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THE SOMATECHNICS OF WILLFULNESS

Review of: Sara Ahmed (2014) *Willful Subjects*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 292 pp.

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‘How do you solve a problem like Maria?’ *The Sound of Music* is a bit far from the cultural intertexts that comprise Sara Ahmed’s willfulness archive, such as numerous novels by George Eliot, two instructive Grimm fairytales, Audre Lorde, and the master and slave of Hegel. Yet, Julie Andrews’s joyfully troubled character flew to my mind as a cheesy embodiment of a figure who says no, and is still the lovable problem of the cultural text. ‘To be identified as willful is to become a problem,’ declares *Willful Subjects* (3). Ahmed’s latest contribution to feminist ‘not philosophy’ is an assemblage of heterodox readings of continental philosophy and literature that incorporates insights from cultural theory, queer and black feminist studies. She explains that the book contributes to ‘not’ philosophy not only through a non-philosopher engaging the novelist George Eliot as a philosopher (though she is “not”), but also by attending to “the not” in order to make it an object of thought (15). ‘Willfulness might be what we do when we are judged as being *not*, as not meeting the criteria for being human,’ writes Ahmed, succinctly parsing the main thrust of

her explorations in the archive of ‘not being white, not being male, not being straight, not being able-bodied’ (Ibid.) As such, *Willful Subjects* greatly expands on the figure of the feminist killjoy introduced in Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (Duke, 2010); it even claims to be readable as a prequel by returning to characters, texts and the question of conditional sociality (see p. 219 n42). By figuring the stray, and doing philosophy astray, Ahmed’s writing stridently affirms the negative “not” within philosophy’s discipline. Likewise, though with eyes open to the masculinist and militaristic captures of the will, Ahmed affirms the utility of working with willfulness ‘to deepen the critiques of voluntarism by reflecting on the intimacy between freedom and force’ (16). The various willful subjects that populate this very wide-ranging study form, like Maria, to *some* people, a problem. They too are decidedly undecided; in other words described as flighty, childish, and won’t listen or understand. For her willfulness Maria is both adored by some and called a headache by others. Drawing often on her own life story, Ahmed reminds us that this attribution of willfulness is not personal, though it may feel so.

Willful Subjects does not need to announce any bold deconstructionist moves, the overflowing archives on the will offer slippage aplenty that Ahmed follows, methodologically, as far as she can. The book is structured according to different inflections and sites of will and its articulation, which means one can read it in any direction or piecemeal. So, allow me to introduce it back to front: Taming a finicky will is central to all structures of inequity, leading to willfulness becoming required to come up against whatever has been defined as the generalized will (chapter 4). Ahmed argues that will and its force is at the core of establishing hierarchies of command/obedience within nationalism (chapter 3), education (chapter 2), and amongst human subjects (chapter 1). Ahmed convincingly shows that rife within contemporary society are a proliferation of ‘straightening’ techniques that bend wills to the correct path, like iron rods, guiding hands, and, I might add, ingestible drugs for impulse control like Ritalin. These will ‘orthopedics’ could also be central to any scholar’s analysis of today’s debates on police force, university management, and a range of activist movements that call for self-determination such as migration, transgender, disability and intersex. Problematizing willfulness also floats through social consciousness in unassuming phrases like “will-

power” that haunt all kinds of feminist body issues like working, eating, and exercising.

Foucault returns regularly as a thinking partner of Ahmed, such as noting the oft-quoted sentence, “If there was not resistance, there would be no power relations,” and reminding us of the less cited: “Because it would be just a matter of obedience” (137-8). The take-away being: There is power because there is disobedience. What Ahmed alludes to in her account of the anti-sociality of the will are the range of dissident practices that comprise the ‘somato-political’ (Foucault 1978) mattering of the body that exercises techniques of control and resistance. Paul B. Preciado’s *Testo-Junkie: Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in a Pharmacopornographic Era* (2013), a book she Ahmed?? does not mention, would make for fascinating companion reading because the author similarly argues that the will has been ingestible and interiorized. In the pharmacopornographic era, according to Preciado, ‘the body swallows power’ predominately in pill form but also through all kinds of consumables and incorporation of images (207). Considering the two authors together would push forward the question of how the somato-political crisscrosses interiority and exteriority; for example, Ahmed discusses disobedient ears that (don’t) hear, or thumbs that feel sore, or voices that croak “no.” In light of this special issue, I will briefly consider how the somato-politics of swallowing, much like the killjoy’s willful gagging that “ruins an atmosphere” that Ahmed discusses in chapter 4 (152), might be placed within the project of the new university.

In a recent keynote “The Somatechnics of Swallowing: Affective Life in the Neoliberal University,” given at the Somatechnics International Conference (Tucson April 18, 2015), Nikki Sullivan reflected on the affective and bodily technologies in place to shape and bend the will of people in the academy. Academics who start their day swallowing selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors might be suffering from gagging on the “bullshit” Sullivan defines as the “neoliberalese” language spoken in the “Kingdom of Bull” (6). Swallowing (or not), she writes, “is a disciplinary practice, a matter of training, a somatechnology” that institutionalizes, normalizes, and also wreaks havoc on dissident forms of visceral corporeality (10). The conceptual portmanteau of *somatechnics* tracks the emergence of gendered, racialized, or sexualized bodily being within various histories of hard and

soft techniques. The analytic of somatechnics, or its kin in the somato-political, clarifies how the operation of willfulness animates and enfleshes different forms of subjectivity and as such is also an illuminating lens to use for reading *Willful Subjects*. Sullivan describes how her experience of gagging led her to realize that, ‘I am twenty-three feet of feminist intestines cocked, alert, ready to shoot from my mouth’ (9). Aligned with Ahmed’s body part that does not submit its will to the whole, that becomes the willful part (10), Sullivan becomes to the administration an embodiment of her willful epiglottis that should close to make swallowing neoliberalese possible, but doesn’t, can’t.

The somatechnics of willfulness is clearly trans-disciplinary. Ahmed shows us the myriad ways that will discourses cross-pollinate from biology, to anatomy, philosophy, psychology, political economy and so on. This might explain the genesis of what one reviewer, Marcie Bianco, described as a ‘methodologically messy’ text that traverses discourses without apparent connection (2014: n/p). The textuality of *Willful Subjects* seems to me to be incarnating not-philosophy in refusing to perform according to the general will of correct disciplinary ways. In my reading, Ahmed (willfully!) refuses one through line resulting in often jarring, or ‘swerving’ (10), skips amidst histories of willfulness. At various points, and often in footnotes, she suggests “a history” of the will could be seen through following the deviations of hysteria, or who selfishness gets attached to, or investigating the entangled emergence of will and desire, or straying along with other “will words” like vandals and vagabonds who are racialized willful wanderers. Though teeming with stray ends, this book never tries to be a complete social history, nor a history of ideas. The wanderings reveal an incredible breadth and depth of knowledge that amasses popular culture like Downton Abbey together with ancient philosophers like Empedocles in a similar way to Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant’s dexterous writings.

As stated in the introduction, the idiosyncratic methodology reads sideways and across an archive of documents ‘that are passed down in which willfulness comes up ... as a character trait’ in order to ask not what willfulness is, but what willfulness is doing. While calling someone willful is a technique of social dismissal that is explored in the first three chapters, in

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chapter 4 and the conclusion Ahmed refuses to ignore the potentially positive side of this charge of ‘too much will’ that might be necessary to forge ahead against the flow of another (general) will. Ahmed’s attraction to the concept seems to be that “the will” offers nearly every sense of agency and of domination. Hence, the book examines what the invocation of the will and its problematic fullness accomplishes, and for whom. Examples of the somatechnics of willfulness at work are often figures in novels that happily carry water pots or accidentally drop jugs that seem to have a will to fly-away; but also we find embodied agency in arms that rise up, feet that hesitantly shuffle, hands that grasp or clinch into fists, mouths that can’t speak or like Sullivan’s, can’t swallow, ears that can’t or won’t hear, and so on.

Perhaps unsurprisingly then, one of the book’s stated departure points is from Foucault’s genealogy of the subject that inquires after the power relations that give rise to the apparent unity of the subject. Cautiously Foucault maneuvers around the will to ask not who wills, but how the human will is a somatechnics to produce a who. Ahmed’s chapter “Willing Subjects” opens with a quote from Augustine’s *Confessions*, also favored by Foucault, to examine how a will becomes a property of a subject. The next chapter on “The Good Will” begins with a moral quandary about a murderous will quoted from Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda* before considering obedience as pedagogical training. Then, Rousseau’s *The Social Contract* is brought in to highlight “The General Will” that paradoxically forces one to be free by wrangling the particular will into alignment with the general. The final chapter on “Willfulness as a Style of Politics” does not open with literature, but advances by arranging quotes from various political actors, who claim to be willful, in feminist, queer and antiracist histories, including a reading of *Antigone*. The effect is a detour around endless discussions of (free) will versus (self) determination that bring little insight into our current political climate. Instead we learn how willful parts, not people, are the acting organs, instruments, and affections that illuminate the mechanics of culture.

Though dealing very often with texts from antiquity and early modern periods, the book pulses towards providing a history of the present. This long arc can be found in how throughout the book Ahmed references the

origin and history of words. Etymology is recruited to unpack senses and tease out politically efficacious associations through a word’s derivatives. Nearly every few pages we encounter this “derives from” phrasing, which is often followed by (concluding or transitioning) passages that burst with the fun of wordplay. Just one example: Ahmed’s discussion of Mary Poovey’s book *Making a Social Body* shows how the classical metaphor of the body politic holds out the image of the whole as a promise of membership to parts that should function sympathetically to each other. ‘Sympathy,’ she writes, ‘can be understood as accordance: the verb “accord” derives from heart. A sympathetic part is an agreement with heart’ (101). Bordering on puns, the rhetorical strategy of feeling out different senses of words often furthers another convincing, poetic twist to the argumentation. However, as a regularly used device it stands out and could irritate some readers looking for an encapsulated argument and less embroidery.

With fifty pages of notes at the end, they comprise another chapter at least of thoughts. Many notes are much more than short asides and suggest whole abandoned projects (much more on Foucault and Fanon’s will) and versions of the chapter (like expanding on Freud’s counter-will). Particularly for readers less familiar with her work, Ahmed usefully explains here how a certain paragraph builds on earlier texts such as *Strange Encounters* (2000) or *On Being Included* (2012). The view from the back of the book suggests retrospectively how Ahmed’s research has all along placed the will at the core of her trajectory.

In fact already on page 3, the author explains that *Willful Subjects* was sparked by a footnote in *The Promise of Happiness* in which she reflects on the sociality of the will, ‘the ways in which someone becomes described as willful insofar as they will too much, or too little, or in “the wrong way”,’ a statement from an earlier work that effectively summarizes the research question regarding the somatechnics of willfulness at the heart of this present book’s investigation. For use in the classroom or just personal interest, Ahmed also shares a great deal of work-in-progress on her blog, feministkilljoys.com. For instance, the most recent entry is on becoming unsympathetic, which is a direct expansion from writing in chapter three on the general will and coercive sympathy. Recurrence and reshuffling of ideas seems to be her *modus operandi*; the writing affords a fascinating kalei-

doscopic view into the mind of one of the most prolific and respected feminist (not) philosophers active today. For now I can only guess which footnote gave rise to the already announced next book, *Living a Feminist Life*. Given the solid basis this one offers for institutional critique, I imagine the next one will also help us all bring into being a new university, or at least one that doesn't make us retch.

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