

"Everyone should  
read this book."  
—bell hooks



# Living a Feminist Life

SARA AHMED

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

**THIS ONE IS FOR YOU.**

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COVER ART: Carrie Moyer, *Chromafesto (Sister Resister 1.2)*, 2003, acrylic, glitter on canvas,  
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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> We had no Pakistani friends, but there was an occasional visit to Pakistan, and visits from Pakistani aunts. 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8</sup> 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 avail-

able 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.

## 2 / ON BEING DIRECTED

In chapter 1, I explored how becoming feminist puts us in touch with a world through alienation from a world. I want to build from this discussion of the sensational nature of feminism by developing an account of what I had begun to notice through feminism: how power works as a mode of directionality, a way of orientating bodies in particular ways, so they are facing a certain way, heading toward a future that is given a face. As you become aware of how the social world is organized, norms appear as palpable things. I think of those times, say, when you walk into a toy shop and it is striking. You might pick up the vacuum cleaner, a toy vacuum cleaner, and feel like you are holding the future for girls in a tangible thing. You can pick up a toy gun, and also feel this: the future for boys held as a tangible thing.

Norms become striking: holdable as palpable things.<sup>1</sup> Once we are stricken, there is still much work left to do. The hardest work can be recognizing how one's own life is shaped by norms in ways that we did not realize, in ways that cannot simply be transcended. A norm is also a way of living, a way of connecting with others over or around something. We cannot "not" live in relation to norms. In this chapter, I thus explore how feminism can be experienced as life alienation, how we can become estranged from the lives we are living in the very process of recognizing how our lives have been shaped or have taken shape. This analysis of power as directionality will enable me to introduce the feminist killjoy in another way.