

Sara Ahmed
Living a Feminist Life
Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2017 (ISBN 978-0-8223-6319-4)

Reviewed by Barbara Fultner, 2018

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Quote: "[W]e should expect others to misunderstand us. Moreover, we might also have to expect ourselves to misunderstand them. Call that the principle of humility."

Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* is at once unflinchingly uncompromising in calling for radical feminist social change and generous in acknowledging the need to ease a seemingly relentless struggle and the impossibility of purity. It is at times--justifiably--an angry book but also a joyful one. Bringing together much of Ahmed's previous work, its overall aim is to show how feminist theory arises from everyday feminist experience. This is not a straightforwardly discursive book; rather, it has a poetic quality and is almost incantatory at times. It is woven together by a number of metaphors: walls (diversity work can feel like hitting a wall over and over again), tables (who is at the table?), bumps (becoming feminist is "bumpy," "equality is a bumpy ride"), arms (the willful arm rising up, "intersectionality is army," feminism as a "call to arms"), and snaps (feminists are snappy). The style can be frustrating, prompting a reader to wish Ahmed had laid out her arguments more directly and in more detail. However, the arguments have been made repeatedly, largely without being heard; institutional as well as individual resistance to change persists. So perhaps there is a need to incant rather than argue, to embody rather than spell out. Besides, as Ahmed notes, "a feminist life is not so linear" (173). Her turns of phrase and juxtapositions frequently imbue words with new resonances, if not new meanings. For example, she describes diversity work as trying, both in the sense of attempting to do something and in the sense of being annoying or difficult (97). She connects revolution with revulsion, exclaiming: "Lesbian feminism: how revolting! We are revolting against the requirement to be in relation to men; we are revolting against the demand to be female relatives. Lesbian feminism: how we revolt; how we become revolting" (224). Throughout, Ahmed trades on hidden ambiguities of terms, drawing our attention simultaneously to a multiplicity of perspectives and to the complexity and messiness of living a feminist (or any) life.

If the personal is political, the academic, for Ahmed, is personal *and* political in spades. Arguing that citations "can be feminist bricks," but can also be used to build walls that protect the status quo by keeping others out, Ahmed adopts the policy not to cite any white men (15-16). One might object that this is just as problematic as when men fail to cite any scholarship by women or that much feminist theory has developed in response to male philosophy and theorizing. However, to use one of Ahmed's own keywords, this is a *willful* refusal; it is not mere omission or ignorance of men's scholarship but a conscious decision to shore up a feminist intellectual landscape, building especially on the work of radical feminists of color. *Living a Feminist Life*,

not unlike Ahmed's resignation from Goldsmith's (Pells 2016), in the wake of which it was written, can be seen as an instance of the breaking of bonds she dubs "feminist snap."

The book has three parts. The first, "Becoming Feminist," offers a phenomenology of developing a feminist consciousness and presents Ahmed's well-known figure of the *feminist killjoy*. The killjoy calls out sexism and racism and thus spoils the mood; she refuses to smile when she is expected to smile; she is a wrench in the works of patriarchy, an unwelcome disturbance and obstruction. The figure is closely connected to Ahmed's critique of *happiness* as a universally desirable good. Conceptions of happiness are shaped by sociocultural norms. One's capacity for happiness is (at least partially) a function of how the social world is organized and how well one fits into that organization. Someone not made happy by the "normal" things that make people happy is an "affect alien," someone whose affective responses are out of tune with the mainstream. Happiness is in many ways opposed to willfulness--a term often used to describe feminists in a negative light: causing trouble, going against the grain or flow (71ff.), and resignifying appeals to happiness as oppressive.

The second part, "Diversity Work," explains how institutions are reproduced through everyday interactions. Ahmed's analysis is from the perspectives of women of color, whom she sees as "ethnographers of universities," as participant-observers--with all the implications this entails of being outsiders to the institution. She recounts experiences of persons of color in the academy and describes the walls those working to make universities more diverse institutions run up against. Drawing heavily on her *On Being Included* (2012), chapter 4 should be mandatory reading for university and college administrators. Diversity workers will find community and many stories that resonate with them, but just as important, white administrators will gain a better understanding of what it is like to be nonwhite, non-cisgender, and nonmale in an institution that, more often than not, has a white, male, Eurocentric, sexist, and racist history that continues to shape its ethos and practices. Feminists of color have rightly objected to being asked constantly to explain what it is like to be them. *Living a Feminist Life* provides such an account, including the pain, stress, vulnerability, exhaustion, and frustration involved. Ahmed describes the tensions diversity workers face in trying to transform institutions from within: "When we have to think strategically, we also have to accept our complicity; we forgo any illusion of purity; we give up the safety of exteriority. . . . Diversity work is messy, even dirty, work" (94). It may require "passing" (120) as less different and more at home in an institution that routinely calls one's being into question, but results in a "struggle not to be compromised" (247). This applies not just to the academy, but to living a feminist life in general.

The third part, "Living the Consequences," focuses on making feminism a sustainable practice. Ahmed begins by considering "fragility as the wear and tear of living a feminist life" (163) and highlighting how racism and sexism render relationships as well as people and bodies fragile. Yet she also acknowledges "white fragility" that prevents whites from addressing, or even seeing, racism and sexism. Thus fragility is both a source of precariousness and vulnerability (cf. Butler 2015) and an obstacle to social transformation. The notion of a feminist *snap* refers to the moment when things break, when connections are severed, though such breaking points can be the very moments when things click into place from a feminist perspective. Even though a snap may appear suddenly to come out of nowhere, Ahmed shows--in part through her analysis of Marleen Gorris's 1982 Dutch film *A Question of Silence*--that when women snap, it is in response to what they have had to put up with, to past pressures of sexism and racism: "A snap is not a starting point, but a snap can be the start of something" (194), even "of a feminist revolt" (210).

Ahmed calls for the revival of radical lesbian feminism. *Pace* its critics, she holds that how one lives one's life *can* be a way of transforming social structures and institutions when that life does not easily fit with but challenges those structures and institutions: "When a life is what we have to struggle for, we struggle against structures" (214). Unfortunately, she does not elaborate on her suggestion "that it is transfeminism today that most recalls the militant spirit of lesbian feminism in part because of the insistence that crafting a life is political work" (227), although she briefly and somewhat opaquely condemns the transphobia of some feminists (174). She regards such transphobia, defended by appeal to feminist principles, as an example of how assuming our own status as killjoys can prevent us from recognizing both how others can be killjoys to us by pointing out our own shortcomings, and how these other killjoys agree with us. This is a point worth emphasizing to which I return below.

The book concludes with "A Killjoy Survival Kit" and "A Killjoy Manifesto." The kit contains people, things, and strategies that help feminists not only to persist and survive but to find pleasure and joy; they range from favorite feminist books and other killjoys to humor and "permission notes" to step back. The feminist killjoy itself, for Ahmed, is energizing and affirming: "there is something about her, a sense of vitality, perhaps a sense of rebelliousness and mischief, perhaps naughtiness, even . . ." (247).

Ahmed acknowledges that to think of the survival kit "as a form of feminist self-care . . . might seem to be a neo-liberal agenda, a way of making feminism about the resilience of individuals" (236), and resilience, for Ahmed, is a matter of being able to tolerate more weight, a yet greater burden. Given the current popularity of "mindfulness" and the proliferation of wellness programs in the academy and elsewhere, feminists are well advised to heed Ahmed's caution. My institution's health center is undergoing renovation, with the promise of spaces for yoga, among other wellness initiatives, in an effort to foster students' ability to cope with the demands of college life. But will they find the extra time for this self-care? How will the changes in the health center change the structure of their day-to-day lives? Against the neoliberal reading, Ahmed endorses Audrey Lorde's assertion that, because the world does not accommodate her flourishing, caring for herself is "not self-indulgence [but] self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (quoted on 237). What would a health center that supported such acts of political warfare look like?

The manifesto consists of ten principles created from feminist experience. These principles are "not rules of conduct we must agree on to proceed," but principles as first steps, "as a commencement, a start of something" (256). They are literally statements of will ("I am/am not willing to . . ."). As such, they are not neat and tidy, and the kit and manifesto may not always easily dovetail. Humor, for example, is part of the survival kit: feminist laughter is part of lightening the load of dealing with heavy histories, laughter in the recognition of the logic of oppression, of power relations that reproduce sexism and racism. In the manifesto, however, principle 4 enjoins the killjoy not to laugh at jokes intended to cause unhappiness--sexist, racist, ableist jokes, and so on, that is, nonfeminist jokes. Yet principle 2 asserts the willingness to cause unhappiness. The principles thus provide no easy answers. The "sweaty concepts" generated from feminist experience are surrounded by difficult questions, but Ahmed asserts that "our task is not to resolve them; they are life questions" (195). Reminiscent of Sandra Bartky's analysis of feminist consciousness as calling all of one's desires and beliefs into question (Bartky 1990), "being in question" is not just about having one's legitimacy questioned by others, but also about

questioning oneself. Ahmed thinks "it is good to think of life as always potentially in crisis, to keep asking the question: how to live" (196). In this sense, *Living a Feminist Life* is a deeply philosophical book.

Living a Feminist Life raises questions about readership. Who makes up Ahmed's "we" or "us" is not always the same. However it is constituted, "we" is precarious. I read the book as a white, cis-het feminist, teaching at a liberal arts college in the United States, who has been an immigrant to three different countries at three stages in my life. Much of the time, I am not included in Ahmed's "we." And that's ok. White feminists ought to be familiar with and to acknowledge critiques by feminists of color by now. But how well are we addressing them? To what extent are we still perpetuating exclusion? Ahmed calls on feminists to be vigilant, and white cis-het feminists especially must be vigilant not to marginalize others. We must keep in mind, however, that it is not easy to maintain vigilance at all times, that we will make mistakes, and that it is not only white cis-het feminists who must be thus vigilant.

Ahmed describes countless instances of feminists being misheard or read in ways they may not intend: as antagonistic when (merely) declining to participate, as *being* rather than as pointing out "the problem." She offers rhetorical analyses of comments made to her and others by whites that misrepresent or misdirect what she and others have actually said, where such misdirections serve to maintain institutional systems and structures of inequality and thus avoid addressing racism and sexism. Though she does not label it as such, Ahmed is developing a *phenomenology of misunderstanding*. Whereas the principle of charity in hermeneutics enjoins us to interpret others as sincerely telling the truth unless we have reason to believe otherwise, a phenomenology or hermeneutics of misunderstanding seems to invoke the principle that we should expect others to misunderstand us. Moreover, we might also have to expect ourselves to misunderstand them. Call that the principle of humility. Item #7 of the Killjoy Survival Kit is "other killjoys." At first, having other killjoys in one's survival kit is "about the experience of having others who recognize the dynamics because they too have been there, in that . . . difficult place" (244), but then it becomes about fallibility and accountability. Ahmed tells the story of when she herself was seen by black women

as participating in their erasure from public spaces and discussions. I responded too quickly and became defensive, hearing their voices as part of the same chorus of what I would call more questionable critiques that positioned brown women as gaining position by taking up places that did not belong to them, which used the familiar narrative that women of color use diversity as a career advancement. I heard as a killjoy. And that stopped me from hearing killjoys, those who were getting in the way of what I thought of as a lifeline: black British feminism as my intellectual community. Staying close to other killjoys is thus not about being on the same side. It is how we can ask more of ourselves; it is how we can be and stay vigilant. Our crossness can and should be directed toward ourselves. We get things wrong. I did. And I do. (245)

Having other killjoys in one's kit thus becomes about staying vigilant, about recognizing our own fallibility and accountability.

Fallibility and accountability are two sides of the same coin. Given the many apparent rifts in contemporary feminism today, we might do well to keep this in mind, with a view not necessarily toward patching up the rifts but approaching them with humility. We have our differences,

diverging interests, and political as well as theoretical disagreements. But we are accountable to one another, and we all are fallible. Living a feminist life is messy.

References:

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