

*Living a Feminist Life*. By Sara Ahmed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017. 299 pp. \$99.95 (hardcover), \$26.95 (paperback).

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I expect that many readers of *Politics & Gender* will find deeply satisfying moments of recognition in *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed's personal "retracing of [her] own intellectual journey," which is also "[her] own history of willfulness," wherein she willed against expectations at both home and in the academy and lived to tell the story (11, 72). Begun alongside Ahmed's popular blog, *Feminist Killjoys: Killing Joy as a World Making Project* (<https://feministkilljoys.com>), and finished as Ahmed decided to resign from Goldsmiths, University of London, to protest its inaction against sexual harassment, the book draws on concepts generated in her previous books to take up the explicit question of *what* it means to live a feminist life and *how* to do so. The answer will be unsurprising to most feminist scholars — by speaking out against injustice and by strengthening and sheltering oneself in feminist worlds — but Ahmed's account is fresh and invigorating. Equal parts feminist theory, history, poetry, self-help, and call for a "feminist army of arms" (84), *Living a Feminist Life* commingles genres to reject the partitions of theory and practice, personal and political, and weave together an account of feminist life. It closes with a "Killjoy Survival Kit" and "Killjoy Manifesto," both of which invoke essential feminist texts. The content and form of the book align: Ahmed has a "strict citational policy: I do not cite any white men" because "[c]itation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt" (15).

Ahmed has divided the book into three sections: "Becoming Feminist" gives an account of feminism, "Diversity Work" describes what happens when feminists try to change institutions, and "Living the Consequences" acknowledges and responds to the fragility and depletion that can jeopardize feminist life and work. A series of pithy definitions of feminism frame the first section — I found myself underlining them like a zealous undergraduate, and I am tempted to post a few on my office door. Some favorites: "To become feminist is to kill other people's joy" (65); "Feminism is my theory class" (29); and "There is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just" (6). The second section

of the book, the strongest, in my view, provides a searing account of diversity work in the academy — an account that could extend to underrepresented experiences in more explicitly political institutions such as local, state, and national governments. With a mix of feminist outrage and absurdist comedy, Ahmed chronicles how feminists can be invited into the academy to perform diversity work and then met as “space invaders” when they seek feminist institutional change. Some of her account of the modern university’s obsession with diversity and equality through documents and documentation warrants quoting:

Being good at writing documents [that document inequality] becomes a competency that is also an obstacle ... as it means that the university gets judged as good because of the document. It is this very judgment about the document that ... produc[es] a ... feeling that we are doing enough ... or even that there is nothing left to do ... [A]s one of [the diversity workers she interviewed] puts it, “You end up doing the document rather than doing the doing.” Documents become all diversity workers have time to do ... **Diversity work: a paper trail.** (104, bold in original)

In the final section, Ahmed introduces the concept of “feminist snap,” the point at which feminists decide they must “break ties that are damaging” (162). Exemplifying the kind of double entendre that runs throughout the book, Ahmed repurposes “feminist snap” as not simply breaking but also how feminists find the energy and pluck to “invest in new possibilities” (162), as they always have. (Another one for my door: “Feminist history [is] a history of snappy women” [191]). To survive the “wear and tear of living a feminist life” (163), Ahmed uncovers diverse feminist histories and ends with the radical vision of lesbian feminism. The citational policy of the book is also a practice of feminist living in which feminists lean on each other and build feminist shelters.

Ahmed’s refusal to cite or name white men productively jars the reading (and reviewing) experience, as she removes the canonical male banisters of many feminist theory texts. For example, Ahmed offers oblique references to the male theorist of desire and the phallus, but she does not name him. I sometimes found myself unconsciously wondering where the white men fit into the story — thinking, for example, “Does she mean ‘ordinary’ in the sense of that early twentieth-century Austrian-British philosopher?” Ahmed’s citation policy reminds us that one can only cite so many authors and texts, and when feminists feel compelled to situate our work in the context of philosophical fathers, we necessarily restrict our ability to engage in feminist and queer archives. The killjoy resists the academic

pressure to be scholarly in a particular way — “[g]o this way, go that way. . . . *Oppression* . . . is from *press*” (49–50).

As Ahmed acknowledges, some readers will find *Living a Feminist Life* “old-fashioned” or not adequately “theoretical” because the lived experience of “women,” especially the experiences of queer women and women of color forged through “consciousness-raising,” ground her feminist theory. Some will also want a more nuanced account of the dichotomy between gender as a constraint and feminist willfulness as liberation. With some exceptions, the book is written to sustain, rather than problematize, contemporary feminist practice. It fits alongside books about feminist life in the academy such as Nadya Aisenberg and Mona Harrington’s *Women of Academe* (1988) and Judith Glazer-Raymo’s *Shattering the Myths* (2001), as well as writings by radical feminists of color such as Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s collection *This Bridge Called My Back* ([1983] 2015) and Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider* ([1984] 1995). It will be an excellent resource for graduate students in feminist studies and undergraduates interested in feminism, difference, and feminist action. (Duke University Press now sells “feminist killjoy” T-shirts, anticipating this reception.) The last chapter’s closing lines sum up the book’s spirit: “Moments can build a movement, a movement assembled from lighter materials. This is not a secure dwelling. We are shattered, too often, but see how the walls move. **We are willing to participate in a killjoy movement. We are that movement. Watch us roll**” (268, bold in original).

Let’s get to work.

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