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*A Call to Arms:
A Review Essay of Sara Ahmed's Willful Subjects*

Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects*, Duke University Press, 2014, 292 pp., \$24.95 US (pbk), 9780822357834.

This essay borrows its title, “A Call to Arms,” from the conclusion of the book it is reviewing, Sara Ahmed’s, *Willful Subjects*. This intertextual reference, I hope, recalls the project of the book itself which not only opens and closes with a story of an arm—a willful arm—but features on its cover a picture of an arm made up of many other arms. The Grimm story of the willful child used as a frame, metaphor, and illustration of the project itself is perfectly conceived and executed: the arm of a child punished by God for her willfulness continually protrudes from her grave until the dead girl’s mother has beaten it under the ground with a rod. This story is both an iconic, fairytale representation of the meaning of “willful” and also a metaphor to open *Willful Subjects* that deliberately mirrors Ahmed’s own writing. It works in concert with the book’s argument and sums it up brilliantly. The play on words between the girl’s actual arm, and the concept of a “call to arms” which is in the end the work’s main message, is almost too perfect. As this mise-en-scène suggests, the book’s language is sharp and clear; its arguments are creative and original, as well as thoroughly researched with copious footnotes. Ahmed’s prose is virtuoso. An extended theoretical essay on the concept of the eponymous willful subject, this book is a mix of philosophy, political theory, and literary criticism. Ahmed’s unique combination of theoretical questioning, politics, and poetics is both the work’s subject matter and its writing style. *Willful Subjects* is a beautifully crafted book.

Sara Ahmed's Oeuvre

All of this will come as no surprise to readers familiar with Sara Ahmed’s works, many of which share these characteristics. Tracing Ahmed’s intellectual genealogy through her published writing reveals a deeply engaged thinker who moves with ease between literature and philosophy, anti-racist, feminist, and queer political theory and criticism, presenting her insights as “not philosophy” (15). *Willful Subjects* consciously builds on her previous works,

especially her linked pair of books: *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke University Press, 2010) and *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (Duke University Press, 2012). She refers to these works a number of times, characterizing *Willful Subjects* as a deeper theoretical investigation into some of the material she collected as part of *On Being Included* to probe the work “diversity” initiatives do and do not do in university settings. The other obvious link that Ahmed indeed spells out explicitly is how the willful subject herself relates to her most famous figure—developed out of *The Promise of Happiness* and the title of her popular blog—“the feminist killjoy” (2). The feminist killjoy is an operational concept in this work and *Willful Subjects* is a fascinating exploration not only of some of her attributes but also her “back story.” Another important operational figure from Ahmed’s earlier works who comes into play in this one is the “stranger.” Though this idea is better fleshed out in *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (Routledge, 2000), it still both underlies and drives *Willful Subjects*, allowing it to discuss—among other things—the work of racialized women in the academy, particularly ways in which to think differently about performance and performativity in academic work. Ahmed ties these ideas to how to understand politics today, how they might disrupt stable concepts of western philosophy and the usefulness of not-philosophy to this work.

Sarah Ahmed’s body of scholarship—*Willful Subjects* included—is crucial to our field/s in the study of the Islamic world/s. In this essay, I hope to suggest some ways in which it might be thought through in relation to many of the inquiries with which we are most concerned. This can be, for example, in relation to concepts like performance, her method and style of reading and writing and/or her political engagements from anti-racist, queer, and feminist angles. Moreover, Ahmed’s focus on marginalized people and politics in the academy is timely. She can help us understand ourselves as scholars and thinkers in important ways, and also, I would argue, as workers. Her conceptualization of academic work, particularly in seats of global power like the UK, US, Canada, and Australia, is urgent and necessary today. Her arguments can help us to unpack the processes and politics at play in our own work. This is particularly true in encouraging all of us to examine more closely our scholarship and intellectual genealogies, especially those that dominate the academy. Her equation of schooling and the socialization of children within schools with the disciplines and disciplining of universities not only enables her to link the figure and concept of the willful child to the willful academic, but also brings to light how the Other is infantilized in academia. Working in the constellation of fields with which this journal is concerned, the figure of an adult (scholar) not allowed to be seen as an adult but scripted into the role of the willful child, certainly has a deep resonance—particularly due to persistent Orientalism even amidst its currently fashionable disavowal. Similarly to the feminist killjoy, a figure that so many of us in academia embody and deeply relate to, the willful subject is a conceptual resource that offers rich possibilities.

Building a Willfulness Archive

I will focus the rest of this essay on what I consider the most useful part of *Willful Subjects*: the question of “arms,” as Ahmed would put it. I invoke the phrase in the title and again here not simply to be clever, but also to underline the book’s insistence that it make a political statement and act as a political intervention. Ahmed carries the arm metaphor throughout the book and uses it in fluid ways to move between her many areas of concern. For some, the prose and its pace may seem dizzying, the disjointed style and method

disorienting. This is deliberate and the way in which the associative patterns work in relation to each other, as well as to sounds of the words she writes on the page in relation to each other, are part of the project as a whole and key to understanding it.

To give a better sense of what this means, Ahmed defines the project of *Willful Subjects* as the creation of a “willfulness archive” (1-22). The entire book, in a sense, is the story of the concept of “will” in western—more specifically western European canonical, philosophical—thought and literary writing in English.

In tracing the multiple, shifting meanings of this word, term, and concept, she tells a story of “will” and “willfulness” through this building the archive. This is a useful conceptual framework for the collection and analysis of all kinds of material and one upon which we may wish to pause. In our field/s of study, the notion of using but also creating and collecting archives is particularly powerful and salient. Moreover, the ways in which Ahmed goes about building the archive is certainly very familiar to people working with Arabic, and also other languages of the Islamic world/s. Performing what we would likely define as a philological study, Ahmed delves into etymology, collects every invocation or use of the term “willful” she can find, and links these together in often erudite, at times surprising, and always suggestive ways.

The terms of study here are broad, obviously, and there is a great deal that can potentially be drawn out from a study of the will and willfulness. One of the things this book does very well is to demonstrate in detail how will, willfulness, willingness, and relations of power are embedded within the philosophy and knowledge production of western culture, linking these with literary and other cultural artifacts. What is more, she shows how power relations operate in the construction and manipulation of the very meaning of “willful” and “willing,” in particular. Ahmed narrows her focus in order to ground her analysis of the meaning of the willful subject by using feminist, queer, and anti-racist politics. It is the ways in which these elements are drawn into and explored through the concept of will that I found the most compelling and relevant in the book and which raised many questions relevant to the political usefulness of the concepts and how its call to arms might work.

Europe at the Center: Method and Methodology

In order to execute the task it has set itself, *Willful Subjects* is grounded in Europe. One of the major challenges I found in thinking through this book and its relation to our field/s of study is that it is extremely Eurocentric, and operates only within this realm. The work takes a series of concepts from European philosophy and thought and investigates them in painstaking detail. The etymological work done is in English, and uncovers histories and genealogies within English, England, and an Anglo-centered world. Sara Ahmed masters European philosophy and works with it, through it and around it to destabilize and question these foundations even as she inhabits their logics so fully. What does this kind of Eurocentrism mean in this context and how can such a text be useful to our fields of inquiry? When we think of a work like *Willful Subjects*, its sheer brilliance suggests the possibility of using it as a model of theory and political engagement. In thinking of it as a model in this way, however, what does its deep base in Europe mean? Even as it is a solid critique of what western theories produce, it is totally shaped in content and form by these concepts.

This book’s Eurocentrism produces its method and its method reproduces Eurocentrism in the kind of contradiction that Sara Ahmed herself would find provocative and no doubt

could unpack more eloquently than this review will. The building of an archive based on the close study of words and linking them in an associative way with a series of current and historical ideas, concepts, and cultural production in *Willful Subjects* reads as brilliant in a way that the later work of, say, Bernard Lewis, for example, does not. The parallel methodology when described in this way smacks of Orientalism, even when her own work turns these logics upside down. Can the combination of Ahmed's methodological looseness and not-philosophy with a particular politics lead to something interesting in studies of the Islamicate world/s? Or would this lead to more rehashing of the kinds of damaging Orientalist pseudo-scholarship we already know? I propose that we might think more about the relevance of Ahmed's methods, as well as her ideas and philosophical contributions, in the contexts in which we work.

Europe, Islam, and Palestine

Willful Subjects is completely focused on Europe and European concepts, rather tightly defined as such, and has very little to say directly about Islam, Muslims, and the Islamicate world/s more generally. It deals fairly extensively with the politics and phenomenology of being "different" or the "stranger," as a willful subject, and therefore in today's climate directly speaks to the experiences of so many people who are Muslim or are read as Muslims because of the Othering and difference the "west" is enacting upon that identity today. Because of the location and audience for this particular review, I would like to turn to two exceptions to this, specific and direct examples perhaps particularly relevant here. The first is her brief exploration of the "Muslim veil" (150-151). The second is how she treats Zionism as willfulness and its relation to the oppression of Palestinians (96, 248).

Like *On Being Included*, this book offers ways to use the concept of willfulness in particular to think through issues of race and racialization within the academy, in particular as professors and scholars. This is useful to all of us in different ways and speaks directly to many of us, as does the feminist killjoy. The way in which what she calls the "Muslim veil" fits in here complements this project, though not explicitly a part of it. She states that she will here use the terms "veil debates" and "veil" for the following reason: "I am going to keep using the word 'veil' because of its catchiness: we need to account for how some can be caught" (151). Here, Ahmed ponders the multiple ways in which covering or "putting on the veil" can be interpreted within the concept of willfulness. While the example here is relevant and works, this is very much bounded within the same dominant, western frameworks that encase and produce the book itself. There is not a deep or flexible discussion of multiple meanings and contexts for covering. A framework in which this might be normative and part of affiliation to the state, as opposed to being in willful opposition to it, is not considered, though there is a brief contemplation of individual and collective agency in relation to this practice (and a footnoted conversation with the arguments of Saba Mahmood on this point). The example fits well within the text and works to further its arguments about willfulness, but the reverse is not true. Willfulness here does not offer a particularly engaging or new approach to thinking about veiling, but rather draws and expands upon the social meaning of veiling as a communal practice that is willful when faced with political structures that oppose it, particularly in western contexts.

The political potential of the conversation between the veil/veil debates and willfulness therefore is not operational here. The same can be said for the second example, Ahmed's brief and unsatisfying discussion of Zionism as willfulness and in relation to this concept.

The example is raised in the book twice, though within the main text only once. The footnotes here—as other places in the book—offer a deeper and more sustained discussion. In the very last paragraph of Chapter Two, Ahmed concludes her discussion of *Daniel Deronda*, and the decision of its title character to “go East” (96). She frames this in terms of Edward Said’s definition of Orientalism as “willed human work” and identifies Daniel’s journey as part of a Zionist project, which she leaves at that and footnotes in relation to Zionism and Kantian ethics (228n43). The irony of invoking a Palestinian scholar for this analysis is not brought out. This rather neutral and depoliticized reference to Zionism primarily as a project of Jewish national will is later challenged in a second footnote (248n60), which recalls the first one. In this second note, Ahmed condemns Zionism as a project which dispossesses Palestinians, taking a political position, but in a rather round about way. The Palestinian story is erased within the main text where Zionism is highlighted as a willful national project. In a way this is of course consistent with the book’s Eurocentered views and inscription within these discourses and philosophies. But as an essay that challenges and works against the received ideas of western Eurocentrism and its racism again and again, and within a context where the author herself comes out as firmly critical of this project, it is frustrating that this is deeply buried in footnotes rather than placed within the main text.

To be fair to Ahmed, the footnote is composed very much in her own language, but the politics of it are disappointing when read within a discourse that repeatedly claims neutrality and “balance” to erase Palestinian claims and rights. She presents the issue of Zionism’s willfulness in hypothetical language: “we could imagine sympathetically” or “we might be less sympathetic” (248). Faced with the extent of the injustice that Zionism has caused for the Palestinian people, the language of more and less sympathetic is unsatisfying, particularly if we seek to use *Willful Subjects* to advance ideas for political change. I found this especially true in that one of the many figures and “parts” she identifies as a symbol and metaphor, in addition to others like arms and rods, is stones. Stones hold powerful symbolism and meaning in the case of Palestine, especially in the political resistance of the Intifadas. Stones are not merely a multifaceted symbol of resistance but as much a functional and material tool as a figurative one. There are many ways in which the arguments here around Zionism, Palestine, willfulness, and oppression might have been discussed in a more politically consistent and useful way.

Theory, Practice, and Politics: The Call to Arms

Whether by our definition or affinity—by birth, personality, predilection, social location, et cetera—many of us are willful subjects. This book therefore is deeply resonant and relevant. Readers of this review in this journal almost certainly are because of our locations as scholars, teachers, and students in the English-speaking academy, where Ahmed’s book itself is firmly rooted. Though this book is not deeply rooted and linked to the languages and intellectual genealogies we tend to be most concerned with in our fields, it is nonetheless interesting and useful in many ways. I would like to return here to the book’s conclusion, which is framed as “A Call to Arms.” Ahmed’s proposal is to locate the political potential of willfulness for the future—one I agree should be further investigated. The challenge of *Willful Subjects* is how to connect the brilliance of its arguments and theoretical insights with concrete, material, political practice to bring about change. We can embrace willfulness, but

what politics will make that willfulness meaningful? This remains an unanswered question and one perhaps the reader rather than the author is meant to answer.

Thus there are a number of other things that we can take away from *Willful Subjects*, beginning with its broad and ambitious project to rethink the concept of willfulness by building its archive and linking it to political struggles through feminist, queer, and anti-racist politics. All three of these political frameworks could be better integrated into our studies of what we refer to as the Islamicate world/s. This means not just studying the experiences of women and queer people, challenging and expanding gender roles, or investigating the dynamics of race and racism, but also reshaping how we think of the world and the way in which we form and frame our inquiries.

The kinds of arguments and theoretical insights of *Willful Subjects*, combined with its method, can offer our field not only models but also suggestions for future directions and shapes of projects. Indeed Ahmed's ability herself to be suggestive, to juxtapose things seen as like and unlike, an artistic method that recalls *assemblage* in artistic practice, is powerful; we should consider it more. This style of writing may be disorientating to some readers, but it takes risks in conjuring up ideas, rather than always relying on "scientific evidence." These risks allow the work to develop deeper and more challenging arguments and theoretical insights while never losing sight of the core concept being investigated. This is a major achievement of *Willful Subjects* and something we can learn from it as a project, a book, an essay and an experiment. I would propose this generally across fields of scholarly inquiry. In my field, Arabic literary studies, such stretching and breaking of boundaries would be welcome. If nothing else, we can take away from Sara Ahmed's book that we should harness the flexible power and potential of her willful subjects in order to transform our world/s into something better than they are now.

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