

Review of *Willful Subjects* by Sara Ahmed, Duke University Press, Durham and London paperback, 2014, 320 pp, \$24.95

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Sara Ahmed's recent monograph, *Willful Subjects*, is both a culmination of her previous works, as well as being a new examination of the intersections of concepts of will, time, the body, and society. Through an interdisciplinary investigation of a variety of sources—including those from Continental philosophy, Grimm's fairy tales, novels by George Eliot, and Critical Race Theory—Ahmed seeks to assemble a "willfulness archive" such that a "queer history" of will becomes possible.

The potential of such a project is readily observable: if will has historically been developed as a "straightening device," (and indeed, one of the aims of *Willful Subjects* is to demonstrate this development), then a queer history may reveal "what is already bent" (p. 7). That which is "already bent" is a concern because although Ahmed considers the arguments of her book to be philosophical in nature, she suggests that they do not "inhabit in any 'straightforward' way the house of philosophy" (p. 15). Instead, she practices "*not philosophy*" in an effort to state her relationship to traditional philosophy while simultaneously creating room within it "for others who are not philosophers." Moreover, her concern extends to those who are judged as being *not* more generally; those who are deemed willful and "as not meeting the criteria for being human." This "not" Ahmed notes, is "often to be attached to other nots...not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied" (p. 15). Creating a willfulness archive, writing a queer history of will, and practicing *not philosophy* is done in order to reinhabit "the body of philosophy" and to "queer that body."

Ahmed begins the book with the Grimm brothers' story of "The Willful Child," a tale of disobedience, a willing of death, and disturbing persistence. This story is integral to the book not only because the willful child (and particularly her arm) becomes something of a mascot, but also because her story provides the starting point for Ahmed's argument that a certain "form of will seems to involve the rendering of other wills *as* willful," and further, that "one form of will assumes the right to eliminate the others" (2). This story also encapsulates the interweaving of the main themes which Ahmed seeks to develop in every subsequent chapter: will involves authority, it involves overlapping layers of time, it involves the body, and it is exercised socially. Lastly, although Ahmed never explicitly states it, "The Willful Child" also illuminates the context in which her exegesis on will operates; this analysis, while occasionally engaging with postcolonial perspectives, largely focuses on will and willfulness as they have been developed within western discourses of theology, philosophy, literature, etc.

As mentioned above, Ahmed's methodology is interdisciplinary insofar as she combines approaches drawn from Literary Theory, Phenomenology (following Edmund Husserl), Queer Theory, Critical Race Theory, philosophy, and feminist critique. Structurally, she divides the book into four chapters which, as they unfold, "thicken gradually [her] account of the sociality of will" (p. 19). Thus, although the first two chapters deal heavily with willfulness as it has been explored in dominant western discourses, and it is not until the second half of the book that we begin to see the queer

potential of willfulness for resistance, Ahmed asserts that, "to wander away we must first recognize the path we are asked to follow" (p. 9).

In Chapter One, Ahmed examines willing as an everyday experience and as a fundamentally social activity. She investigates willing in how subjects aim to bring about certain results, and she seeks to "depersonalize" willfulness such that it can be attributed to whatever obstructs the will (be it object or subject). She begins with an account of will given by Augustine who characterizes will as a form of address. In being able to "call upon the will", Augustine "creates a will that can be called upon" (p. 28). This realization leads Ahmed to examine how calling upon the will is done in order to "will about" a particular object or ends. Turning towards Husserl's *Ideas*, Ahmed elaborates on willing as something done in order to reach towards a horizon. Further, "willing is corporeal: a willing is a bodily turn" (p. 35). Willing is also something we do in-the-world and thus, Ahmed explores "the will sphere," specifically through an analysis of George Eliot's novels *Silas Marner* and *Adam Bede*. In these texts, we can see how it is not only other subjects who can will and be willful, but also objects; objects can be filled with will, can become willing objects, and conversely, their obstruction to the will of a subject can make them willful. Ahmed demonstrates that when objects, or certain subjects, become obstructions to the will, force is employed in order to make that thing willing. She concludes the chapter by examining how willing is done with Others. By discussing "social willing," Ahmed is able to expand her definition of force such that it is not only "the rod" by which willful objects are directed to "will right," but also the mandate for attunement. Those who are not in tune, "or who are out of tune become the obstacles," they become willful and must be pressed towards the will of society. The social will towards harmony, then, is a project towards which willing subjects must reach, and under which willful subjects will be shaped by force.

In Chapter Two, Ahmed moves on in her genealogy to examine how, in nineteenth-century western philosophical and literary discourses, the will itself becomes a project. She investigates three manifestations of the will as a project, namely within literature that sought to promote "an educable will," within self-help literature, and within texts focused on converting "the strong will" into "the good will." Returning to the Grimm's tale of "The Willful Child," Ahmed explores a genre of texts she, following Alice Miller, characterizes as "poisonous pedagogy." Whether scrutinizing more overtly violent texts such as the Grimm's tale, wherein the will of the child is literally broken by the rod, or reading more liberal, utopian texts like those of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wherein the will of the child is "made" by "the steady hand," Ahmed demonstrates how willfulness is something to be eradicated at worst, or "straightened out" at best. In the self-help literature, exemplified by texts such as those by John Stuart Mill, Ahmed shows how "will is treated as an internal resource" (p. 75). By working on one's will, one has the capacity to "set oneself right". The implications here are that external circumstances—like the unequal distribution of resources—are obscured and reconfigured such that one who does not "will right" can be characterized simply as weak-willed. Ahmed states that also "implicit in the diagnosis of weakness of will is an idea or ideal of a strong will," and it is the conversion of "the strong will" into "the good will" that occupies the last part of the chapter. In order to investigate the narrative of "the good will," Ahmed returns to the novels of George Eliot, and specifically to *Daniel*

Deronda. She argues that, within the novel, “wilfulness and weak wills, understood as character flaws, participate in the creation of a moral landscape of the will” (p. 84). This moral landscape can also be observed in Kantian ethics which must be critiqued on their presumed universality. The danger of ignoring the ways in which “the good will” is intimately tied up with obedience, and assumed to be universally desirable, are obvious when one looks at, for example, the Eichmann trials: Ahmed notes, “a Kantian model of duty as obedience to the moral law can be used to justify obedience to the will of a leader” (p. 92).

In Chapter Three, Ahmed begins by asking “how the good will becomes a technique for gathering a disparate population into a coherent body,” or, in other words, how it is that “the good will” transforms into “the general will?” Moreover, “who or what embodies the general will?” In order to answer these questions, Ahmed brings the body back into the frame by arguing that the general will is the will of “the whole body.” In order to examine the particular will, and its relation to the general will, it is necessary to explore the relation “between the will of the whole body and the will of a body part” (p. 97). Regarding the theme of obedience, Ahmed notes that “the demand for obedience is not simply a demand that the part obeys the whole but is willing to become part of the whole” (p. 97). She explores this demand in both Rousseau’s *The Social Contract*, as well as in Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*. Following Mary Poovey, Ahmed suggests that this perspective within western discourse was not only applied to bodies, but also the “the social body,” or the body politic. The significance of this metaphor lies in its potential to promise those who were traditionally “not part” to become a member of “the whole.” This promise, however, was conditional. To truly be a part of the whole body, parts must be sympathetic to each other, they must be in accordance. This formula is not only descriptive of how parts relate to each other, “but also *prescribes* what parts must do for other parts, and for the body of which they are part” (p. 101). To become part of the social body therefore, is to inherit a prescribed function; “the parts must be willing to do what they are assumed to be for” (p. 101).

The relation between the part and the whole is given more complexity when Ahmed turns to questions of productivity. She notes that the idea of function, or an assigned duty, paves the way for certain parts to be diagnosed as willful when they fail to do their duty and thus, fail to support the whole. What becomes obvious, however, is that only *some* parts are ever charged with willfulness. She suggests that when the will of certain parts appears to align with the general will, those parts are considered to have accomplished their duties and are thus given “*a freedom not to be supportive*” (p. 105). In other words, if the general will is expressed within the will of particular parts, those parts are no longer required to labor in order to support the whole. The health of the body then rests solely on those parts whose particular will must be surrendered in order to support the will of the whole. Labor within a western, capitalist context, for example, not only shapes what a part does, but ultimately what it is assumed to be *for*. Ahmed looks at metaphors used to describe laborers and emphasizes that it is the arms and hands which come to represent their particular duty (to support the whole), and subsequently, which *stand in* for the workers themselves (i.e. they become known as “hired hands”). By engaging with Disability Theory, and with the history of prosthetics in the West specifically, Ahmed goes on to show that the willful part is one which does not, and even

cannot, do the duty it is assumed to be for. Developing prosthetic hands and arms for workers was not in order to restore some sense of wholeness to the individual subject, but rather, so that that subject might return to its duty in supporting the whole social body.

The relation between the whole will or the general will and productivity leads Ahmed to the connection between general will and reproductivity. The part must willingly do its duty to support the whole not only so that the whole body is productive, but also so that the body may continue its productivity, and become reproductive. Ahmed examines this mandate first in terms of family lineage and again, invokes the willful child. The willful child is a threat because by failing to adhere to the will of the parent (connected in the Grimm story to the will of society and ultimately, to the will of God), she fails to support the body of the family and thus, to reproduce the family by being an appropriate point on the family line. Ahmed also evokes Eliot's novel *Romola* to examine the figure of the willful woman who attempts to flee marriage and thus avoid the reproduction of societal norms, as well as the reproduction of her family lineage. *Romola* also provides Ahmed with an example of "the willful wanderer" who in her refusal to be "put right" or "put in her place," similarly threatens the health, coherency, and reproduction of the social body. Ahmed concludes the chapter by extending the idea of the wanderer to the idea of "the stranger". Because of the threat to productivity and reproductivity that a wandering part poses, Ahmed argues that the creation of "a new sphere of voluntary criminals (the vagrant or vagabond)" was necessary in order to maintain a class of willing workers. Building on the work of Karl Marx, Ahmed demonstrates how legislation in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries made wandering a criminal offense and therefore, the vagabond (a classed, as well as raced figure) the chief criminal. In order for a part to avoid willfulness, it must abstain from wandering and become a willful worker.

Paradoxically, strangers are parts that potentially endanger the health of the whole but they are also necessary for the creation of the national body, "another fantasy of the 'whole social body'" (p. 126). Those who are strangers are *not yet part* of the whole body, and it is only those who are willful who refuse to become a part, and to will in accordance with the whole. In an international context, we can see this relationship play out in terms of citizenship. Migrants become "would-be citizens" who will be "welcomed on condition [that] they are willing to will in accordance with the national will" (p. 127). Of course those who are deemed willful, or inassimilable (Ahmed uses Muslim women and "the veil" as an example), are also necessary insofar as they highlight, through their difference, the supposed homogeneity of the national will and can be used as a technique for justifying security projects designed to eliminate "the threat of otherness" (p. 128).

The turn towards more politically engaged analyses in Chapter Three is extended in Chapter Four within which Ahmed reflects on how willfulness "can become a style of politics" (p. 133). She clarifies that she has no intention of "prescribing a set of behaviors," that questioning the status of willfulness remains part of her project, and that willfulness as a style is not always easily recognizable. Nonetheless, she turns her attention towards constructing a more hopeful agenda for those against whom the charge of willfulness has been directed. "To claim *to be* willful or to describe oneself or one's stance *as* willful is to claim the very word that has historically been used as a technique for dismissal" (p. 133). She suggests that this strategy begins with "a history of

willfulness as a history of those who have been willing to receive its assignment” (p. 134). Her first history is one of willful disobedience. In examining figures spanning from Antigone to Martin Luther King Jr., Ahmed highlights “how willfulness can be an *orientation toward crime* (to expose wilfully the injustice of the law)” (p. 135). Willful disobedience often comes at a high price and involves not only those who are willing to accept that cost, but also those who willfully worked on the path that those refusing to obey travel down. Willful disobedience may be as corporeally compromising as it was for Antigone, it may involve reclamation and new creation as called for by Frantz Fanon, or it may involve “the willingness of a community that allows an act to acquire the status of willful *for* others,” as it did for Rosa Parks (p. 143).

Willfulness might also be mobilized in diversity work. Ahmed defines diversity work in two ways: “firstly...[as] work that has the explicit aim of transforming an institution; and secondly...[as] what is required when you do not ‘quite’ inhabit the norms of an institution” (144). These two ways meet in the bodies of those who do not “quite” inhabit institutional norms and are thus, frequently tasked with changing those norms. She explains that once a particular type of will becomes habit within an institution, it no longer needs to be actively willed and indeed, is no longer visible to those within the institution. It is not until someone whose will does not “quite” align comes up against that institutional will that it becomes apparent. The organization of spaces does not come into question until certain bodies requiring adjustments in the width of the corridors, the access to upper floors, or the audio technology enter these spaces and “get in the way” of institutional progress. It is only through modifications that the ways in which “spaces are already shaped around certain bodies” become visible (p. 147). Moreover, those modifications—and those who require them—become willful impositions. Ahmed argues that institutional wills act as a type of residence for certain subjects, and for those who do not, or cannot align with that will, it is only through their insistence that they are given residence with the others. This type of insistence is diversity work and always already positions the “not quite” subject as the willful subject. Insistence in this way becomes a political grammar: in making use of it, the willful subject illuminates how the object of her insistence is automatically given to the others, “to those whose residence is assumed” (p. 149). For the willful subject, she has to “insist just to exist,” for those normatively housed within the institution, all they have to do is turn up. The value of willfulness in this context is that it “describes the uneven consequences of this differentiation” (p. 150).

Ahmed also points to the feminist killjoy in her history of willful subjects who (re)claim the charge of willfulness. At the family dinner table she is the “feminist daughter” whose contributions elicit the rolling of eyes. The feminist killjoy is loud, frustrating, mouthy, the mouth. “She is viewed as too full of her own will, as not empty enough to be filled by the will of others” (p. 154). To transform this from judgement to empowering project, Ahmed argues that we must make a willful translation, “we are *willing not* to be willing: *not willing* translated into *willing not*” (p. 154). This translation is not without risk. On the lighter side, it is possible that the content of the feminist killjoy’s speech may go unheard. More concerning are those circumstances in which the staunch unwillingness to be willing results in isolation, dependence, and violence. Nevertheless, Ahmed suggests that it is possible to withdraw, even from those seemingly

inescapable places; willfulness can become “a way of creating a room of one’s own” (p. 157). The act of this creation can become an everyday project, it can become a pedagogy: “don’t adjust to an unjust world!” This may mean retaining some of the negativity attached to willfulness and to being a feminist killjoy. Ahmed suggests that because refusing to participate in an unjust context may result in a charge of willfully desiring to kill joy, one must get behind *being* a feminist killjoy. She states, “we might need to intrude on a world in which we figure as intrusion” (p. 160). The cost, and yet also the necessity of this charge is most keenly felt by minority subjects whose very beings are “deemed a threat to [the general] body” (p. 160). Willfulness is thus a way to expose “the violence that supports that body.”

Ahmed concludes the chapter by examining “striking bodies.” Willfulness might not only mean an unwillingness to go with the flow, but also being willing to become an obstruction to the flow. Striking bodies are those that “go *on* strike” in order “to aim *for* obstruction” (p. 161). It is a willingness to mark the body, to adopt stigma voluntarily. For those bodies that are already stigmatized (by skin color or sexuality, for example), Ahmed states, “you might have to be willing (at least) to double that inheritance, to be stigmatized *all over again*” (p. 161). This voluntary assumption of stigma can be a way of performing the body in-the-world and with others whose deaths have also been willed. Demonstrations are important not only because they gather bodies in the streets, but also because they shape and reshape those streets. Reclaim the Night marches, and the Occupy movements provide concrete examples wherein willful occupation of streets can become acts of reclamation and transformation. Political demonstrations also come with risk of violence, but Ahmed argues that “to bother is to be bothered,” even an act of violence can become a rallying point “if we rally around what we are against” (pp. 164-65). However, she goes on to suggest that even as willfulness can act as a spark, or a charge, we must not “assume that in a given situation we are the willful subjects,” willfulness is not a side which “one can simple be on or stay on” (p. 168).

Of primary importance in describing the dynamics of willfulness and its potential is “to learn not to repeat the dismissal” (p. 169). We must not foreclose the possibilities of willfulness by pre-empting its meaning or assuming its appearance in advance. In order for willfulness to be a project of connecting, of building spaces, of creating worlds, Ahmed asserts that we must learn “that we can loosen our hold on willfulness, even if, or maybe because, willfulness is used by others to hold us in place.” To transform willfulness into pedagogy then, it seems we “have to work out how to travel on unstable grounds” (p. 170). Rather than persisting in the belief that looking ahead, that progress should determine our activism, Ahmed evokes the queerness of hindsight, of re-writing history from behind, from the perspective of those who are behind. “A politics of the rear,” maintains time to question and “to ask rather than tell” (p. 171). In the Conclusion of *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed moves away from the willful subject itself. Instead, through queer re-readings of Eliot’s novels, Augustine’s writings, and of other material objects, she aims to examine the roll of willfulness in shaping our shared world. Thinking about willfulness not only through subjectivity, but also through materiality, allows Ahmed to further explore the relationships between parts and parts, and parts and the whole. Willfulness via parts and materials can help us to further rethink our assumptions about place, order, promises, and time. Willfulness as a history of objects is also critically

important because "colonialism and slavery are object relations as well as embodied relations: bodies become objects" (p. 200).

As mentioned previously, Ahmed's book has powerful potential for scholars invested in challenging the white, androcentric, heteronormative boundaries historically constructed around western philosophy specifically, and around "the subject," more generally. *Willful Subjects* also provides fruitful new avenues for exploring contemporary feminist debates about women's agency, particularly with respect to the "gatekeeping" tendencies observable in much mainstream, western liberal feminist discourse. I would argue that scholars interested in rethinking the relationship between philosophy and literature would also benefit from Ahmed's work, as would those whose research focuses on the history of emotions (she argues strongly for the interconnectedness of the history of will with the history of happiness, for instance). The ideal reader of this monograph however, might be, much like Ahmed herself, thoroughly familiar with Continental philosophies of will and, to a lesser extent, the novels of George Eliot. One has to wonder therefore, if Audre Lorde's ever-pressing observation about "the master's tools" is necessary to raise in relation to *Willful Subjects*.

Indeed, in the final pages, Ahmed herself evokes these words, (although not in reference to her own work). Still, her reading of Lorde's words as a directive, and her "willful misreading" of Hegel may act as a response. For Ahmed, the master's tools are his arms, which, within the master/slave dialectic are embodied in the slave who provides his labor and provides support for his will. If we translate this to Ahmed's work, we might think of the master as the dominant discourse of the will, and his arms/tools/slave as the willful subject. Ahmed argues that what she attempts to do is enact a "call to arms as the call of arms," to re-read the story of the arms through a queer lens such that it is their voice we hear, rather than the master's. In re-reading the "master" narrative of the will as a "queer history of arms," Ahmed seeks to encourage the arms to abandon their duty to carry. For her, Lorde delivers "a call to arms: do not become the master's tool" (p. 203). Therefore, Ahmed's queer readings might be interpreted as an "army" act of refusal to support the master narrative of the will and instead, to "reach for something that is not present, something that appears only as a shimmer, a horizon of possibility" (p. 204).

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