1895–1897) placed the memory of a real scene of seduction in a central role to psychoneuroses. Seduction described a moment when the child was sexually seduced by an adult by words, gestures, or physical advances that the child experiences passively, in a state of fright and lack of understanding. For Laplanche, Freud's theory of seduction was an attempt to account for repression. This theory suggests that trauma occurs in two moments. The first moment is the act of seduction experienced passively by the child. The second moment is when any event happens to revive the memory of seduction, which leads to the first repression of the memory. Later, Freud discovered that many scenes of seduction were not literal past experiences but fantasies. Freud's abandonment of the seduction theory in 1897 is often seen as the beginning of his actual theory of sexuality.

[3]See Ruth Stein's "Moments in Laplanche's Theory of Sexuality" (2007) and Judith Butler's "Seduction, Gender and the Drive" (2014).

[4]Fantasy denotes a specific imaginary production that exceeds imaginative activity precisely because in the psychoanalytic sense this term blurs the distinction between reality and imagination, truth and fiction. Even fantasies have psychic reality.

[5]Laplanche accords seduction priority over fantasy even though seduction itself can be a fantasy. Seduction as a fantasy and the events of potential seduction cannot be easily distinguished. In other words, the reality of seduction cannot be reduced to the fact that an adult has or has not seduced the child. Thus, the priority assigned to seduction "is based on the fact that the other scenarios invoked as primal have seduction as their nucleus, to the extent that they too convey messages from the other, always at first in the direction from adult to child" (Laplanche, 1999, p. 173). External others guarantee the formation of the unconscious in the child (the internal other). The external and internal are heuristic terms to emphasize the adult–child relationship and the fact that the unconscious is formed by others in/through seduction.

sexuality "appears as *implanted* in the child from the parental universe: from its structures, meanings, and fantasies" (Laplanche, 1985, p. 48, italics in original).. Laplanche maintains that the appearance of sexuality as implantation does not negate the two-sided process of deviation from and autoerotic reversal of the vital processes. Instead, for Laplanche, that appearance adds to or corrects the understanding of sexuality as a two-sided process, which risks portraying sexuality as merely a secretion by the vital processes (Laplanche, 1985, p. 48).. That portrayal would imply a linear emergence of sexuality from the vital order and thus a state prior to autoeroticism when the vital order was independent. Implantation, however, reveals that the vital order itself does not result in sexuality, but provokes an intrusion from the adult world. The vital order is always infested with the sexual.

Second, according to Laplanche, the child receives from adult others demands and expectations about masculinity and femininity in the form of prescriptive messages. The development of the child does not occur in a neutral space that allows the child to freely perform sexuality and gender. Laplanche refers to the ongoing assignment, or prescription, of gender as a "prescription in the sense in which we speak of so-called 'prescriptive' messages: of the order, then, of the message, indeed of the bombardment of messages" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 213.)

Gender is assigned to the child through a multiplicity of prescriptive messages. Laplanche calls these messages *enigmatic* because they are not transparent to the adults themselves and much less so to the child. As he remarks in *Essays on Otherness*: "The adult world is entirely infiltrated with unconscious and sexual significations to which *adults themselves* do not have the code" (Laplanche, 1999, p. 130, italics in original). In other words, the prescriptive messages are enigmatic because they are infiltrated by the unconscious of adults who do not recognize their significance. These messages are not unconscious as such but, as John Fletcher explains, they are "formulated at the conscious–preconscious level of attachment and tenderness that is comprised or surcharged by an unconscious excitation and its accompanying fantasies" (Fletcher, 2007, p. 1252).

For Laplanche, gender is not structured solely by receiving messages, but also by translating them. Because preconscious–conscious messages of gender assignment are not transparent, they require the labor of translation on the part of the child. "We place the individual in the presence of the other, the child *in the presence* of the adult and receiving from him messages that are not *raw givens* but material 'to be translated'" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 212, italics in original). It is this material "to be translated" that is enigmatic and requires working through, initially in a stage of immaturity.

Laplanche's thesis on translation is informed by Freud's December 6, 1896, letter to Fliess, where he discusses a "process of stratification." Freud argues that memory traces are not inscribed permanently but are from time to time rearranged from the subject in accordance with new circumstances. Freud calls this part of psychical formation a translation (Freud, 1985, p. 208). This translation also entails an element of failure. Freud writes: "A failure of translation—this is what is known clinically as 'repression.' The motive for it is always a release of the unpleasure that would be generated by a translation; it is as though this unpleasure provokes a disturbance of thought that does not permit the work of translation" (Freud, 1985, p. 208). Excessive inscriptions that provoke translation of stimuli but are too painful to be processed cannot be carried into the new psychical state. Therefore, the untranslated material is repressed and forms the unconscious.

Gender as a social construction is inscribed socially. But for Laplanche, this assignment does not occur by society in general but by the socii: "It is really the father, the mother, a friend, a brother, a cousin, etc. It is thus the small group of socii that inscribes *in* the social, but it is not Society that does the assigning" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 214, italics in original). Gender is assigned by messages that spring from the language and bodies of adult others and from the social code or social language. This social code is "the message of the socius" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 215), and such messages are messages of gender assignment:

> The theory of general seduction sets out from the idea of messages from the other. In these messages there is a code or carrier wave, that is to say, a basic language that is preconscious-conscious language … there are preconscious–conscious messages, and that the parental unconscious is like the "noise"—in the sense of

> communication theory—that comes to disturb and *compromise* the preconscious-conscious messages. (Laplanche, 2007, p. 215, italics in original)

While the assignment of gender is social, abstract "society" does not and cannot perform this assignment. In the same way that the child does not find itself in the presence of an abstract other, but in the presence of multiple concrete parental figures, the child is not assigned a gender by abstract "society," but its inscribed by the socii. This assignment does not occur within a single act or event; it is a continuous process that begins immediately at birth, if not before (Laplanche, 2007, p. 213). "Assignment is a complex set of acts that extends into the meaningful language and behavior of the environment. We may speak of an ongoing assignment or of an actual *prescription*" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 213, italics in original). The assignment of gender is a complex process that cannot be reduced to a singular factor, to a single event, or to the phenomenal world.

The assignment of gender, for Laplanche, is related to a process of identification. Freud famously describes the Oedipus complex as the child desiring the parent of the opposite sex and identifying with the parent of the same sex. Laplanche argues that Freud clearly contradicts himself in his claim that the child identifies with the parent of the same sex when he argues that at such a young age the infant does not perceive a difference between the parental figures. The infant is not surrounded by a mother and a father, but by caregivers. Thus, the theory of gender assignment through enigmatic messages leads Laplanche to a different understanding of identification. As Fletcher argues, Laplanche's recourse to the adult world as the source of enigmatic messages is a significant departure from psychoanalytic accounts that argue that the Oedipal scene structures desire at a primary level (Fletcher, 1992). Centering on the primacy of others, Laplanche argues that identification by, instead of identification with, occurs first. For him, the infant has representations of the male and female body before the primary identification with either one of them. For example, the infant realizes that her body resembles the body of her mother and is different from the body of her father. The infant does not simply identify with the mother; before identification with occurs, the infant is identified by her mother as *female*. She hears herself being referred to as *she*, in the same way that she hears her father, who is a distinct *he*, addressing her mother as *she*. The female infant identifies the mother as the same and the father as different, in the same way that the father identifies the female infant as different from himself. Infants are identified by others as male or female—the same as or different from the others—before they themselves identify with the female or male other. Thus, Laplanche argues that prior to identification with, there is identification by the other: the assignment of gender.

Similar to Ahmed, Laplanche takes seriously the external identification from parental figures. Yet the primacy of others in Laplanche's seduction theory does not indicate a deterministic account of gender assignment by the parents as a drive for conformity. As Judith Butler[6] elaborates:

> There is no development of the infant without the intervention of the other, and the other may well be a parent or a caretaker, so that when we consider that it may be any adult, it would appear that the gender of that other is incidental to the fact of intervention. To be called a gender is to be given an enigmatic and overwhelming signifier; it is also to be incited in ways that remain in part unconscious. To be assigned a gender is to be subject to a certain demand, a certain impingement and seduction, and not to know fully what the terms of that demand might be. (Butler, 2014, p. 123)

The subject *is* by virtue of adult others. Ruth Stein articulates this as a seduction that builds an interiority and a subjectivity. Otherness constitutes the subject through an asymmetrical relationship, though this asymmetry does not necessarily include passivity on the part of either party. She writes: "Laplanche pursues the primacy of the other to the point of viewing the infant and the child's unconscious mind and drives as deriving from the adult other" (Stein, 2007, p. 179). The child is not

[6]The work of Judith Butler has been heavily criticized, initially for her distinction of sex and gender (see, e.g., Toril Moi's 1999 *What is a Woman?*) and later for her theory of performativity and use of femininity and masculinity after criticizing them for being ideological constructs. See, for example, Joan Copjec's *Read my Desire* (2015) where she critiques Butler's historicist account of sexuality. She argues that Butler operates with binaries that always make gender in the process of discursive construction. Whatever the merits of the critiques of Butler, they are outside of the scope of this article.

simply a passive body that unconditionally follows the directions of the parental figures. Rather, their relationship constitutes subjectivity itself through a process that remains enigmatic to both parties and, thus, requires the working through or translation on the part of the child.

Laplanche's theory of assignment does not posit a society/biology dichotomy because his theory of sexuality is not limited to sex/gender. That is because the realm of enigmatic messages is not simply sex or gender. Rather, for him, it is the gender/sex/*le sexual* triad. *Le sexual*, for Laplanche, is the polymorphous sexuality that has its basis in repression, the unconscious, and fantasy. In "Gender, Sex, and the Sexual," he argues that it is the psychiatrist Robert Stoller who associated the notion of gender with a set of convictions of belonging, correctly or incorrectly, to either the feminine or the masculine social group. The appearance of the notion of gender was always an appearance of a couple: sex/gender. In the Anglo-Saxon world this came to mean that sex is primarily associated with the biological while gender is primarily associated with the sociocultural. For Laplanche, this coupling of gender/sex forms *le sexual* as the enemy. Laplanche turns to Reimut Reiche who articulated the gender/sex couple as emblematic of the erasure of the problem of sexuality. Laplanche pushes this argument even further and argues that the gender/sex couple has been a "formidable tool against the Freudian discovery" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 206). And here it is worth noting that the Freudian discovery par excellence is, for Laplanche, *le sexual*. Laplanche expresses the problem of the couple gender/sex as a double movement: "First there is a movement to subvert the notion of sex to the point of annihilating it in a pure retroaction by gender, and then there is a movement in which a need is seen to posit something foundational nevertheless, if only to be able to subvert and annihilate it" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 207). The conceptualizations of sex as biological and gender as social "need sex in order to subvert it and 'denaturalize' it into gender" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 208). In other words, the biological conception of sex becomes necessary precisely to undermine and translate it through gender.

If the popular coupling of gender/sex loses sight of the unconscious, sexuality, and fantasy, while at once establishing biological sex as foundational, why speak of gender at all? Or, as Laplanche puts it: "Does introducing gender in psychoanalysis mean colluding with those who want to diminish the impact of the Freudian discovery? Or, on the contrary, would it be a paradoxical way to reaffirm the intimate enemy of gender, *le sexual?*" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 208). Laplanche's initial response is that gender is already present in psychoanalysis, already present as a hint in Freud even though he never himself uses the term "gender." In fact, the German word *Geschlecht* means both gender and sex. According to Laplanche, the masculine/feminine is presented as a riddle in Freud's work precisely because it is not purely biological, psychological, or social. Rather, it is an odd mixture of the three. But the question remains: What are gender and sexuality? In a Freudian sense, Laplanche inquiries into how the child comes to be gendered and sexed. He addresses this question in the form of a triad —gender, sex, *le sexual*—that forms the child. This triad is crucial for Laplanche because it emphasizes what is, as explained in the preceding, central to sexuality: the primacy of others and the centrality of the unconscious and repression in the constitution of sexuality.

To speak of the child in the presence of the adult, receiving messages in need of translation, is to put gender—in the gender, sex, *le sexual* order—first. This, for Laplanche, "implies the primacy of the sexuated 'foundation'" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 212). The "biological sex" is not perceived or experienced by the child in the first months. For Laplanche, "Gender comes first in time and awareness, and it begins to be stabilized toward the end of the first year" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 213). Gender as an assignment is a social construction for Laplanche but in an entirely different sense from Ahmed. His theory of gender assignment does not entail a simple separation of biology and society (sex is biological and gender is social). As he claims in "Gender, Sex, and the Sexual," gender "is *neither* a hypothetical cerebral impregnation, which would be a hormonal impregnation *nor* an imprint in Stoller's sense, *nor* a habit" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 213, italics in original). Laplanche calls these notions of gender ipsocentric—"centered on the single individual" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 213). Thus, he argues, the key term for an understanding of gender is *assignment* because assignment "emphasizes the primacy of the other" (Laplanche, 2007, p. 213). In other words, the social construction of gender denotes the process by which gender is assigned—but not determined—by adult others in a process of enigmatic messages and their translation.

## Determination or Resistance

For Ahmed, gender is an "effect of how bodies take up objects" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 59). Sexual object-choice, for her, is "sticky" because other things stick "when we orient ourselves towards objects, especially if such orientations do not follow the family or social line" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 101). Thus, because sexualization is spatial, differences in our sexual orientation are a result of object-choice and our relation to the world (Ahmed, 2006, p. 68). Sexual orientation, for Ahmed, "involves different lines insofar as the others that desire is directed toward are already constructed as the 'same sex,' or the 'other sex.' It is not simply the object that determines the 'direction' of one's desire; rather, the direction one takes makes some others available as objects to be desired. Being directed towards the same sex or the other sex becomes seen as moving along different lines" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 70). As I show in the first section of this article, tending toward what is within reach means following the family line. Thus, for Ahmed, to be straight is to follow a straight line toward the "other sex" and to reproduce compulsory heterosexuality; to be queer is to diverge from the straight line through accidents that disorient us and to challenge compulsory heterosexuality.

If heterosexuality is compulsive, how does non-heterosexuality arise? How is resistance to compulsive heterosexuality possible? For Ahmed, an encounter with new objects can lead to a disorientation that reconstitutes the body and its surroundings. In other words, the same structures that reproduce heterosexuality can lead to its subversion. For Ahmed, to simply overcome moments of disorientation is to reproduce the binary between the normative and nonnormative gender lines. "The normative can be considered an effect of the repetition of bodily actions over time, which produces what we can call the bodily horizon, a space for action, *which puts some objects and not others in reach*" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 66, italics in original). The world is in line when the body is straight and out of line when non-heterosexual possibilities are opened up through disorientation.

According to Ahmed, to become lesbian, for example, does not mean that one was not a lesbian before naming oneself a lesbian. At the same time, however, the naming itself does not suggest that one was not a lesbian prior to this naming. What you are called and called to be are related. To be named a gender is also to demand that you perform that gender. For Ahmed, to name oneself a gender is an effect of being a particular gender, which then produces the effects of that gender.[7] "After all, declaring oneself to be a lesbian is not what makes one experience lesbian desire: tending toward women as objects of desire is what compels such a risky action of self-naming in the first place" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 93). In this way, she argues that there is truth to "contact sexuality," which claims that contact with others shapes our sexual orientation. Since sexual orientation is formed phenomenologically and the predominant sexuality is heterosexuality, Ahmed relies on the accidental to account for non-heterosexuality.

If non-heterosexuality is not socially produced with the force of heterosexuality, does disorientation, induced socially and externally, produce a new desire? If it does not produce a new desire, does it play on an already existing non-heterosexual desire? If non-heterosexuality does not require an innate non-heterosexual desire or a predisposition to non-heterosexuality, but rather is produced externally, then what determines what bodies become non-heterosexual? Put another way, if there is no innate sexual desire, does each disorienting moment affect every person in the same way?

But Ahmed's theory cannot answer these questions. Her account of the compulsiveness of heterosexuality and the accidental nature of homosexuality does not account for what sexuality and gender are. To explicate this, let us turn to her reading of Freud's "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman." She turns to this case to account for straightness as socially determined and compulsive

[7]Ahmed's theory of sexual orientation draws from Judith Butler and echoes Butler's argument that gender performativity retrospectively creates the illusion of the existence of an inner gender. It is important, however, to briefly mention their differences. For Butler, as argued in *Gender Trouble* and *The Psychic Life of Power*, it would be inaccurate to reduce the psychic workings of gender to its performativity. What gender is, for Butler, cannot be derived from its performance whether or not performance is compulsory. Moreover, Butler argues that gender and sexuality can never be reduced to their performativity because she does not lose sight of the unconscious.

through a critique of Freud's analysis of homosexuality. Ahmed rightly maintains that Freud analyzes this case by looking backward "for earlier signs to explain the acquisition of the queer tendency" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 72). But for her, Freud's method of seeking the genesis of desire is problematic because it assumes that sexuality follows a line. In fact, not only is Freud trying to find a line, she argues that Freud is reading this case for a line (Ahmed, 2006, p. 72). For Ahmed, Freud reduces the homosexual woman to an object belonging to her family, and her homosexuality to a threat to her family's desire to reproduce heterosexuality. The homosexual desire is a problem because it threatens the desire of the family. Thus, Ahmed writes: "Rather than reading this case as being about an explanation of homosexuality in a woman, we could read it as a family case" about how families demand the reproduction of heterosexuality in exchange for familial love (Ahmed, 2006, p. 73). Instead of reading this case as an attempt to explain lesbian desire, Ahmed reads this case as illustrating conformity to the family.

Freud's "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" shows for Ahmed that the family takes the place of the ego ideal. She argues that while for Freud the family "is the primary and intimate space in which libidinal energies are shaped, through identification with or desire of the mother and father, which are then displaced onto other social forms," we could see the family "as an artificial social group in the way described above: to become loyal to the family, one has identified one's ego ideal with an object, *or 'the family' becomes the object that is put in the place of the ego ideal*" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 73, italics in original). The family, for Ahmed, is in fact the body of the father; thus, an identification with the father is an identification with the family, manifested in the desire to continue the line. Ahmed is not concerned with the identification with the father or mother but with the desire to be in line as an identification with the family, or the father as the embodiment of the family. For her, "identification would not necessarily be determined by the axis of gender, but would be about values and qualities that are attributed to the figure of the father and, through him, the family form (the social good). To identify with the family would be to wish for its approval (to become a good subject) and thus to desire what 'the family' desires: the reproduction of its line" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 74).

But, as we saw with Laplanche, prior to identification with, identification by occurs. Before gender and sexual differences are perceived by the child, they are perceived in the child. Values and qualities of the family figures are already demarcated by the axis of gender. In fact, Ahmed recognizes this herself when she claims earlier that others that attract our sexual desire "are already constituted as the 'same sex,' or the 'other sex'" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 70). Yet in her reading of "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," she loses sight of this because she reads homosexuality as framed only through heterosexuality, the very same move for which she critiques Freud. She critiques Freud's rendering of homosexuality as a failed heterosexuality and argues that homosexuality appears as a failure only because it resists the reproduction of heterosexuality. But despite her criticism, she too reduces homosexuality to a failure. She states that though heterosexuality is a background that orients us and our futures, it does not always work (Ahmed, 2006, p. 94). Thus, homosexuality is the failure to conform to compulsive heterosexuality. Moreover, like Freud, she affirms that homosexuality is a problem insofar as it threatens heterosexuality. But while for psychoanalysis homosexual desire is a case that requires analysis because its genesis and nature are not transparent, for Ahmed homosexual desire becomes a case only because it challenges heterosexuality.

Ahmed's rereading of Freud's case asserts only that homosexuality is a threat to heterosexuality. What is lost in Ahmed's rereading of Freud's case is an attempt to explain the manifestation of queer desire (Ahmed, 2006, p. 75). Because she renders Freud's attempt to account for the genesis of queer desire a reduction of sexuality to a straight line, she does not give an account of what homosexual desire is. Instead, Ahmed rethinks desire as a form of action that shapes bodies and environments (Ahmed, 2006, p. 75). For Ahmed, it appears that desire is something to be directed and not something that directs us. Desire is not a driving force that is never fully transparent to us, but rather a form of action to be oriented normatively. Ahmed argues that queer orientations require work, reinhabiting the body, and redirecting one's desire. For example, she argues that lesbian desire is shaped by being in contact with others and "can be rethought as a space for action, a way of extending differently into space through tending towards 'other women'" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 102). But

psychoanalysis shows that unconscious content governs our desire. That desire does not have a predetermined object does not mean, for Freud and Laplanche, that it is empty of psychic content and able to be directed at will. The dissociation of the sexual drive from the object does not imply that an object does not come to be determined. That the object of our desire could be anything does not imply that it can be anything at any time. That the object-choice is not inherently connected to the drives does not imply polymorphous perversity. Thus, unconscious sexuality is not the passive opposite of the conscious; rather, the unconscious is an active process intrinsic to sexuality.

Ahmed misses this point because she renders the production of heterosexuality, which has been presupposed, compulsory, à la Rich (Rich, 1996). Specifically, she separates two forms of sexual orientation: (i) compulsory heterosexuality produced from outside forces, and (ii) non-heterosexuality *not* produced from outside forces and yet produced from accidents in relation to the external world. To maintain the subversive character of non-heterosexual desire she presupposes heterosexuality and lets this presupposition inform her reading of non-heterosexuality. In doing so, she risks making only non-heterosexuality innate. Heterosexuality is not innate, for Ahmed, insofar as it is compulsive. A natural and inevitable heterosexuality would not require social work to guarantee its reproduction. She argues that this does not mean that straight people are victims but that they become straight by being brought under the rule of law. That is, to be straight is to fall prey to compulsory heterosexuality and not one particular expression of sexuality. To be queer is to resist this compulsion. Thus, homosexual possibilities, and homosexuality as such, are understood through heterosexuality.

But by making heterosexuality foundational to the constitution of sexuality, Ahmed never accounts for what heterosexuality, particularly, and sexuality, in general, are. She argues that, in opposition, all other sexualities are nonnormative. Unlike Freud and Laplanche, for whom sexuality is always a site of tension and conflict, for Ahmed the "problem" with sexuality is its battle with imposed social norms, or with compulsory heterosexuality.

If gender and sexuality are not constituted by our choice and if our unconscious is, at least partially, a product of the unconscious desires and fantasies of others, can heterosexuality simply be a product of normalization by virtue of a push to stay "in line," as Ahmed claims? If others, in general, and parental figures, in particular, make demands and manifest their aspirations and expectations, can a phenomenological account address the nature of these demands and expectations? Unlike Ahmed, I argue that to answer these questions it is necessary to account for the formation of sexuality and gender without presupposing heterosexuality and without reducing sexuality to observable patterns of behavior and lifestyle.

For Ahmed, the phenomenal space, which constitutes gender and sexuality, opens up a space of possibilities and forecloses others. If sexuality and gender are formed phenomenologically, are they phenomenologically determined? The space of possible sexual orientations, for Ahmed, seems to be both determined and limited by the phenomenal world. In the conventional family, the most reachable objects are heterosexual precisely because the child most often finds itself in a field of heterosexuality. But in the case of psychoanalysis, the phenomenal space—the space in which the child forms bonds—opens up a space of possibility that is no longer limited by the phenomenal space. This is possible by virtue of both the unconscious and fantasies. The phenomenal space in which we find ourselves is already infiltrated with the extra-phenomenal: the unconscious, *le sexual*, fantasies.

Sexuality is not reducible to the phenomenal world. Because sexuality is not reducible to its appearance, we cannot presume, for example, that our father is in fact a heterosexual body demanding the reproduction of heterosexuality. Moreover, it is because the demands of others are never transparent that there is need for translation. We resist the demands of others precisely because the sexualized space we inhabit is not something we simply are in, but is our very own skin, as Ahmed claims. Objects around us can create imprints in our body because there is resistance, otherwise the demand would simply pass through in a process of determination. For the child to simply realize the demand of others and

reproduce the family line, the child would need to possess both the content of the demand and the capability to process that demand. Given the enigmatic content of prescriptive messages, parental figures can demand homosexuality while in a heterosexual space. That is, the demands are never transparent requests that correspond to the articulated desires and fantasies of adult others. We cannot, therefore, speak of "successful" or "unsuccessful" translations in the same way that lines cannot exhaust familial sexual dynamics. If we take seriously the unconscious in the formation of sexuality and gender, the answer cannot simply be that the child tends toward what they are assigned unless an accident leads to a disorientation that puts new objects in the foreground. We cannot simply demarcate differences in sexuality on the basis of straightness. We need a different answer to the question of what determines and forms our gender and sexuality.

Where Laplanche shows the inseparability of the unconscious from sexuality, in Ahmed's account of sexual orientation the unconscious is conspicuously absent. The absence of the unconscious in Ahmed's work leads to the erasure of *le sexual*. One might object that Ahmed is not concerned with psychoanalysis and therefore the absence of the unconscious in her work is not significant. But Ahmed states explicitly in her introduction to *Queer Phenomenology* that she will draw on psychoanalysis. However, what kind of psychoanalysis does Ahmed need for her theory of sexual orientation? A psychoanalysis without the unconscious. The absence of the unconscious is conspicuous, to say the least, for at least two reasons: (i) because Ahmed engages directly with Freud, for whom the concept of the unconscious is a key concept; and(ii) because she engages with Freud's theory of sexuality, which is taken up by Freud only insofar as it is unconscious. Ahmed's engagement with Freud, as we saw with her rereading of "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman," takes the form of naturalizing *le sexual* by way of revising Freud's theory.[8] Sexuality is no longer a point of tension and conflict without resolution; rather, in Ahmed's case, sexuality becomes problematic insofar as its enemy is heterosexuality.

Gender and sexuality are neither purely social, nor psychological, nor biological. Freud, in a letter to Carl Muller-Brunschweig, maintains that the dichotomy between the psychic and the biological has no place in psychoanalysis.[9] In fact, for Laplanche, sexuality and gender manifest the breakdown of this distinction. Because Laplanche breaks with the society–biology distinction, he does not provide a theory of sexuality either as that which is molded by "society" or as a deviation from heterosexuality. For him, sexuality arises from a deviation of the vital orders and is implanted from the structures, unconscious, and fantasies of the adult world. Sexuality and gender are possible by virtue of asymmetrical and nontransparent relations to others. Specifically, even though the formation of gender occurs through messages of gender assignment received from the socii, these messages are not solely determinative and require translation. Thus, Stein rightly argues that "without the other, the transition from brute self-preservation (instinct) to the intersubjective sexual (drive) is not possible" (Stein, 2007, p. 181).

J. Rose and Anthony Elliott, among others, have criticized Laplanche for reducing the child to a product of others (Elliott, 2005). But in my interpretation of Laplanche, the child is not and cannot be a simple replica of caregivers; rather, the child's ego is formed as a result of repression that occurs during translation. To translate and work through psychic content is not to replicate the demand of others because the child is not simply a victim of normalization. If messages are enigmatic, their content could contain homosexuality, heterosexuality, asexuality, bisexuality, or other significations. If the child could literally interpret the messages and take up the demands of others, then we would no longer be in the psychoanalytic sphere of translation but in simple determination. As Laplanche argues, the child does not receive raw messages but rather material that requires the labor of translation. To speak of translation is already to speak of agency in the formation of gender and sexuality, however limited that may be.

[8]It is worth noting that Ahmed is operating in a long tradition of feminist theory that has rightly criticized Freud on multiple fronts —for arguing that the libido is masculine, for equating passivity with femininity, or for his theory of penis envy, to name a few.
[9]Quoted in Hsieh (2012, p. 106).

In *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, Laplanche claims that the drives have their source in the untranslated remains of enigmatic messages that are implanted by others. Laplanche refers to this as a wound (Laplanche, 1985, p. 129). Judith Butler rightly reads his theory of seduction as a "primary trauma, an unwanted interruption by what is foreign" (Butler, 2014, p. 120). The psyche is this breach. Therefore, the drives are not simply hereditary or adaptive. The sources of the drives, as Butler argues, are adult impingements that excite the child through mundane practices that are nonetheless sexual. "Sexuality emerges in its first moment as the 'leaning' (*Anlehnung)* of the drive on the instinctual self-preservative functions (of feeding, digestions, excretion, etc.), specified by Freud in the second of the *Three Essays*, that on 'Infantile Sexuality'" (Butler, 2014, p. 120). Precisely because the messages of the others are enigmatic, the child needs to process and translate them.

If the child receives and translates enigmatic messages, we must ask, can the child refuse, resist, or filter these messages in order not to become simply a product of others? Does the infant defer the translation of the messages? Does the confrontation with enigmatic messages lead to trauma, since the child has no available tools to decipher and process messages? To speak of forces that come to determine gender in a way that does not reduce all subjects to either victims or mimicry, we cannot claim that a successful translation leads to heterosexuality. Rather, to speak of gender assignment in terms of communication and relations with the socii is to critically engage with gender assignment as something that is not purely conscious and transparent. In the same way that prescriptive gender messages are not clear but instead call for translation, the assignment of gender is not an unavoidable destiny. Gender assignment as a product of an exchange that requires the labor of translation cannot guarantee the reproduction of heterosexuality or preclude the possibility of non-heteronormative sexualities.

Butler and Fletcher rightly ague that Laplanche's framework reworks the normalizing function of the paternal law and Oedipus complex in a way that allows for resistance. Lacan's paternal law, as both authors argue, is replaced by the enigmatic messages. And here lies Ahmed's disclosure of the possibility for change. She replaces the family—the socii—with the paternal law, with the figure of the father. She speaks of the "line of the family" as the demand to reproduce the blood of the father through the process of compulsory heterosexuality.[10] Unlike Ahmed, Laplanche does not privilege the paternal law but reconstitutes the formation of gender and sex themselves. If gender is a result of the translation of enigmatic messages by the child, we would deceive ourselves to assume that we can choose our gender by exercising radical autonomy or change our sexual orientation by directing our desire. As Butler claims: "The unconscious is the breach in radical autonomy, and that cannot be reversed" (Butler, 2014, p. 131).

For Ahmed, what we perceive and see depends on what we are facing. Queer phenomenology, she claims, "faces the back" and "looks 'behind' phenomenology, which hesitates at the sight of the philosopher's back" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 29). As I show in the first section of this article, for Ahmed, backgrounds reveal conditions of emergence. This attentiveness to backgrounds, this looking back, is key for queering phenomenology. The looking back, however, does not seem to require taking into account the unconscious, despite her use of other psychoanalytic concepts. In fact, Ahmed is critical of Freud's method of looking backward to account for the emergence of queer desire. She argues that phenomenology accounts for the way in which "objects and others have already left their impressions on the skin surface" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 54). Psychoanalysis, on the other hand, shows how objects have left their impressions on the psyche and the role of others in the creation of the psyche itself. The method of looking backward, for psychoanalysis, is necessary because the unconscious, which bleeds in our everyday life, is blind to its own genesis.

[10]The work of many authors, such as Theodor Adorno, has shown that the family, as the locus of sexual development, is not a neutral and closed circle. The family, in whatever particular historical formation, depends on social processes and not on the father's wishes and dreams. In fact, as Adorno (1972) has pointed out in *Aspects of Sociology*, in our present conditions, the child can very quickly see that the father by no means possess the power and goodness that the child expected. The father is weak in our society. This can lead to an inability to identify with the father and familial expectations, as well as to a disillusionment with our abilities to meet expectations such as reproduction.

Resistance must be located at the level of translation. As Laplanche claims:

> The translation model of repression can be conceived only within the framework of the seduction theory. The thing-like presentations which form the kernel of the unconscious are to be conceived as that which eludes the child's first attempt to construct for itself an interhuman world, and so translate into a more or less coherent view the messages coming from adults. The partial but necessary failure of these attempts derives from the fact that these messages are enigmatic for the one who sends them, in other words they are *compromised* by the sender's unconscious. (Laplanche, 1999, p. 95)

Enigmatic messages are partly repressed and partly translated. It is precisely because the content of enigmatic messages is not transparent to anyone that we all inevitably translate differently. Retranslation is a form of resistance precisely because to make good on the demands of others is impossible; one cannot replicate the others. Translation, as Freud shows, always also entails a failure that leads to repressed content. In other words, gender assignment occurs in the play of translation, the failure to translate, repression, and the taking up of psychic content for a retranslation.[11]

Any theorization of sexual liberation—leaving aside the question of its actual possibility in our society—must take seriously the relation of the unconscious to sexuality. Both the repressed content and the unconscious are active in our everyday life.[12] It is not evident how following certain nonconventional lifestyles amounts to challenging or threatening the production of normativity. Sexual drives, even if not constrained by compulsive heterosexuality, could not be satisfied directly or without mediation. In fact, the sublimation of sexual drives, which begins with identification, is decisive for socialization. The direction of these sublimations, in other words, is never entirely autonomous.

To follow Ahmed's account of sexual orientation on the basis of available orienting figures and objects requires a serious analysis and critique of the ways in which non-heterosexuality is presented as a possible path. For Ahmed, heterosexuality becomes the norm against which sexual orientation can be in line or deviate. Deviation from the norm constitutes non-heterosexuality. As a result, Ahmed does not account for sexuality and gender but only affirms heterosexuality as compulsory and queerness as divergent from the straight line. In presupposing the existence of heterosexuality, Ahmed excludes the unconscious, *le sexual*, and fantasies. But we must move beyond a theory of sexuality and gender that takes the world as it appears to an analysis of real antagonisms that structure the way in which the world is, appears, and is interpreted. Only then can we begin to understand the way in which sexuality can be, or is, a part of ideological normative structures.

## Notes on contributor

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[11]For Laplanche transference is not confined to the psychoanalytic situation but can also occur in cultural and artistic productions.
[12]It is significant to point out that Michel Foucault's (1990) *The History of Sexuality* is a seminal text in feminist theory and queer theory. Foucault famously argued that sexuality, unlike what Freud claims, is not repressed; rather, there is an incitement to bring sexuality into the focus, to produce discourse around it, and to control it. Sexuality is everywhere and we speak about it all the time. Alenka Zupančič (2016) has rightly criticized Foucault's account of Freud's theory of sexuality and the absence of the unconscious in *The History of Sexuality*. Zupančič points out that the unconscious for Freud is significant not just because of what is repressed but also because of what is discharged. In other words, the unconscious is not simply the passive opposite of the conscious.

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