

## Ahmed, Sara. *Living a Feminist Life*. Duke UP, 2017. 312 pages.

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Most of us are familiar with the popular radical-feminist term “the personal is political.” It encapsulates the embodied ways in which institutions in our terminally unbalanced society impact us, and, conversely, how our bodies can hope to impact the institutions in return. Sara Ahmed’s newest monograph, *Living a Feminist Life*, takes this creed as its key foundation. She seeks to explore what the embodiment of feminism means, especially in relation to the constant pressure of cultural norms. Her argument rests upon the creation of a feminist aesthetic that is both informed by theory and the creator of it, a tension that is required because, as she says, “feminism needs feminists to survive...and the reverse too is very true: feminists need feminism to survive” (236). Feminism is only possible with feminists, and Ahmed takes this book as an opportunity to address the ways in which feminism impacts the very fabric of life. Time, place, space, relationality, affect: all receive a critical new reading.

This book lives up to the radical-feminist mantra: it is both deeply political and deeply personal. Her call to continue the work of the feminist killjoy, to expand it and continuously re-evaluate who and what we include, is essential in a climate of ever-widening ideological chasms. While it is my responsibility as a reviewer to tend to a summary of its contents, I think it is of equal value in this unique situation to also report on the experience of reading Ahmed’s work. The book is joyful, painful, sublime, impossibly easy, excruciatingly difficult. I found myself stopping every few pages just to ruminate on the incisive truth that she was delivering, as though I had just taken a sip of bitter, but necessary medicine. To continue with tired metaphors, this book is simultaneously the richest dessert and the most essential staple: we, as feminists, salivate for these theories and methods, and yet struggle to consume them in quantities larger than a mouthful. While her organizational structure is traditional for an academic monograph, the arguments within defy traditional methods of summarization, analysis, and critique. The task of regurgitating key points for a book review proves a great challenge. However, a key element of a feminist life is utilizing a privileged space to disseminate information key to resistance. In that vein, I will pursue a brief outline of *Living a Feminist Life*, before concluding with its impacts on the institution of studying, teaching, and living in feminist rhetoric.

The monograph is split into five sections: "Introduction," "Becoming Feminist," "Diversity Work," "Living the Consequences," and "Conclusions." In the introduction, Ahmed pursues the most traditional of approaches for an academic intervention: she brings her key concepts to the forefront and explains the purpose of her work. She aims to continue the hope and energy of feminism by providing calls to action and practical tools to her readers, acknowledging that the movement is not over and cannot be over without a continued commitment to the eradication of privilege and oppression. Of course, the final pages of her introduction include outlines of the succeeding sections and chapters; however, the key radical difference in her scholarship is noted here: she reveals her policy that, for this work, she did not cite any white male scholars. This decision resonates with a deep internalization of feminist ideals: a sign of resistance to the various institutions of privilege, a self-care method, a commitment to exposure of other feminist, anti-racist, and intersectional scholars. It also foreshadows the process through which Ahmed leads us in her book: from personal realization of one's feminism, through institutional oppression, to the consequences of a feminist life and the resistances and responsibilities one must engage with to continue the work.

"Becoming Feminist" presents the first step towards self-recognition and feminism: a personal realization and reconciliation of one's embodiment of various identities. These identities—alienation, killjoy, willful—are presented in their accompanying chapters as part and parcel of the becoming-feminist experience. Ahmed's discussion of the "affect alien" in chapter one, "Feminism is Sensational," explains the sensation of "becoming the problem when identifying the problem," a concept that will be familiar to readers of her previous work. When a marginalized individual speaks up and comments on the inequality in a situation, they are accused of rocking the boat, and thus creating a problem. This allows the actual problem of oppression to be ignored and casts the marginalized individual as a person experiencing an affect that is unknown to the "normal." In addition, rolling eyes as a feminist pedagogy is also introduced in this chapter. While it is fleshed out in the book's conclusion, Ahmed briefly defines this concept as both a typical response to feminist behaviors, and also a form of resistance against the norm: rolling eyes is a key part of not accepting the status quo.

She expands her concept of the feminist killjoy in chapter two, "On Being Directed," by noting the transformation of the affect alien into the killjoy through an acceptance of feminism's reality. Being an affect alien is a status placed upon an oppressed woman by her oppressors; being a feminist killjoy is a status claimed by oneself and is marked by a refusal to accept the oppressive status quo. She uses an extended analysis of the character of Mrs. Dalloway to explain the key notion that one may as well be active if one's

existence is always going to be assumed as passive. In her final chapter of section one, "Willfulness and Feminist Subjectivity," Ahmed notes that to be willful is to both participate in some activities and to refrain from others, creating an inherently communal act of resistance. The use of arms (both as body parts and as weapons), seen as tools of oppression and signs of insignificance, are rebranded as tools of the feminist rather than tools to silence her, causing a change in dynamics. A feminist subject must embody this willful space through their alien affect and their killjoy persona.

Having addressed the consciousness-raising aspect of feminism, Ahmed then turns toward the institutional. Her second section begins with "Trying to Transform," a synopsis of her previous works articulating the difficulties and realities of diversity work in higher education. In this chapter lies one of the most important revelations for scholars of rhetoric and composition: the relationship between using words to ignite change and the changes (or lack thereof) that the words cause. She notes that the "paper trail" created by university-sanctioned diversity workers is insignificant when the practices of oppression do not change, indicating the reality that using words does not necessitate those words effecting reality. She shows how this uselessness of words impacts the treatment of particular groups in the next chapter, "Being in Question." Ahmed indicates how the bodily realities of non-privileged individuals are questioned when noticed. This reality can become a feminist resistance: Ahmed plays with "fidgiting" to indicate how refusing to be still within the bounds of institutional discrimination can force encounters with oppressive structures.

She completes this section with a chapter dedicated to "Brick Walls," expanding upon the concept from her book *On Being Included*. Walls are tangible, Ahmed notes, as manifestations of social categories that precede a bodily encounter. A lack of encounters with walls—structures that stop an individual from proceeding through a space, such as graduate school or the tenure timeline—speaks to an individual's perceived privilege in that category, that "what came up" catalogued that person as acceptable to that space—male, white, cisgendered, economically privileged, able-bodied. She reiterates her stance that walls are what we are not yet over but are expected to be over, such as racism and sexism, and also are the very standards that uphold these continuing privileged identities. Temporality is defined as a feminist resistance here: by continuing to come up with responses to the walls, acknowledging them in the here and now and refusing to move either into the past or the future, time is warped. The definition of time gives privilege to the existence of the feminist killjoy when she refuses to "get over" the walls, destabilizing the relationship of time to a privileged body.

Ahmed's final body section addresses the intimate and real aspects of becoming feminist and the creation of other ways of being. She sagely notes that "feminism is what we need to handle the consequences of being feminist" (162). These final chapters deal with the harsh truth of many stereotypes of feminism and with the resistance many of us feel towards being read as "too much" or "broken." The chapter "Fragile Connections" feels all too real in the wake of the recent #MeToo movement, as Ahmed explains that fragility is a material as well as embodied connection between experiences of oppression and elision. She returns to the concept of walls to explain that walls come up when something finally breaks, again calling forward in all our minds the push-back against holding men accountable for sexual assault due to the woman being "willing," or black, or better off because of the experience. Fragility is essential in all relationships. By recognizing this truth, one can combat the argument that this feminism is simply a phase or a fad. Feminism is necessary as long as fragility is a prerequisite for relationships—between people, between people and structures, between people and the world—to exist. Ahmed uses this opportunity to point out that recognizing privilege is a key part of activism, and continuous fighting to exist can hinder more oppressed minorities from doing more active work. She notes that feminism must be intersectional to be successful and sustainable, calling on anti-racist and anti-ableist methods to be integrated into the feminist lifestyle.

Feminism necessitates living with fragility and brokenness, and the manifestation of these realities is embodied in her next chapter, "Feminist Snap." Ahmed articulates the snap as a concept that transcends time, materiality, and affect, as it is not the starting point of feminism, but is rather a queerly situated manifestation of its consciousness. Snap and will are intimately related, as snapping is a refusal to reproduce optimism for a future that cannot be seen by oppressed peoples. She notes also that snap is collective, women's constant experience of sexism as a thread worn down with tradition. Listening can be a snappy activity for more privileged bodies within the feminist movement. When privileged bodies make space for more oppressed narratives, they refuse to occupy the space of the oppressor, and that is the essence of snap. She brings back the concept of rolling eyes as feminist pedagogy, noting that both the response of rolling eyes and the action of rolling eyes by feminists indicate an upending of the status quo, feminism as joykilling disturbance.

She concludes her final section with a chapter on "Lesbian Feminism." Rather than simply addressing a sexual orientation, she takes lesbian as the political and personal reality of living without having to be defined in relation to a man. Extending her notion of rolled eyes, she notes that raised eyebrows is a lesbian feminist pedagogy, creating ordinary out of what is not recognized as ordinary and refusing to reify the structures of heteropatriarchy. The

creation of feminist support systems is key in lesbian feminism, as is recognizing that lesbians are not simply meant to be “a step on a path that leads in queer direction” (Ahmed 223). Resistance requires intersectionality, and the responsibility of allies is to learn willfulness and lesbian feminism and enact them in spaces occupied by privileged individuals.

Ahmed’s book ends with two extremely practical conclusions. Her first, “A Killjoy Survival Kit,” details ten key concepts (books, things, tools, time, life, permission notes, other killjoys, humor, feelings, and bodies) that a feminist killjoy must have to equip themselves daily. She notes that this project is, in fact, a critique of the very thing that it is: her killjoy survival kit is her killjoy survival kit, a reality that is marked by its feminist rhetoric implications. Self-care is warfare and survival is a protest. Her “Killjoy Manifesto,” then, acts as the space in which she lists nine key components of this feminism she has built. These components act as useful summaries of her chapters and are all articulated as “willful statements,” underlining the necessity of feminism as an exercise of will. Her book finishes with a note that this movement is rolling, ever breaking, ever snapping, and ever living.

This book challenges core concepts of rhetorical acts, especially those by women and for women. Ahmed successfully considers and reworks concepts of time, relationships, structures, and resistance, to weave them into feminist and queer ideals for life practice. She calls out both the way research is conducted and the way life is conducted beyond our roles as academics. As a rhetor, she pulls off an incredible composing feat: by describing a killjoy survival kit, she herself crafted and became a killjoy survival kit. bell hook’s endorsement on the front cover exclaims “everyone should read this book.” I could not agree more. I will expand on hook’s instruction, though. Everyone should read this book carefully. Everyone should read this book, critically examining their own feminism and their own status in their political and personal lives. Everyone should read this book expecting to be thrilled, disgusted, challenged, and ultimately empowered. In this monograph, Ahmed creates breathing space for figuring out how to theorize feminism and create a set of actions and attitudes that sustain and reinforce that theory, all while creating an assemblage of concepts to embolden us to keep living a feminist life. Everyone should, indeed, read this book.

## About the Author

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