

Excursions

Volume 8, Issue 1 (June 2018) Networks



Cover photo: Students in Bangladesh protest 7.5 per cent VAT on their tuition fees, 10 September 2015.
© Nahid Sultan / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0.

Emily Cousens, 'Review of *Living a Feminist Life*, 2017, by
Sara Ahmed'

Excursions, vol. 8, no. 1 (2018)

www.excursions-journal.org.uk

Reviews

Emily Cousens

Oxford Brookes University

Living a Feminist Life, 2017, Sara Ahmed
London: Duke University Press

Sara Ahmed's hotly anticipated—thanks in part, at least, to the lively conversation sparked by her declared no-white-men citation policy and, if Twitter is anything to go by, readily received—2017 *Living a Feminist Life* is a handbook for how to get by in a world that is not set up for you. Who is included in this 'you'? All women, which means 'all those who travel under the sign *women*' (2017, p.14). 'No one is born a woman; it is an assignment' and one that, as Ahmed discusses, is the site of both restriction and feminist possibility (p.15).

Her project emphatically reclaims the category of woman both from those who seek to circumscribe its limits for exclusionary purposes and from those who see identity politics as reinforcing women's status as victims. 'A feminist politics that centres on women can keep the category of women open to women' and this is key to Ahmed's open-ended, transformatory political project (p.212). Inclusivity is also fostered through Ahmed's writing style and there is nothing didactic about the book. Rather, Ahmed presents her thoughts as an ongoing conversation with herself and her readers. Defining key terms like feminism anew gestures to the undecided, collaborative nature of her project. Feminism: 'stories that dislodge the happiness myth' (Ahmed, 2017, p.57) 'when we refuse to get used to it' (p.206). Meanwhile, the multiple definitions of sexism have the additional effect of performing its pervasiveness. Sexism is: 'women existing only in relation to men; women as female relatives' (p.150), 'the elimination of a gap between inheritance and reproduction' (p.150), 'how women are introduced only to be passed over' (p.152). Readers are encouraged to similarly find definitions of feminism and sexism that speak to their own experiences—encouraging creative participation in a killjoy project, rather than discipleship.

Ahmed's influence, Audre Lorde, memorably wrote that 'Poetry is Not a Luxury' and we might read the first section of the book, 'Becoming Feminist', as making the same point about theory. Becoming feminist is the process whereby we 'describe the world we are in' (p.27). Feminist theory 'is something we do at home', it is 'homework' (p.7) and Ahmed urges that 'we need to resist positioning feminist theory as simply or only a tool, in the sense of something that can be used in theory, only then to be put down or put away' (p.14). In her emphasis on experience—indeed the book is replete with memories and anecdotes—Ahmed builds on the second wave mantra 'the personal is political' with her insight that 'The personal is theoretical'. Her own variety of this intentionally breaks disciplinary boundaries; combining phenomenology, materialism and feminist, queer and critical

race theory for the insights they offer into embodied existence. Her contention for instance that ‘I learned you can be hit by a structure, bruised by a structure’ is exemplary of this tendency to insert the fleshy body into traditionally abstract theoretical instruments (p.10). Fitting, perhaps, for a book not intended for an exclusively academic readership, any hierarchical distinction between theory and experience is erased.

Whilst experience is generative of theory, the latter can inform, even help one come to terms with, the former. This is evidenced in Ahmed’s discussion of the regulatory role of happiness and its proximity to disciplinary norms, a subject she has addressed previously (Ahmed, 2010). Here, readers for whom the comfort promised by conformity to such norms is not available, may find reassurance in Ahmed’s exploration of how paths that are recognised as promising happiness can instead be experienced as a form of pressure. Following Marilyn Frye, Ahmed writes ‘Oppression: how we feel pressed into things, by things, because of who we are recognised as being’ (2017, p.50). Paths, she explains, are thus used to delimit the normative and the acceptable and it is the prescriptive nature of the paths themselves, not wayward travellers, that are the problem. Nonetheless, as Ahmed discusses, much emotional labour goes into sustaining these gendered happiness paths, to the extent that ‘smiling becomes a feminine achievement’ (p.58). For black women or women of colour, this requirement can be even more important, to counter perceptions of her as angry or too assertive (p.58). Rejecting this gendered imperative to please, Ahmed approvingly recollects Firestone’s call for a ‘smile embargo’ and this becomes part of the killjoy manifesto, advanced in the conclusion.

In articulating the myriad of ways in which people are chastised when they do not play along with these affective ideals, Ahmed provides community for readers, feminist and queer, who are familiar with being blamed for causing their own or others’ unhappiness. This refusal to conform is termed ‘wilfulness’ and if ‘feminist consciousness can be thought of as

consciousness of the violence and power concealed under the languages of civility happiness and love' (p.62) then 'to claim wilfulness might involve not only hearing the negativity of the charge but insisting on that negativity: the charge, after all, is what keeps us proximate to scenes of violence' (p.84). Offering her own take on the academic debate surrounding queer temporalities, Ahmed is not arguing against happiness, or as Edelman provocatively does (2004), the future. Rather, hers is an argument for creativity, for rethinking happiness away from socially prescribed, linearly directed, routes: 'our feminist politics makes things as well as breaks things' (Ahmed, 2017, p.241). Hence, among other things, the killjoy survival kit Ahmed offers as part one of her conclusion, contains 'happy objects'—and, of course, dancing.

Having explored how we become feminist, and the ways in which experience and theory inform each other, Ahmed moves on to her second section 'Diversity Work'. 'Diversity work' is used to refer both to the work undertaken in the attempt to transform an institution 'and to the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution' (2017, p.91). Discussions with diversity workers are included alongside Ahmed and colleagues' own experiences at effecting change. Whilst focussing on the university, her insights here are relevant to a wide range of institutions that are putting resources into approving their diversity credentials. Ahmed proffers that diversity is a 'form of institutional polishing' a mode of posturing that serves the interests of neoliberal image management, rather than the individuals in whose name it is undertaken (p.102). Ahmed points out that equality/diversity documents are created for their own sake, rather than as a means to effect change. Indeed, it is the quality of the writing that will see an institution's diversity credentials praised, rather than the proximity between the changes it identifies as necessary and those actualised. Here we have an instance of what Ahmed calls 'non-performativity', 'when naming something does not bring something into

effect or (more strongly) when something is named in order not to bring something into effect' (pp.106-7). Ahmed's insistence regarding the ubiquity of sexual harassment in universities, and the readiness of those same institutions to protect perpetrators, will be assuring to those who have been on the receiving end of such behaviour. Again, Ahmed's discussion serves to remind readers: you are not alone. Her earlier statement 'a drip drip becomes a flood', read in this context, may even encourage readers who are interpellated by what she says to become a drip themselves (p.30).

The final chapter, *Living the Consequences*, is about fragility as a modality of feminism. The 'feminist snap' articulates the possibilities that arise when the path trodden becomes unbearable, 'how we collectively acquire tendencies that can allow us to break ties that are damaging as well as to invest in new possibilities' (Ahmed, 2017, p.162). Referring to Frye again, snap is the consequence of oppression as pressure (p.189). What may be subjectively felt as failure or excess then, particularly in light of disciplinary injunctions to resilience, is reframed by Ahmed as possibility. 'Snap' does not come from nowhere. It is a moment with a history (p.190). And in queer and feminist genealogy, life unfolds from such points (p.192). Snapping is necessary for happiness on one's own terms.

She notes 'recent feminist strategies' have 'revived key aspects of second-wave feminism' and this text participates in this revival (p.30). Indeed, *Living a Feminist Life* is an exercise in precisely the prefigurative politics (Echols, 1989, p.33) that defined the second wave: 'Feminism is praxis. We enact the world we are aiming for; nothing less will do' (Ahmed, 2017, p.255). Explicitly taking its cue from lesbian feminism and transfeminism in 'insisting that crafting a life is a political work' (p.227), Ahmed fosters the sense both that change is possible and that it begins at home. A charge levelled against 1970s and 1980s lesbian feminism was that it was merely a 'lifestyle movement' (Echols, 1989, p.283). Repudiating such criticisms that the way one lives one's life is somehow not 'real' politics, Ahmed writes 'The

suggestion is not only that life change is not structural change but that focussing on how one lives one's life might be how structures are not transformed' (2017, p.213). And herein lies Ahmed's biggest theoretical contribution. She advances a materialist feminism that has the well-being of the individual at its core: 'For those who have to struggle to be, to become an individual is a profoundly communal achievement' (p.228). Finding ways to survive is creative and collective, not individualistic. To live a feminist life is a political act of the highest order.

Living a Feminist Life will become part of many readers' own killjoy survival kits; fitting given that ultimately it is a guide to survival: surviving in relationships, surviving in institutions and the importance of self-care and queer community to survival on one's own terms. Combining personal experiences, her figures of the feminist killjoy and wilful subject and an archive of feminist texts that includes fiction and film, Ahmed offers a sense of community in experiences of difference and exclusion that are so frequently isolating.

Bibliography

Ahmed, S., 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Echols, A., 1989. *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967-1975*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Edelman, L., 2004. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Frye, M., 1983. *The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.