The Poetics Of Bodies: Reflections On One Of Sara Ahmed's Philosophical Insights

Josh Dohmen

ABSTRACT

In this paper, I aim to articulate, at least in part, what makes Sara Ahmed's uses and analyses of metaphors fruitful for thinking about problems in the social world. I argue that Ahmed's these metaphorical concepts perform three functions. First, her analyses improve our understanding of the social world precisely because we already understand the world through metaphors. They draw out the metaphors we use to think about ourselves and others and, in doing so, allow us to think more carefully about those metaphors. To support this claim, I will draw on the insights of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal *Metaphors We Live By*. Second, one thing that Ahmed's analyses of metaphors often allow us to see is that the movement and arrangement of bodies in the social world can be analyzed in poetic terms. To be clear, it is not just that we linguistically express and understand bodies through metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and the like, but also that the movement, arrangement, and reactions of our bodies are (1) themselves experienced as metaphorical and metonymical, and (2) that they provide the foundation for understanding social reality in metaphorical terms. Finally, as a result of the first two functions, Ahmed helps us imagine ways to intervene so that we can change how we live and interact with others. Specifically, to work toward positive social change, we might both (1) rework the metaphorical concepts we use to understand the social world and (2) alter our practices of movement that, all too often, reify existing social boundaries and inequalities.

Copyright © 2022 by Trivium Publications, Pittsburgh, PA

The Poetics Of Bodies: Reflections On One Of Sara Ahmed's Philosophical Insights

Several semesters ago, I taught selections of Sara Ahmed's book, *Queer Phenomenology*, in my existentialism class. It is a rich text that fostered many fruitful discussions, but students were sometimes puzzled by Ahmed's use of metaphors. How are we to understand the text when she refers to compulsory heterosexuality as a form of repetitive strain injury, when she discusses sexuality as a way of being "in" or "out of line," or when she plays with the ambiguity between social and biological senses of familial lines of inheritance? Is there something underlying these metaphors that they give us access to? That is, are these metaphors merely suggestive devices that help Ahmed probe topics in a way that is memorable but that could potentially be achieved in a more literal or non-metaphorical way? I would like to argue against this interpretation. Instead, I contend that Ahmed's use and analysis of metaphors throughout her work performs three functions. First, her analyses improve our understanding of the social world precisely because we already understand the world through metaphors. They draw out the metaphors we use to think about ourselves and others and, in doing so, allow us to think more carefully about those metaphors. To support this claim, I will draw on the insights of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal *Metaphors We Live By*, because they carefully articulate the ways in which we understand and act in the world through metaphor. Second, one thing that Ahmed's analyses of metaphors often allow us to see is that the

movement and arrangement of bodies in the social world can be analyzed in poetic terms. To be clear, it is not just that we linguistically express and understand bodies through metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and the like, but also that the movement, arrangement, and reactions of our bodies are (1) themselves *experienced* as metaphorical and metonymical, and (2) that they provide the *foundation for* understanding social reality in metaphorical terms. To illustrate these first and second points, I will discuss two of Ahmed's ideas: the skin of the community and familial lines. Finally, as a result of the first two functions, Ahmed helps us imagine ways to intervene so that we can change how we live and interact with others. Specifically, to work toward positive social change, we might both (1) rework the metaphorical concepts we use to understand the social world and (2) alter our practices of movement that, all too often, reify existing social boundaries and inequalities.

Metaphors We Live By

In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that metaphor is not a mere poetic device that exists on top of, or that extends beyond, our normal uses of language. Instead, we understand the world, and act in that world, through metaphors. They write, "Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature."[1] To establish this, they demonstrate how concepts fundamental to our understanding and experiencing the world are

metaphorical, and how these metaphors relate to one another in systematic ways. "The essence of metaphor," for Lakoff and Johnson, "is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another."[2] Notice their emphasis on experience as well as understanding. For the authors, we *live* by metaphors (as their title makes explicit) rather than just conceptualizing the world through them. Or perhaps more accurately, the way we conceptualize the world shapes how we act in that world and vice versa.

Metaphors work, according to Lakoff and Johnson, by highlighting some aspects of an object or phenomenon while hiding others. To understand the ideas discussed so far, consider the example of understanding labor as a resource. In understanding labor as a resource, we highlight certain aspects of labor that are shared with material resources. For example, it can be quantified (as hours clocked, units produced, etc.), "assigned a value per unit" ($15 per hour, $0.75 per unit boxed, etc.), and it serves a certain, specific purpose (collecting accurate payments from customers, counting and boxing products for shipment, creating profits, etc.).[3] We also hide certain aspects of labor, like the nature of the labor for the worker or the fact that some of what we think of as "labor" does not serve a clear purpose. If we find a way to mine and refine iron in a more efficient way, especially if we can do so with no more environmental destruction than earlier practices, this will be considered an unequivocal good, and that iron is con-

---

1 George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 3.

2 Ibid., 5.

3 Ibid., 65.

sidered a resource insofar as there is a use for it. Similarly, hearing many politicians and economists talk about labor, one could reasonably come to the conclusion that people working for poverty wages in manual labor, people who work in office jobs for middle-class wages, and people who play golf while making decisions about restructuring entire corporations are all doing fundamentally the same sort of thing; that is, their activities are all the same sort of resource. Thus, within the "labor is a resource" metaphor, if a business finds a way to get more labor out of workers for less, this is considered a good; we're maximizing the resource. On the other hand, within the metaphor, it becomes difficult to recognize that a lot of labor does not serve a useful purpose (unlike iron as a resource). For example, many of us have been asked to write reports that are never read or scrolled through social media threads on the clock. Understanding labor as a resource means this effort and time are on par with all other forms of labor.[4]

Importantly, such metaphors not only influence how we understand the world, but they also shape our actions. Taking the "labor is a resource" example, we can attend to the ways this influences the actions of employers, governments, and workers themselves. Governments seek policies to minimize unemployment (that is, to make the most use of labor resources as possible), employers seek to squeeze as much value out of workers as possible, and workers negotiate for new positions or raises based on the value they create (that is, how valuable their labor is as a resource).

Another important insight offered by Lakoff and Johnson is that metaphors build upon one another in ways that establish coherence across a culture's

set of shared metaphorical concepts. For example, the metaphor "labor is a resource" builds upon other metaphors in a coherent way. Since labor is an activity, this metaphor relies upon another metaphor, "activity is a substance," which highlights the quantifiable aspects of labor. We also often understand labor as a particular kind of substance: a container. We ask how much effort is put *into* one's labor, how much value can be *extracted from* workers, and so on. And since much of labor is quantified in terms of time, it is unsurprising that we frequently make use of the metaphor "time is a resource," which is related to "time is a container" among other metaphors. Consider a claim like, "You have to guard your time. If you don't, your employer will squeeze what they can out of you." This claim relies on a complex set of relationships between (1) time as a resource that can be taken by an employer, (2) you, or your labor, as a container that can have its contents "squeezed" out, (3) your labor as a fixed resource that can either be used by you or by your employer but not both, and so on.

So far, I have discussed (1) how metaphors structure our understanding of and action in the world, (2) how they do so by highlighting some aspects of a phenomenon while hiding others, and (3) how different metaphors connect to one another in coherent ways. Before moving on to discuss Ahmed's work, I want to note one other, related idea developed by Lakoff and Johnson: metonymy. They understand metonymy (and its related phenomenon, synecdoche) as "using one entity to refer to another that is related to it."[5] Whereas metaphor is about conceptualizing or understanding something, metonymy is about referring to something, about one thing standing

for another.[6] But this referential function is not always straightforward; that is, one item is often not a simple replacement or substitute for the other. When we use metonymy, we may highlight one aspect of the thing being referred to. Consider the phrase "We need more boots on the ground." What this means is that we need more soldiers, workers, or whatever at a particular site. But using "boots" puts emphasis on being prepared for an activity (marching, setting up, etc.). Lakoff and Johnson note that our use of metonymy can sometimes structure our experiences in ways that are similar to our use of metaphors. For example, they note that we use "face" to refer to a person and that this is reflected in our culture more broadly. We both say "We need some new *faces* around here" and use paintings or photographs of a person's face as portraits, as representations of the person as a whole.[7] And our uses of metonymy often connect to the metaphorical concepts discussed above. Our use of "boots on the ground" for non-military activities, for example, relies upon metaphors like, "a task or activity is a battle."

Bodies in Motion: The Skin of the Community

In this section, I will move on to discuss Sara Ahmed's work in order to argue that her ideas can be understood in terms of Lakoff and Johnson's insights, but also that her ideas make important innovations. One important argument that Ahmed presents is that emotions like disgust, hatred, and love do not simply respond to an existing object. Instead, disgust, fear, love and the like constitute, or re-constitute, objects as disgusting, feared, or loved. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* and elsewhere,[8] Ahmed references a story recounted by Audre Lorde.

---

4 In this analysis I am obviously simplifying. Discussions of labor in the news do sometimes focus on worker complaints, labor conditions in factories overseas, wasted time at work, and so on. But the point Lakoff and Johnson are making is not that a metaphor completely obscures other aspects of the phenomenon, only that it emphasizes some and hides others. Notice, for example, how egregious the working conditions have to be to be considered newsworthy compared to the frequency of coverage of opening up new labor markets through trade deals or of dropping unemployment numbers. Also, consider the ways in which even these stories are often considered in terms of resources on the market. Discussions of unionization, for example, are often covered in terms of the market: workers increase their value on the market through work stoppages, strikes, and collective bargaining. In order to improve their dignity and working conditions, unionizing workers must understand themselves as a resource and act as one. We certainly do have competing ways of conceptualizing labor and workers, but these alternative concepts are not as dominant in our culture and, thus, they must often be mediated through the metaphor "labor is a resource."

5 Ibid., 35.

6 Ibid., 36.

7 Ibid., 37.

8 In addition to the other works cited here, the reader may consult: Sara Ahmed, The Organisation of Hate. Law and Critique, 12, (2001), 345-365.

Permit me two long quotations, one from Lorde and one from Ahmed, to prepare my reading of Ahmed's argument. Lorde writes,

> The AA subway train to Harlem. I clutch my mother's sleeve […]. My mother spots an almost seat, pushes my little snowsuited body down. On one side of me a man reading a paper. On the other, a woman in a fur hat staring at me. Her mouth twitches as she stares and then her gaze drops down, pulling mine with it. Her leather-gloved hand plucks at the line where my new blue snowpants and her sleek fur coat meet. She jerks her coat closer to her. I look. I do not see whatever terrible thing she is seeing on the seat between us – probably a roach. But she has communicated her horror to me. It must be something very bad from the way she's looking, so I pull my snowsuit closer to me away from it, too. When I look up the woman is still staring at me, her nose holes and eyes huge. And suddenly I realize there is nothing crawling up the seat between us; it is me she doesn't want her coat to touch. The fur brushes past my face as she stands with a shudder and holds on to a strap in the speeding train. […] I quickly slide over to make room for my mother to sit down"[9]

Notice the movement of bodies that re-creates a boundary, here, between black and white individuals and between white and black communities. Of this moment, Ahmed writes,

> The emotion of hate aligns the particular white body with the bodily form of the community – the emotion functions to substantiate the threat of invasion and contamination in the body of a particular other who comes to stand for, and stand in for, the other as such. […]

The organization of social and bodily space creates a border that is transformed in an object, as an effect of this intensification of feeling. So the white woman's refusal to touch the Black child does not simply stand for the expulsion of Blackness from white social space, but actually re-forms social space through re-forming the apartness of the white body. […] [T]he skin comes to be felt as a border through reading the impression of one surface upon another as a form of negation. Such impressions are traces on the skin surface of the presence of others, and they depend on the repetition of past associations, through which the other is attributed as the cause of bad feeling. It is through how others impress upon us that the skin of the collective begins to take shape.[10]

One way to read Ahmed, here, is as offering "skin" as a metaphor for boundaries of the community. If the essence of metaphor is understanding one thing in terms of another, then maybe that is what Ahmed has hit upon – that we can understand the boundaries between communities, including racial communities, as skin. Indeed, Ahmed is keen to point out that the skin, whether that of the community or of the human individual, is a boundary that is brought about by contact, a boundary that creates the inside which it bounds and the outside which it excludes. The surface of my skin is precisely where I lean against the wall, where it presses into me, or where the air presses against my body. She writes, *"the impression of a surface is an effect of such intensifications of feeling.* I become aware of my body as having a surface only in the event of feeling discomfort (prickly sensations, cramps), that become transformed into pain though an act of reading and recognition ('it hurts!')."[11] As such, the skin is constituted by the contact between

what is inside and outside, and the inside and outside are an effect of the boundary of the skin. The skin of the community can be understood in the same way. The boundary between races, neighborhoods, classes, etc. is an effect of bodies coming into contact but moving away from certain bodies and towards others. And that point of contact, that boundary, that skin, creates an inside and an outside. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson, we could note that this metaphor highlights certain aspects of these boundaries while hiding others. For example, it highlights the phenomenological experience of one's skin and the similar experience of community boundaries, the felt experience of pain, threat, repulsion, or embrace. On the other hand, it hides the way in which the skin of a community does not need physical integrity (that is, it can be spread throughout space, across rooms, neighborhoods, or cultures) in the same way that an individual's skin does. We might also note that this metaphor relies on others, like bodies or social groups as containers, in a way that establishes coherence across metaphors.

I want to suggest, however, that stopping here would too quickly bring her argument to the level of metaphorical concepts and neglect the movement of bodies on which the skin metaphor is founded. In the white woman's movement away from the Lorde, and the movement of Lorde's mother sitting next to her, there is a sort of metonymy at work: Lorde *is* black and the white woman *is* white precisely in these movements. In "re-forming the apartness of the white body," as Ahmed puts it, both the woman's whiteness and the separation of white bodies from black bodies, of the white community from the black community, is enacted. Once the white woman stands, Lorde's mother sits next to her. Following Ahmed's quotation above, we could say that this movement re-forms the togetherness of both the black community and

9 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984), 147-8.

10 Sara Ahmed, Collective Feelings, or, the Impressions Left by Others, *Theory, Culture & Society,* 21(2), (2004), 32-33. See also *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2014), especially Chapters 2 and 4. There she goes into greater depth describing the "stickiness" of some emotions, such that some groups are more likely to be experienced as disgusting, identified as invaders, etc. Words like "flood" and "overwhelm" "stick" to immigrants in the UK or USA, for example, in a way they don't to white people.

11 Sara Ahmed, The Skin of the Community: Affect and Boundary Formation. *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis*, eds. Tina Chanter and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005), 101.

Lorde's family. Importantly for Ahmed, the white woman's feeling of disgust or hatred for Lorde as a black girl does not originate in an inside feeling against an already constituted outside object. Nor, we could extrapolate, does her mother's feeling of love or comfort originate in an inside feeling toward Lorde as an already constituted outside object. Instead, the feelings of hatred and love re-create an inside/outside distinction that is inherited but that, by virtue of its status as a boundary between bodies in motion, is always unstable. It takes work to maintain this boundary, the work of some bodies moving toward certain bodies and away from others.

In short, bodies themselves must be read poetically. They move, they circulate, and in their juxtapositions they create metonymical and metaphorical relations. Lorde describes two movements: that of the white woman away from Lorde and that of Lorde's mother sitting next to her. These movements both establish the white woman as apart, as white, but also create the conditions by which Lorde's body (and her mother's) can be read *as* black, such that the white woman's body can be read *as* white. To the white woman, Lorde comes to stand for "blackness" in a sort of experiential metonymy. It is this more fundamental, affective movement of bodies toward some others and away from other others that gives rise to boundaries between communities that can be understood through the metaphor of the "skin of the community."

Importantly, for the white woman, what it means to experience Lorde's body as black is to experience it as filthy or threatening. Lorde is experienced metonymically by the white woman as a source of infection or invasion. By extension, blackness is experienced metaphorically as a disease or an invading force. Building on the insights of Lakoff and Johnson, we could note that these instances build upon metaphors like "social groups are containers," "outside is contamination," "disease is an invasion from the outside," and so on. In order to experience blackness as an invasion, whiteness must be understood as a container with boundaries that can be compromised, interactions between outside and inside must be understood as battle lines. As Susan Sontag has noted, we also tend to think of disease in military terms, considering both individual bodies and entire populations as battle-grounds between outside, potentially invading diseases and inside processes and immune responses that maintain health (where health is understood as the integrity of the boundary).[12] It is unsurprising, then, that we can so easily slide between metaphors of containment, battle, and disease. Similarly, the comfort and sense of belonging between Lorde and her mother may well rely on metaphors of social groups as containers or homes. Consider phrases like, "You're always welcome *in* this family," "*within* communities of color," or "I feel *at home* with you." Indeed, Ahmed provides an insightful analysis of how likeness is produced by a desire for connection, a desire for familial or group identification, even while that likeness is itself read as a given. That is, being perceived as alike is understood as evidence of an already existing connection.[13]

Permit me to diagram the processes I have discussed so far.[14]

On my reading, Ahmed's analysis aligns with that of Lakoff and Johnson on points (a) and (d). While Lakoff and Johnson don't write about race in particular, they do comment upon the ways in which we consider social groups as containers and the ways in which we understand individuals metonymically as standing for, or referring to, groups or institutions. They can also help us recognize the coherent, if problematic, metaphorical concepts that reinforce one another in our understanding of social groups as containers. Ahmed's innovation is in understanding affect as the experiential connection between (a) and (b), between the perception of a person metonymically and one's movement toward or away from them. It is through this bodily movement, this alignment of some bodies with particular others and against or away from other others, that communities are constituted such that they can be understood as metaphorical containers (d).

In this section, I have argued that the analysis of metaphor offered by Lakoff and Johnson can be helpfully used to understand Ahmed's argument concerning the skin of the community and develop further insights from it. I also argued that her emphasis on bodily movement reveals the embodied, affective experiences of metonymy upon which cultural metaphorical concepts are founded and through which those concepts are recreated. In the following section, I will offer a second example to illustrate these points: sexual orientation.

Lines of Desire: Sexual Orientation

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed offers an analysis of sexual orientation using the language of lines to take the "orientation" in sexual orientation seriously. We can think of sexual orientation as a line of desire[15] toward certain others (and away from others). But in certain heteronormative cultural contexts, not all such lines are equal. To be attracted to those of the opposite sex is "straight," while to be attracted to those of the same sex is "queer." What's more, mainstream culture often fails to accept queer desire *as* queer. Ahmed introduces the term "straightening device" to name those techniques for bringing deviations, queer or abnormal trajectories, "back in line." For a simple example, consider the way in which homosexual couples are often interpreted as having, or are expected to have, "traditionally" masculine and femi-

---

12 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 2001).

13 Interested readers should consult the third chapter of *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

14 Please see page 60 to view the diagram referenced in this section.

15 Ahmed notes that the term "desire lines" comes from landscape architecture where it names the paths worn into the ground where people take shortcuts off the sidewalks. Desire lines are where "off the beaten path" becomes the beaten path. See *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 19-20.

nine roles and characteristics. Discussing Havelock Ellis's early account of "sexual inversion," Ahmed writes, "if the inverted woman is really a man, then she, of course, follows the straight line toward what she is not (the feminine woman)."[16] (2006, 71). By reading this lesbian as masculine, Ellis interprets her desire as "in line," saving the "straight line" of attraction between different sexes. This move leaves unquestioned not only the norm of heterosexual desire, but also the role that this straight line plays in defining the sexes in the first place. Treating sex difference as *the* difference or the "not" to which one is attracted in heterosexual desire, sex difference is in part constituted by the norm of heterosexual desire. In other words, the direction of heterosexual desire is toward that which is different, such that part of what it means to be a man, for instance, is to be attracted toward the different sex, namely women. This is why for Ellis the lesbian's attraction to other women can only be understood as coming from a masculine character. To desire another sexually, (1) that other must be different from the one who desires and (2) the only difference that matters is sex. Thus, the woman who loves other women must *really* be a man.[17] In sum, straightening devices read individual deviations as "in line" such that the conditions that constitute what is "in line" remain imperceptible and unquestioned.

In a way that resonates with the insights of Lakoff and Johnson, Ahmed notes several ways in which the metaphor of heterosexual desire as a straight line coheres with other line metaphors, specifically lines of inheritance and descent. To be "in line," Ahmed notes in a reading of Freud, "is to direct one's desires toward marriage and reproduction; to direct one's desires toward the reproduction of the family line."[18] The "straight" line of

heterosexual desire is seen as being "in line" with the continuation of the line of familial descent, whereas queer desire threatens to terminate that line.[19] In turn, this family line is seen as a form of inheritance, an investment or debt. The gift of having been born into the family, the investments made by the family in rearing children, are burdened with the expectation of continuing the family line. As Ahmed says, "The child who refuses the gift [that is, refuses to continue the family line] thus becomes seen as a bad debt, as being ungrateful, as the origin of bad feeling."[20]

At this point it may be worth noting what is highlighted and what is hidden by these metaphors of orientation, line, and inheritance. These metaphors highlight sex differences as the basis for sexual attraction, genetic descent (or perhaps more loosely the continuation of a family's traditions or name)[21] as the most meaningful basis of a family, and the care of children as a form of investment that requires effort and resources with the promise of some form of return. They hide the way in which sex difference is itself constituted by heterosexual norms. They deemphasize various forms of meaningful family relations that do not rely upon passing on genes or a family name and the ways in which care for children can be motivated by things other than a return on investment. To be clear, even those who speak of their children as an investment or who concern themselves with their family line may love them for reasons that have nothing to do with how their children will repay them or make them proud. We have multiple metaphors for understanding the relationships between generations. Consider the metaphor popularized by Whitney Houston: "the children are our future." There is an ambiguity in the

phrase. We could conceive of children as a mere continuation of the previous generations. (They are *our* future, suggesting a sense of possession.) But children could also be understood as gifting the present adult generations with a future. They *give* a future to the present through whatever lives they choose to lead. (Indeed, this is suggested by Houston's insistence that we should "let them lead the way.") The point I'm trying to make, though, is that when we understand the family through the concepts of the "family line," and thus the related concepts of children as investments and one's family as the gift of inheritance, we emphasize children as investments while downplaying other ways of valuing or understanding them.

As in the case of racialized communities discussed in the last section, however, Ahmed does not stop at considering these concepts as they shape our understanding and experiences of family and sexuality. She is also keen to point out the ways in which we are brought together or moved apart from others by these lines of desire and inheritance. Ahmed uses the table as an object around which we orient ourselves to demonstrate this point. First, the lines of descent move those who follow "in line" to family spaces. The family gathers around the dinner table, the card table, or the coffee table. A family that understands itself in terms of lines of inheritance may well exclude people from these spaces who are queer, who don't follow the family's line, or who fail to represent a return on investment. Some families even have designated seats. Maybe grandpa always sits at the head of the table or the kids always sit by the wall where they can squeeze in better. One could also consider the practice of having a "kiddy table," a table for the children to sit at until there is room for them at the "adult table," until they prove

---

16 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 71.

17 Another story Ahmed shares may be worth sharing, in this regard. Walking toward her home, which she shared with a woman, one night, her neighbor asked, "Is that your sister, or your husband?" Notice how the neighbor refuses to recognize Ahmed's partner as a woman and a partner simultaneously. If she is a woman, she must either be a sister or (if we interpret the neighbor's use of "husband" as stretching the concept) a masculine lesbian. If the partner is male, he must be Ahmed's husband. See Ibid., 95-6.

18 Ibid., 74.

19 Ibid., 77.

20 Ibid., 86.

21 At one point in my life, I proposed changing my last name upon getting married. A patriarch in my family said he would never speak to me again if I changed my last name (read: exile me from the family).

themselves mature enough to conduct themselves as the adults in the family do. Again, we see a circular process: those who follow the proper familial lines are brought together, and in bringing certain people together familial lines are re-created.

We can see a similar phenomenon in more public spaces. Ahmed writes of going to dinner with her partner, "I face what seems like a shocking image. In front of me, on the tables, couples are seated. Table after table, couple after couple, taking the same form: one man sitting by one woman around a 'round table,' facing each other 'over' the table. […] I am shocked by the sheer force of the regularity of that which is familiar."[22] As we see in this example of dining out, straight lines of desire, reinforced by lines of familial descent, bring certain people together in shared social spaces outside of family gatherings. Such social spaces may also work to exclude those who deviate from the straight and familial lines. One only needs to hear a server ask, "Just you this evening?", consider the language of the "third wheel," or feel the weight of being the only non-straight party in a dining room to understand that the space welcomes those who are "in line" while seeking to exclude those who are not, that there is a pressure, that bodies are *pressed* in line. Or, to take another example, consider how often there develops a men's space and a women's space in friendly gatherings. A man who likes chatting, a woman who likes grilling, or a person who doesn't fit neatly into either gendered space will experience these gatherings as less welcoming, regardless of the intentions of the hosts.

However, it is not just that the "straight" line leads those "in line" together and excludes those who are "out of line." It is also the case that those who follow different lines also create different spaces. Ahmed writes,

Lesbian desire can be rethought as a space for action, a way of extending differently into space through tending toward 'other

women.' […] Lesbian bonds can involve orientations that are about shared struggles, common grounds, and mutual aspirations, as bonds that are created through the lived experience of being 'off line' and 'out of line.' To be orientated sexually toward women as women affects other things that we do.[23]

Just as the "straight line" and "family lines" bring people together around various tables, being "out of line" can bring people together to form other spaces. What Ahmed emphasizes here is that these spaces are not *just* about being brought together by shared lines of desire (though such desire may certainly be involved), but, like the extension of "straight lines" into "family lines," these spaces seek to form a community in which their lines of desire can be accepted, developed upon, and experimented with: a space to consider what social spaces would look like outside of the expectations of straight desire or biological family inheritance. And as in the case of the heteronormative family, we see a circular process: those who are "out of line" are brought together and, in bringing certain people together, ways of living and having desires "out of line" are re-created.

As I hope to have shown, Ahmed's discussion of sexual orientation offers another example of her nuanced treatment of metaphor and the ways in which widespread metaphorical concepts are founded upon and reinforce the movement of some bodies toward one another and away from others. By taking the spatial metaphors of sexual orientation and family lines seriously, Ahmed reveals the ways in which we understand sex, desire, and familial forms as being "in line" or "out of line." Her treatment also reveals the ways in which these different metaphors, from "straight orientation" to "children are investments," provide coherence for one another. And recognizing these concepts as metaphors can help us understand what is highlighted and what is left out by understanding desire and social relations in these ways. But, as

with the case of racialized communities and their boundaries, Ahmed is also able to show both (1) the ways in which these concepts are the effect of the movement of some bodies toward one another and away from others and (2) how such movement re-creates the conditions for the metaphorical concepts. The family line, the queer community, and the heteronormative couple are continually reconstituted by the movement of some family members toward shared spaces and the expulsion of others, the movement of people who are "out of line" toward one another, and the movement of men and women toward one another (at least in the appropriate settings, like the restaurant dining room), respectively.

Conclusion: Queering Our Metaphors, Queering Our (E)Motions

In conclusion, I would like to note that Ahmed's work is not only diagnostic, but it can also help us develop ways to work toward more just social relations. If it's true (1) that the metaphors we use to understand social groups and identities effect the movements of bodies toward and away from one another, (2) that the movement of bodies recreates the social groups and identities that are understood metaphorically, and (3) that current social relations are unjust and unnecessarily restrictive, then we could work to challenge those social relations by critically reevaluating our metaphors, our movements, and our emotions. Consider the way in which metaphors of battle and contamination are marshalled to support white supremacy, conjure fear of immigration, and present queer desire as a threat. One might follow Susan Sontag, here, in calling for metaphors to be viewed with skepticism or even abandoned. Perhaps the only effective solution is to understand black lives, immigrant lives, and queer lives in their concrete singularity. If Lakoff and Johnson are right about the importance of metaphor for our understanding of the world, though, then we cannot ask to simply stop understanding social phenomena like race, immigration, or sexuality through metaphorical

22 Ibid., 82.

23 Ibid., 102-3.

concepts. Becoming more aware of these metaphors and what they exclude, though, may work against the injustices supported by the current metaphors. Imagine calling to mind, for example, the way in which immigrants are largely different from invading forces because their motivations are usually about their personal or familial well-being rather than a desire to defeat or conquer their new home. Such an awareness quickly robs the "immigrants are an invading force" metaphor of much of its urgency. In this way, recognizing existing metaphors for what they emphasize or obscure could help us gain a greater degree of control over whether and how those metaphors are used. Indeed, I think that this is a tactic that Ahmed herself uses. In her discussion of the family line, for instance, she notes the way that children are understood as indebted to the family, as an investment. But of course, this excludes all sorts of other ways in which families may relate to children, and in recognizing the extent to which we view children as "investments" we may be motivated to put greater emphasis on these other modes of relation.

A second option would be to promulgate new metaphors. I find an example of this tactic in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*. In her discussion of *mestizaje*, she uses the language of "hybridity" and "mixture" to think of cultural mixture differently than it is often considered in U.S. contexts, that is, as contamination, of spoiling purity. Like corn that has been bred to develop certain traits, a culture that results from mixture has the opportunity to "take inventory," to glean the strengths from each culture and/or discard aspects that are regressive.[24] Lakoff and Johnson point out that creating and spreading new metaphors is difficult, particularly when they conflict with a broad range of other coherent metaphors that structure our experiences and/

or when they are promoted by those in positions of less power relative to those deploying the existing metaphors.[25] Still, this may be a useful long-term tactic, and even if new metaphors receive little uptake in mainstream culture, they may still be successful within some communities for whom the existing metaphors are more readily recognized as insufficient or problematic.

Of course, for Ahmed these metaphorical concepts are founded upon the movement of bodies such that to truly challenge unjust social relations, we must also work to question who we are moving toward and away from. This will require critical reflection on the emotions that move us. We might imagine starting on the smallest scale, the day-to-day interactions that serve as the foundation of social groups and institutions such that we can understand them through the metaphors discussed above. If one feels disgust, fear, hatred, or shame in encounters with a differently racialized other, for example, one could slow down and interrogate the basis of that emotion. Whence the fear, the hatred, or shame? A more difficult task, but one that is equally important, would be to interrogate feelings of comfort or love around those with whom one is identified. This is especially important for those in positions of relative privilege and/or power. What is the cost, one might ask, of this feeling of comfort? What or who is excluded? One may also experience spontaneous emotions that problematize their habits of movement and metaphors. Ahmed's example of feeling a surge of discomfort at the arrangement of tables for couples at the restaurant could prove instructive in this regard. One might also imagine the white woman on the subway feeling warmth, rather than hatred, toward Lorde as she sat next to her and working to sustain that emotion. Of course, the weight

of our metaphors and habits often leads us to reject these spontaneous emotions when they question the status quo, but such "outlaw emotions," as Alison Jaggar has called them, *may* be a starting point for challenging and revising our habits and metaphors.[26] Hopefully, with considered reflection, such self-interrogations could lead to embracing discomfort by moving toward those others that one has tended to move away from in the past. If more people moved toward one another regardless of race, if more families were welcoming of those who do not "honor their investment," if more public spaces were accessible and open to all, then it would be much more difficult to sustain the metaphors that understand some as outside, as deviant or "out of line," as a threat or contaminant.
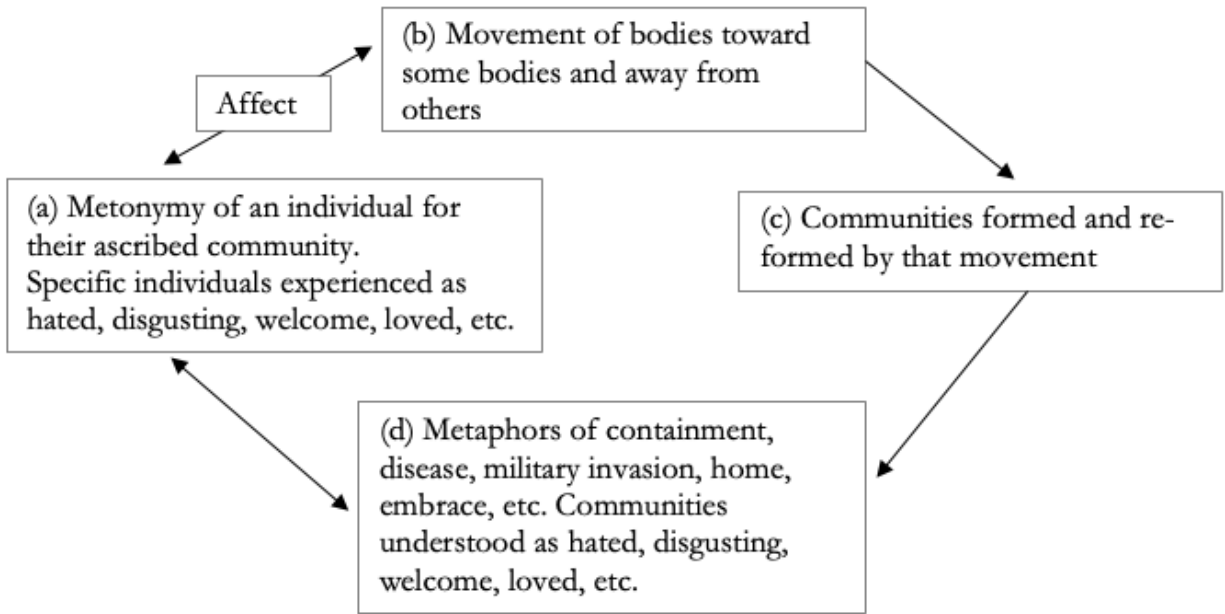
To be clear, neither practice – questioning and revising our metaphors or interrogating our emotions and changing the ways we move toward and away from others – will be easy. Our metaphors are entrenched in the culture; our movements toward and away from others are habituated; and our emotions are sustained by these metaphors and movements. Indeed, I think Ahmed helps us understand the pull of the status quo. Still, by helping us understand our concepts, emotions, and movements as contingent – as a result of who we come into contact with and what form that contact takes[27] – she also provides resources for rethinking the status quo and for forming new habits. It is in our power to push boundaries and live lives "out of line."

24 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco: Aunte Lute, 2012 [1987]). See especially Chapter 7.

25 Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By,* 145, 157.

26 Alison M. Jaggar, Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology, *Inquiry*, 32 (2), (1989), 157-176. In this article, Jaggar helpfully distinguishes between "outlaw emotions," which are those that challenge the emotional expectations of a specific context, and *feminist* outlaw emotions, which challenge the emotional expectations of a context in a way that is "characteristic of a society in which all humans (and perhaps some nonhuman life, too) thrive, or […] conducive to establishing such a society" (161). Clearly it is the latter I am advocating for.

27 Ahmed points out that "'contingent' has the same root in Latin as the word 'contact' (*contingere: com-*, with, *tangere*, to touch). So she uses the word in a way that honors this sense: "Contingency is linked in this way to the sociality of being 'with' others, to getting close enough to touch." Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 103.

(b) Movement of bodies toward some bodies and away from others

Affect

(a) Metonymy of an individual for their ascribed community. Specific individuals experienced as hated, disgusting, welcome, loved, etc.

(c) Communities formed and re-formed by that movement

(d) Metaphors of containment, disease, military invasion, home, embrace, etc. Communities understood as hated, disgusting, welcome, loved, etc.

Bibliography

Ahmed, Sara. "Collective Feelings, or, The Impressions Left by Others." *Theory, Culture & Society* 21.2 (2004.): 25-42.

Ahmed, Sara. "The Skin of the Community: Affect and Boundary Formation." *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis.* Ed. Tina Chanter and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek. Albany: SUNY Press, 2005.

Ahmed, Sara. *Queer Phenomenology: Objects, Orientations, Others.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2006.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. San Francisco: Aunte Lute, 2012 [1987].

Jaggar, Alison M. "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology." *Inquiry* 32.2 (1989), 151-176.

Lakoff, George and Johnson, Mark. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1980].

Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984.

Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors*. New York: Picador, 2001.

Josh Dohmen

Josh Dohmen is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Mississippi University for Women. His research focuses on feminist epistemology, twentieth century continental philosophy, and the philosophy of disability as resources for enriching ethical and political thought. Josh is grateful to the students in his Existentialism seminar for prompting him to think more about the topic of this paper.