

“Everyone should
read this book.”
—bell hooks



Living a Feminist Life

SARA AHMED

Living a Feminist Life

SARA AHMED **Living a
Feminist
Life**

Duke University Press / Durham and London / 2017

© 2017 Duke University Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞

Designed by Heather Hensley

Typeset in Arno Pro by Graphic Composition, Inc., Bogart, Georgia

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ahmed, Sara, [date] author.

Title: Living a feminist life / Sara Ahmed.

Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2017.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers:

LCCN 2016032264 (print)

LCCN 2016033775 (ebook)

ISBN 9780822363040 (hardcover : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822363194 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 9780822373377 (e-book)

Subjects: LCSH: Feminist theory. | Feminism.

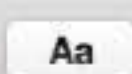
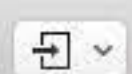
Classification: LCC HQ1190.a36 2017 (print) | LCC HQ1190 (ebook) |

DDC 305.4201—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016032264>

Carrie Moyer, *Chromafesto (Sister Resister 1.2)*, 2003, acrylic, glitter on canvas, 36 x 24 inches.

© Carrie Moyer. Courtesy of DC Moore Gallery, New York.



To the many feminist killjoys out there doing your thing:

THIS ONE IS FOR YOU.



CONTENTS

Acknowledgments

INTRODUCTION Bringing Feminist Theory Home

PART I BECOMING FEMINIST

1. Feminism Is Sensational

2. On Being Directed

3. Willfulness and Feminist Subjectivity

PART II DIVERSITY WORK

4. Trying to Transform

5. Being in Question

6. Brick Walls

PART III LIVING THE CONSEQUENCES

7. Fragile Connections

8. Feminist Snap

9. Lesbian Feminism

[CONCLUSION 1 A Killjoy Survival Kit](#)

[CONCLUSION 2 A Killjoy Manifesto](#)

[Notes](#)

[References](#)

[Index](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the first time I have written a book alongside a blog. Thank you so much to those who encouraged me to start my blog, especially my feminist friends on Facebook. Thanks also to those with whom I have engaged on social media since. I have learned so much. Thanks to Mulka and Poppy for your furry brown companionship, then and now. Thanks to Leona Lewis for your voice and inspiration. My special thanks to my partner in feminist crime, Sarah Franklin. My appreciation to Duke University Press for working with me again, and to Ken Wissoker and Elizabeth Ault for sustaining your enthusiasm for this project throughout, as well as to Liz Smith for her patience at the late stages. To my feminist colleagues at Goldsmiths and beyond, I appreciate the care and connection, whether from near or afar, especially Rumana Begum, Sirma Bilge, Lisa Blackman, Ulrika Dahl, Natalie Fenton, Yasmin Gunaratnam, Heidi Mirza, Fiona Nicoll, Nirmal Puwar, Beverley Skeggs, Elaine Swan, and Isabel Waidner. To those who have participated in the Centre for Feminist Research and the Feminist Postgraduate Forum, thanks for working to make work a better and safer place, especially Tiffany Page and Leila Whitley. During the copyediting of this book, I made the difficult decision to resign from my post at Goldsmiths after three years of working with others to challenge how sexual harassment has become normalized in academic culture. I have been overwhelmed by the feminist solidarity and support I have received. Each message brought a message home to me, one I have been trying to write about in this book: living a feminist life is about how we connect with and draw upon each other in our shared project of dismantling worlds. We are chipping away, slowly, but we are chipping away!

INTRODUCTION *Bringing Feminist Theory Home*

What do you hear when you hear the word *feminism*? It is a word that fills me with hope, with energy. It brings to mind loud acts of refusal and rebellion as well as the quiet ways we might have of not holding on to things that diminish us. It brings to mind women who have stood up, spoken back, risked lives, homes, relationships in the struggle for more bearable worlds. It brings to mind books written, tattered and worn, books that gave words to something, a feeling, a sense of an injustice, books that, in giving us words, gave us the strength to go on. Feminism: how we pick each other up. So much history in a word; so much it too has picked up.

I write this book as a way of holding on to the promise of that word, to think what it means to live your life by claiming that word as your own: being a feminist, becoming a feminist, speaking as a feminist. Living a feminist life does not mean adopting a set of ideals or norms of conduct, although it might mean asking ethical questions about how to live better in an unjust and unequal world (in a not-feminist and antifeminist world); how to create relationships with others that are more equal; how to find ways to support those who are not supported or are less supported by social systems; how to keep coming up against histories that have become concrete, histories that have become as solid as walls.

It is worth noticing from the outset that the idea that feminism is about how to live, about a way of thinking how to live, has often been understood as part of feminist history, as dated, associated with the moralizing or even policing stance of what might be called or might have been called, usually dismissively, cultural feminism. I will return to the politics of this dismissal in [chapter 9](#). I am not suggesting here that this version of feminism as moral police, the kind of feminism that might proceed by declaring this or that practice (and thus this or that person) as being unfeminist or not feminist, is simply a fabrication. I have heard that judgment; it has fallen on my own shoulders.¹

But the figure of the policing feminist is promiscuous for a reason. Feminism can be more easily dismissed when feminism is heard as about dismissal; as being about making people feel bad for their desires and investments. The figure of the feminist policer is exercised because she is useful; hearing feminists as police is a way of not hearing feminism. Many feminist figures are

antifeminist tools, although we can always retool these figures for our own purposes. A retooling might take this form: if naming sexism is understood as policing behavior, then we will be feminist police. Note that retooling antifeminist figures does not agree with the judgment (that to question sexism is to police) but rather disagrees with the premise by converting it into a promise (if you think questioning sexism is policing, we are feminist police).

In making feminism a life question, we will be judged as judgmental. In this book I refuse to relegate the question of how to live a feminist life to history. To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable. The question of how to live a feminist life is alive as a question as well as being a life question.

If we become feminists because of the inequality and injustice in the world, because of what the world is not, then what kind of world are we building? To build feminist dwellings, we need to dismantle what has already been assembled; we need to ask what it is we are against, what it is we are for, knowing full well that this *we* is not a foundation but what we are working toward. By working out what we are for, we are working out that *we*, that hopeful signifier of a feminist collectivity. Where there is hope, there is difficulty. Feminist histories are histories of the difficulty of that *we*, a history of those who have had to fight to be part of a feminist collective, or even had to fight against a feminist collective in order to take up a feminist cause. Hope is not at the expense of struggle but animates a struggle; hope gives us a sense that there is a point to working things out, working things through. Hope does not only or always point toward the future, but carries us through when the terrain is difficult, when the path we follow makes it harder to proceed.² Hope is behind us when we have to work for something to be possible.

A FEMINIST MOVEMENT

Feminism is a movement in many senses. We are moved to become feminists. Perhaps we are moved by something: a sense of injustice, that something is wrong, as I explore in [chapter 1](#). A feminist movement is a collective political movement. Many feminisms means many movements. A collective is what does not stand still but creates and is created by movement. I think of feminist action as like ripples in water, a small wave, possibly created by agitation from weather; here, there, each movement making another possible, another ripple, outward, reaching. Feminism: the dynamism of making connections. And yet a movement has to be built. To be part of a movement requires we find places to gather, meeting places. A movement is also a shelter. We convene; we have a convention. A movement comes into existence to transform what is in existence. A movement needs to take place somewhere. A movement is not just or only a movement; there is something that needs to be kept still, given a place, if we are moved to transform what is.

We might say a movement is strong when we can witness a momentum: more people gathering on the streets, more people signing their names to protest against something, more people using a name to identify themselves. I think we have in recent years witnessed the buildup of a momentum around feminism, in global protests against violence against women; in the

increasing number of popular books on feminism; in the high visibility of feminist activism on social media; in how the word *feminism* can set the stage on fire for women artists and celebrities such as Beyoncé. And as a teacher, I have witnessed this buildup firsthand: increasing numbers of students who want to identify themselves as feminists, who are demanding that we teach more courses on feminism; and the almost breathtaking popularity of events we organize on feminism, especially queer feminism and trans feminism. Feminism is bringing people into the room.

Not all feminist movement is so easily detected. A feminist movement is not always registered in public. A feminist movement might be happening the moment a woman snaps, that moment when she does not take it anymore (see [chapter 8](#)), the violence that saturates her world, a world. A feminist movement might happen in the growing connections between those who recognize something—power relations, gender violence, gender as violence—as being what they are up against, even if they have different words for what that what is. If we think of the second-wave feminist motto “the personal is political,” we can think of feminism as happening in the very places that have historically been bracketed as not political: in domestic arrangements, at home, every room of the house can become a feminist room, in who does what where, as well as on the street, in parliament, at the university. Feminism is wherever feminism needs to be. Feminism needs to be everywhere.

Feminism needs to be everywhere because feminism is not everywhere. Where is feminism? It is a good question. We can ask ourselves: where did we find feminism, or where did feminism find us? I pose this question as a life question in the first part of this book. A story always starts before it can be told. When did *feminism* become a word that not only spoke to you, but spoke you, spoke of your existence, spoke you into existence? When did the sound of the word *feminism* become your sound? What did it mean, what does it do, to hold on to feminism, to fight under its name; to feel in its ups and downs, in its coming and goings, your ups and downs, your comings and goings?

When I think of my feminist life in this book, I ask “from where?” but also “from whom?” From whom did I find feminism? I will always remember a conversation I had as a young woman in the late 1980s. It was a conversation with my auntie Gulzar Bano. I think of her as one of my first feminist teachers. I had given her some of my poems. In one poem I had used *he*. “Why do you use *he*,” she asked me gently, “when you could have used *she*?” The question, posed with such warmth and kindness, prompted much heartache, much sadness in the realization that the words as well as worlds I had thought of as open to me were not open at all. *He* does not include *she*. The lesson becomes an instruction. To make an impression, I had to dislodge that *he*. To become *she* is to become part of a feminist movement. A feminist becomes *she* even if she has already been assigned *she*, when she hears in that word a refusal of *he*, a refusal that *he* would promise her inclusion. She takes up that word *she* and makes it her own.

I began to realize what I already knew: that patriarchal reasoning goes all the way down, to the letter, to the bone. I had to find ways not to reproduce its grammar in what I said, in what I wrote; in what I did, in who I was. It is important that I learned this feminist lesson from my auntie in Lahore, Pakistan, a Muslim woman, a Muslim feminist, a brown feminist. It might be assumed that feminism travels from West to East. It might be assumed that feminism is what the West gives to the East. That assumption

is a traveling assumption, one that tells a feminist story in a certain way, a story that is much repeated; a history of how feminism acquired utility as an imperial gift. That is not my story. We need to tell other feminist stories. Feminism traveled to me, growing up in the West, from the East. My Pakistani aunties taught me that my mind is my own (which is to say that my mind is not owned); they taught me to speak up for myself; to speak out against violence and injustice.

Where we find feminism matters; from whom we find feminism matters.

Feminism as a collective movement is made out of how we are moved to become feminists in dialogue with others. A movement requires us to be moved. I explore this requirement by revisiting the question of feminist consciousness in [part I](#) of this book. Let's think of why feminist movements are still necessary. I want to take here bell hooks's definition of feminism as "the movement to end sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual oppression" (2000, 33). From this definition, we learn so much. Feminism is necessary because of what has not ended: sexism, sexual exploitation, and sexual oppression. And for hooks, "sexism, sexual exploitation and sexual oppression" cannot be separated from racism, from how the present is shaped by colonial histories including slavery, as central to the exploitation of labor under capitalism. Intersectionality is a starting point, the point from which we must proceed if we are to offer an account of how power works. bousuano lo resaltaron Feminism will be intersectional "or it will be bullshit," to borrow from the eloquence of Flavia Dzodan.³ This is the kind of feminism I am referring to throughout this book (unless I indicate otherwise by referring specifically to white feminism).

A significant step for a feminist movement is to recognize what has not ended. And this step is a very hard step. It is a slow and [painstaking](#) step. We might think we have made that step only to realize we have to make it again. It might be you are up against a fantasy of equality: that women can now do it, even have it, or that they would have it if they just tried hard enough; that individual women can bring sexism and other barriers (we might describe these barriers as the glass ceiling or the brick wall) to an end through sheer effort or persistence or will. So much ends up being invested in our own bodies. We could call this a postfeminist fantasy: that an individual woman can bring what blocks her movement to an end; or that feminism has brought "sexism, sexual exploitation or sexual oppression" to an end as if feminism has been so successful that it has eliminated its own necessity (Gill 2007; McRobbie 2009); or that such phenomena are themselves a feminist fantasy, an attachment to something that was never or is no longer. We could also think of postrace as a fantasy through which racism operates: as if racism is behind us because we no longer believe in race, or as if racism would be behind us if we no longer believed in race. Those of us who come to embody diversity for organizations are assumed to bring whiteness to an end by virtue of our arrival (see [chapter 6](#)).

[When you become a feminist, you find out very quickly: what you aim to bring to an end some do not recognize as existing.](#) This book follows this finding. So much feminist and antiracist work is the work of trying to convince others that sexism and racism have not ended; that sexism and racism are fundamental to the injustices of late capitalism; that they matter. Just to talk about sexism and racism here and now is to refuse displacement; it is to refuse to wrap your speech around postfeminism or postrace, which would require you to use the past tense (back then) or an elsewhere (over there).⁴

Even to describe something as sexist and racist here and now can get you into trouble. You point to structures; they say it is in your head. What you describe as material is dismissed as mental. I think we learn about materiality from such dismissals, as I will try to show in [part II](#), on diversity work. And think also of what is required: the political labor necessary of having to insist that what we are describing is not just what we are feeling or thinking. A feminist movement depends on our ability to keep insisting on something: the ongoing existence of the very things we wish to bring to an end. The labor of that insistence is what I describe in this book. We learn from being feminists.

A feminist movement thus requires that we acquire feminist tendencies, a willingness to keep going despite or even because of what we come up against. We could think of this process as practicing feminism. If we tend toward the world in a feminist way, if we repeat that tending, again and again, we acquire feminist tendencies. Feminist hope is the failure to eliminate the potential for acquisition. And yet once you have become a feminist, it can feel that you were always a feminist. Is it possible to have always been that way? Is it possible to have been a feminist right from the beginning? Perhaps you feel you were always that way inclined. Maybe you tended that way, a feminist way, because you already tended to be a rebellious or even willful girl (see [chapter 3](#)), who would not accept the place she had been given. Or maybe feminism is a way of beginning again: so your story did in a certain way begin with feminism.

A feminist movement is built from many moments of beginning again. And this is one of my central concerns: how the acquisition of a feminist tendency to become that sort of girl or woman, the wrong sort, or bad sort, the one who speaks her mind, who writes her name, who raises her arm in protest, is necessary for a feminist movement. Individual struggle does matter; a collective movement depends upon it. But of course being the wrong sort does not make us right. Much injustice can be and has been committed by those who think of themselves as the wrong sort—whether the wrong sort of women or the wrong sort of feminists. There is no guarantee that in struggling for justice we ourselves will be just. We have to hesitate, to temper the strength of our tendencies with doubt; to waver when we are sure, or even because we are sure. A feminist movement that proceeds with too much confidence has cost us too much already. I explore the necessity of wavering with our convictions in [part III](#). If a feminist tendency is what we work for, that tendency does not give us a stable ground.

HOMework

Feminism is homework. When I use the word *homework*, I think first of being at school; I think of being given an assignment by a teacher to take home. I think of sitting down at the kitchen table and doing that work, before I am allowed to play. Homework is quite simply work you are asked to do when you are at home, usually assigned by those with authority outside the home. When feminism is understood as homework, it is not an assignment you have been given by a teacher, even though you have feminist teachers. If feminism is an assignment, it is a self-assignment. We give ourselves this task. By homework, I am not suggesting we

all feel at home in feminism in the sense of feeling safe or secure. Some of us might find a home here; some of us might not. Rather, I am suggesting feminism is homework because we have much to work out from not being at home in a world. In other words, homework is work on as well as at our homes. We do housework. Feminist housework does not simply clean and maintain a house. Feminist housework aims to transform the house, to rebuild the master's residence.

In this book I want to think of feminist theory too as homework, as a way of rethinking how feminist theory originates and where it ends up. What is this thing called feminist theory? We might at first assume that feminist theory is what feminists working within the academy generate. I want to suggest that feminist theory is something we do at home. In the first part of this book, I explore how in becoming feminists we are doing intellectual as well as emotional work; we begin to experience gender as a restriction of possibility, and we learn about worlds as we navigate these restrictions. The experiences of being a feminist, say at the family table, or at a meeting table, gave me life lessons, which were also philosophical lessons. To learn from being a feminist is to learn about the world.

Feminist theory can be what we do together in the classroom; in the conference; reading each other's work. But I think too often we bracket feminist theory as something that marks out a specific kind, or even a higher kind, of feminist work. We have to bring feminist theory home because feminist theory has been too quickly understood as something that we do when we are away from home (as if feminist theory is what you learn when you go to school). When we are away, we can and do learn new words, new concepts, new angles. We encounter new authors who spark moments of revelation. But feminist theory does not start there. Feminist theory might even be what gets you there.

Within the academy, the word *theory* has a lot of capital. I have always been interested in how the word *theory* itself is distributed; how some materials are understood as theory and not others. This interest can partly be explained by my own trajectory: I went from a PhD in critical theory to being a lecturer in women's studies. As a student of theory, I learned that theory is used to refer to a rather narrow body of work. Some work becomes theory because it refers to other work that is known as theory. A citational chain is created around theory: you become a theorist by citing other theorists that cite other theorists. Some of this work did interest me; but I kept finding that I wanted to challenge the selection of materials as well as how they were read.

I remember one theorist being taught as having two sides, a story of desire and a story of the phallus. We were told, basically, to bracket the second story in order to engage with and be engaged by the first. I began to wonder whether doing theory was about engaging with a body of work by putting questions like phallogentrism or sexism into brackets. In effect, we were being asked to bracket our concerns with the sexism at stake in what was read as theory as well as what we read in theory. I still remember submitting a critical reading of a theory text in which woman was a figure as one of my essays, a reading that was later to form part of the chapter "Woman" in my first book, *Differences That Matter* (Ahmed 1998). I was concerned with how statements made by the teacher, like "This is not about women," were used to bypass any questions about how the figure of woman is exercised within a male intellectual tradition. When the essay was returned to me, the grader had scrawled in very large

letters, “This is not theory! This is politics!”

I thought then: if theory is not politics, I am glad I am not doing theory! And it was a relief to leave that space in which theory and politics were organized as different trajectories. When I arrived in women’s studies, I noticed how I would sometimes be recruited by the term *feminist theory*, as a different kind of feminist than other kinds of feminists, those assumed, say, to be more empirical, which seemed to be conflated with less theoretical, or less philosophical. I have always experienced this recruitment as a form of violence. I hope always to experience this recruitment as a form of violence. Even though I am relatively comfortable in critical theory, I do not deposit my hope there, nor do I think this is a particularly difficult place to be: if anything, I think it is easier to do more abstract and general theoretical work. I remember listening to a feminist philosopher who apologized every time she mentioned such-and-such male philosopher because he was so difficult. It made me feel very rebellious. I think that the more difficult questions, the harder questions, are posed by those feminists concerned with explaining violence, inequality, injustice. The empirical work, the world that exists, is for me where the difficulties and thus the challenges reside. Critical theory is like any language; you can learn it, and when you learn it, you begin to move around in it. Of course it can be difficult, when you do not have the orientation tools to navigate your way around a new landscape. But explaining phenomena like racism and sexism—how they are reproduced, how they keep being reproduced—is not something we can do simply by learning a new language. It is not a difficulty that can be resolved by familiarity or repetition; in fact, familiarity and repetition are the source of difficulty; they are what need to be explained. In the face of such phenomena, we are constantly brought home by the inadequacy of our understanding. It is here we encounter and reencounter the limits of thinking. It is here we might feel those limits. We come up against something that we cannot resolve. We can be brought home by the inadequacy of what we know. And we can bring what we know back home.

As I show in [part II](#), my own experience of bringing up racism and sexism within the academy (of refusing to bracket these questions in a more loving digestion of the philosophical canon) replicated some of my earlier experiences of bringing up racism and sexism at the family table. This replication is another form of pedagogy: we learn from how the same things keep coming up. You are assumed to be interrupting a happy occasion with the sensation of your own negation. You are assumed to be doing identity politics as if you speak about racism because you are a person of color or as if you speak about sexism because you are a woman. Nirmal Puwar (2004) has shown how some become “space invaders” when they enter spaces that are not intended for them. We can be space invaders in the academy; we can be space invaders in theory too, just by referring to the wrong texts or by asking the wrong questions.

A question can be out of place: words too.

One response might be to aim to reside as well as we can in the spaces that are not intended for us. We might even identify with the universal of the university by agreeing to put our particulars to one side.⁵ There is disruption, even invention, in that, of that I have no doubt. But think of this: those of us who arrive in an academy that was not shaped by or for us bring knowledges, as well

as worlds, that otherwise would not be here. Think of this: how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us. **Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge. To bring feminist theory home is to make feminism work in the places we live, the places we work. When we think of feminist theory as homework, the university too becomes something we work on as well as at. We use our particulars to challenge the universal.**

BUILDING FEMINIST WORLDS

I will come out with it: I enjoy and appreciate much of the work that is taught and read as critical theory. There were reasons I went there first, and I explain how this happened in [chapter 1](#). But I still remember in the second year of my PhD reading texts by black feminists and feminists of color including Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa. I had not read their work before. This work shook me up. Here was writing in which an embodied experience of power provides the basis of knowledge. Here was writing animated by the everyday: the detail of an encounter, an incident, a happening, flashing like insight. Reading black feminist and feminist of color scholarship was life changing; I began to appreciate that theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin.

I decided then: theoretical work that is in touch with a world is the kind of theoretical work I wanted to do. Even when I have written texts organized around the history of ideas, I have tried to write from my own experiences: the everyday as animation. In writing this book, I wanted to stay even closer to the everyday than I had before. This book is personal. The personal is theoretical. Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, **to bring theory back to life.**

Even though my earlier works did include examples from everyday life, they also involved substantial reference to intellectual traditions. I have no doubt I needed those traditions to make some of the steps in my arguments: in *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed 2010), I needed to place the figure of the feminist killjoy in relation to the history of happiness, to make sense of how she appears; in *Willful Subjects* (Ahmed 2014), I needed to place the figure of the willful subject in relation to the history of the will for her too to make sense. But once these figures came up, they gave me a different handle. They acquired their own life. Or should I say: my writing was able to pick up these figures because of the life they had. These figures quickly became the source of new forms of connection. I began a new blog organized around them (feministkilljoys.com), which I have been writing as I have been working on this book. Since I began that blog, I have received communications from many students including not only undergraduates and postgraduates but also high school students about their own experience of being feminist killjoys and willful subjects. I have learned so much from these communications. In a genuine sense, the book comes out of them. I address this

book to feminist students. It is intended for you.

To become a feminist is to stay a student. This is why: the figures of the feminist killjoy and willful subject are studious. It is not surprising that they allowed me to communicate with those who sensed in these figures an explanation of something (a difficulty, a situation, a task). I am still trying to make sense of something (a difficulty, a situation, a task), and this book is the product of that labor. One of my aims in *Living a Feminist Life* is to free these figures from the histories in which they are housed. I am trying to work out and work through what they are saying to us. In a way, then, I am retracing my own intellectual journey in this book. In going through the conditions of their arrival, how they come up for me, how they became preoccupying, I am going back over some old ground. An intellectual journey is like any journey. One step enables the next step. In this book I retake some of these steps.

I hope by retaking the steps to make some of my arguments in a more accessible manner: in staying closer to the everyday, feminist theory becomes more accessible. When I first began working on this book, I thought I was writing a more mainstream feminist text, or even a trade book. I realized the book I was writing was not that kind of book. I wanted to make a slow argument, to go over old ground, and to take my time. And I still wanted to make an intervention within academic feminism. I have been an academic for over twenty years, and I am relatively at home in the academic language of feminist theory. I am aware that not all feminists are at home in the academy, and that the academic language of feminist theory can be alienating. In this book, I do use academic language. I am working at home, so academic language is one of my tools. But I also aim to keep my words as close to the world as I can, by trying to show how feminist theory is what we do when we live our lives in a feminist way.

In retracing some of the steps of a journey, I am not making the same journey. I have found new things along the way because I have stayed closer to the everyday. I should add here that staying close to the everyday still involves attending to words, and thus concepts, like happiness, like will. I am still listening for resonance. I think of feminism as poetry; we hear histories in words; we reassemble histories by putting them into words. This book still follows words around just as I have done before, turning a word this way and that, like an object that catches a different light every time it is turned; attending to the same words across different contexts, allowing them to create ripples or new patterns like texture on a ground. I make arguments by listening for resonances; the book thus involves repeating words, sometimes over and over again; words like *shatter*, words like *snap*. The repetition is the scene of a feminist instruction.

A feminist instruction: if we start with our experiences of becoming feminists not only might we have another way of generating feminist ideas, but we might generate new ideas about feminism. Feminist ideas are what we come up with to make sense of what persists. We have to persist in or by coming up with feminist ideas. Already in this idea is a different idea about ideas. Ideas would not be something generating through distance, a way of abstracting something from something, but from our involvement in a world that often leaves us, frankly, bewildered. Ideas might be how we work with as well as on our hunches, those senses that something is amiss, not quite right, which are part of ordinary living and a starting point for so much critical work.

By trying to describe something that is difficult, that resists being fully comprehended in the present, we generate what I call “sweaty concepts.” I first used this expression when I was trying to describe to students the kind of intellectual labor evident in Audre Lorde’s work. I want to acknowledge my debt here. I cannot put into words how much I am indebted to Audre Lorde for the extraordinary archive she left for us. When I first read Audre Lorde’s work, I felt like a lifeline was being thrown to me. The words, coming out of her description of her own experience, as a black woman, mother, lesbian, poet, warrior, found me where I was; a different place from her, yet her words found me. Her words gave me the courage to make my own experience into a resource, my experiences as a brown woman, lesbian, daughter; as a writer, to build theory from description of where I was in the world, to build theory from description of not being accommodated by a world. A lifeline: it can be a fragile rope, worn and tattered from the harshness of weather, but it is enough, just enough, to bear your weight, to pull you out, to help you survive a shattering experience.

A sweaty concept: another way of being pulled out from a shattering experience. By using sweaty concepts for descriptive work, I am trying to say at least two things. First, I was suggesting that too often conceptual work is understood as distinct from describing a situation: and I am thinking here of a situation as something that comes to demand a response. A situation can refer to a combination of circumstances of a given moment but also to a critical, problematic, or striking set of circumstances. Lauren Berlant describes a situation thus: “A state of things in which something that will perhaps matter is unfolding amidst the usual activity of life” (2008, 5). If a situation is how we are thrown by things, then how we make sense of things also unfolds from “the usual activity of life.” Concepts tend to be identified as what scholars somehow come up with, often through contemplation and withdrawal, rather like an apple that hits you on the head, sparking revelation from a position of exteriority.

I became more aware of this academic tendency to identify concepts as what they bring to the world when doing an empirical project on diversity, which I discuss in [part II](#). I had this tendency myself, so I could recognize it. In the project I interviewed those employed by the university as diversity officers. It brought home to me how, in working to transform institutions, we generate knowledge about them. Concepts are at work in how we work, whatever it is that we do. We need to work out, sometimes, what these concepts are (what we are thinking when we are doing, or what doing is thinking) because concepts can be murky as background assumptions. But that working out is precisely not bringing a concept in from the outside (or from above): concepts are in the worlds we are in.

By using the idea of sweaty concepts, I am also trying to show how descriptive work is conceptual work. A concept is worldly, but it is also a reorientation to a world, a way of turning things around, a different slant on the same thing. More specifically, a sweaty concept is one that comes out of a description of a body that is not at home in the world. By this I mean description as angle or point of view: a description of how it feels not to be at home in the world, or a description of the world from the point of view of not being at home in it. Sweat is bodily; we might sweat more during more strenuous and muscular activity. A sweaty concept might come out of a bodily experience that is trying. The task is to stay with the difficulty, to keep exploring and exposing this difficulty. We might need not to eliminate the effort or labor from the writing. Not eliminating the effort or labor becomes an

academic aim because we have been taught to tidy our texts, not to reveal the struggle we have in getting somewhere. Sweaty concepts are also generated by the practical experience of coming up against a world, or the practical experience of trying to transform a world.⁶

Even as I have labored in this way, I have noticed (partly because readers have noticed) signs of not quite being able to admit a difficulty: for instance, when I discuss some of my own experiences of sexual violence and harassment, I keep using *you* and not *me*, allowing the second person pronoun to give me some distance. I tried putting in *me* after it was written, but that *me* felt too strained, and I let the *you* stay but with qualification. Feminism: it can be a strain. This strain is evident as tension in this text, sometimes revealed as a confusion of pronouns and persons; a tension between telling my own story of becoming feminist, being a diversity worker, handling what you come up against, and making more general reflections about worlds. I have tried not to eliminate that tension.

Feminism is at stake in how we generate knowledge; in how we write, in who we cite. I think of feminism as a building project: if our texts are worlds, they need to be made out of feminist materials. Feminist theory is world making. This is why we need to resist positioning feminist theory as simply or only a tool, in the sense of something that can be used in theory, only then to be put down or put away. It should not be possible to do feminist theory without being a feminist, which requires an active and ongoing commitment to live one's life in a feminist way. I encountered this problem of how feminist theory can be feminism in theory as a student in critical theory. I met academics who wrote essays on feminist theory but who did not seem to act in feminist ways; who seemed routinely to give more support to male students than female students, or who worked by dividing female students into more and less loyal students. To be a feminist at work is or should be about how we challenge ordinary and everyday sexism, including academic sexism. This is not optional: it is what makes feminism feminist. A feminist project is to find ways in which women can exist in relation to women; how women can be in relation to each other. It is a project because we are not there yet.

We should be asking ourselves the same sorts of questions when we write our texts, when we put things together, as we do in living our lives. How to dismantle the world that is built to accommodate only some bodies? Sexism is one such accommodating system. Feminism requires supporting women in a struggle to exist in this world. What do I mean by *women* here? I am referring to all those who travel under the sign *women*. No feminism worthy of its name would use the sexist idea "women born women" to create the edges of feminist community, to render trans women into "not women," or "not born women," or into men.⁷ No one is born a woman; it is an assignment (not just a sign, but also a task or an imperative, as I discuss in [part I](#)) that can shape us; make us; and break us. Many women who were assigned female at birth, let us remind ourselves, are deemed not women in the right way, or not women at all, perhaps because of how they do or do not express themselves (they are too good at sports, not feminine enough because of their bodily shape, comportment, or conduct, not heterosexual, not mothers, and so on). Part of the difficulty of the category of women is what follows residing in that category, as well as what follows not residing in that category

because of the body you acquire, the desires you have, the paths you follow or do not follow. There can be violence at stake in being recognizable as women; there can be violence at stake in not being recognizable as women.

In a world in which *human* is still defined as *man*, we have to fight for women and as women. And to do that we also need to challenge the instrumentalization of feminism. Even though feminism can be used as a tool that can help us make sense of the world by sharpening the edges of our critique, it is not something we can put down. Feminism goes wherever we go. If not, we are not.

We thus enact feminism in how we relate to the academy. When I was doing my PhD, I was told I had to give my love to this or that male theorist, to follow him, not necessarily as an explicit command but through an apparently gentle but increasingly insistent questioning: Are you a Derridean; no, so are you a Lacanian; no, oh, okay, are you a Deleuzian; no, then what? If not, then what? Maybe my answer should have been: if not, then not! I was never willing to agree to this restriction. But not to agree with this restriction required the help of other feminists who came before me. If we can create our paths by not following, we still need others before us. In this book, I adopt a strict citation policy: I do not cite any white men.⁸ By *white men* I am referring to an institution, as I explain in [chapter 6](#). Instead, I cite those who have contributed to the intellectual genealogy of feminism and antiracism, including work that has been too quickly (in my view) cast aside or left behind, work that lays out other paths, paths we can call desire lines, created by not following the official paths laid out by disciplines.⁹ These paths might have become fainter from not being traveled upon; so we might work harder to find them; we might be willful just to keep them going by not going the way we have been directed.

My citation policy has given me more room to attend to those feminists who came before me. Citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow. In this book, I cite feminists of color who have contributed to the project of naming and dismantling the institutions of patriarchal whiteness. I consider this book primarily as a contribution to feminist of color scholarship and activism; this body of work is where I feel most at home, where I find energy as well as resources.

Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings. My citation policy has affected the kind of house I have built. I realized this not simply through writing the book, through what I found about what came up, but also through giving presentations. As I have already noted, in previous work I have built a philosophical edifice by my engagement with the history of ideas. We cannot conflate the history of ideas with white men, though if doing one leads to the other then we are being taught where ideas are assumed to originate. Seminal: how ideas are assumed to originate from male bodies. I now think of that philosophical edifice as a timber frame around which a house is being built. In this book I have not built a house by using that frame. And I have felt much more exposed. **Perhaps citations are feminist straw: lighter materials that, when put together, still create a shelter but a shelter that leaves you more vulnerable.** That is how it felt writing this work as well

as speaking from it: being in the wind; being blown about, more or less, depending on what I encountered. The words I sent out danced around me; I began to pick up on things I had not noticed before. I began to wonder how much I had in the past built an edifice to create a distance. Sometimes we need distance to follow a thought. Sometimes we need to give up distance to follow that thought.

In the chapters that follow, I refer to different kinds of feminist materials that have been my companions as a feminist and diversity worker, from feminist philosophy to feminist literature and film. A companion text could be thought of as a companion species, to borrow from Donna Haraway's (2003) suggestive formulation. A companion text is a text whose company enabled you to proceed on a path less trodden. Such texts might spark a moment of revelation in the midst of an overwhelming proximity; they might share a feeling or give you resources to make sense of something that had been beyond your grasp; companion texts can prompt you to hesitate or to question the direction in which you are going, or they might give you a sense that in going the way you are going, you are not alone. Some of the texts that appear with me in this book have been with me before: Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, George Eliot's *Mill on the Floss*, Rita Mae Brown's *Rubyfruit Jungle*, and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. I could not have proceeded along the path I took without these texts. To live a feminist life is to live in very good company. I have placed these companion texts in my killjoy survival kit. I encourage you as a feminist reader to assemble your own kit. What would you include?

The materials we include in our kits could also be called feminist classics. By feminist classics, I mean feminist books that have been in circulation; that have become worn from being passed around. I do not mean classics in the sense of canonical texts. Of course, some texts become canonical, and we need to question how these histories happen, how selections are made; we need to ask who or what does not survive these selections. But the texts that reach us, that make a connection, are not necessarily the ones that are taught in the academy, or that make it to the official classics edition. Many of the texts that connect with me are the ones assumed to be dated, to belong to a time that we are in no longer.

The idea of feminist classics for me is a way of thinking about how books make communities. I was part of a feminist classics reading group held in women's studies at Lancaster University. This reading group was one of my favorite experiences of feminist intellectual life thus far. I loved the labor of going over materials that might now tend to be passed over, of finding in them some abundant resources, concepts, and words. To attend to feminist classics is to give time: to say that what is behind us is worth going over, worth putting in front of us. It is a way of pausing, not rushing ahead, not being seduced by the buzz of the new, a buzz that can end up being what you hear, blocking the possibility of opening our ears to what came before. What I also really enjoyed too in the reading group was the attention to the books themselves as material objects. Each of us had different copies, some of them tattered and well read, worn, and, as it were, lived in. You can, I think, live in books: some feminists might even begin their feminist lives living in books. Participating in the group with books made me aware of how feminist community is shaped by passing books around; the sociality of their lives is part of the sociality of ours. There are so many ways that feminist books change hands; in passing between us, they change each of us.

There are many ways of describing the materials I bring together in this book: companion texts and feminist classics are just two possible ways. The materials are books, yes, but they are also spaces of encounter; how we are touched by things; how we touch things. I think of feminism as a fragile archive, a body assembled from shattering, from splattering, an archive whose fragility gives us responsibility: to take care.

Living a Feminist Life is structured in three parts. In [part I, "Becoming Feminist,"](#) I discuss the process of becoming a feminist, and how consciousness of gender is a world consciousness that allows you to revisit the places you have been, to become estranged from gender and heteronorms as to become estranged from the shape of your life. I start with experiences I had growing up, exploring how these individual experiences are ways of (affectively, willfully) being inserted into a collective feminist history. In [part II, "Diversity Work,"](#) I focus on doing feminist work as a form of diversity work within universities, as the places where I have worked, as well as in everyday life. I show how questions of consciousness and subjectivity raised in the first part of this book, the work required to become conscious of that which tends to recede, can be understood in terms of materiality: walls are the material means by which worlds are not encountered, let alone registered. I explore experiences of being a stranger, of not feeling at home in a world that gives residence to others. In [part III, "Living the Consequences,"](#) I explore the costs and potential of what we come up against, how we can be shattered by histories that are hard, but also how we become inventive, how we create other ways of being when we have to struggle to be. The history of creativity, of bonds made and forged, of what we move toward as well as away from, is a history that we need to keep in front of us; a feminist history.

It is the practical experience of coming up against a world that allows us to come up with new ideas, ideas that are not dependent on a mind that has withdrawn (because a world has enabled that withdrawal) but a body that has to wiggle about just to create room. And if we put ourselves in the same room, how much knowledge we would have! No wonder feminism causes fear; together, we are dangerous.

PART I **Becoming Feminist**

IN THIS FIRST PART OF THE BOOK, I explore the process of becoming feminist. Reflecting on this process can offer a way of doing feminist theory, a way of generating new insights into how gender works, as social system, or as machinery that tends to spit some bodies out. Insights into gender as well as race are worldly. Becoming a feminist involves coming up against the world.

What's my feminist story? Like you, I have many. As I will try to show, my own feminist biography is entangled with other aspects of my biography; how could it not be; how messy life is. I start this part of the book very simply, staying in [chapter 1](#) as close to home as I can, beginning by recalling things that happened. I return to experiences that were painful and difficult, but that were animating, that gave me life because they were how I was directed along a feminist path. If we start close to home, we open ourselves out. I will try to show how, in making sense of things that happen, we also draw on histories of thought and activism that precede us. Throughout I thus reflect on how feminism itself can be understood as an affective inheritance; how our own struggles to make sense of realities that are difficult to grasp become part of a wider struggle, a struggle to be, to make sense of being.

In the process of describing how I became a feminist, this opening part of the book also offers a feminist approach to some key areas of concern within feminist theory and beyond: the role of sensation in knowledge formation; the sociality of emotions; how power operates through directionality and orientation; and how to think about happiness, as well as the relationship between will and force. I show how becoming feminist is also about generating ideas about the worlds we encounter. Feminist theory, in other words, comes out of the sense-making process of becoming feminist and navigating a way through a world.

The figures of the feminist killjoy and willful subject are considered in this part of the book primarily in terms of how they relate to some of my early experiences of becoming and being a feminist. These figures will pop up all over the place. They are everywhere.

1 / FEMINISM IS SENSATIONAL

Feminism is sensational. Something is sensational when it provokes excitement and interest. Feminism is sensational in this sense; what is provocative about feminism is what makes feminism a set of arguments that is hard to deliver. We learn about the feminist cause by the bother feminism causes; by how feminism comes up in public culture as a site of disturbance.

When you speak as a feminist, you have to deal with strong reactions. **To be committed to a feminist life might require being willing to elicit those reactions. When you speak as a feminist, you are often identified as being too reactive, as overreacting, as if all you are doing is sensationalizing the facts of the matter; as if in giving your account of something you are exaggerating, on purpose or even with malice.** In this chapter I accept that feminism begins with sensation: with a sense of things. I want to explore how feminism is sensible because of the world we are in; feminism is a sensible reaction to the injustices of the world, which we might register at first through our own experiences. We might work over, mull over, these experiences; we might keep coming back to them because they do not make sense. In other words we have to make sense of what does not make sense. There is agency and life in this making. In this chapter, I share some of the experiences that led me to feminism, which I would describe as a bumpy rather than smooth process of coming to register something that is difficult; these experiences provided the raw materials of my feminist instruction.

SENSING WRONGS

A sensation is often understood by what it is not: a **sensation is not an organized or intentional response to something.** And that is why sensation matters: you are left with an impression that is not clear or distinct. A sensation is often felt by the skin. The word *sensational* relates both to the faculty of sensation and to the arousal of strong curiosity, interest, or excitement. If a sensation is how a body is in contact with a world, then something becomes sensational when contact becomes even more intense. Perhaps then to feel is to feel this even more.

Feminism often begins with intensity: you are aroused by what you come up against. You register something in the sharpness of an impression. Something can be sharp without it being clear what the point is. Over time, with experience, you sense that

something is wrong or you have a feeling of being wronged. You sense an injustice. You might not have used that word for it; you might not have the words for it; you might not be able to put your finger on it. Feminism can begin with a body, a body in touch with a world, a body that is not at ease in a world; a body that fidgets and moves around. Things don't seem right.

Many of my early experiences of feeling wronged, as a girl, involved unwanted male attention. Things happened. They happened again. Already we sense some consequences: if becoming feminist cannot be separated from an experience of violence, of being wronged, then what brings us to feminism is what is potentially shattering. The histories that bring us to feminism are the histories that leave us fragile. Feminism might pick up (or more hopefully pick us up) from the experiences that leave us vulnerable and exposed. Feminism: how we survive the consequences of what we come up against by offering new ways of understanding what we come up against.

Feminist work is often memory work. We work to remember what sometimes we wish would or could just recede. While thinking about what it means to live a feminist life, I have been remembering; trying to put the pieces together. I have been putting a sponge to the past. When I think of my method, I think of a sponge: a material that can absorb things. We hold it out and wait to see what gets mopped up. It is not that memory work is necessarily about recalling what has been forgotten: rather, you allow a memory to become distinct, to acquire a certain crispness or even clarity; you can gather memories like things, so they become more than half glimpsed, so that we can see a fuller picture; so you can make sense of how different experiences connect.

There is one time I remember, very acutely, still. I was out jogging, just near my home. A man whirled passed on a bike and put his hand up the back of my shorts. He did not stop; he just carried on cycling as if nothing had happened, as if he had not done anything. I stopped, shaking. I felt so sick; invaded, confused, upset, angry. I was the only witness to this event; my body its memory.

My body its memory: to share a memory is to put a body into words. What do we do when these kinds of things happen? Who do we become? I kept on going. I began jogging again, but it was different: I was different. I was much more nervous. Every time someone came up behind me, I was ready, tense, waiting. I felt differently in my body, which was a different way of encountering the world.

Experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time, gathering like things in a bag, but the bag is your body, so that you feel like you are carrying more and more weight. The past becomes heavy. We all have different biographies of violence, entangled as they are with so many aspects of ourselves: things that happen because of how we are seen; and how we are not seen. You find a way of giving an account of what happens, of living with what happens.

This you is me. You seem to receive the same message again and again: the flasher at school who keeps returning; the time you walk past a group of boys and girls on the way home when one of them shouts out to you to come back because you are "fuckable," and they all laugh; that time you come across a man masturbating under a tree in the city parklands who tells you to come and take a look and comes after you when you hurry away; the time when you are walking down a street with your sister

and a man jumps out of the door exposing himself; the time you are waiting at a bus stop and a group of men in a car stop and ask you to get in, and you run away and they start jeering and shouting; the time when you fall asleep on a long flight under a blanket and you wake up with a man's fingers all over you.¹ I remember each of these occasions not only as an experience of being violated, but as a sensory event that was too overwhelming to process at the time. I can still hear the sound of the voices, the car as it slowed down, the bike that rushed past, the door that opened, the sound of the footsteps, the kind of day it was, the quiet hum of a plane as I woke up. Senses can be magnified, sometimes after the event.

At the time, each time, something happens. You are thrown. These experiences: What effects do they have? What do they do? You begin to feel a pressure, this relentless assault on the senses; a body in touch with a world can become a body that fears the touch of a world. The world is experienced as sensory intrusion. It is too much. Not to be assaulted: maybe you might try to close yourself off, to withdraw from proximity, from proximity to a potential. Or perhaps you try to deal with this violence by numbing your own sensations, by learning not to be affected or to be less affected. Perhaps you try to forget what happened. You might be ashamed. You might stay silent. You might not tell anyone, say anything, and burn with the sensation of a secret. It becomes another burden: that which is not revealed. Maybe you adopt for yourself a certain kind of fatalism: these things happen; what happens will happen; whatever will be, will be.

The violence does things. You begin to expect it. You learn to inhabit your body differently through this expectation. When you sense the world out there as a danger, it is your relation to your own body that changes: you become more cautious, timid; you might withdraw in anticipation that what happened before will happen again. It might be your own experiences that lead you here, to caution as withdrawal, but it might also be what you have learned from others. **You are taught to be careful: to be full of care as to become anxious about the potential to be broken. You begin to learn that being careful, not having things like that happen to you, is a way of avoiding becoming damaged. It is for your own good. And you sense the consequence: if something happens, you have failed to prevent it. You feel bad in anticipation of your own failure. You are learning, too, to accept that potential for violence as imminent, and to manage yourself as a way of managing the consequences.**

You are taught to care for yourself by being careful about others. I remember a policeman coming to our classroom one time, to teach us all about what they called "stranger danger." The lesson was given as it is usually given, as a simple instruction: don't talk to strangers. An image was conjured in my mind, derived not only from my own experience but from this instruction, of a stranger. An image, a body, a figure: it appears as if by magic. I began the first chapter of my book *Strange Encounters* by evoking this image: the stranger as a shadowy figure with a "grey mac shimmering at your feet" (Ahmed 2000, 19). The police, in evoking the stranger, also gave me a body in which to deposit my anxiety. If the stranger could be anyone, the stranger was someone I recognized; somebody I could look out for. **Stranger danger is an effective as well as affective script: some bodies become dangerous, others endangered. As girls you learn to be cautious and careful in public spaces with that caution and care directed toward those who do not belong, whose presence or proximity is illegitimate. The stranger loiters. The stranger becomes a**

container of fear.

Violence becomes instruction when it is accompanied by a narrative, an explanation. When you have learned something, when you have received the message of this instruction, your feelings are given direction and shape. Your body reacts in the right way. Iris Marion Young (1990) in “Throwing like a Girl” asks how girls come to be “like girls” through how they come to inhabit their bodies. Girls come to take up less space by what they do, and by what they do not do. Girls come to restrict themselves through restricting how they use their bodies. Young calls this restriction an “inhibited intentionality,” using the example of how girls learn to throw, by not getting their bodies behind an action.

Becoming a girl is here about how you experience your body in relation to space. Gendering operates in how bodies take up space: think of the intense sociality of the subway or train, how some men typically lounge around, with their legs wide, taking up not only the space in front of their own seat but the space in front of other seats. Women might end up not even having much space in front of their own seats; that space has been taken up. To become accommodating, we take up less space. The more accommodating we are the less space we have to take up. Gender: a loop, tightening.

A world can shrink when we shrink. Judith Butler (1993) taught us to think of “girling” as a social mechanism. A baby is born: we might say, “It’s a girl!” or “It’s a boy!” Even before birth: we might watch on the screen to see whether it’s a girl or boy, where that is decided by virtue of the absence or presence of a penis. The attachment to gender rests from the very beginning on phallocentrism: on the penis as the decider of the future, two sexes as two paths: the sexual binary as fate, as fated, as fatalism. Even when we critique the sex-gender distinction, even when we learn from feminist critiques of this distinction (Gatens 1983; Butler 1990), we know that that distinction works as a form of sequencing: as if from sex, gender follows. We could call this sequencing “gender fatalism,” as implied by the assumption that “boys will be boys.” I remember that utterance “boys will be boys” as one often made by adults, often with a nod of the head and an intonation of forgiveness: an unruliness explained as boys being boys; aggression, violence, even. Gender fatalism rests on ideas about nature as well as time: what “will be” is decided by “what is.” This is what boys are like; girls, too. But likeness becomes not only an explanation (he is being such boy; what a boy he is being) but an expectation. The “will be” in “boys will be boys” acquires the force of prediction. A prediction becomes a command. You will be boy. When you have fulfilled that command, you are agreeable; you have lived up to an expectation.

Sex is given as an assignment; homework. No wonder mere description (it’s a girl; it’s a boy!) provides the basis of a task (being boy! being girl!) as well as a command (You will be boy! You will be girl!). To receive an assignment is to be given a sign: boy or girl. This *or* too is doing something, registering as opposition; one or the other. A sign: what means or denotes something. Right from the very beginning matter and meaning are deeply entangled; it is not matter (sex), then meaning (gender). You are in being assigned *x* or *y* also being assigned to a group; an assignment is what you receive from others that will determine how you are positioned in relation to others. We are more than these assignments right from the beginning.

We can feel at home in an assignment; or not; more or less. An assignment also means a task; like homework. To be assigned a sex in this binary system is a way of being directed toward a future, as I explore in more detail in [chapter 2](#). Perhaps gender

becomes more work for those who feel less at home in their original assignments. We might, early on, not be at home in a body by not being at home in a sign. And we might be perpetually reassigned; reminders of our assignment punctuate our lives like grammar. So of course girling moments do not stop happening, even after we are pronounced girls. As Judith Butler elaborates, “the girling of the girl does not end there” (1993, xvii). Rather, “that founding interpellation is reiterated by various authorities” (xvii). It is not simply that the sign denotes something. What matters is who addresses you through the sign; how you receive it.

Girling is enacted not only through being explicitly addressed as a girl, but in the style or mode of address: because you are a girl, we can do this to you. Violence too is a mode of address. Being girl is a way of being taught what it is to have a body: you are being told; you will receive my advances; you are object; thing, nothing. To become girl is to learn to expect such advances, to modify your behavior in accordance; to become girl as becoming wary of being in public space; becoming wary of being at all. Indeed, if you do not modify your behavior in accordance, if you are not careful and cautious, you can be made responsible for the violence directed toward you (look at what you were drinking, look at what you wearing, look at where you were, look look). You can be made responsible whether or not you have modified your behavior in accordance, because gender fatalism has already explained the violence directed against you as forgivable and inevitable. The violence of judgments that tend to follow violence against women and girls has been documented by feminists over generations. Documentation is a feminist project; a life project.

FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

When did you begin to put the pieces together? Perhaps when you put the pieces back together you are putting yourself back together. We assemble something. Feminism is DIY: a form of self-assembly. No wonder feminist work is often about timing: sometimes we are too fragile to do this work; we cannot risk being shattered because we are not ready to put ourselves back together again. To get ready often means being prepared to be undone.

In time, with work, things begin to make more sense. You begin to recognize how violence is directed: that being recognized as a girl means being subjected to this pressure, this relentless assault on the senses; a body that comes to fear the touch of a world. Maybe you learn from that, from what that repetition does; you realize retrospectively how you came to take up less space. You might express feminist rage at how women are made responsible for the violence that is directed against them. Feminism helps you to make sense that something is wrong; to recognize a wrong is to realize that you are not in the wrong.

Becoming feminist: how we redescribe the world we are in. We begin to identify how what happens to me, happens to others. We begin to identify patterns and regularities. Begin to identify: this sounds too smooth. It is not an easy or straightforward process because we have to stay with the wrongs. And think about feeling: to direct your attention to the experience of being wronged can mean feeling wronged all over again.

We need to attend to the bumps; it is bumpy. You had already sensed something amiss. Maybe it was an uneasy feeling at

first. As Alison Jaggar describes, “Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability, revulsion, anger, or fear may we bring to consciousness our ‘gut-level’ awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice or danger” (1996, 181; see also Spelman 1989). A gut has its own intelligence. A feminist gut might sense something is amiss. You have to get closer to the feeling; but once you try to think about a feeling, how quickly it can recede. Maybe it begins as a background anxiety, like a humming noise that gradually gets louder over time so that it begins to fill your ear, canceling out other sounds. And then suddenly it seems (though perhaps it is not sudden) what you tried so hard not to notice is all you can hear. A sensation that begins at the back of your mind, an uneasy sense of something amiss, gradually comes forward, as things come up; then receding, as you try to get on with things; as you try to get on despite things. Maybe you do not even want to feel this way; feeling wrong is what brings a wrong home. Attending to the feeling might be too demanding: it might require you to give up on what otherwise seems to give you something; relationships, dreams; an idea of who it is that you are; an idea of who it is that you can be. You might even will yourself not to notice certain things because noticing them would change your relation to the world; it would change the world to which you exist in relation. We have to stay with the feelings that we might wish would go away; that become reminders of these things that happened that made you wary of being at all.

Perhaps there is just only so much you can take in. Perhaps you take in some things as a way of not taking in other things. As I have been putting a sponge to my own feminist past, I remembered another conversation. It was with a teacher of mine at university, Rosemary Moore, who taught the first feminist classes I took: Nineteenth-Century Women’s Writing in 1988; Twentieth-Century Women’s Writing in 1989. I hadn’t thought about this conversation for a long time, though it is probably not true to say that I had forgotten it. I asked her whether my essay for the course had to refer to women or gender. Her answer was that it didn’t but that it would be surprising if it didn’t. Why did I ask her this question? I had come to university hoping to study philosophy. I was especially interested in what I called “scepticism,” philosophies that proceeded by doubting what is as a way of questioning what’s what. Sadly, philosophy at Adelaide University was pretty much straight analytical philosophy and scepticism was dismissed as self-refuting in the first lecture of Philosophy 101. To study the kind of work I was interested in, I ended up in the English literature department because there they taught what was referred to as “theory.” And I chose the women’s writing courses not because I was interested in feminist theory (even though I was passionate about feminism) but because I was interested in critical theory. I was interested in how we know things, in questions of truth, in perspective and perception, in experience and subjectivity. I wanted to ask how I know that what I see as green is what you see as green; those sorts of questions were my sort of questions.

Yes: I chose women’s writing because I wanted to do critical theory. Our teacher was engaged with and by Lacanian psychoanalysis. If we began there, that wasn’t what kept my attention; it was 1980s feminist literary theory and from there, feminist philosophy of science and feminist epistemology. I ended up writing my first feminist essay for that course.² So why did it happen this way around: from critical theory to feminist theory, given that I thought of myself as a feminist and had been such

an outspoken feminist growing up? I think there was only so much feminism I could take in. I had thought that to be philosophical or to ask questions about the nature of reality was not to do feminism: that feminism was about something particular not general, relative not universal, that feminism was about questioning and challenging sexual violence, inequality, and injustice and not the nature of reality as such. I did not understand that feminism was a way of challenging the universal. I did not appreciate how questioning sexism is one of the most profound ways of disrupting what we take to be given and thus learning about how the given is given. Feminist theory taught me that the universal is what needs to be exploded. Feminist theory taught me that reality is usually just someone else's tired explanation. So if in my introduction to this book I suggested that feminist theory is what gets you there, to the classroom, we might note how feminist theory can be what gets you out of there. By this I mean: I thought I wanted to be in the theory class; feminist theory taught me that that was not the class for me. Feminism is my theory class.

We learn also: how we recognize sexism or racism here can be a way of not recognizing it there. A location can be a reduction. Becoming feminist involves a process of recognizing that what you are up against cannot be located or reduced to an object or thing (which could then be discarded so we could start up again). The process of recognizing sexism was not smooth or automatic. I had multiple false starts because there was so much I resisted: I could take feminism in only bit by bit. Maybe there was only so much I could take in because it meant recognizing that I had been taken in. You can feel stupid for not having seen things more clearly before. You have to give up on a version of yourself as well as a version of events. And maybe we need to remember how hard it is to acknowledge that a world is not accommodating you because of the body you have. I didn't want feminism to be everywhere, as I didn't want to encounter these limits; I wanted there to be places to go where I could just leave my body behind.

If becoming feminist is not a smooth process, if we resist what we encounter because it is too much to take in, this is not to say when we do let go it is just difficult. When you begin to put the pieces together, it can feel magical: the wonder of the clicking moment, when things that had previously been obscured begin to make sense, when things fit into place. You blink and the world reappears: clarity can feel magical. For me reading feminist theory was a series of continuous clicks. And later, teaching women's studies was such a delight as you can participate in other people's clicking moments: what a sound it makes; how important it is that this sound is audible to others.

Finding feminism can be empowering as it is a way of reinhabiting the past. It is personal. There is no question: it is personal. The personal is structural. I learned that you can be hit by a structure; you can be bruised by a structure. An individual man who violates you is given permission: that is structure. His violence is justified as natural and inevitable: that is structure. A girl is made responsible for his violence: that is structure. A policeman who turns away because it is a domestic call: that is structure. A judge who talks about what she was wearing: that is structure. A structure is an arrangement, an order, a building; an assembly.

We need structure to give evidence of structure. To catalog instances of violence is to create a feminist catalog. I think one of the reasons I find the project *Everyday Sexism* so important and compelling is that it shows how the cataloging of instances of

sexism is necessarily a collective project.³ The project involves the creation of a virtual space in which we can insert our own individual experiences of sexism, sexual violence, or sexual harassment so that we show what we know: that this or that incident is not isolated but part of a series of events: a series as a structure. These recent feminist strategies have revived key aspects of second-wave feminism; we are in the time of revival because of what is not over. Consciousness-raising was also about this: reaching a feminist account, as an account for oneself with and through others, connecting my experience with the experience of others. We need a deposit system to show the scale of sexism. When there is a place to go with these experiences—and feminism is about giving women places to go—the accounts tend to come out: a “drip, drip” becomes a flood. It is like a tap has been loosened, allowing what has been held back to flow. Feminism: the releasing of a pressure valve.

Feminism can allow you to reinhabit not only your own past but also your own body. You might over time, in becoming aware of how you have lessened your own space, give yourself permission to take up more space; to expand your own reach. It is not necessarily the case that we take up this permission simply by giving ourselves permission. It does take time, to reinhabit the body, to become less wary, to acquire confidence. Feminism involves a process of finding another way to live in your body. We might learn to let ourselves bump into things; not to withdraw in anticipation of violence. Of course I am describing a difficulty; I am describing how ways of resolving problems can enact the problems we are trying to resolve. We know we are not responsible for resolving the problem of violence; changing how we relate to the world does not change the world. And yet in refusing to withdraw, in refusing to lessen how much space we take up, in insisting on taking up space, we are not receiving the message that has been sent out. In order to put the pieces together, you cannot but get the message wrong, the message that makes a wrong a right. No wonder then, as I explore later, to become a feminist is to be perceived as in the wrong.

As we begin this process of putting ourselves back together we find much more than ourselves. Feminism, in giving you somewhere to go, allows you to revisit where you have been. We can become even more conscious of the world in this process of becoming conscious of injustices because we had been taught to overlook so much. A world can flood once we have let it in, once we have unlocked the door of our own resistance. Feminism too can become a flooding experience: one book read that leads to another, a trail that leads you to find feminism, more and more feminism, new words, concepts, arguments, models: patriarchy, phallocentrism, rape culture, the sex-gender system. In finding feminism, you are finding out about the many ways that feminists have tried to make sense, already, of the experiences you had, before you had them; experiences that left you feeling all alone are the experiences that lead you to others. We still have sorting to do: some of these ways of making sense make more sense to you than others. But I will always remember that feeling; a sense that there are others like you out there, that you are not on your own, that you were not on your own. Your own difficult history is written out in words that are sent out. I often think of reading feminist books as like making friends, realizing that others have been here before.

Even if you still feel pain, frustration, and rage, even if you feel these feelings more as you have given them more attention, they are directed in a different way. Knowledge is this achievement of direction. Your feelings are directed neither at some

anonymous stranger who happened upon you (or not only), nor toward yourself for allowing something to happen (or not just), but toward a world that reproduces that violence by explaining it away.

PROBLEMS WITH NAMES

Feminist consciousness can feel like a switch that is turned on. Turning off might be necessary to survive the world that we are in, which is not a feminist world. Feminist consciousness is when the on button is the default position. Unless you turn it off, you are on. Perhaps this is the reverse of the usual setting, where you have to be switched to be on. No wonder: it can be exhausting. Sometimes it might even seem that it is as or even more tiring to notice sexism and racism than to experience sexism and racism: after all, it is this noticing that makes things real. And at times, it can be tempting to think: it would be less difficult if I could just stop noticing sexism and racism. It would be easier to screen things out. Personally I don't think that is an easy option. And I don't think that it is always available as an option: because having let the world in, screening it out, would also require giving up on the subject you have become. I think this is a promise: once you become a person who notices sexism and racism, it is hard to unbecome that person.

If a world can be what we learn not to notice, noticing becomes a form of political labor. What do we learn not to notice? We learn not to notice some suffering, such that if the suffering of those deemed strangers appears, then it does so only dimly, at the edges of our consciousness. In fact this is another way we learn about the figure of the stranger: strangers are not simply those we do not recognize but those we recognize as strangers, not only those you do not know but those you should not know. As a child you might have been taught to turn away from homeless people on the street, to screen out not only their suffering but their very existence. They are not anything to do with you. Hurry on, move on. We are learning not only whose suffering should affect us, or how we should be affected by whose suffering; we are busy exercising the very distinction between friends and strangers, creating that distinction, between those who matter and those who do not. It is a distinction predicated on violence. It is a distinction enforced through violence. We are learning to screen out what gets in the way of our occupation of space. Once you have learned this something, you don't notice this someone.

If we have been taught to turn away, we have to learn to turn toward. Audre Lorde taught me how turning toward what is difficult, which can be a what with a who, is politically necessary, even if this turning can at times feel like we are making life more difficult for ourselves. She teaches us how some difficulties—when we come up against a world because of the body we have—resist being comprehended when they are experienced. In *Sister Outsider*, Audre Lorde describes the words *racism* and *sexism* as “grown up words” (1984a, 152). We encounter racism and sexism before we have the words that allow us to make sense of what we encounter. Words can then allow us to get closer to our experiences; words can allow us to comprehend what we experience after the event. We become retrospective witnesses of our becoming. Sexism and racism: if they are problems we have

given names, the names tend to lag behind the problems.

Having names for problems can make a difference. Before, you could not quite put your finger on it. With these words as tools, we revisit our own histories; we hammer away at the past. It took a long time for me to get to the point where I could even describe how race and racism had structured my own world. Reading black feminist and feminist of color scholarship allowed me to revisit my own past, to occupy that past. I was brought up in Australia in a very white neighborhood. I went to a very white school (is there something very “very” about whiteness? One wonders.). There were just a few of us of color; we didn’t quite know what to do with each other, though we knew we had something to do with each other. I had a white English mother and a brown Pakistani father who had kind of let go or almost let go of his own history in order to give us children a chance in a new world.⁴ We had no Pakistani friends, but there was an occasional visit to Pakistan, and visits from Pakistani aunties. But they were occasional, fleeting moments, ones that did not leave me with a possibility I could grasp. I was brown, visibly different but with no real account of that difference; no real sense of where it or I was coming from. I kept feeling wrong, being treated as in the wrong, but I did not know what was wrong. Something was wrong. How to acquire the words for this something?

I had to leave home before I could find these words. I had to leave so I could come back again. I was writing a chapter of my PhD thesis on subjectivity. I needed an example. I remember looking around the room as if something lying around might provide me with inspiration. It is funny to recall this because later on I would turn to an object that was nearby: the table, an object that was to become another kind of writing companion (Ahmed 2006). As I was glancing around, it came back to me. A memory intruded into the present as if by its own will. I was ready for the intrusion. I recalled an experience I had when I was fourteen years old, walking close to home, along a street in Adelaide. Two policemen in a car pulled up next to me. The first asked, “Are you Aboriginal?” It turned out there had been burglaries in the area. **Racism: how an association between Aboriginality and criminality is turned into a question.** I will pick up this association in due course. The second policeman then quipped, “Or is it just a sun tan?” Although given as a quip it was a hostile address, and it was an unsettling experience at the time. It was an experience of being made into a stranger, the one who is recognized as out of place, as the one who does not belong, whose proximity is registered as crime or threat. Once I recalled this experience, so much else came back to me; a drip, drip became a flood.

The police at the school were friendly and taught me to fear strangers for my own protection. The police on the street were hostile and taught me that to become a stranger is to be stopped by how you are addressed. We learn from this difference: my first instruction was an instruction into whiteness and not just femininity. It is a white female body that is assumed to be vulnerable and in need of protection from others. In the second encounter, I was danger, not endangered; a brown body is not perceived as a fragile female body. My different experiences with the police show how the stranger is a racialized figure. What happened to me partly depended on how I would pass into or out of this figure. I return to this instance in [chapter 5](#), to reflect on how I was able to start up again, and how being able to start up again was a form of class as well as racial privilege. But let’s think

about the stranger as a racialized figure. The racialization of the stranger is not immediately apparent; after all, we are taught the stranger could be anyone. My stranger memory taught me that the “could be anyone” points to some bodies more than others. You are stopped because they think you are Aboriginal; you are allowed to start up again when you pass as white.

Feminist and antiracist consciousness involves not just finding the words, but through the words, how they point, realizing how violence is directed: violence is directed toward some bodies more than others. To give a problem a name can change not only how we register an event but whether we register an event. Perhaps not having names is a way of turning away from a difficulty that persists whether or not we turn away. Not naming a problem in the hope that it will go away often means the problem just remains unnamed. At the same time, giving the problem a name does not make the problem go away. To give the problem a name can be experienced as magnifying the problem; allowing something to acquire a social and physical density by gathering up what otherwise would remain scattered experiences into a tangible thing. Making sexism and racism tangible is also a way of making them appear outside of oneself; something that can be spoken of and addressed by and with others. It can be a relief to have something to point to; otherwise you can feel alone or lost. We have different tactics for dealing with sexism and racism; and one difficulty is that these tactics can be in tension. When we give problems their names, we can become a problem for those who do not want to talk about a problem even though they know there is a problem. You can cause a problem by not letting things recede.

We need to acquire words to describe what we come up against. Becoming feminist; finding the words. *Sexism* is another such word. It often arrives after the event: we look back and we can explain things that happened as sexism. To name something as sexist does not make something there that was not there before; it is a sexist idea that to describe something as sexist is to make something sexist. But naming something as “sexism” does do something. It modifies a relation given that it does not create something from nothing. Connections can be what we have to struggle for, because there is so much silence about sexism: sexism makes it costly for women to speak about sexism. Because, after all, to name something as sexist is not only to name something that happens as part of a wider system (to refuse to give what happens the status of an exceptional event), but it is also to give an account of that something as being wrong and unjustifiable. To name something as sexist is not only to modify a relation by modifying our understanding of that relation; it is also to insist that further modification is required. When we say, “That’s sexist,” we are saying no to that, as well as no to the world that renders such a speech or behavior permissible; we are asking individuals to change such that these forms of speech and behavior are no longer acceptable or permissible.

Not just individuals: the point is that individuals are encouraged and rewarded for participating in sexist culture. It might be a reward given through affirmation from peers (the egging on that allows a group to solidify over how they address others as imposters). But institutions also enable and reward sexist behavior: institutional sexism. Sexual banter is so often institutionalized. You might participate in that banter because it is costly not to participate: you become the problem, the one who is disapproving or uptight. You are treated as policing the behavior of others simply by virtue of not participating in that behavior. Not participating can be judged as disapproval whether or not you make that judgment. You are judged as taking

something the wrong way when you object to something. When we give an account of something as sexist or racist, we are often dismissed as having a faulty perception, as not receiving the intentions or actions of others fairly or properly. “I didn’t mean anything by it,” he might say. And indeed then by taking something said or done the wrong way, not only are you wrong, but you are understood as committing a wrong against someone else. When you talk about sexism and racism, you are heard as damaging the reputation of an individual or an organization. I return to this issue of damage in [chapter 6](#) in my discussion of brick walls.

Sometimes it might be to our own advantage not to have a problem with how we are addressed. Another time, a rather long time ago when I was still in Australia, a woman told me how in a job interview a man asked her where she was from (some of us are always asked this question, as our being is in question, as I explore in [chapter 5](#)). She explains; she gives an account of herself. She is mixed race. He then says to her that mixed-race women are beautiful. I was outraged when she told me this, but she shrugged it off: she said it was a compliment; she was offered the position. What a history I suspect is implied here: a history of how we shrug things off. To get on, you get along. I would use words like *racism* and *sexism* to describe how she becomes an exotic spectacle, but for her these words would probably have been experienced as impositions, as coming from the outside, as potentially requiring her to give up an opportunity that was available, to give up something, all over again.

These are complicated scenarios: you can receive some benefits by adapting yourself to a system that is, at another level, compromising your capacity to inhabit a world on more equal terms. I think for many women, becoming willing to participate in sexist culture is a compromise, even if it is not registered as such, because we have been taught (from past experience, from what we come up against) that being unwilling to participate can be dangerous. You risk becoming alienated from all of the existing structures that enable survival within an institution, let alone a progression. Here we can say: resistance to recognizing something might be a way of coping with or living with that thing. Resistance to recognition can be a form or manner of recognition; recognition as a form of resignation, even.

Sometimes: surviving the relentlessness of sexism as well as racism might require that you shrug it off, by not naming it, or even by learning not to experience those actions as violations of your own body; learning to expect that violence as just part of ordinary life; making that fatalism your fate. Sometimes: we have to teach ourselves not to shrug things off, knowing full well that by not doing something we will be perceived as doing too much. When we start using words like *sexism* and *racism*, words that make what we are asked not to notice all the more real, we sense there will be consequences. We sense the pain that might follow, as well as the punishment. [Part III](#) of this book reflects on living a feminist life as living with the consequences of being feminists who are willing to give problems their names. But I want to make a start here by turning to the figure of the killjoy. She has been waiting (rather impatiently) to speak to us.

BECOMING THE PROBLEM

As I have suggested, when you name something as sexist or as racist you are making that thing more tangible so that it can be more easily communicated to others. But for those who do not have a sense of the racism or sexism you are talking about, to bring them up is to bring them into existence.

When you expose a problem you pose a problem.

It might then be assumed that the problem would go away if you would just stop talking about it or if you went away. The charge of sensationalism falls rather quickly onto feminist shoulders: when she talks about sexism and racism, her story is heard as sensationalist, as if she is exaggerating for effect.⁵ The feminist killjoy begins as a sensationalist figure. It is as if the point of making her point is to cause trouble, to get in the way of the happiness of others, because of her own unhappiness. I turn to the question of happiness and unhappiness in [chapter 2](#). But note how the feminist killjoy begins her life as an antifeminist figure: we are retooling her for our own purpose.

Let me retell my story of becoming a feminist by turning to the figure of the feminist killjoy. I would begin this story with a table. Around the table, a family gathers.⁶ Always we are seated in the same place: my father one end, myself the other, my two sisters to one side, my mother to the other. Always we are seated this way, as if we are trying to secure more than our place. We are having polite conversations, where only certain things can be brought up. Someone says something you consider problematic. At first you try not to say anything. But they keep saying something. So maybe you respond, carefully, perhaps. You say why you think what they have said is problematic. You might be speaking quietly, but you are beginning to feel wound up, recognizing with frustration that you are being wound up by someone who is winding you up. The feminist killjoy appears here: when she speaks, she seems wound up. I appear here. This is my history: [wound up](#).

However she speaks, the one who speaks as a feminist is usually heard as the cause of the argument. She stops the smooth flow of communication. It becomes tense. She makes things tense. We can begin to witness what is being locked in this dynamic. The problem is not simply about the content of what she is saying. She is doing more than saying the wrong thing: she is getting in the way of something, the achievement or accomplishment of the family or of some *we* or another, which is created by what is not said. So much you are supposed not to say, to do, to be, in order to preserve that *we*. And yet, even if she is not supposed to react this way, her reaction is, at another level, willed. She is after all being wound up by someone who is winding her up. The family is performed by witnessing her being wound up, spinning around. Look, look at her spin! To make her the cause of a tension is another way of preserving the illusion that without her, the family would be civil. I think those of us who have been killjoys around family tables probably know this; how useful we are as containers of incivility and discord.⁷

Whenever we speak, eyes seem to roll, as if to say, well, you would say that. From these experiences we can condense a formula:

[Rolling eyes = feminist pedagogy.](#)

Eyes seem to roll wherever you go, whatever you say. In fact, you don't even have to say anything before eyes start rolling. It

can seem as if eyes roll as an expression of collective exasperation because you are a feminist. Becoming a feminist is often about being lodged in a *because*. She says that because she is a feminist; or, even more strongly, she is only saying that because she is a feminist. In the introduction, I described how practicing feminism is about developing our feminist tendencies (becoming the kind of person who would be willing to speak out about sexism and racism). We can see now how feminism is refuted or dismissed as simply a personal tendency, as if she disagrees with something because she is being disagreeable; as if she opposes something because she is being oppositional. Feminists are then judged as being unable to help themselves, as if to be a feminist is to function on automatic pilot.⁸ Feminism is treated as a removal from the world rather than engagement with the world. We are talking about how feminists are removed from the world because of the nature of their engagement; how feminist accounts are discounted as sensationalizing the facts of the matter.

We can appreciate, then, how the sensations that lead us to feminism are often the very same sensations that follow being a feminist. Through feminism you make sense of wrongs; you realize that you are not in the wrong. But when you speak of something as being wrong, you end up being in the wrong all over again. The sensation of being wronged can thus end up magnified: you feel wronged by being perceived as in the wrong just for pointing out something is wrong. It is frustrating! And then your frustration can be taken as evidence of your frustration, that you speak this way, about this or that, because you are frustrated. It is frustrating to be heard as frustrated; it can make you angry that you are heard as angry. Or if you are angry about something and you are heard as an angry person (an angry black feminist or an angry woman of color), then what you are angry about disappears, which can make you feel even angrier. If feminism allows us to redirect our emotions toward different objects, our emotions can become their objects. We are dismissed as emotional. It is enough to make you emotional.

And then of course the objects we are objecting to are reaffirmed as inappropriate objects for critique or complaint. I remember one time we were talking over the family table about the film *Kramer vs. Kramer*. I remember questioning how the mother is demonized. I make that point, that rather obvious feminist point, which is hard not to make once you have acquired a feminist tendency. And then: the noise, the noise! “Oh can’t you just let us enjoy this lovely sweet film”; “Oh can’t you see how special the relationship is between the father and son, how cruel she is”; “Oh you are always looking for problems,” and so on. **Feminists: looking for problems. It is as if these problems are not there until you point them out; it is as if pointing them out is what makes them there.**

We become a problem when we describe a problem.

One time much later than my other killjoy moments over the family table, I was having dinner with my sister and her (then) partner. He began saying things about Aboriginal people and how they would complain about the army moving a rock because it was sacred. He was deeply offensive. I responded. Maybe I used the word *racism*. I can’t remember if I used that word, but it was on my mind. Racism was on my mind because racism was in the room. Whatever I said, he became very angry, but an anger that took the form of silence and stares. He sat there, steely faced, for the rest of the dinner, not touching his food. Waiters hovered

nervously. We spoke politely around him. When I woke the next morning, my mother called, and she had heard that I had put him off his food. When will you ever learn—I could hear those unuttered words.

Poor him

Mean

Memories of being a killjoy at the table flooded back to me, a burning sensation on skin; recalled as being the one who puts others off their food. You sense that an injustice follows pointing out an injustice. Another dinner ruined. So many dinners ruined. That flooding: it happens. It still happens. Feeling wrong, being wrong; being wronged. If sensation brings us to feminism, to become a feminist is to cause a sensation.

CONCLUSION: ALIENATION AS SENSATION

The feminist killjoy first came up for me in a painful and difficult situation. I have learned so much from returning to some of my early experiences of this assignment. In [chapter 2](#) I complicate the scene of her arrival to show how the killjoy does not simply come up because of what she brings up. But it is important to start with my first sense of her as a figure, how she came up, for me; how she spoke to rather than simply of that feeling of alienation, of being alienated, from a world, a family, a set of arrangements. If you say something and eyes roll, you might end up in a state of wonder and disbelief: how can they not see it, what is right in front of us? You learn to doubt reality as such, because you doubt their reality, this reality. When you question sexism and racism it is hard not to question everything.

That is another promise.

To be a feminist can feel like being in a different world even when you are seated at the same table. If that is the case, then to be a feminist is to be in a different world. So much is reproduced by not being noticed: by receding into the background. What had receded into the background comes alive when you no longer participate in that recession. No wonder: the family becomes a more tangible thing the more you are alienated from it.

If the feminist killjoy comes up in a conversation over the table, she brings other things into view, including the family, as well as the table, as a series of arrangements. When feminists are dismissed as sensationalist, we experience the world as all the more sensational; what is ordinarily overlooked or looked over appears striking. The world registers yet again as sensory intrusion; the events you might have tried to forget come more and more into focus as you make feminism your stance. The past is magnified when it is no longer shrunk. We make things bigger just by refusing to make things smaller. You experience the world on a different scale.

The experience of being feminist is often an experience of being out of tune with others. The note heard as out of tune is not only the note that is heard most sharply but the note that ruins the whole tune. Of course it sounds negative: to ruin something.

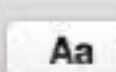
We are heard as negative: ruining something; dinners, as well as photographs, as I explore in [chapter 2](#). We need to ruin what ruins. We could think of ruining not only as an activity that leads to something collapsing or falling down but as how we learn about things when we dismantle things, or by dismantling things.

I think of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. This is a text that begins by dismantling the happy family, by literally sentencing it to death: the nuclear family, the white family of the picture book, becomes garbled when the punctuation of the story is removed. I would describe the narrator of this novel, Claudia, as a black feminist critic. She is studious not only about whiteness but also about gender. She teaches us about intersectionality in how she pokes things; how she pokes around in things. In one scene Claudia reflects on how it began:

It had begun with Christmas and the gift of dolls. The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish. . . . [What was] supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite. . . . [I] traced the turned-up nose, poked the glassy-blue eyes, twisted the yellow hair. I could not love it. But I could examine it to see what it was that all the world said was lovable. . . . I destroyed white baby dolls. (1979, 13–14)

Claudia encounters the doll she is supposed to wish for, that she is supposed to love, as an unlovable thing. Attunement is here a technique of power: by clucking, adults are trying to tell her the appropriate ways of handling the white baby doll. Attunement matches an affect with an object. Claudia knows by their clucking that she is supposed to love the white baby doll. Claudia's misattunement is expressed in how she handles the thing (she pokes and twists the doll rather than clucking), a handling that will, no doubt, be registered by others as violence and aggression; as disaffection, disloyalty, ingratitude. If misattunement is expressed as a mishandling of things, then misattunement is worldly. Objects bring worlds with them. In Claudia's case, she is alienated not only from dolls as things but from patriarchal whiteness that elevates such things as lovable things. To be misattuned is to be out of sync with a world. Not only that: it is to experience what is in tune as violence. Claudia could also be described as a black feminist killjoy: she dismembers rather than clucks at what she has been given to love, the white baby doll; she uses the gift to generate counterknowledge.

If alienation is sensation, it is not then just or only the sensation of negation: of experiencing the impress of a world as violence, although it includes those feelings. Alienation is studious; you learn more about wishes when they are not what you wish for. We can think of alienation then as wonder: we wonder about things; we marvel at their assembly. The dolls we do not want are not simply discarded or left behind, lifeless limp rags left on the table. When dolls are dismembered, they are the object of our attention; we learn not only what they are like (the turned-up nose, the glassy-blue eyes, the yellow hair) but from them what we are supposed to like or even be like; from them we learn about the very stuff of human aspiration. It is when we are not attuned, when we do not love what we are supposed to love, that things become available to us as things to ponder with, to



wonder about. It might be that we do destroy things to work them out. Or it might be that working them out is perceived as destroying things.

When we sense a wrong, we withdraw from a wish. Having a sense of things as palpable things is thus not unrelated to having a sense of injustice. A feminist life is how we get in touch with things. How astonishing.