

## Emily Castle

Sarah Ahmed,

*Living a Feminist Life*

(Duke University Press, 2017)

IN EARLY HIGH school, I often wrote a dictionary definition of feminism on the back of my hand with the aim of convincing my friends that, if they believed women should be equal to men, then they too were feminists. Yet *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed's most recent book, makes clear that feminism cannot limit itself to a vision of equality defined by a world that remains decidedly non-feminist. That is because, for Ahmed, feminism is no less ambitious a project than the building of new worlds—an affirmative life project that grounds itself in the “active and ongoing commitment to live one's life in a feminist way” (25).

Building on two decades of work in the fields of feminist, queer, and critical race theory, *Living a Feminist Life* foregrounds Ahmed's personal experiences “as a brown woman, lesbian, [and] daughter” (23) to show that feminist theory is generated through the embodied effort to challenge everyday forms of sexism and racism. Importantly, her assertions on this point do not lead her to jettison academic frameworks; instead, Ahmed consistently strives to undermine any kind of dichotomy in which criticality and activism are opposed. Far from an academic tool that may be

deployed and put aside as and when convenient, feminist theory, Ahmed insists, does “more the closer it gets to the skin” (20). Drawing from legacies of feminist-of-colour scholarship, with particular tributes to the work of black feminists Audre Lorde and bell hooks, Ahmed intertwines memories, anecdotes, and individual accounts of feminist struggle with astute yet accessible scholarly insights, opening up new possibilities for feminist theory as precisely “what we do when we live our lives in a feminist way” (22).

In the first of the book’s three sections, Ahmed reflects upon the process of becoming a feminist—a process by which one becomes willing to be a “problem” through speaking out about the problem of sexism and racism. Neither a memoir nor a guidebook, Ahmed’s monograph offers no originary moment of feminist awakening but instead a sustained reflection on the figure of the feminist killjoy, first developed on her blog of the same name. Understanding oneself as a killjoy, Ahmed suggests, allows feminists to productively reframe the labour of getting in the way of unjust structures and prejudices, which others are invested in not seeing, or ignoring. For Ahmed, reframing antifeminist concepts for feminist purposes is not just a matter of converting them to positive terms; rather, insisting on the negativity of these concepts requires staying close to the everyday scenes of violence that feminism seeks to expose (105). Far from embracing the postfeminist fantasy that “feminism has been so successful it has eliminated its own necessity,” Ahmed argues convincingly for the enduring relevance of feminism, defined as the ongoing and everyday labour of insisting that sexism and racism exist (14).

In part two of her monograph, Ahmed explores diversity work as a form of feminist theory in practice. Through her own and others’ experiences as diversity practitioners in British universities, Ahmed considers various attempts to transform institutions, as well as the embodied effort of departing from institutional norms, in relation to living a feminist life. More than this, Ahmed argues for the further disruption of the normative citational system, which she suggests guarantees the reproduc-

tion of certain bodies and minds within academic scholarship, by advocating that scholars avoid or reject the citation of white men. This strict citation policy marks a shift in Ahmed's own work: she has frequently traced the history of feminist concepts and figures through a predominantly masculine philosophical canon. Ahmed's call for feminists "to create a crisis around citation, [or] even just a hesitation, a wondering" (179) constitutes her refusal to conflate the history of feminist ideas with white male intellectuals—a strident recentring of the work of feminists of colour in this history.

While *Living a Feminist Life* is certainly a call to arms, it resists becoming an exercise in didacticism in that Ahmed does not limit her prescriptions to any singular form of feminism. Indeed, her writing shows great sensitivity to the costs and consequences of being a feminist, particularly in part three. Ahmed's distinctive methodology of "listening for resonances" (22) allows words such as "fragility," "snap," and "shatter" to be turned this way and that so they catch the light from different angles, illuminating moments of individual and collective resistance or refusal. Ahmed's 2016 resignation from her position as professor and director of the Centre for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths, University of London—a protest against the the University's failure to respond to the problem of sexual harassment on campus—gives particular resonance to her discussion of "feminist snap." Yet, once again, Ahmed insists that such points of rupture are not only negative but may be both positive and productive. In a compelling exploration of the creative possibilities and support systems that give feminists the energy to keep going, Ahmed draws from transfeminism and Lorde's womanism to advocate a revival of lesbian feminism, such that "a feminist politics that centres on women can keep the category of women open to women" (253).

*Living a Feminist Life* comes at a time when, as Ahmed observes, feminism appears to be gaining increased momentum—in popular culture and academic circles alike (11). Writing with a sense of urgency tempered with wit and lyricism, Ahmed successfully taps into and galvanises this contemporary feminist resurgence and, for the most part, avoids rehearsing tired

aphorisms. The two-part conclusion—the first part titled the “Killjoy Survival Kit,” comprising a personal list of resources to sustain feminist labour, followed by a “Killjoy Manifesto”—effectively summarises the ideas contained in the first parts of the book. As addenda, these sections seem unnecessarily repetitive, although they could easily act as standalone texts to prompt discussion or reflection in the classroom. Similarly, the influence of the blog that Ahmed maintains at <https://feministkilljoys.com> seems to express itself in the book’s increasingly loose structures and poetic interjections. While these experimental elements become unnecessarily heavy handed as the book progresses, they nevertheless help make *Living a Feminist Life* an engaging and accessible work for the non-academic reader.

A feminist movement requires the development of feminist tendencies—“a willingness to keep going despite or even because of what we come up against” (15)—such that, like the note on the back of my hand, feminism is always “at hand.” And yet, crucially, these tendencies do not provide us with a stable ground for political empowerment. Ahmed’s work is thus at its strongest when it argues against conventional narratives that position feminism as an exclusionary site—a space that belongs to some women more than others. Ahmed criticises, for example, the assumption that feminism is “a conversation that starts with white women,” whereby instances in which feminists of colour who bring up racism are heard as interruptions (212). For Ahmed, feminism necessarily addresses sexism *and* racism; though she notes that, within a politics of intersectionality, not all tensions can be neatly resolved. In a powerful account of childhood trauma, Ahmed works through the complicated nature of speaking out about sexism while attending to the risks that this speech may serve to co-opt certain forms of violence into a racist narrative (92). Yet what is so refreshing about Ahmed’s analysis is that it emphasises the importance of not simply eliminating or dismissing this tension but of staying with the difficulty and contingency of feminist collectivity. It is this ability to withstand tension, Ahmed suggests, that never ceases to fill her “with hope, with energy” (9). So long as feminism itself remains continually open

to question and to critique—so long as the “we” that feminism rallies around is “not a foundation but what we are working towards” (10)—feminism remains, she writes, not only relevant but imperative.

*Living a Feminist Life* can be read as updating and weaving together all of Ahmed’s past work. Although Ahmed’s previous books have engaged with the complex interplay of gender, sexuality, and race, here Ahmed explicitly and unambiguously anchors her analysis in intersectionality. A foundation rather than an end point, intersectionality allows us to understand how some bodies, once stopped, are less or more able to start up again due to their proximity to different forms of oppression and privilege (145). Significantly, Ahmed turns this critical optic on herself, reflecting, for example, on her ablebodiedness and those advantages that have allowed her to theorise the intimacy of bodies and worlds without offering any substantive discussion of disability or engagement with crip theory (218). Ahmed’s continual reference to and reflection upon her past work is one of the the primary strengths— and potential frustrations—of *Living a Feminist Life*. Although readers familiar with Ahmed’s previous seven books may find certain sections of this book repetitive, it is also true that this book has an altogether different aim than her former works. Rather than pursuing any singular concept in great detail, *Living a Feminist Life* works through ideas that Ahmed has elaborated elsewhere in a more succinct and accessible manner, effectively demonstrating the way in which every aspect of her diverse intellectual and political projects to date can be understood as feminist theory in practice.

As such, *Living a Feminist Life* is an excellent introduction to the impressive scope of Ahmed’s own work, as well as to feminist theory generally. At once poetic, academic, and personal, the book less prescribes guidelines for a way of life than offers a provocation to readers: always keep open the question of how to live a feminist life.