

“Everyone should
read this book.”
—bell hooks



Living a Feminist Life

SARA AHMED

SARA AHMED **Living a
Feminist
Life**

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*To the many feminist killjoys
out there doing your thing:*

THIS ONE IS FOR YOU.

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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 polic-

ing 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. 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 ex-

perience. 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 as 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.