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Re-orientation: Marriage, heteronormativity and heterodox paths

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Abstract
'Hetero' (from the Greek, 'different') is most familiar to us in its attachment as a prefix to 'sexuality'. In gender studies, sexuality studies and feminist scholarship, heterosexuality is routinely contrasted with homosexuality, and this contrast is often mapped over the opposition of heteronormative versus queer (ideas, practices, effects). These word-pairs (heterosexual and homosexual; heteronormative and queer) tend to operate dichotomously – that is, in exclusive, exhaustive and hierarchically ordered ways. Taking up Sara Ahmed's work on orientation, this article experiments with an alternative pairing, exploring the potential for admixture or subversion in those dichotomies. 'Heterodoxy' is introduced as a concept that might be usefully contrasted with 'orthodoxy' in sexuality/gender studies – particularly in relation to current debates on marriage. The larger aim of this endeavour is to theorise heterosexuality in more accurate ways, and to seek out understandings of heterosexuality (including its historical relationship with heteronormative marriage) which acknowledge its horrors without foreclosing hope for its future.

Keywords
Cohabitation, desire paths, marriage, queer heterosexuality, Sara Ahmed, sexualities

Introduction

This article explores ways of thinking about heterosexuality, and especially the intersection of heterosexuality with heteronormative marriage, in order to reconsider their relationship. Its purpose is to assess the impact of arguably small subversions and to consider their contribution to broader social change. It builds on existing work on critical heterosexualities, adopting a similar rationale to Beasley et al.'s view that theorisations of sexuality are limited by understandings of

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heterosexuality as always-already monolithic (2012, 2015).[1] The argument unfolds in several sections. I begin by outlining the prevalent ways that heterosexuality is understood in critical sexuality studies. I describe three overlapping fields of critique levelled at heterosexuality, then illustrate how these critiques can be applied to understandings of marriage and, more broadly, conjugality.[2] These illustrations also demonstrate how heterosexual marriage and heteronormativity are sometimes collapsed. In the second section, I explain why the simple imperative to 'queer' heterosexuality may not be as feasible as it sounds. Analysing readings of the phrases 'same-sex marriage' and 'queer heterosexuality' as relatedly (albeit troublesomely) oxymoronic, I look for spaces in which conjugality might offer useful material for theorising social change. In the latter part of the article, I suggest that Sara Ahmed's account of orientation presents a useful approach to understanding heterosexual as well as queer orientations, and assess some of its strengths and omissions (2006). Finally, I extend my critique of Ahmed's work to show how her approach might be augmented to reframe conjugality in ways that refuse the opposition of straight/queer and similar organising binaries.

The trouble with heterosexuality

In feminist gender and sexuality studies, it is almost axiomatic that heterosexuality is troublesome – so much so that there are many more critical objects and approaches to heterosexuality than can be detailed here.[3] Heterosexuality and homosexuality are no longer inevitably binarised, and many scholars are working in ways that complicate their opposition. Indeed, Judith Butler's analysis of the heterosexual matrix opened up ways to think about gender, embodiment and desire that refuse the naturalness of their easy alignment (1990).[4] This idea is a keystone of queer theory, which 'names or describes identities and practices that foreground the instability inherent in the supposedly stable relationship between anatomical sex, gender, and sexual desire' (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 1). While queer counterparts to heterosexuality demonstrate again and again that there is no necessary alignment of embodiment, gender and desire, (heterosexual) norms tend to continue to be positioned as stable and coherent. Queer identities are seen as provisional, fluid and contingent, but heterosexuality – or, at least, institutionally buttressed, mainstream heterosexuality – is more often perceived to be steadfastly monolithic (Beasley et al., 2012).

This is not to ignore recent, welcome attention to divergent or transgressive heterosexualities. A 2015 special issue of the journal *Sexualities*, for example, focuses on untangling progressive possibilities for heterosexuality beyond the regime of domination with which it has been historically (and correctly) strongly associated. Contributors offer analyses of how heterosexuality intersects with other markers of difference such as gender, class and ethnicity, to produce multiple, complex configurations. The articles explore cases and accounts that unsettle the well-trodden connection between heterosexuality and dominance both theoretically and empirically, and present ways of thinking about diversely heterosexual

identities and practices. Kath Albury (2015), for example, discusses the 'crossed' and multiple categories with which people attending 'sex/play parties' identify (2015). Alison Better and Brandy L. Simula present a nascent taxonomy of sexual orientations that defy heteronormative binaries, in which power differentials are eroticised but not necessarily gendered in any consistent way. The particular contribution of these (and similar) research undertakings is that they explore heterosexualities whose divergence from heteronormativity does not necessarily inhere in same-sex attraction or activity (2015). In this respect they differ from both research into bisexuality and scholarship on the broader range of 'disconnects' between sexual identities and practices.[5] Further, they depart markedly from earlier and much more numerous critiques, most of which employ one or more of three (nonetheless useful and productive) characterisations. Each of these three elements can be conceptualised as a constituent element of heteronormativity's critical umbrella, offering degrees of intersecting or overlapping shade.

The first critical characterisation of heterosexuality is that it is unfairly privileged – it confers unearned, unmarked benefits to those whose experience of desire aligns with heterosexual norms (after McIntosh, [1988] 2011). Heterosexual sex – or at least the pinnacle or hegemonic form of heterosex – is permissible sex: it is protected, representable and respectable (Rubin, 1984).[6] Public displays of heterosexual affection such as hand-holding and kissing are generally tolerated (if not welcomed); heterosexual people have no trouble finding appropriate Valentine's Day cards; straight couples feature routinely in movies and television shows. In countless mundane ways, heterosexuality is summarily equated with love and romance. Like white race privilege, heterosexual privilege is largely taken for granted and unmarked by its beneficiaries.[7] As film scholar Ewan Kirkland (2007) says of heterosexuality in romantic comedy (2007): 'identifying the features of something usually featureless necessarily involves forcing into relief qualities otherwise invisible, due, paradoxically, not to their absence from view, but to their constant and pervasive visibility'. In its unmarked ubiquity, heterosexuality is 'normal' and naturalised. It is the privileged, 'default' sexuality.

The flipside of heterosexual privilege is homophobia. Homophobia is sometimes understood as an anxious and negative personal response to homosexuality, originally denoting, in Barry D. Adam's words, 'an irrational fear or a set of mistaken ideas held by prejudiced individuals ... [which can be purportedly alleviated] through therapy or education' (Adam, 1998: 388). However, as Adam goes on to argue, heterosexist projects draw on structural, discursive, historical and institutional supports on a broader scale: their homophobic effects are not merely the expression of individual fears and prejudices but are also socially inscribed. Homophobia can be thus conceived as the social/structural (as well as personal/psychological) mobilisation of anti-homosexuality. In positioning itself as natural and normal, heterosexuality excludes and disavows whatever is not-heterosexual, drawing and re-drawing its boundaries (Fuss, 1991), tolerating, excusing and even endorsing violence against non-heterosexual people and those heterosexual people who fail to meet heteronormative standards (Adam and Maticka-Tyndale, 2011: 217). Heterosexuality is not

merely or benignly normative, then, but is also in many ways more flatly dangerous. Heterosexuality is protected from being held to account for the brutality it permits – homophobia is in many instances excused as 'legitimate'. In this sense, homophobia is not merely an individualised response whose disciplinary mode is psychological (Adam, 1998: 388, after Plummer, 1981: 62, and Kitzinger, 1987: 154), but is a more thoroughly *socially* inculcated element.

A third critical characterisation of heterosexuality is its complicity in producing, repeating and endorsing gendered power relations. As Chrys Ingraham comments, 'gender ... organize[s] the institution of heterosexuality' (2005: 4). Critiques of heterosexuality constitute a productive and enduring field of feminist theory and analysis, from Adrienne Rich's landmark essay 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence' (1980) to Ingraham's 'The Heterosexual Imaginary' (1994), to Stevi Jackson's extensive body of work, including her recent collaboration with Momin Rahman (Rahman and Jackson, 2010), among others. As one of a number of starting points, feminist critiques assert that heterosexuality eroticises men's domination of women: heterosexuality requires sustaining meaningful distinctions between masculinity and femininity, aligning masculinity with men, and femininity with women. These and other dichotomies are naturalised in heterosexuality, usually to men's advantage. A simple illustration of heterosexual male domination is apparent in the way that heterosexual couples typically comprise a taller man/shorter woman, despite many women being taller than many men. There is no explicit rule forbidding taller woman/shorter man pairings, (and indeed some couples defy the convention). Nevertheless, men and women typically form taller man/shorter woman couples, and this, in turn, reinforces the idea that men in general are taller than women in general. In fact, all that can be said is that the tallest men are taller than the tallest women – there are greater differentials of height *within* gendered categories than between them (Touraille, 2013). Nevertheless, the expectation is for women to be the 'lesser' partner in heterosexual coupledom, and this extends to more broadly conceived power relations – from household labour to earning power to the exercise of physical (and other forms of) violence. As Stevi Jackson quips, heterosexuality's gendered reach stretches out to dictate 'who washes the sheets as well as what goes on between them' (2005: 18).

These three aspects of heterosexuality – its privilege, homophobia and gendered power relations – together constitute what the term 'heteronormativity' means for present purposes. While each of these three elements is sometimes understood to be thoroughly dependent on the others (Schilt and Westbrook, 2009), they can also be explored in isolation.[8] Despite heterosexuality's propensity to 'hide in plain view', the connections that tie heterosexuality to marriage, and in doing so buttress heteronormativity, are clear (Ward and Schneider, 2009: 435). Indeed, marriage is central to heterosexuality (Ingraham, 1999, 2005: 405). Each of the critical approaches to heterosexuality outlined above can be illustrated with examples drawn from the history of conjugality or marriage. Like heterosexuality, marriage offers and occupies a privileged status. Wearing a wedding ring, even in the 'post-closeted' present, signifies heterosexuality (Dean, 2014: 25). The position

of marriage as one of life's milestones overlays the expectation that people are normally and naturally heterosexual, and this heteronormative structure is reinforced in marriage law. Marital sex, in the form of *vera copula* (Latin, meaning the 'true' conjunction of bodies), is the hegemonic expression of heterosexuality. Whether or not other sex acts are criminalised, *vera copula* marital sex is specifically lawful sex (Honoré, 1978: 10), anchoring law and its effects to corporeal sexual activity. First and foremost, then, heterosexual marriage bestows historically heteronormative privilege.

The 'respectable' status that marriage confers is not a harmless social preference. Marriage has a distinctly homophobic history. Homophobia is evident not only in the exercise of exclusionary violence and harassment against identifiably gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, but also in the particularly cruel outcomes of a number of matrimonial cases. One need not look past the notorious *Corbett v. Corbett* case for confirmation that this is so (1970). *Corbett v. Corbett* adjudicated the validity of a marriage purported to have occurred in 1963 between an English aristocrat, Arthur Corbett, and his bride, model April Ashley. The groom was aware that Ashley had undergone sex reassignment surgery several years prior to their wedding. Throughout the course of the protracted proceedings, lawyers inquired into Ashley's corporeal and sexual identity in highly offensive terms, and the case has been the subject of much commentary and critique.[9] The decision handed down by the presiding judge was that, for the purpose of marriage, sex is to be considered fixed at birth. According to the chromosomal, gonadal and genital criteria set out in the judgment, April Ashley was deemed to be male. The effects of all this on April Ashley's well-being were predictably devastating, and no doubt served as an injunction to silence others, just as the acquittal of people perpetrating homophobic attacks deters other victims from coming forward (Ashley, 2012). *Corbett* is an infamously homophobic and transphobic decision (Sharpe, 2002b). Despite its singularity, there are many more instances of homophobic and transphobic case law relating to marriage (Taitz, 1986; Sandland, 2009; Sharpe, 2009, 2012). These, along with the longstanding heterosexual exclusivity of marriage, amount to a governmental expression of homophobia and transphobia (Sharpe, 2002b; Gill, 2012). The heterosexual exclusivity of marriage as the most valued form of intimate relationship constitutes unambiguous homophobia, manifesting as a generalised political endorsement and privileging of heterosexuality to the detriment of other orientations (Johnson, 2013). In these ways (and more), heterosexual marriage is homophobic.

Finally, marriage is an obvious site for the gendered power relations attaching to heterosexuality. Gendered double standards relating to adultery, for example, form part of matrimonial legal history in many places (Golder and Kirkby, 1995; Sweeny, 2014). Married women (but not married men) were routinely expected to resign their jobs in Australia (and elsewhere) even into the 1970s (Sawer, 1996), and continue to be disadvantaged in relation to paid work and financial matters more generally (Usdansky and Parker, 2011; Finch, 2012). Lower-paid, part-time and casual work remains the norm for many married women

(Junor, 1998; Markey et al., 2002). In a range of feminist analyses, women's social subordination is tethered to heterosexual marriage. The connection is evident, for example, in analyses of domestic violence.[10] Prior to the criminalisation of wife-beating, domestic violence was dealt with in many jurisdictions as the matrimonial offence of 'cruelty'. Gendered expectations, assumptions and difficulties attaching to cruelty as grounds for divorce have been imported into more recent laws criminalising domestic violence, resulting in remedies of limited effectiveness (Brook, 2015). In this and many other ways, marriage has been criticised as an institutional arena in which heterosexuality's gendered power relations have been endorsed and upheld.

The three orders of heteronormativity outlined above – highlighting heterosexual privilege, homophobia and gendered power relations in the arena of conjugality – are by no means always distinct. On the contrary, each critique can be seen to overlap one or more of the others, often reinforcing but sometimes complicating each other. They are best conceptualised as a kind of heteronormative love triangle whose complex whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Heteronormative, homophobic, misogynistic heterosexuality is a critically rich place where dichotomies – especially normative/queer; hetero/homo; man/woman – are mobilised, with all that such opposition entails (Fuss, 1991). To be clear: I do not question the existence or significance of these orders of trouble. The broad-brush descriptions above are not meant to reduce them, but rather to serve as a starting point.

It is apparent, then, that heterosexuality and marriage share strongly heteronormative features. Heteronormativity, heterosexuality and marriage occupy overlapping critical fields but they are not identical.[11] When any two of the three are collapsed, discursive, political and material tensions emerge. For example, hesitating to endorse marriage as an institution that is in itself good for everyone can be easily misread as a heterosexist defence of the institution (Leonard, 2006). In what follows, I explore those tensions with one overarching aim: to identify progressive possibilities (even if they are micro-possibilities) for mainstream heterosexuality that go beyond being a queer ally. Can we identify how heterosexual practices have been organised in ways that challenge institutional heteronormativity? Can such practices or instances be explored and perhaps celebrated without doing an apologetics, or a faulty recuperation? Are even small subversions potentially effective? These are questions whose answers must be offered tentatively if the re-validation of heteronormativity is to be avoided.

Critiques of heterosexuality can be mapped over critiques of marriage, but it does not necessarily follow that remedying the civil inequality of access to marriage according to sexual orientation will alleviate marriage's sexist or misogynistic elements. That is, one might support extending access to marriage for same-sex couples even as one continues to criticise its effects for different-sex couples: heterosexual privilege, homophobia and sexism are not all of a piece, even if we sometimes refer to them as the single complex of heteronormativity. It might be suggested that if what is sought is space for, or theorisations of, a (mainstream) heterosexuality that is less privileged, less homophobic and less gendered, the obvious place to turn

is queer theory and/or queer practices. In the next section I suggest some reasons for resisting this turn.

'Queer heterosexuality' and 'same-sex marriage'

While the intention to unhinge the privileges attached to heterosexuality must be welcomed – and while 'queering' may be a useful shorthand for describing this enterprise – a more precise terminology is desirable. So long as heterosexuality prevails as a majority orientation it will, almost by definition, repel efforts to 'make [it] strange, to frustrate, to counteract, to delegitimize, to camp [it] up' (Sullivan, 2003: vi). Heterosexual practices allied with queer sexualities tend to be non-mainstream – they may be polyamorous (Anapol, 2010; Kean, 2015) or BDSM-based (Better and Simula, 2015), or mobilise gender-queer desires and identities (Heasley, 2005), for example. Research into these practices and identities is clearly worthwhile. But 'queering' heterosexuality as a means to dismantling heteronormative privilege is an arguably fraught enterprise on several counts.

First, it tends to obscure the different valency of heterosexual and non-heterosexual desires and practices. There are corporeal, social, discursive, historical meanings attached to who and how we love. If queering heterosexuality involves contesting 'uniform and essentialist understandings of heterosexuality', and if this contestation is evident in 'sexual fluidity' (Dean, 2014: 182), those who find their desire remaining steadfastly heterosexual can only be figured as an embarrassment of dinosaurs plaguing the post-closeted sexual landscape – particularly if, as Dean's findings suggest, some straight people's willingness to embrace sexual fluidity is motivated by their anti-homophobic politics more than by sexual desire (2014). Claiming such fluidity despite not being moved by it seems to me to risk endorsing a kind of (straight) sexual hypocrisy in which the corporeal differences between heterosexual and homosexual practices and desires – and the knowledges associated with personally experiencing them – are discounted. In other words, 'queering heterosexuality' invites a smoothing out of meaningful difference, or an invitation to experiential sameness, that may be (at best) premature, and (at worst) potentially assimilatory and annihilating.

Second, it may be interpreted as relieving heterosexual people of the burden of examining heteronormative privilege and working towards a more equitably oriented world. In the same way that rape is characterised as a women's problem, or racism becomes 'about' those who are its targets, figuring a queer solution to heteronormativity carries the possible implication that heterosexual people need do nothing. The irony is, of course, that not having to factor one's sexual orientation as an everyday risk is in fact a privilege of heterosexuality.[12] The flipside of this constitutes a third inadequacy – namely, the risk of appropriation or misappropriation. To explore this risk, I want to place a second phrase, 'same-sex marriage', side by side with 'queer heterosexuality'. Both have been charged with having oxymoronic tendencies.[13] Whether we prosecute or defend the idea that either or

both of these terms are oxymoronic, it is clear that their trouble is discursively constituted: oxymora are, after all, entirely discursive creatures.[14] Both phrases trouble the taken-for-grantedness of heterosexuality and its respectable norms, but they are hardly synonymous. Many arguments for marriage equality liken respectable homosexuality to heteronormativity and ask for a share of its social spoils.[15] 'Queer heterosexuality' does not simply return the gesture, because the relationship between homosexuality and heterosexuality is not symmetrical. Both phrases, however, mobilise fear of (discursive) appropriation or misappropriation, even when they are deployed in politically contrasting ways.

Heteroconservatives like James Q. Wilson (1997) and Robert Knight (1997) insist that marriage is by definition heterosexual, and that if the word 'marriage' ceases to mean the union of one man and one woman, the term will pejorate, perhaps prompting the invention of a neologism that re-centres marriage as (proudly, properly) privileged, homophobic and hetero-gendered. Their fear is that if gay and lesbian couples access the institution of marriage, straight conservatives will be forced to rebuild and re-name the institution whose meaning, for them at least, is almost entirely premised on its exclusionary logic. The metaphors they mobilise feature imagery associated with war, ruin and corporeal crisis. In the hetero-conservative world, same-sex couples infiltrate, infect and weaken marriage, and this is perceived as socially devastating.[16]

In more complex and measured ways, the phrase 'queer heterosexuality' can also incite fear of appropriation (Schlicter, 2007: 190–191). Remember that, from the beginning, 'queer' was itself an appropriated or reclaimed term, a word that was ousted from service as an element of hate speech to a badge of pride. 'Queer' has been transformed by its targets from a word used mainly as a weapon to something very different (Kitzinger and Wilkinson, 1994: 451). The oxymoronic worry, for some queer theorists and activists, is that the subversive edge of activities challenging heterosexual privilege, homophobia and hetero-gendering might be appropriated and blunted by the heterosexual mainstream. While some commentators reject the idea that the queer can ever be appropriated (Edelman, 2009: 149), instances of mainstream sexualities angling in on gay and lesbian activities or festivities belie this.[17] In the context of conjugality, the worry is that marriage may have an assimilatory impetus – that it might function to 'straighten out' gay and lesbian lives, absorbing and disarming queer social/political critiques.[18]

The assimilatory potential attached to marriage raises questions about how heteronormative institutions work. Does marriage, as an institution, remain thoroughly, hegemonically heteronormative when gay and lesbian couples get married? When same-sex couples marry, does marriage get queered, or do queers get straightened? How might we think about institutionalised relationships without re-opposing hetero and homo; men and women; queer and straight?[19] In the remainder of this article I explore possibilities for approaching such questions, using, as my starting point, Sara Ahmed's work *Queer Phenomenology* and the theory of orientation she mobilises therein (2006).

Ahmed, orientation and turning tables

There are a number of reasons why we might expect Ahmed's work to be useful in this enterprise, not least of which are her longstanding commitments to queer intersectionality and to investigating whiteness (1998, 2000, et passim). These concerns augur well for thinking about marriage in ways that do not occlude its racism, classism, sexism, ableism and so on. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed discusses sexual orientation, working the concept of orientation in literal, corporeal ways. She builds a queer phenomenology, an account of orientation, direction-finding, relationships in time and space between bodies and objects, paying particular attention to straightening up, or how individuals are steered along particular 'lines' or norms. Ahmed argues that heteronormativity is constituted as a gathering of objects and objectives such that possibilities for action are directed in certain ways. In time and space, Ahmed says, heteronormativity straightens, creating paths that simultaneously direct us and invite us to repeat them, so that following and retracing those lines is rewarded. Heteronormative lines are vertical and horizontal in that they involve inheriting and reproducing, receiving and giving at certain points. For Ahmed, 'heterosexuality shapes the contours of inhabitable space' (2006: 565), and of course this has effects – the most obvious being that some people live their lives feeling comfortable and safe, and are rewarded for being 'correctly' oriented, while others live in a less stable, less easily navigable space. Ahmed's dynamic phenomenology resonates with and arguably extends Butler's account of the heterosexual matrix (1990). Imagine a three-dimensional grid over all sorts of terrain. In this grid or matrix, being straight means that the space is easy to navigate: up/down is vertical and left/right is horizontal, and the two are always perpendicular to each other. For people who live heteronormatively, there are trusted paths for moving between various points; the footholds and handholds are the right size, and are positioned appropriately.

Ahmed argues that being queer means that the grid, or one's navigation of it, appears 'wonky' (2006: 66). Lines lose their predictability and stability, and appear to bend, as if seen through glasses made to someone else's prescription. Being queer means encountering the oblique (or being oblique), such that the grid is experienced as slanted, and movement is thus more perilous. In developing her account of queer phenomenology, Ahmed positions heterosexuality in an interesting way, and marriage seems to occupy an important – perhaps even pivotal – place in her thinking. In Ahmed's conceptualisation, marriage is a straightening point or device. Ahmed says marriage presents the heterosexual couple as 'a social gift' (2006: 91). One of the most ubiquitous and enduring illustrations of this is the wedding photograph. In such representations, as Niall Richardson and Sadie Wearing explain, bride and groom are inevitably positioned at the centre of the frame (2014). Accentuating the gender order, women and girls are grouped alongside the bride, men alongside the groom. Regardless of how the photographic subjects might actually have felt at the moment the image was captured, everyone smiles for the camera (Richardson and Wearing, 2014: 6). The representation is unremittingly happy. As a representational object, the wedding photo is experienced as pleasurable, aspirational,

joyous. Indeed, for Ahmed, a particular wedding photo is precisely one of those 'traces of heterosexual intimacy' (2006: 11; see also Rossi, 2011) experienced as a 'point of pressure' or straightening device (2006: 12, 89–90).

In this way, Ahmed figures marriage as a necessarily (or at least historically) heteronormative structure.[20] We need to ask how gay marriage – or same-sex marriage – affirms or complicates Ahmed's theorisation. She says: 'It is possible to live on an oblique angle and follow straight lines' (Ahmed, 2006: 567). Here, she cites and endorses Lisa Duggan's account of homonormativity as 'a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them' (Duggan, 2002: 179; Ahmed, 2006: 172; see also Ward, 2008). While Ahmed asserts that it is possible to 'live on an oblique angle' yet move in straight directions, she intimates that this might not always be comfortable. To continue Ahmed's organising analogy, to be a queer person following straight lines might be to live with vertigo, or to negotiate constant listing. Her view seems to be that gay spouses – whether queer or more homonormatively inclined – cannot experience the comfort of straightening in the same way that heteros might. And for Ahmed, the threat of being pushed back, or pushed off that line, remains. This, in turn, compromises the safety of that place. Ahmed thus tends to figure gay marriage as a kind of assimilation, or pseudo-assimilation, in which same-sex couples will never be perfectly acceptable.

Ahmed also acknowledges that some institutional structures of conjugality might be changed by queer presence there, that queer attendance might make the wedding table (or the marriage path) a bit wonky (2006: 174). However, she argues that the hegemonic power of heterosexuality will iron any queer wrinkles out; the inference is that there is no enduring queer value in marriage. Like Duggan (2002, 2008), Ahmed asserts that queer politics is better off turning away from those straightening points and living differently; living in ways that allow for disorientation and the possibilities it affords. Thus Ahmed participates, perhaps in a modified way, in that figuring of 'same sex marriage' as (at least vaguely if not fundamentally) oxymoronic, and as potentially if not truly assimilatory; of swallowing up the queer; straightening; aligning. But perhaps she goes there too quickly. The appeal of remaining outside the institutional gates may be seductive, but it is a place where the social comfort of familiarity (in several senses of the word) remains out of reach. Between the lines of Ahmed's work, there is traction to be gained in refusing the fear of appropriation, and instead considering what elements of heteronormative privilege embraced by straight subjects might be taken up by queer subjects even as the complex connections those privileges share with gender conformity and homophobia are resisted or challenged. To come at it from a different angle, which elements of the queer challenge to gender conformity and homophobia can be reinforced by straight folks without resorting to neoliberal accounts of sexualities as (already) equal? Is there room, in Ahmed's formulation of the phenomenology of sexual orientation, to follow a line that is neither straight nor twisted, or that moves between both? In the space remaining, I endeavour to locate this line by considering three problems or queries that emerge from *Queer Phenomenology*.

Ahmed's way

Ahmed does not always differentiate heterosexuality as an orientation from heteronormativity as a 'line'. Perhaps this is because the two are in fact often aligned. In a recent collection of essays entitled *Queer Futures*, for example, 'heteronormativity' is extensively indexed, but 'heterosexuality' not at all (Yekani et al., 2013). In this and many more contexts, we are enjoined to take the two terms as synonymous. However, they are not identical (Corber and Valocchi, 2003; Ward and Schneider, 2009: 435), and Ahmed alludes to their distinction at several points. In the course of discussing 'gay marriage' and its assimilatory potential, she says: 'this desire [on the part of conservative gays and lesbians] to support straight lines and the forms they elevate into moral and social ideals (such as marriage and family life) will be rejected by those whose bodies can and do line up with the straight line, which is not, of course, all straight bodies' (Ahmed, 2006: 174).

Ahmed avoids the disdain for gay marriage advanced by Duggan (2002), whose compelling critique of Andrew Sullivan's book *Virtually Normal* (1996) coined the term 'homonormativity' (2002). Ahmed, more than Duggan, seems to understand why marriage might be an appealing prospect for many. Her argument is not that gay and lesbian couples should know better than to direct their energy to heteronormative institutions, but that gay and lesbian couples risk being pushed off any straight line they try to follow. Ahmed's confidence that gay and lesbian alignment with heteronormative practices 'will be rejected by those whose bodies can and do line up with the straight line' is complicated by the fact that in the United Kingdom, New Zealand and many other places – even in Australia, where a conservative federal government refuses even to debate same-sex marriage – there is widespread and mainstream support for it. Despite initially faltering steps in some US jurisdictions, it seems unlikely that where legal and institutional support for gay and lesbian partnerships has been confirmed (whether as marriage or some other form of conjugality) it will be easy to revoke. However, as Ahmed suggests, equal marriage is not a panacea for homophobia. Homophobia endures beyond such conjugal reforms, as the American experience since the 2015 ruling guaranteeing marriage rights to gay and lesbian couples no doubt attests.

This blurring of heteronormativity and heterosexuality is evident in a second way. Ahmed refers from time to time to 'the conventional family'. It is no accident that 'the family' in *Queer Phenomenology* remains singular; or that its straightness is not always marked. Ahmed's 'straight' is *hegemonically* straight, not straight as it is lived. This is important, because Ahmed takes the trouble to develop a specifically phenomenological approach, and as such she endeavours to produce an account of orientation grounded in and consistent with lived experience. But actual straight families are often – I daresay even *usually* – inconsistent with that hegemonic version.[21] Again, this is not to suggest that there is nothing objectionable about conservative defences of the family; and it is certainly not to deny that families remain implicated in all manner of trouble. But it does suggest that the match between the ('conventional') family's directions and lines may not be as tight or consistent as Ahmed suggests.

Finally, Ahmed's work – focused as it is on queer phenomenology – sometimes misses opportunities to figure how sexualities (specifically straight and queer; homosexual and heterosexual) might be reconceived as other-than-oppositional. This is not so much a critique of Ahmed's account as a chance to extend it. Ahmed's account of living queer suggests that disorientation can be simultaneously uncomfortable and appealing. Her explanation is easily understood by anyone who has travelled to an unfamiliar place, and points to an under-theorised element in her work on orientation. Directions might be mapped, or not. Map-reading requires creative, critical, social engagement and interaction. Maps make things accessible, help bring objects into our reach and suggest directions – shortcuts, even – that might otherwise elude us. Directions can be multiple; sometimes there are roundabouts rather than forks in the road, and routes can be presented without shepherding or corralling people. How do hidden paths become visible; how do directions establish themselves as directions – and, most importantly of all, how are directions and maps *socially* rather than individually navigated? For Ahmed, the order of objects and materials creates lines. Objects and expectations certainly orient people but perhaps Ahmed understates the resilient and dynamically orienting effects of people and knowledge. I will return to this point a little later.

Hetero/doxy

So far I have suggested that in feminist, gender and sexuality studies, heterosexuality is a problem, and a problem resistant to any easy solution. I have argued that heterosexuality cannot be easily queered, as if with a theoretical silver bullet, partly because its meaning relies on a dichotomous and aligned contrast between hetero and homo; straight and queer (Corber and Valocchi, 2003: 3). And, for better or worse, the dichotomy on which the oxymoronic weight of 'queer heterosexual' and 'same sex marriage' is built remains meaningful, and continues to produce material effects. In the previous section, I outlined some strengths in Sara Ahmed's work that seem to indicate promising paths, but that are not entirely, if I may be allowed the pun, straightforward. I want to ask, now, whether it is possible to think and talk about heterosexuality in ways that bring in the most useful elements of Ahmed's account of orientation but avoid collapsing heterosexuality and heteronormativity, and avoid mapping marriage over that collapse.

For these purposes, it may be useful to posit another, different contrast: one that complicates (but avoids reiterating) hetero/homo and straight/queer binaries. We know that these are wrongly presented as exclusive and exhaustive categories (everyone is supposed to be one or the other, never neither or both, never moving from one to another), and that heterosexuality is the unfairly privileged term endowing unearned, largely invisible benefits on those who are aligned with it. With others, Ahmed is taking a step away from this dichotomous figure, presenting sexual orientation not as a property of individuals (something we 'have') but as something lived and negotiated. There are sound reasons for continuing to understand straight and queer as distinct and different. However, Ahmed wrongly

presents heterosexuality as relentlessly straight (apart from exceptional instances), and homosexuality as always oblique (bent, twisted, queer), even when following straight lines. I want to suggest that the contrast that may be more useful in understanding movement across and between binary categories is not 'heterosexuality' and 'homosexuality' – terms which continue to connote meaningfully different sexual orientations and practices – but 'heterodoxy' and 'orthodoxy'.

Like 'hetero' and 'homo', 'ortho' is from the Greek. *Orthos* means upright, correct, accepted and, ironically enough, straight. If you need your teeth straightened, you consult an orthodontist; to be orthoscopic means to have correct vision. *Doxa* is Greek for opinion.[22] Anything orthodox is consistent with received wisdom, established opinion or doctrine and (more broadly) practices. Thus *orthodoxy* is what is accepted or assumed; it is (literally) straight, upright. Heterodoxy is that which stands apart from, is different from or other than, the orthodox (Beasley et al., 2012, 2015). Neither has any fixed contents; both are always/already 'under construction'. The usefulness of this contrast is that instead of laying heterosexual and homosexual orientations neatly over straight and queer; instead of seeing heterosexuality as always and inevitably in league with its institutional privilege, with sexism, homophobia and heteronormativity, we can make space for something other, such that heterosexuality can be heterodoxical, and homosexuality can have orthodox articulations. Heterodoxy is not just a neo-synonym for queer, because heterodoxy and orthodoxy are not always or inevitably opposed. The heterodox can, by degrees, *become* orthodox (and vice versa) but the queer can never be heteronormative. This is not to be interpreted as an assimilatory move, as some kind of sexual-political fantasy of oneness in which we can all come together.[23] The contrast is not offered as a gesture of reconciliation or appropriation, but as a way to figure social change as movement from the orthodox to the heterodox and vice versa. This formulation may present a way to think about heterosexualities outside the heteronormative or hegemonic box; beyond those orders of trouble outlined at the beginning of this article.[24] It does not lay claim to queerness or colonise queer trajectories, but nevertheless aims to unsettle mainstream, institutionalised heteronormativity from 'within' (including its interrelated elements of gender, embodiment and sexual orientation), attending to small subversions more than radical transformations.

How can we think about conjugality – and its changing terrain – in relation to all this? One avenue is to build on Ahmed's spatial framework in *Queer Phenomenology* to consider 'desire paths' or 'desire lines' and their potential as a metaphor for theorising social change. In urban planning, desire paths are those unmarked paths that become well-trodden (see Figure 1). For Ahmed, people tend to follow the (sexual) lines and directions they inherit. People, she says, are rewarded for reproducing the paths they have been given: 'life gets directed through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us' (Ahmed, 2006: 554). This can be understood as an adjunct to Butler's concept of iteration (1999: xv, et passim): paths become well-trodden through repetition. Ahmed says there is an ambiguity there, that it is hard to understand the relationship between following

Figure 1. This image shows a paved, orthodox path on the right, and a 'desire path' veering off to the left. Source: Photograph by the author.

a line, and the conditions for its emergence *as* a line. She positions desire paths in *opposition* to straight lines: Ahmed identifies 'desire paths' as obviously (and perhaps exclusively) queer. Queer, in this instance, means other-than-heterosexually-oriented, and other than straight.

But it is a mistake to designate desire paths as queer. Desire paths, usually, are shortcuts: they mark the quickest, easiest, most direct way to get to where you want to go. They appear because people initiate and repeat them. Desire paths are not so much queer as heterodox – they present a path unmapped. Some desire paths are pre-orthodox. Many of the paved paths in New York's Central Park started as desire lines (Lidwell et al., 2003: 76). You could say, similarly, that the whole of central London started as a network of desire lines. In other words, desire paths forged through repetition can endure and alter; the ground beneath is tamped down and may be solidified as a road. If a desire line is institutionally supported it can become orthodox; it might be paved and included on maps, becoming a 'direction'. If a desire path is not institutionally supported, it will remain off-map, and heterodox. *Desire paths are a kind of social question*; they might be gated and foreclosed, and subject to rules against trespass; or they might be supported, paved and signposted.

Desire paths are heterodox; they might also be queer, in some instances, but the correlation is by no means necessary. Mapped, paved paths are orthodox rather than hetero/straight. Their conceptual extension can be illustrated in relation to conjugality. Consider cohabitation. Not so long ago it was not socially acceptable to live in a (hetero-)sexual relationship outside of marriage: people called it 'living in sin', and denounced cohabitees as fornicators. But significant numbers of people did it anyway. Indeed, so many people took that path that it became visible as a direction or line. In fact, in some places, cohabitation as an alternative (or precursor) to marriage became a very well-trodden desire path. Even as it was variously reviled or welcomed, heterosexual cohabitation could never amount to a queer subversion; it falls short of queer subversion but remains, in some places at least, distinct from the orthodox line of marriage. (Cohabitation is, perhaps, an imperfect iteration of marriage, but its subversive potential is uncertain.) Heterosexual cohabitation cannot properly be understood as queer (Dean, 2014: 182), but it is (or has been) heterodox. Cohabitation can veer away from or towards orthodox marriage. The direction it takes relative to marriage depends to a large extent on its regulation, its social and governmental weight. In many US states, authorities have tried to fence off the path of cohabitation (Pleck, 2012: 66–70; Dean, 2014: 9) Policy-makers in such places erect the legislative equivalent of a big sign saying 'Trespassers Prosecuted', and post even bigger signs pointing out the preferred path (which is, of course, bona fide heterosexual marriage). In other places the story runs differently. In my own home jurisdiction, South Australia, it was acknowledged very early on that if people were taking the cohabitation path, it might as well be mapped, it might as well be paved.[25] Policy-makers didn't exactly light it up and line it with coffee shops and furniture stores, but heterosexual cohabitation quickly became a relatively orthodox line. In Australia, regulations concerning cohabitation mean that it is virtually identical to bona fide marriage. Moreover, Australian policies, laws and regulations concerning cohabitation were subject to overhaul in 2010 to ensure that all relevant legislation was amended to include couples regardless of gender and orientation (Morgan, 2011). Indeed, in Australia, the paths of cohabitation and marriage have now pretty much merged.[26] The situation is different elsewhere, and such differences are instructive. As Jasbir Puar observes in the context of gay marriage's position in racist and Islamophobic projects, critical attention must be directed 'to the conditions of its possibility and impossibility' (2007: 29) – and to how one claim might sideline, divert, subsume or support another.

Conclusion: Becoming familiar

Same-sex marriage is not (yet) lawful everywhere, but for some gay and lesbian couples it is a desire path. Some same-sex couples have wedding ceremonies at which no lawful marriage occurs, but which everyone present understands as constituting a marriage; others are understood by the state and society as married de facto: their lived experience is as a married couple. If cohabitation is a form

of marriage without a wedding, it is tempting to understand the (unlawful) wedding ceremonies of gay and lesbian couples as weddings without marriage. This would be a mistake. In Australia, at least, gay and lesbian couples are part and parcel of the cohabitative path: that path is governed through rules that no longer inquire into the gender configuration of the couple walking it. In other words, the (particular) material conditions of the desire path and the orthodox path are extremely similar—to the point where there is little to differentiate them. This is not to say that all is well: marriage equality is overdue; homophobia continues its damaging trajectory and must be countered wherever possible. It is, however, to suggest not only that marriage is not as heteronormative as it has been, but also that those 'other straight' people, chasing and tamping down desire paths, walked heterodoxically beside it, veering alongside and away at various points. If, as I have suggested, in some places the desire path of cohabitation and the paved path of marriage have more or less merged, we need to think about how that has transpired, with what effects and the direction future desire paths might take.

If we deploy this contrast of heterodox/orthodox, heterosexuality cannot be simply *equated* with heteronormativity, and heteronormativity cannot be mapped holus bolus over marriage. Rather, there are variously heterodox and orthodox conjugal paths whose stability, straightness and governmental treatment change over time. Heterosexuality continues to be closely aligned with the problems of heteronormativity, homophobia and gender, but not such that they are identical, inseparable or irredeemable – even though they are surely related. In using the term 'heterodoxy', possibilities offering potential, at least, for practising institutionally regulated (even mainstream) heterosexuality differently are revealed – without appropriating queer theory and practices, but also without trying to recuperate heterosexuality as another politically weightless or fluid option. Heterodoxy is not necessarily about radical approaches, though of course it can extend to the radical (Beasley et al., 2012, 2015). Rather, things are heterodoxical by degrees. None of this requires smoothing over what distinguishes hetero- and homo- as distinctive identities and practices. As noted already, there are important material and phenomenological differences between living queer and living straight. What is contested, instead, is the understanding or expectation, in Ahmed's terms, that what is heterosexual is inevitably orthodox and that the only alternative is queer. With Ward and Schneider I want to problematise the alignment of heterosexuality with heteronormativity (2009: 434), but not in ways that devalue or repudiate the particular value of queer lives and queer knowledge. In the end, perhaps we can use such formulations to untangle the love triangle that is heterosexual privilege, homophobia and sexism, in order 'to see how heteronormative projects [like marriage] mobilize and reinforce themselves, and to see how, in turn, they might be curbed or dissipated' even if the process of undoing such projects is gradual, slow and even mundane (Adam, 1998: 401).

This article has explored some of the ways that heterosexuality – and its flagship institution, heterosexual marriage – might be critically examined for their imbrications with homophobia and gendered power relations, while simultaneously

seeking out tentative, provisional ways that those connections might be dismantled or defused. Conjugality is presented, here, as a rich, complex and highly diverse regulatory field in which a variety of strategies proliferate. Extending Ahmed's work on orientation, this article suggests that governmental responses to emergent 'desire paths' are subject to contestation and may present sites for quietly heterodox practices and solutions and, at the same time, offer a more accurate account of heterosexuality as other than monolithic. I have argued that the project of theorising anti-heteronormative social change can be advanced by moving beyond a politics of marriage equality in which the conjugal standard remains a heteronorm. Instead, attention should be trained on the complex interplay of preferences, privileges and power relations as these play out against the shifting terrain of heterodox and orthodox directions.

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Notes

1. This is not the only account to present heterosexuality as other than simply and thoroughly heteronormative, but it is certainly one of the only attempts to identify progressive possibilities in *mainstream* heterosexuality.
2. 'Conjugality', here, is used to denote the broad field of 'weddings, divorce, living together, marriage, and same-sex relationships as these forms of intimacy are materialized in and mediated through various regulatory schemes' (Brook, 2015: 3).
3. A good place to begin is with Beasley (2005); Rahman and Jackson (2010); or Holmes et al. (2011).
4. This alignment – or expectation of alignment – is what is usually meant by the term 'heteronormativity'. The word was popularised, if not coined, by Michael Warner (1991). In what follows, I explain how the term should be understood for present purposes.
5. For perspectives on studies in bisexuality, see Geller (1990) and Garber (2000); for arresting empirical accounts of the complex factors affecting people whose sexual behaviour and orientation/gender identity are not in straightforward alignment, see Jane Ward's (2015) book *Not Gay: Sex Between White Straight Men* and Robert Heasley's (2005) richly complex essay on 'queer-straight' masculinity. James Joseph Dean's (2014) *Straights* is also notable. Dean emphasises that 'hetereosexual identities should not be conflated with a singular, unitary set of identity practices, nor should they be viewed as automatically constitutive of normative heterosexuality's institutional dominance' (2014: 31–32). The warning is apposite, and the book offers valuable insights into 'post-closeted' culture, but Dean tends, in my view, to assess heterosexuality's progressive potential as precisely correlated to its proximity to same-sex attraction. That is, even as Dean challenges the characterisation of heterosexuality as one monolithic (homophobic, sexist) thing, his continuum retains 'hetero' and 'homo' poles.

6. In the present context, Gayle Rubin's (1984) work is especially useful in its ability to accommodate changes in the acceptability of various sexual practices, and is discussed in Beasley et al. (2012).
7. I do not mean to equate different axes of oppression, here. Rather, the suggestion is that in any hierarchical order, the privileged terms 'above the line' ('white', 'male', 'able-bodied', 'English-speaking', 'middle-class', and so on) are usually unmarked. See Ross (2002) for a discussion of the limits and uses of analogy.
8. See, for example, Jessica Kean's (2015) nuanced study of HBO's television series *Big Love*. Kean argues that *Big Love*'s polygamous family is 'conservative in every way *except* their plural marriage' (2015: 698), and suggests that while heterosexual privilege, homophobia and gendered power relations certainly intersect, prising them apart may offer useful insights towards dismantling or diminishing their effects. Kean's attention is trained on mononormativity (those normative systems and values working to naturalise and privilege monogamy), but both marriage and heterosexuality figure strongly in her work. See, too, Heasley's (2005) exploration of non-gender-normative (non-hegemonic) expressions of heterosexual masculinity, and Dean's (2014) analysis of gender differences in homophobic attitudes.
9. See, for example, Mountbatten (1991); Bird (2002); Sharpe (2002a, 2002b); Sandland (2003); Probert (2005); Sandland (2009); Liu (2011); Brook (2014).
10. Good examples include Murray (2002) and valentine and Breckenridge (2016), among others.
11. As Corber and Valocchi (2003: 4) warn, 'heteronormativity and heterosexuality are not co-extensive and cannot be reduced to each other'.
12. Moreover, against Dean's (2014) account, these kinds of institutionalised privilege cannot be rescinded or 'surrendered' on an individual basis.
13. One of the earliest characterisations of same-sex marriage as oxymoronic was Lisa Schiffren's (1996) piece for the *New York Times*. The motif has recurred in various guises, but usually takes conservative inclinations; see essays in: Baird and Rosenbaum (1997); Sullivan (1997); and Wardle et al. (2003). In contrast, the oxymoronic tendencies of 'queer straight' or 'queer heterosexuality' are more complex, and attraction to the label usually indicates a politically progressive stance. For discussion, see Schlicter (2007), among others.
14. Oxymora are phrases or expressions that seem to present a contradiction in terms, such as: 'true lie' or 'genuine reproduction'.
15. On this, see Lisa Duggan's (2002) brilliant critique of Andrew Sullivan (1996) (among others).
16. Some queer theorists have a similar view concerning the potential for gay and lesbian couples to infiltrate and subvert traditional marriage, but this is seen as a source of hope rather than fear. (See, for example: Hunter, 1995.)
17. See, for example, Banki and Antalffy's (2014) reference to a debate over whether to allow self-identified 'queer heterosexuals' to participate in the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.
18. See, for example: Warner (1999); Ettelbrick (2001); Butler (2002); Duggan (2008); Polikoff (2008); Barker (2012).
19. These are big, complex, longstanding questions with no easy solutions. I do not propose any definitive answer here, but rather suggest another way of approaching them.

20. We should remember, too, that her account was written in the mid-2000s, and conjugality has since been subject to a number of regulatory shifts.
21. Indeed, heterosexuality is sometimes lived at a considerable and complex distance from hegemonic straightness, as Jane Ward's recent book attests (2015). Ward discusses how straight men's sexual activity with other men can reinforce (rather than compromise) their straight identity.
22. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists another word, 'doxy'. Unrelated to the Greek, 'doxy' is Elizabethan slang for 'slut'. For me, this is etymology at its most fascinating. It is also worth noting that 'Heterodoxy' was the name of a club for 'unorthodox women' that flourished in New York City from 1912 to 1940 (Schwarz, 1986). 'Doxa' is also a term used in particular ways in sociology, after Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Eagleton, 1992). This sociological usage can be usefully articulated to the concerns addressed in this article, but space prohibits this.
23. As Diana Fuss warns, '[t]he dream of a common language is ... a fantasy' (1991: 7).
24. See Beasley et al. (2012). The aim of this earlier work is, broadly, to question dominant understandings of heterosexuality.
25. In South Australia, legislation equating cohabitation and marriage (for certain purposes) was enacted in 1975 (Müller-Freienfels, 1987: 272).
26. This, in turn, means that the context for debates about relationship recognition in Australia differs in important ways from debates elsewhere. On this, see Morgan (2011) and other contributors to Marsh (2011).

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