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**Sara Ahmed. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. 328 pp. Paperback.**

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I was holding on to a love I knew so long  
I thought it must be keeping me afloat  
Only when I was down,  
Only when I was drowning.  
Did I finally feel the hands on my throat  
(The Thermals 'I Let it Go' 2009)

Ahmed's book directs us to recognise the role of affect in the discipline of our personal, political and social orders. Irreverent to the self-help market, *The Promise of Happiness*, along with (guilty) pleasures of academic-activist-popular books (e.g. Halberstam 2011; Easton & Hardy 2009; Behrendt & Ruotola-Behrendt 2005), zines, superfox treatise, unrelenting support and mix-cds from friends, has provided me with a rich resource to help reconfigure a life turned upside down, and engage an ocean of bad feeling, failure and unhappiness. The speech act Ahmed starts from – "I just want you to be happy" - has of course been uttered by my parents in a limited acknowledgement of my same-sex partner.

Blame has been placed on my feminist and queer orientations in my role as a killjoy bent on spoiling the happiness of the family dinner table. Ahmed even touches on the hopeless attempts that my ex-girlfriend and I engaged in to make each other (and convince others that we were) 'happy' to the detriment of my mental health and inevitable exhausting and painful breakup. Ahmed's main argument that the promise of happiness (including its objects, rituals and trajectory) is located in the production of privilege (in marriage, family, monogamy, employment, money, heterosexuality, gender norms and citizenship) resonates very well with the everyday life of this undone queer feminist subject.

This book carves out a home within feminist cultural studies of emotion and affect that push forward an engagement with bad feelings (Nguyen 2010), failure (Halberstam 2011), shame (Munt 2007),

and violence (Cvetkovich 2003). Ahmed turns the situation around to understand the promise of happiness as a process of concealment that hides inequalities and justifies the oppression of 'others' under the rubric of the 'good life'. In this argument happiness plays a neo-liberal trick, placing responsibility on the individual to achieve authentic happiness and obscures diverse ways of being. In short; queers, feminists and migrants all threaten to expose the unhappiness of the scripts and duties of happiness and can only be seen as the cause of bad feeling. Feminists cause sexism. Migrants need to get over racism. Homophobia no longer exists. Nobody wants to break the illusion of happiness and those who refuse to play along and dare to make alternative lives in queer, feminist and migrant life worlds are stigmatised as unhappy, negative and difficult 'affect aliens' (Ahmed 2010, 158). Nonetheless it is through engagement with negative affect experienced by bodies that refuse to be placed in the social order that Ahmed argues we can explore the "feelings of structure" [...] how structures get under our skin' (Ahmed 2010, 216). In this sense it is those that have been 'undone by suffering' that Ahmed views as potential 'agents of ethical transformation' (Ahmed 2010, 216). Unhappiness is not something that should be simply overcome or eradicated but should signal the limits of the promise of happiness and motivate

'affect aliens' to create life worlds around a different set of wants and needs.

Ahmed constructs her cultural critique from readings of popular literature and film including *Mrs Dalloway*, *The Well of Loneliness*, *Rubyfruit Jungle*, *Bend it Like Beckham* and *Children of Men*. Her ideas constitute a theoretical framework for an empirical study into the everyday life worlds of queers, feminists and migrants. However an empirical investigation of how culture and affect are used to resist structures and create different ways of being and grassroots life worlds is not realised in Ahmed's book. Grassroots music-making is not included in Ahmed's archives despite its use by marginal groups in the creation of resistant life worlds (e.g. Smith 1997). Nonetheless Sara Ahmed makes crucial theoretical contributions towards an understanding of the tensions in UK contemporary queer feminist life and activism. Contemporary commentators have identified the 'resurgence' of feminism, the goal to 'normalise' feminism and a 'new generation' of feminist activists (e.g. MacKay 2011). These are important interventions in a field that has previously focused on the political apathy of young women. However, what is often missing from these accounts is an admission that the doing of feminism can be difficult and challenging. What happens when the feminist collective or women-only space fails to be a positive ex-

perience? What are the options for those who do not fit in?

In 1972 Jo Freeman critiqued the white middle-class heterosexual feminine values of feminist groups. This breakdown of feminist organisations across lines of race, class, sexuality, ability and gender is well documented. Ahmed's assertion that 'feminist consciousness can thus be thought of as consciousness of the violence and power that are concealed under the languages of civility and love, rather than simply consciousness of gender as a site of restriction of possibility' (Ahmed 2010, 86) is well placed to interrogate the affective bonds and spaces in feminism and other progressive social movements. For instance, in riot grrrl, moments of 'girl love' also reveal failures, 'affect aliens' and bad feelings. Mimi Thi Nguyen's work in this area identifies how queers of colour are constructed as problematic interruptions to a linear historical narrative of feminism (Nguyen 2010). This links to Ahmed's concept of the 'melancholic migrant' (Ahmed 2010, 121) who will not let go of racist suffering and pressure felt by queers of colour and refuse to take part in a fantasy of forgetting racism or comply with a 'happiness duty'. Likewise LGBT social movements have also invoked positive affect as an important counterpoint to shame, guilt and silence suffered as an effect of the violence of straight happiness. Ahmed astutely identifies how rights and recognition for

same-sex relationships act as gifts from straight society that obscure queer labour, struggle and diverse life worlds generated by queer activism. In this sense Ahmed warns against being a 'happy queer' to instead be 'happily queer' (Ahmed 2010, 117): happy to be the cause of unhappiness and discomfort, push the straight lines of happiness scripts, be defiant, irreverent and make trouble. As activists and academics of social movements and social theory I agree with Ahmed that we need to engage with what hurts, what causes us pain, what we have learned to tread quietly around for the sake of maintaining a happy united front. We need to be ready to investigate how happiness makes some personhoods more valuable than others and be prepared to make trouble and disrupt the lines drawn around our biographies, cultures and lives.

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