

BOOK REVIEW

**Review of *Living a Feminist Life* by Sara Ahmed. Durham:
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Living a Feminist Life by Sara Ahmed confronts one of the most defining and relevant questions of this era: What does it mean to live a feminist life? Feminism is not a disembodied theory to Ahmed, but instead feminism is lived. It is embodied. For Ahmed, living a feminist life requires “asking ethical questions,” about how we live, about how we relate, how we care, and most importantly, “how to keep coming up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become as solid as walls” (p. 1). Ahmed explores these questions in three parts, “Living a Feminist Life,” “Diversity Work,” and “Living the Consequences.” Interwoven within each part of *Living a Feminist Life* is the figure of the feminist killjoy, a subject of many of Ahmed’s previous writings. Ahmed brilliantly develops tools for feminist survival by giving shape and form to the figure of the feminist killjoy. This figure asserts itself when we live a feminist life, because, as Ahmed writes, “It is not simply that we first become feminist and later become killjoys. Rather, to become feminist is to kill other people’s joy; to get in the way of other people’s investments” (p. 65). The feminist killjoy is a valuable contribution to conversations surrounding feminist subjectivity, because she refuses the ways in which will and happiness can be expectations for some bodies, and refused to other bodies.

Chapter 3, “Willfulness and Feminist Subjectivity,” explains that feminist subjectivity is perceived “as having too much will, or too much subjectivity, or just as being too much” (p. 66). Existing becomes burdensome for someone whose existence is perceived as willful, perceived as “too much.” The feminist killjoy does not shy

away from that willfulness, but instead Ahmed partners with this figure to theorize feminist ways of being. In being willful, feminist killjoys refuse silence because some have no other choice than to make themselves audible (p. 73). In Part II, which covers “Diversity Work”, Ahmed argues that being a feminist is work, because to exist as a feminist requires one to work to transform organizations and institutions. Ahmed analyzes her own experiences working in academia, and the experiences of others involved in diversity work. Through these experiences and interviews, Ahmed describes diversity work as “banging your head against a brick wall job,” because to exist for some is to constantly come up against walls (p. 136). Ahmed explains, “Walls are how some bodies are not encountered in the first place. Walls are how other bodies are stopped by an encounter” (p. 145). According to Ahmed, to come up against walls means to exist in a body that is stopped from existing, yet hitting walls can also teach lessons. Ahmed uses these experiences of coming up against walls to think of ways to work the system, to smile strategically, and to navigate spaces that perceive diversity workers as hostile (p. 101).

Living a feminist life and engaging in diversity work are both challenging, as part III, “Living the Consequences,” delves into highly personal and uncomfortable realities of feminism. This part in *Living a Feminist Life* is relatable. It demonstrates the necessity of being vulnerable and honest. To be a feminist provokes fragility and the constant threat of bruising or even shattering relationships, sometimes relationships which we might hold dear. Ahmed explains that, even when you know that you are not the source of the problem, “exposing a problem is posing a problem,” you still experience “exposing a problem as posing a problem for yourself” (p. 172). Sometimes being the feminist killjoy feels like too much, or like she might cost you too much (p. 172). However, Ahmed focuses on fragility’s strength by drawing on Audre Lorde’s use of “hardness” to argue that feminism is to live with fragility, rather than eliminate it, because sometimes walls need to shatter (p. 186). Sometimes we need to break relationships. Most importantly, Ahmed recognizes

that when your existence is viewed as a problem, “you have to come up with your own systems for getting things through. You might even have to come up with your own system for getting yourself through” (p. 231). Ahmed recognizes that feminist politics are fluid, and that the tools of one feminist might not be the same as those of another feminist. However, she concludes by sharing “A Killjoy Survival Kit” and “A Feminist Killjoy Manifesto,” which both contain resources gained through experiences coming up against walls and materials gained, and which hope to reproduce survival as a shared feminist project (p. 236).

Ahmed’s quest throughout *Living a Feminist Life* is a critical contribution to works by authors such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, which dignify embodied feminist theorizing. Ahmed makes important interventions in conversations surrounding what it means to live, to survive, and to live a feminist life. *Living a Feminist Life* is an important book for our time, very accessible and beneficial to anyone in academia, policy, activism, or community who wants to live as a feminist.