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Maternal Inclinations, Queer Orientations, Common Occupation

Isabell Dahms

Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven, Leuven, Belgium

ABSTRACT

This article explores queer spatial and feminist coalitional practices through Adriana Cavarero's concept of maternal and mimetic "inclinations", Sara Ahmed's concept of queer "orientations" and a political action by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP). It argues that through these paradigms, social histories become central to philosophical thinking about subjectivity. Ahmed and Cavarero conceive of subjectivity through postural and spatial relations. To explore how spatial and postural relations generate subjectivities, I focus on an example of a deliberate political takeover of space. In the article, Ahmed and Cavarero's concepts are explored through a historical analysis of the 1982 takeover of Holy Cross Church (London, UK) by the ECP. This political action offers a different starting point for philosophical inquiry and proposes an additional response by orienting and inclining us towards a feminist coalitional practice and commons that builds support without minimising difference. The paper will show that the conceptual tools of Cavarero, Ahmed and the ECP can be productively brought into conversation and used to conceptualise maternal inclinations through queer spatial relations and feminist coalitional practices.



KEYWORDS

Mimetic inclinations; queer orientation; Sara Ahmed; Adriana Cavarero; ECP; queer commons

Introduction: Not Just a Concept but a Re-orientation

Concepts work best when they speak to us and when we can relate them – in different ways – to our own experiences and everyday understandings of the world. When they function like this, concepts enable us to name with clarity complex aspects of life that affect us, but which also go beyond us, without losing subtlety nor over-defining them. Adriana Cavarero and Sara Ahmed are two feminist authors who develop and define such concepts to think subjectivity through postural and spatial relations, Ahmed through her concept of queer orientations and Cavarero through her concept of maternal and mimetic inclinations.

The concept of inclinations, as Cavarero outlines it in her book *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, is meant to speak to feminist theory and philosophy and to all those

CONTACT Isabell Dahms  i.dahms@gold.ac.uk  Bishopsgate Institute, Goldsmiths University of London, 8 Lewisham Way, London SE14 6NW, UK

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who – through care work – are more immediately and visibly *inclined* towards others. Cavarero writes from within philosophy but is not interested in simply adding a new concept to the philosophical canon. Rather, she aims to bring about a change in the social discourse within this discipline. Cavarero's ambition is to reorient us in philosophy, in thinking and living. She argues that the main task is to change our register, reposition our gaze and to imagine ontology otherwise – as a geometry of variable postures. Through her concept of inclinations, Cavarero frames subjectivity in postural and relational terms.

According to Ahmed, “[t]o think with orientations is to think of how we are involved in worlds; it is to write from our involvement”.¹ Ahmed pursues this throughout her work, and this commitment also informs her philosophical concepts. In *Queer Phenomenology*, to which this article mainly refers, Ahmed introduces the concept of “orientation” to explore what it means for bodies to be shaped by relation, through their situatedness in time and space. By focusing on the aspect of “orientation” in “sexual orientation” and the “orient” in “orientalism”, Ahmed places race, gender and sexuality at the centre of her investigation. She demonstrates what orientations do to bodies and how social relations are spatially arranged and, at times, wilfully disrupted.

Cavarero and Ahmed both use geometric metaphors to reconceptualise philosophical discourses on subjectivity, ontology and ethics. The article explores the relational understanding of embodiment that emerges from the works of these two contemporary feminist philosophers. First, the mimetic character of Cavarero's inclination, and its relational scope, is analysed alongside Ahmed's. Second, the article argues that the exploration of subjectivity through postural (inclined) and spatial (oriented) relations means that social histories become central to philosophical thinking about subjectivity. This is because social histories allow us to explain social patterns of inclinations and orientations. Their engagement also provides tools to challenge the perception that certain philosophical concepts and ideas are natural and given and have always existed as they do today. Cavarero's focus on the devaluation of motherhood in philosophy and Ahmed's analysis of the structuring role of heteronormativity and racism name historical processes that actively shape philosophical accounts of subjectivity. If philosophical concepts produce social affects, tendencies or orientations and are thus constantly changing, as Ahmed and Cavarero argue, then they must also be understood historically, including through an engagement with feminist, queer and trans social histories.

The article asks: What kind of concept of relation and what kind of engagement with social histories emerge from Cavarero and Ahmed's accounts? To answer these questions, I examine the concepts of Ahmed and Cavarero alongside a historical analysis of the takeover of Holy Cross Church by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) in the UK in 1982. The ECP's political action offers a different starting point for philosophical inquiry and proposes an additional response by orienting and inclining us towards a queer coalitional practice and commons. I conclude by arguing that multiplying the scenes and figures of inclinations and orientations can make visible different and intersecting histories and genealogies of care and vulnerability. In the case of the church takeover, for example, the struggle for the decriminalisation of sex work is also a struggle against racist policing and part of the campaign for wages for housework. These struggles are articulated through non-heteronormative or queer notions of kinship and a mimetic repurposing of iconography. Different figures thus allow us to understand care and vulnerability in different contexts and across struggles.

A Relational Concept of Subjectivity? The Case for Mimetic Inclinations

According to Cavarero's "theoretical perspective, subjectivity is entirely constituted by others".² Through a dialogue with Nidesh Lawtoo, the concept of mimesis and mimetic inclinations has recently been introduced into Cavarero's work to further clarify her claim that "we start from relationships, rather than starting from the I".³ While her concept of "inclinations" aims to describe the relational character of subjectivity, mimesis is identified in dialogue with Lawtoo as a modality of relationality, as the concrete and affective shaping of subjectivity.⁴ Following Lawtoo, embodied mimesis refers to the unconscious tendency to imitate others. In dialogue with Cavarero, the concept of mimesis and mimetic inclinations is discussed as a way of theorising the how of relationality in philosophy. Mimesis can describe the embodied doing of relationality and its affective orientations that shape the becoming subject. Accordingly, "mimesis shapes and continues to reshape this subjectivity in time (...)".⁵ Mimetic inclinations then is another name for the constitutive relationality that forms subjectivity or better, is what makes this relationality possible in the first place.⁶

Ahmed's analysis offers further insights into the spatial orientations of affective and mimetic relations, their tendencies towards certain directions, which are not static but shaped by broader social-historical processes. In her analysis, Ahmed shows that if we focus only on the fact of relationality, on mimetic inclinations or embodied imitation, we cannot explain "how the subject arrives into a world that already has affects and feelings circulating in very particular ways".⁷ Ahmed's concept, alongside Cavarero's and Lawtoo's, provides theoretical tools to locate relationality in its spatial, historical and affective orientations. Through Ahmed's work, the power dynamics within relations become visible. While, as Cavarero argues, relationality is ontologically constitutive, its affective embodiment is always specific, social and historical, and Ahmed provides philosophical tools to analyse this specificity.

Central to Ahmed's analysis, and I would argue also to Cavarero's account of mimetic inclinations, is a concept of embodied social habit. As Ahmed argues, if orientations are repeated over time, then bodies and social spaces acquire the very shape of that orientation. Cavarero formulates a similar argument about the practice of philosophy. If bodies refuse to incline, in the sense of participating in, being shaped by, and recognising the centrality of care, dependence and vulnerability, then social practices, including philosophy, will marginalise care and vulnerability. For Cavarero, philosophy and its conceptual tools actively shape the world we live in. Philosophical accounts of subjectivity (e.g. an autonomous account of subjectivity such as Immanuel Kant's) can influence legal frameworks, pedagogy and the organisation of public and political institutions. But concrete ways of being, such as maternal inclinations, as Cavarero argues, can also shape philosophical concepts.

For Cavarero, material care work is an example of an embodied social habit that might allow us to rethink subjectivity by focusing on vulnerability rather than autonomy. Her concept of inclinations aims to produce and normalise different affects, forms of contact and subject positions. In the chapter "Schema for a Postural Ethics" in her book *Inclination*, Cavarero writes that "(m)aternal inclination could work as a model for a different, more disruptive, and revolutionary geometry (...)".⁸ The second part of the article will think the revolutionary and disruptive with Cavarero, that is her call for action. I will argue that maternal inclinations should be detached from the

heterosexuality of the nuclear family model, though not from maternity. What happens to care and maternity when they are thought of within a framework of queer spatial relations as outlined by Ahmed?

Critiquing Straightness as Norm – Learning How to Get to the Point but Not Straight (Away)

Cavarero and Ahmed use geometric metaphors to identify and critique a straight subject position in Western philosophy and culture. Cavarero writes that in European philosophy a straight and self-balanced self is imagined in a straight line alongside every other self.⁹ In other words, “the center stage is occupied by an I whose position is straight and vertical”.¹⁰ This I is “(e)ncapsulated in its formal uprightness, (is) straight within itself”.¹¹ Straightness here is not just postural or geometrical. Cavarero indicates that the straight imagination also has a cultural and political dimension as it determines how care, social roles, and norms, as well as bodily orientations, will be understood. While philosophical discourse spans “(...) persons, eras, and nations”¹² who align themselves on the vertical line of the straight autonomous I, Cavarero suggests that a different non-straight, relational ontology should be imagined. This would be an ontology of an inclined I which “leaning toward the outside, is no longer straight”.¹³ There is an implicit queerness in this statement that I would like to elaborate further through Ahmed’s work.

Ahmed explores the cultural and political dimension of straightness when she analyses “how bodies become straight by “lining up” with lines that are already given”.¹⁴ Ahmed writes that things seem straight when they are “in line”, which means when they are aligned with other lines. Straightness, following Ahmed, is not simply given but is the effect of a process of alignment.¹⁵ According to Ahmed, bodies extend into space along lines of connection, association and exchange that are often invisible but that produce and reproduce those narratives that are already given. Her work demonstrates how geometric metaphors, such as those of orientation, can open a critical discourse on embodiment and the spatiality of queerness. Ahmed explains that “(t)he etymology of “direct” relates to “being straight” or getting “straight to the point””.¹⁶ “To go directly”, she writes, “is to follow a line without a detour, without mediation”.¹⁷ To follow a line might be a way of becoming straight, by not deviating at any point.¹⁸ Queerness then signifies a spatial relation that does not get to the point, is not direct or straightforward. The term queer, Ahmed reminds us, is after all a spatial term. Queer, she writes, “comes from the Indo-European word ‘twist’”.¹⁹ It is a “spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a ‘straight line’, a sexuality that is bent and crooked”.²⁰ The spatial in Ahmed is inherently linked to the affective, as I will discuss in the second part of my analysis. Queer lives produce a different affect in their very failure to inhabit and reproduce straight lines. Ahmed demonstrates how inclining towards certain objects produces broader social tendencies and affects, most notably feelings of happiness and unhappiness, that constitute a social world.

Ahmed’s analysis of queer directionality resonates with Cavarero’s work which aims to produce different social tendencies and affects through examples and images of maternal inclination. Cavarero’s critique of straightness relates not only to posture but also to sexuality, and like Ahmed, she turns to etymology. Cavarero explains that the word queer derives from the Latin *torquere* (to twist, bend) through the German *quer*

(oblique, transverse, diagonal), and she observes its recent use and transformation as queer theory in the Anglophone world. However, unlike Ahmed, this remains a secondary aspect that is not actively included in Cavarero's use of figures. Queer theory, Cavarero points out, mobilises queer identities to denounce and contest the heterosexual hegemony that turns "right" and "straight" into synonyms.²¹ In this sense, Cavarero argues that "queer theory challenges *Homo erectus* (...)".²² Cavarero makes these observations in her chapter on Immanuel Kant, where she exposes Kant's investment in "straightness" in all its dimensions, cultural, philosophical, and sexual, and briefly critiques his homophobia. But then the chapter breaks off and queerness disappears from the book. As a result, queerness remains marginal or anecdotal to Cavarero's concepts and figures of inclinations. It is here that I would like to intervene by introducing another figure of maternal inclinations to be read alongside Cavarero's project. However, before I do so, I also want to complicate her project and figure of maternity in another sense.

I turn to Sara Ahmed's concept of queer orientation and a political action by the English Collective of Prostitutes to explore the potential queerness of Cavarero's figure of inclined motherhood. While the mother's inclined posture could be understood as an indication of a domestic relationship, Ahmed's work exposes the disciplinarity of the private home – the official space of motherhood. I ask: if motherhood cannot be anchored in the realm of heterosexual privacy, can we imagine other histories of maternal inclinations and queer orientations? I argue that to answer this question, one must not only engage with queer theory, but also explicitly with queer and feminist histories.

The history of sex workers, often left out of feminist and queer narratives, speaks to both feminist and queer political concerns and accounts for their common struggle for liberation. Sex worker struggles are part of a long history of legislation against queer and non-normative heterosexual sex, which has historically been subsumed under the common denominator of "sexual deviance". The history of sex workers is also an important part of feminist history, as I will explore in the second half of this article. Here I will explore how a sex workers' campaign for women's rights (both cis and trans) and for the value of their labour sought to liberate motherhood and other gendered work from what Monique Wittig calls the "straight mind", that is from a heterosexual political project.²³ In what follows, I further argue that a revolutionary feminist geometry must be accompanied by a critical geographical lens, one which allows for the further development of Cavarero's ideas, specifically her notion of maternal and mimetic inclinations.

Focus on European Modernity – The Figure of Man

Cavarero's critique of the upright and straight philosophical subject focuses on the modern European philosophical subject. Cavarero also refers to this subject as the modern subject, the modern concept of the self and geometries of modernity. She writes that "(a)mong the various geometries of modernity, the prevailing one involves precisely the individualist ontological model, which can be found in Kant".²⁴ According to Cavarero, Kant is exemplary of this anthropology of modernity. We gain a sense that Kant, in particular, conceptualised the figure of Man as an upright and straight universal figure, and that this has had consequences for political philosophy and ethics. According to Cavarero, as "(t)his model is widely known"²⁵ and used, it marginalises other approaches that centre relational models, ontologies and conceptions of the human.²⁶

Can we extend Cavarero's critique of the modern straight subject and her focus on gender and geometry to further consider, and historicise, power relations? Cavarero cites Kant's *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. In her reflections, she leaves out that Kant's concept of inclination also defines racial hierarchies. According to Kant, non-European, non-white people are more inclined towards emotions and passions which, according to him, disturb the disinterestedness of the universal subject.²⁷ What has so far been missing from Cavarero's critique of rectitude is an analysis of the geographical position of the upright philosophical subject, as well as its claim to racial superiority. To convincingly rethink and reclaim inclinations, the geometry of the philosophical subject must be related to its geographical position and orientation. Here we can learn from Ahmed. Following Ahmed, we can say that Kant spatialises inclinations and assigns them geographically to places and people. Orientations, as Ahmed explains, involve the racialisation of space.²⁸ Geography then works within geometry as Kant places "the 'others of Europe' in affectability [...]".²⁹ This offers an important extension of Cavarero's project of inclinations and her critique of straightness. While it is important to expand the philosophical imagination, as Cavarero convincingly argues, a reclaiming of maternal inclinations as concept³⁰ and feminist geometry as frame will need to include a critical geographical lens, that is a critique of coloniality.³¹

In the following, I look at an example of deliberate political takeover of space, taking into account postural, spatial and geographical orientations. I propose this as a starting point for thinking queer maternal inclinations.

Introducing Another Figure – Queering Motherhood

Cavarero discusses paintings of the virgin Mary and her inclined or bent posture towards the infant Jesus as her main example for the development of a new philosophical account of subjectivity and ethics. According to Cavarero, the iconography of the virgin Mary crystallises the philosophical imaginary of maternity.³² While propagating stereotypes, this confrontation has critical potential according to Cavarero.³³ The figure of the inclined mother is a methodological tool to negotiate this confrontation. I will analyse an alternative image of Mary from a feminist direct action in Kings Cross London, UK. By including another image, I hope to rethink maternal inclinations and integrate Cavarero's critique of philosophical, cultural and sexual straightness into her description of the figure of the mother and concept of mimetic and maternal inclinations.

The church takeover by the English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) is interesting because not only did it advocate for the decriminalisation and de-stigmatising of sex work and an end to racist policing, but it also repurposed iconography, providing an alternative image of Mary that situates her within a collective of women, some of whom mothers, struggling against racism, sexism and poverty. By exploring the political and historical context of the action, through the writings of the ECP, I hope to provide a basis for a conversation between the political event and the conceptual tools of Cavarero and Ahmed to rethink maternal inclinations as a framework for mimetic relationality. The aim of this part of the analysis is to further explore how social history is central to philosophical thinking about subjectivity. How can queer, trans, and feminist philosophical concepts and political histories of resistance be thought together rather than separately? And how does an understanding of queer commons contribute to Ahmed and

Cavarero's concepts of orientation and inclination? I will first give background information on the occupation and then explain its significance as a figure of inclinations and orientations.

Sex Worker History is Queer History

For 12 days in 1982, the English Collective of Prostitutes³⁴ took over Holy Cross Church in King's Cross to protest police brutality.³⁵ The ECP was started by two migrant women as an autonomous organisation within the broader International Wages for Housework Campaign, which also included the campaigns of Black Women for Wages for Housework and Wages Due Lesbians. The takeover of Holy Cross church was a response to the emergence of numerous vice squads in the 1970s and 1980s. Vice Squads are a division of the police established to enforce laws against sex work, drug abuse and illegal gambling in England and Wales. In the 70s and 80s, most of these squads were based in Kings Cross, a contested area in London which has since been extensively gentrified. The policing of so-called "vice" is part of an ongoing attempt to remove sex workers but also beggars, teenagers, rough sleepers, and working-class communities from the public space of central London and make that space available for urban regeneration.³⁶ As Lucy Neville and Erin Sanders-McDonagh point out: "Processes of urban regeneration often redevelop previously 'undesirable' areas to make them safe and clean for white, middle-class populations, a process which is abundantly clear in Kings Cross".³⁷ City centres are being reinvented as family-friendly, safe spaces of consumption.³⁸ These developments often lead to the erasure of local working-class and migrant communities and position themselves in deliberate opposition to the public and private spaces in which sex workers work and live.³⁹ This struggle against community displacement continues in Soho, as explained in the 2019 zine *Soho Fights: Sex Workers For Safety and Against Land Grabs* by the English Collective of Prostitutes.⁴⁰ What often remains invisible in urban renewal processes, as pointed out by the ECP, is that community-based networks are not only dismantled, but in the process and as a consequence, space is also given to right-wing movements not targeted by the city and police. This is outlined in relation to King's Cross in the publication *Network*, a newsletter of the ECP:

In 1983 the local MP, councillors and some King's Cross residents asked for a special police squad against prostitute women (see *Network* 1, 2 & 3). Since the police 'clean up', the NF [National Front, a far-right fascist political party in the UK formed in 1967] came up again and it was using the Ferndale [a hotel in King's Cross] as a base for national and international Nazis. Nothing was being done to clear up the area of these Nazi terrorists. [...] It seems that prostitutes can be identified, but skinheads wearing swastikas can't.⁴¹

The struggles of sex workers are part of a long history of legislation against queer and non-normative heterosexual sex and the banishment of not only the act (of so-called pathological sexual inclinations) but also the people associated with it from public space. This history has been documented by the ECP as well as in historical scholarship. As Judith R. Walkowitz points out, since the early 1970s and in parallel with the formation of groups like the ECP, historians of sex work have located sex work at the intersection of class and gender, creating a scholarly corpus that views sex work as sexual labour that has been integral to working class survival strategies for many centuries.⁴²

These campaigns and histories are critical of political, including feminist, campaigns that led to laws and other state policies that demarcated sex work from other work and led to further policing.⁴³

One such document that influenced state policy towards stricter regulation and policing in Britain was the 1957 Wolfenden Report, which aimed to re-evaluate existing laws on homosexuality and sex work, which were grouped under the common denominator of “sexual offences”.⁴⁴ By partially decriminalising homosexuality, the report is publicly credited as an important historical document of queer history in the UK, while its negative impact on sex workers is often side-lined in queer history accounts and public remembrance.⁴⁵ The report advocates for stricter regulations to police sex work in public, which were quickly implemented.⁴⁶ It did not include testimony from a single working sex worker, which is an important difference from the report on homosexuality, which included the testimonies of a small number of middle and upper class homosexual men who advocated for the legality of homosexual sex in private spaces.⁴⁷ This set a precedent that we still see today – sex workers are rarely consulted by policy makers.⁴⁸ While the report was significant for LGBTQ + rights in the UK and globally⁴⁹, it arguably also marks a moment when the history of more affluent queer cis men becomes legally and publicly disassociated from the history of sex work. It creates an acceptable queer at the cost of confining queerness to the private sphere.

The report is central to the occupation of Holy Cross Church as it sets a precedent for policing public space, criminalising, pathologising, and misrepresenting the reasons for entering sex work. In the Wolfenden Report, in the introduction to the section on criminal law in relation to sex work and solicitation, it states:

It would have taken us beyond our terms of reference to investigate in detail the prevalence of prostitution or the reasons which lead women to adopt this manner of life. On the former point we have something to say below in connection with street offences. On the latter point, we believe that whatever may have been the case in the past, in these days, in this country at any rate, economic factors cannot account for it to any large or decisive extent.⁵⁰

According to the Wolfenden Committee, economic factors are not decisive. Instead, the Committee argues that the reason for choosing sex work is a psychological element in the personality of the individual woman who becomes a sex worker.⁵¹ The report pathologises sex workers and defines sex work as an identity category of a failed moral subject and femininity, similar to how homosexuals were seen as failed masculinity. This analysis of sex work and sex workers is disrupted by the ECP. As Selma James points out in her account of the occupation of Holy Cross Church⁵², “women who *work* for the sex industry are *workers*. They have those jobs for the same reason that other workers have their jobs: to earn a living”.⁵³ While many feminists did not fight the negative post-war paradigm espoused in the Wolfenden Report and by legislators who branded sex workers as deviant and pathological,⁵⁴ the ECP campaigned for the demands of sex workers to be recognised and advanced as a central part of a broader feminist and workers’ struggle.

Coalitional Feminisms, Queer Orientation and Maternal Inclinations

The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) organises within the International Campaign for Wages for Housework and was joined by Women Against Rape and Black Women for Wages for Housework in taking over Holy Cross church. This action was a direct

response to Margaret Thatcher's welfare cuts and an intensification of racist policing in the UK (this was just one year after the Brixton riots). There was strong disagreement among the wider UK women's movement over the political demands and strategies of the Wages for Housework campaign and, by extension those of the ECP.⁵⁵ The movement was divided on issues such as sex work, pornography and socialism. The church take over did not eliminate these differences, but it did highlight the importance of linking campaigns and organising across issues. People from many different groups began to participate and, as Sarah Walker, one of the participants, describes, "were crossing divisions".⁵⁶ This was perhaps the biggest success in the ECP's ongoing work to connect struggles. In their newsletter, publications, letters to MPs and on their website, the ECP shows that the regulation of sex work is part of a broader criminalisation of queer, working class, black and migrant communities. They emphasise the role of heteronormativity, which, in the words of Beth Capper and Arlen Austin, functions as "a modality of work-discipline" that is particularly directed against sex workers, women of colour and lesbians who refuse the regulatory ideals of white femininity and "face criminalization, sexual violence, forced sterilization, welfare austerity and the loss of child custody for their transgression".⁵⁷

The church takeover, led by mothers, sex workers and children made these connections visible to a wider public. Those who participated made it clear that housework (maternal inclinations) and sex work are not opposites, although often represented as such. Childcare was both a central part of the occupation, as Selma James writes about their day-to-day routine: "we were up at 7 am Nappies were changed and tea made",⁵⁸ and one of the formal demands: children should not be taken away from them and put into care. In addition, mothers should be recognised as workers and sex workers as workers, mothers, lovers and caregivers. These arguments demonstrate the connection between maternal inclinations and queer orientations. As Lopez outlines, when the ECP first started its campaign, "the fight for prostitute women to be acknowledged as part of the women's movement for financial independence and control over our own bodies, and part of the working-class movement for more money and less work, was completely new".⁵⁹



ECP Church Occupation 1982 – Credit and copyright English Collective of Prostitutes/Crossroads AV Collective, who gave generous permission to use this photo.

By claiming the straight and sacred space of innocent motherhood embodied by the virgin Mary, the Christian symbol of motherhood in general, the ECP invite us to think of subjectivity as relation – to other women, to children, to an outside world and as inextricably linked to political imaginaries. The image is staged around the church statue of Mary and an adult Jesus. The women are arranged in a composition that both mirrors the statue and includes it as part of the group. In this way, Mary is claimed as one of us, that is, in Cavarero's words as an inclined mother with child in need of money and recognition, repurposed for a new imaginary. The focus is deliberately shifted from a single mother to a group of women, three of whom (this includes Mary) are holding a child. At the same time, the image includes the protesting women in the religious imaginary of Mary and Jesus. In this image mothers are also political subjects, they are (sex) workers and citizens, activists, and caretakers. Those present speak directly – rather than being spoken for – in a collective voice. The woman in the middle holds up a sign which reads: "MOTHERS NEED MONEY END POLICE ILLEGALITY + RACISM IN KING'S CROSS". The sign links all three mothers and announces their collective struggle. The political demand frames them as well as the statue of Mary and Jesus. The demand is brought into a traditional religious and cultural imaginary. At the same time, the mimetic performance challenges the violent hierarchy that traditionally structures the virgin/whore patriarchal stereotype. Rather than reproducing this binary, its violence is unmasked, and the queered Mary is put forward as a political subject.

Two women wear a hood, a scarf or a blanket around their heads, reminiscent of Mary. Their imitation illustrates the innocence and protection awarded to some mothers, while at the same time offering anonymity. Anonymity is also sought through the use of masks. The masks create semblance and confer group status. They do not reveal who is a sex worker and allow for a certain degree of anonymity. The women claim universality while retaining and acknowledging the important differences between them. Their profession, not their individuality, is masked. Recognition is also sought through images: By subverting the binary between virgin and whore, propagated by church and state, sex workers assert their status as workers, mothers and caregivers who need money – like all women. The enemy is a politics of austerity, racism and police harassment, countered by the demand for abolition and the creation of a different public sphere. While all the images of the church takeover archived by the ECP emphasise collective and political resistance, this image, in particular, reclaims motherhood, away from state and societal definitions that deny care and status based on migration status, skin colour, class, sexuality and occupation towards a self-determined queer collective care.⁶⁰

By claiming the heterosexual space of the church and challenging the image of motherhood of the straight imagination, the participants lived a feminist ethics and politics that rethought understandings of care, work, social roles, emotions and bodily orientations. Participants make visible the many possibilities for creating new relationships that were previously unimaginable in public discourse and media. This is important because, as Ahmed writes, being orientated in different ways shapes what bodies can do.⁶¹ Here, the focus is no longer on an I whose position is straight and vertical, to use Cavarero's words. The images from the church of mothers with children next to Mary holding the baby Jesus, resemble those Cavarero works with, but differ and

suggest a different inclined geometry of the subject. This is because they centre queer and collective motherhood where queer is not understood as one end of the homosexual-heterosexual binary but in its older and reclaimed meaning as a challenge to normative understandings of sexuality and gender roles.

The portrayal of motherhood and caregiving usually includes only a small group of women. The images and voices of the occupation require a rethinking of which mothers, caregivers and women are valued and how material needs need to be met. From the reorientation of motherhood and work “other things follow”, to use Ahmed’s words. In this sense, the reclaiming of Holy Cross Church is an example of the interweaving of multiple and singular dependences as Cavarero imagines them. Walker describes the experience of the occupation as “a real education in collective living”.⁶² According to Walker, the twelve-day takeover was exciting, and it felt a bit disappointing to return to normal life.⁶³ In a place that is taken over for a duration of time to make political demands visible, new bodily and social orientations become possible. Like most such interventions it triggered numerous reactions, including excitement, surprise, support but also anger from some local residents.⁶⁴ The demands, the visibility, the vocal-ity of the ECP, and the arguments put forward were contested. This struggle is ongoing.

The reclaiming of Holy Cross Church works well as a figure of inclinations because it makes bodily orientations visible and central to our thinking about subjectivity. The ECP highlight the effects of racialisation, racialised policing and criminalisation of sex work, as well as their connections. In their resistance to this, they refuse a heteronormative understanding of the family and organisation of life which they identify as a central unit of capitalism’s social reproduction. Instead, they create an alternative space that opens the possibility of queer motherhood and collective subjectivity. What kind of spatial orientations would these have? The participants highlight that urban regeneration and gentrification need to be resisted. Here, the contested ways in which bodies extend into space becomes visible and central to thinking about subjectivity and to a coalitional feminist practice. Any utopic imagination of a queer commons starts from there.

Conclusion

I am concluding with the history of the church takeover to emphasise the need for collective power building to produce ruptures through which new orientations and inclinations can be materially grounded, found, and fought for. The church takeover includes images and examples of maternal inclinations, an interweaving of multiple and singular dependencies which fail to inhabit and reproduce straight lines, actively living and creating queer affects, orientations and subjectivities. Those participating are reclaiming a straight space to create new relations, as well as a queer, migrant, and anti-racist feminist ethics and politics. They resist the spatial and geographical displacement of sex workers and mothers not only from Kings Cross but also from central London, from London and public space more generally, demonstrating against a white straight notion of the public that does not include them and does not care about them.

This history can guide us in our critical thinking, but it is also specific to its context. It shows the centrality of organising against austerity and the “hostile environment”⁶⁵ (a more recent but fitting term) to the histories of queer, feminist, anti-racist and sex worker organising in the UK. The demands were not won in 1982, but they were

carried on, re-articulated, and transformed through other actions, groups and movements, including the continued political activism of the ECP. The action also brings to light disagreements in the wider UK Women's Movement where the political campaign of "Wages for Housework" was contested. This is therefore not a linear or uncontested history of political successes and achievements, and other contexts will require a different lens. The example, therefore, does not offer a blueprint. Rather, it takes Ahmed's understanding of feminist relationality as collective movement as a starting point:

A collective is what does not stand still but creates and is created by movement. [...] A movement comes into existence to transform what is in existence. A movement needs to take place somewhere. A movement is not just or only a movement; there is something that needs to be kept still, given a place, if we are moved to transform what is.⁶⁶

Through their political analysis, the ECP has further developed the concepts of motherhood, work, sex work, abolition and care. For example, the ECP demonstrates that the concepts of motherhood, sex work and queerness are more complicated and always have been. They thus contribute to feminist philosophy and advance feminist analytical tools. The history of the ECP's church takeover reveals new aspects of Ahmed's and Cavarero's work, of mimetic, affective and relational accounts of the subject, and can help us answer a question posed by Judith Butler in memory of Theodor W. Adorno: "how does one lead a good life in a bad life?"⁶⁷ The ECP's action offers one response by orienting and inclining us towards a queer coalitional practice and commons that builds support without minimising difference. It emphasises the need for a space in which relationships can be anchored, moved and transformed as an essential component of a feminist postural and geometric lens as developed by Ahmed and Cavarero. I have tentatively referred to this space as queer commons. The history of the church takeover is one of many that explores the possibility of a good life "within a world in which the good life is structurally or systematically foreclosed for so many".⁶⁸ The possibility of the new, of practising and becoming through new inclinations and orientations brings excitement and joy, as the action testifies. Its practice does not decentre everyday activities like changing nappies, making tea, thinking about media strategy, but repositions them "through a practical-theoretical centering of the entanglements between housework and (sexual) nonnormativity".⁶⁹ There is, as Butler writes, a performative enactment of radical democracy in such movements that alone can articulate what it might mean to be differently orientated and inclined and to live a good life, that is a liveable life.⁷⁰

Cavarero and Ahmed offer philosophical concepts for explaining being moved, personally and collectively. Both authors conceptualise subjectivity through postural and spatial relations. The article further explored this by outlining the history of a deliberate political reclaiming of space and a mimetic repurposing of iconography. By exploring collective and non-heteronormative maternal inclinations, it aimed to demonstrate how social histories become central to the philosophical thinking of subjectivity and to mimetic inclinations in particular.

Notes

1. Ahmed, "Mixed Orientations," 95.
2. Cavarero and Lawtoo, Interview, 186.

3. Ibid.
4. Lawtoo first tracked the link between maternity and mimesis understood as an affective and embodied imitation in *The Phantom of the Ego*, 38–40.
5. Ibid., 196.
6. Ibid as well as chapter one and chapter two in Lawtoo, *Homo Mimeticus*.
7. Ahmed in Schmitz and Ahmed, “Interview,” 98.
8. Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 131.
9. Ibid., 30.
10. Ibid., 6.
11. Ibid., 33.
12. Ibid., 24.
13. Ibid., 6.
14. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 23.
15. Ibid., 66.
16. Ibid., 16
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., 67.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. According to Wittig, the straight mind universalises and materialises heteronormative concepts and ideas. Heterosexuality for Wittig is not only a description of sexuality but a political project. Western societies, Wittig argues, are economically, politically and linguistically organised around straightness and the gender binary. The straight mind accordingly is a totalising theory of social reality. This is still a useful concept, however, other parts of Wittig’s work such as her critique of pornography, her lesbian separatism and universalising of lesbian experiences need to be critically examined. See Wittig, *The Straight Mind*, 54.
24. Ibid., 11.
25. Ibid.
26. The philosopher Sylvia Wynter makes a similar argument, and it would be interesting to read Wynter and Cavarero’s critiques of the Western European canon alongside each other. According to Wynter, Kant, among others, develops a philosophical model of “Man” rather than of humanity. Wynter distinguishes this overrepresented subject – Man – from the human. She proposes that all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and struggles over the environment are all part of this same struggle. Wynter analyses the history of colonialism and racial capitalism and locates the development of the philosophical figure of Man within this history, representing and advancing a particular ethnoclass, that of the Western bourgeoisie. Wynter and Cavarero then differ in their analysis and genealogy of the overrepresented figure of Man, albeit both identify it as untenable. See Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality.”
27. Kant, *Anthropology*.
28. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 23f.
29. Ferreira da Silva, *Towards a Global Idea of Race*, 129.
30. While Cavarero rightly notes that motherhood and maternity need to be rethought in Kant and in philosophy in general, her discussion of Kant misses the opportunity to outline how maternity, sexual difference and race (even if not always addressed in the same texts) were thought together and deeply influential on philosophical, medical and political discourses around and after the time Kant was writing.
31. The importance of a critical geographical lens for feminist organising is outlined, for example, by Francoise Vergès, who asks at the beginning of her book *A Decolonial Feminism* “Who cleans the world?” Vergès describes the strike of Black and brown women who clean Gare du Nord train station in Paris and who are protesting the feminisation of underpaid

and undervalued cleaning and care work, highlighting the racialisation of social reproduction, care and vulnerability and the extractivism of global capitalism.

32. Cavarero, *Inclinations*, 42.
33. *Ibid.*, 14.
34. The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) is a network of sex workers started by two young immigrant sex workers in 1975. The ECP campaigns for the decriminalisation of sex work, sex workers' right to recognition and safety, and the provision of financial alternative to sex work (see: <https://prostitutescollective.net/about-us/>). It formed as an autonomous organisation within the International Wages for Housework Campaign. See Lopez-Jones, "Workers," 271.
35. The ECP website archives the occupation of Holy Cross Church (and other actions), including articles, pamphlets, images and oral history interviews with Sarah Walker, one of the participants. The account of the occupation was first written up by the ECP in the article "Stop Police Illegality and Racism" in their news publication *Network*, No. 1, July 1983 (these can be accessed at the Bishopsgate Institute) and by Selma James, the ECP's external spokesperson, in the book *Sex, Race and Class*. The British Library also has an online collection of articles, video and audio content about the Holy Cross Church Occupation. Recently, on the occasion of the anniversary of the occupation, the following small publication was released: Selma James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord* (40th Anniversary Edition).
36. See Neville and Sanders-McDonagh, "Gentrification and the Criminalization," 162.
37. *Ibid.*
38. See Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* for an analysis of this process in New York between the 1960s and 1990s.
39. See Hubbard, "Cleansing the Metropolis," 1688f.
40. English Collective of Prostitutes, *Soho Fights*.
41. ECP, *Network*, double issue No. 4&5, 8 (accessed at Bishopsgate Institute).
42. Walkowitz, "The Politics of Prostitution," 189.
43. *Ibid.*
44. See James, "Hookers in the House," 112f. and Rickard, "Collaborating With Sex Workers," 51. The laws governing sex work in Britain are prohibition laws. While sex work as such is not itself illegal, everything associated with it is. It is illegal to advertise, loiter, solicit clients, to work in a brothel – ruled as any establishment where more than one person is working – and to live off immoral earnings, which penalises not only sex workers but also cotenants, husbands and lovers. The main laws governing sex work in the UK are the Policing and Crime Act 2009 and the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which build on the 1956 Sexual Offences Act, which makes brothel-keeping an offense, and the 1959 Street Offences Act, which criminalises solicitation. The Street Offences Act was created on the back of the 1957 Wolfenden Report.
45. Laite and Caslin's *Wolfenden's Women* provides legal context on sex work since the Victorian period and a close analysis of the Wolfenden committee and its witnesses, highlighting the different opinions about sex workers expressed within the committee, as well as the police, the magistrates, social workers and civil society at the time.
46. More recently, a growing number of forces in England are using Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), see Neville and Sanders-McDonagh, "Gentrification and the criminalization of sex work."
47. See Laite and Caslin, *Wolfenden's Women*. While the agreed-upon recommendations for sex work (stricter regulations) were implemented within 18 months of the report's publication, it took ten years for the recommendations for homosexual law reform and partial decriminalisation to be debated and voted into law.
48. See Global Network of Sex Work Projects, "Recognising Sex Workers as Experts". https://www.nswp.org/sites/default/files/sg_to_sw_as_experts_nswp_-_2020.pdf
49. For further information on its global influence see Bengry, "Wolfenden 50," 287–8.
50. Home Office, "Wolfenden Report," §223, 79
51. *Ibid.*

52. The account of the occupation was written by Selma James in *Sex, Race and Class*. James participated in the occupation as the ECP's external spokesperson. The ECP asked James, who is co-founder of the International Wages for Housework campaign, to be their public spokesperson because it was dangerous for sex workers to be publicly known in the media.
53. James, "Hookers in the House," 111.
54. Walkowitz, "Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution".
55. Some feminists thought that the claims of the Wages for Housework movement were "outrages and mad" (Beatrix Campbell, "Sisterhood and After," oral history conducted 2010 by Margaretta Jolly, The British Library and the University of Sussex). They felt strongly that wages for housework would further entrench women's role as housewives and caregivers (Mary McIntosh, "Sisterhood and After," oral history conducted 2010 by Margaretta Jolly) and that the demand could not transform the relationship between women, men and the state (Campbell). The ECP has similarly been criticised for its origins in the Wages for Housework movement, and more specifically, for including women who are not sex workers in its organisation and planning. Participants of the wider Women's Liberation Movement (who are not sex workers) questioned whether the movement was authentic and truly representative of sex workers (e.g., see oral history with Beatrix Campbell).
56. Sarah Walker in Frankie Miren "The English Collective of Prostitutes: Occupation of Holy Cross Church". <https://www.bl.uk/womens-rights/articles/english-collective-of-prostitutes-occupation-of-holy-cross-church>.
57. Capper and Austin, "Wages for Housework," 448.
58. James, "Hookers in the House," 120.
59. Lopez-Jones, "Workers", 273.
60. For other images, including other images that repurpose the imaginary of the virgin Mary see Selma James, *Hookers in the House of the Lord* (40th Anniversary Edition).
61. Ahmed, "Mixed Orientations," 100.
62. Oral history interview with Sarah Walker, "Sarah Walker: Occupying the Holy Cross Church". Online: <https://prostitutescollective.net/church-occupation-1982/>.
63. Ibid.
64. See Walkowitz "Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution."
65. See Goodfellow *Hostile Environment*. The term hostile environment refers to a set of policies aimed at making life impossible for migrants designated by the government as illegal. It was officially introduced by Theresa May (then Home Secretary) in 2012. Although it has only recently been officially named, it describes well a general strategy of the government.
66. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 3.
67. Butler, "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?," 9.
68. Ibid.
69. Capper and Austin, "Wages for Housework," 448.
70. Butler, "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?," 14, 18.

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