FEMINIST HURT/ FEMINISM HURTS¹

SARA AHMED

In my last post, I explored the question of fragility (Ahmed, 2014e). Behind my exploration was a reposing of the question of response and responsibility: how can we respond to the histories that leave some bodies, some relationships, more fragile than others? How can we face up to those histories of losing face?

We can be shattered by what we come up against.
And then we come up against it again.
We can be exhausted by what we come up against.
And then we come up against it again.

The question of survival is a political as well as life question. Perhaps survival seems too modest a political ambition. Not for some. Not at all. Survival becomes a political craft for those who, as Audre Lorde describes, 'were never meant to survive' (Lorde, 1978: 32).

And: the histories that leave us fragile are often those that bring us to a feminist room. This is what I want to reflect on here. What are the implications for feminism that our points of entry are often sore points? How many of us became feminists because of experiences of violence? I cannot separate my feminist history from my experiences of violence. What a tangle. Messy.

Feminist work is often memory work. We work to remember what sometimes we wish would or could just recede. As I have been working on *Living A Feminist Life* (Ahmed, 2017), I have been remembering. It is not that memory work is necessarily about recalling what has been forgotten: rather

we gather memories like things, so they become more than half-glimpsed. We bring things into view. Feminist work is often about timing: sometimes we were too fragile to do this work; we would risk being shattered.

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 skirt. 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.

What do we do when these kind of things happen? Who do we become? I kept on going. I began jogging again, but I was transformed. I became much more nervous. Every time someone came up behind me, I was ready, tense, waiting. Self-modification: how in anticipation of violence we inhabit our bodies, worlds, differently.

So many of us have so many experiences like this: they seem to accumulate over time; they carry more and more weight. Sexism: being weighed down as well as worn down. 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 as fast as you can to get away as they shout and jeer; 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. I remember each of these experiences, and others, as if they happened yesterday: the sound of the voices, of 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 quite hum of a plane as I woke up. It is like my senses were magnified, during or after the events; a memory can preserve a feeling, you can feel it again. These experiences: what effects do they have? What do they do?

It feels wrong. You feel wrong. In feeling wrong something is wrong. In my paper 'Black feminism as life-line' (Ahmed, 2013a), I asked how we acquire the words for this something. In that paper, I also recalled another experience I had when I was walking close to home. Two policemen in a car pulled up next to me: one asked 'Are you Aboriginal?' The other one quipped, 'or is it just a sun tan.' It was an extremely 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 recognised as 'out of place', as the one who does not belong, whose proximity is registered as crime or threat.

The racialisation of the stranger is not immediately apparent, disguised we might say, by the strict anonymity of the stranger who after all, we are told from childhood, could be anyone. My stranger memory taught me that the 'could be anyone' points to some bodies more than others.

We learn how violence is directed; how the 'could be anyone' is someone. I think of feminist and anti-racist consciousness in terms of acquiring knowledge of *directedness*.

Let me share an example from Audre Lorde's autobiography, *Zami*:

Tensions on the street were high, as they always are in racially mixed zones of transition. As a very little girl, I remember shrinking from a particular sound, a hoarsely sharp, guttural rasp, because it often meant a nasty glob of grey spittle upon my coat or shoe an instant later. My mother wiped it off with the little pieces of newspaper she always carried in her purse. Sometimes she fussed about low-class people who had no better sense nor manners than to spit into the wind no matter where they went, impressing upon me that this humiliation was totally random. It never occurred to me to doubt her. It was not until years later once in conversation I said to her: 'Have you noticed people don't spit into the wind so much the way they used to?' And the look on my mother's face told me that I had blundered into one of those secret places of pain that must never be spoken of again. But it was so typical of my mother when I was young that if she couldn't stop white people spitting on her children because they were Black, she would insist it was something else. (Lorde, 1984: 17–18)

An event happens. And it happens again. The violence is directed from the white body to the black child, who receives that violence by shrinking, shrinking away from its sound. But the mother cannot bear to speak of racism, and creates an impression that the violence is random. Racism is a pain that is hard to bear. Consciousness of racism becomes retrospective, and the question of its timing does matter. You learn not to see racism as a way of bearing the pain. To see racism, you have to unsee the world as you learnt to see it, the world that covers unhappiness, by covering over its cause. You have to be willing to venture into secret places of pain.

Some forms of 'taking cover' from pain – from not naming the causes of pain in the hope that it will go away – are to protect those we love from being hurt, or even to protect ourselves from hurt, or are at least meant as a form of protection. *But to conceal the causes of hurt can make others the cause of their hurt.* Audre Lorde shows throughout her work that we should not be protected from what hurts. We have to work and struggle not so much to feel hurt, but to notice what causes hurt, which means unlearning what we have learnt not to notice. We have to do this work if we are to produce critical understandings of how violence, as a relation of force and harm, is directed toward some bodies and not others. In *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed,

2010a), in reflecting on Lorde's example, I suggested that we could follow Raymond Williams (1977) to explore 'structures of feeling', but also consider 'feelings of structure'; feelings might be how structures get under our skin.²

Structures are thus not independent of bodies; structures are about how violence gets directed towards some bodies and not others. As my example of the institutional brick wall from previous posts (Ahmed, 2014c; 2014d) showed, what some of us come up against, others do not experience. Structures can bruise some bodies whilst not appearing to affect others.

It matters how we think about feeling. Feelings are how structures become affective; how we are 'impressed upon' in our encounters with others; how we are impressed differently, affected differently, by what we come up against. And if the violences that leave us fragile are those that bring us to feminism, no wonder a feminist bond is itself fragile: an easily broken thread of connection. Perhaps we need an account of some of these breaking points (Ahmed, 2013b) by not assuming we know what breaks at these points.

Perhaps it is in teaching rooms or seminar rooms that we can think more of this fragility as a space that can occupied. I have been reading some of critiques of trigger warnings in the past six months relating primarily to the migration of this term from the feminist blogosphere into US classrooms. And there have been many critiques: my sense is that the rush to critique almost warrants the term 'moral panic'. I think this term 'moral panic' is warranted because of some of the inflationary logics in use. These critiques tend to inflate what is intended by trigger warnings (from a specific technique for dealing with PTSD to a more generalised culture of warnings about any or all potential harms) and they also take form as narratives of crisis: trigger warnings have been identified as causing the demise of academic freedom, as being anti-intellectual, as a symptom of neoliberalism, as evidence of narcissism – almost as a sign of the 'end of education' itself.

I will not engage with these critiques directly, nor will I address the question of trigger warnings in a full and systematic manner (trigger warnings are rather remote from the pedagogic scene in which I have been taught to teach).³ What has interested me is how these critiques have created a general impression: positing a hurt, traumatised or hypersensitive student against the rigorous demands of intellectual culture.

The figure of the too-easily-hurt student is familiar to anyone coming out of Women's Studies: indeed many of the charges against Women's Studies as anti-intellectual often rested on claims that in Women's Studies all we do is talk about hurt feelings. And I suspect there is a longer history at stake here, whereby feminism itself is understood as politically impoverished (and damaging to the left) because of its concern with individual consciousness and suffering. As Imogen Tyler explores in her important paper, 'The selfish feminist', much anti-feminist rhetoric in the 1970s and 1980s mobilised

a diagnosis of narcissism: 'One of the central arguments made by these accounts of cultural narcissism is that politics, mainstream and/or counter-cultural politics had degenerated into individual quests for self-awareness and self-realisation' (Tyler, 2007: 180).⁴ Whilst consciousness raising was about exploring how the personal is political, these anti-feminist critiques worked to reframe feeling as only and just personal. Feminism becomes a symptom of 'the me decade'.

This widely circulating figure of the too-easily-hurt student thus has a longer history, one that might also relate back to the figure of the feminist killjoy: the hurt of some gets in the way of the happiness of others.

Can we think about the politics of hurt differently? I have always taught courses on racism and colonialism, ever since I have taught. I thus bring difficult histories in the room, often difficulties that manifest as stuff (an image, a written document, a thing). I think asking ourselves how we do this is something we must always do. These histories are alive, they are not over. Racism and colonialism are the present we are in. So how we bring these histories into the room does matter. I remember one time, it was a rather difficult time, and I was about to show a film that was dealing very explicitly with histories of violence against black women. I was going to be talking about histories that persist. I stopped. I did not show it. Something about the occasion stopped me. Other times I have shown the film.

Stopping and starting; we hesitate; things splatter. I do not assume that I know what I am doing in what I am bringing or not bringing into the room. I hope to be willing to listen. If students find what I bring to the room makes it hard for them to be in the room, I want to find another way to bring things in, or at least to ask myself about different ways of bringing things in. This is a hope of course: I get things wrong, we all get things wrong. Things do shatter. The fragility of the pedagogic encounter is something I take for granted because the histories I bring up are or can be shattering for those in the room, for some more than others, for some in different ways than for others. And I too am in the room. I too can be shattered by what I bring with me. Can be, have been.

There were a couple of experiences I had early on that made me aware of what it means to bring histories that leave us fragile into the room. One time a student doing an undergraduate degree in English Literature and Women's Studies came to my room in tears. She said that a lecturer had shown a film that involved a graphic depiction of rape. When she had been upset by this, he had basically said to her that she was 'taking it literally' and that the rape was a metaphor. His assumption of the aestheticisation of rape allowed him to show and to keep showing a film with a structural indifference to the effects it might have for some students. *Hurt was dismissed as literalism*. The same year an MA student in Women's Studies came to my

room also visibly upset. A tutor on a feminist theory course had shown some images from nineteenth-century science depicting women's genitals. Apparently she had left these images in the middle of the table throughout the session, mostly uncommented upon. When a student complained about this at the end of the session, the tutor laughed. I did not hear more about this laughter but I learnt from the fact that it was possible to laugh.

The insistence on one's right to use certain kinds of materials *can* become a scathing indifference to how these materials affect others. Neither of these students was asking for the removal of these materials from the classroom. But perhaps their expression of hurt is already heard as censoring. And that's what is at stake here: how hurt is heard as wrong (you are wrong to be hurt) and as an imposition (Ahmed, 2014a). An imposition here is what is treated as alien (out of place) and, in the academic context, it is something that would get in the way of our freedom, of our freedom to show what we do, to do what we show. No wonder those who ask us to change how we introduce certain materials (as potentially causing harm) have become killjoys: those who get in the way. Hurt itself becomes framed as censoring: as requiring the removal of some offending thing.⁵ But actually the killjoy here is asking for more, not less: asking for us to complicate the materials; to situate the materials; to consider how materials can create ripples in how they move us: matter as motion, as deviation. Of course we cannot always anticipate how things affect somebody, but that does not mean we cannot learn about how things are affective by how others are affected. I might be thrown by how you are thrown.

Of course some public expressions of hurt can close spaces down. So too, of course, can public expressions of what some might call reason. It is collective work to keep spaces open especially when we are talking about histories that hurt. No wonder feminist spaces are tense, intense.⁶

Feminist hurt. We might say if hurt brings us to feminism, feminism can also hurt (from *feminist hurt* to *feminism hurts*). We might let ourselves be hurt all over again. When I teach, I teach about things that still hurt. I am willing this still. When I write, I stay close to the histories of violence. Sometimes I write with tears, in tears. I read the work that reminds me of this hurt: I read about racism, sexism, injury, injustice. These words become lifelines too, allowing me to live on by going on.

Hurt: still. We are moved because it hurts still.

We are not over it; it is not over.

The desire to get over suffering is of course an understandable desire, one that might express a longing to do more than describe social relations of force and harm. Rosi Braidotti suggests in her work on affirmative ethics that 'repugnant and unbearable events do happen' but then concludes that 'ethics consists however in reworking those events into positive relations' (Braidotti, 2006: 13). She argues that 'paradoxically, it is those who have

already cracked up a bit, those who have suffered pain and injury, who are better placed to take the lead in the process of ethical transformation' (2006: 14). Perhaps the relationship between leadership and suffering is only paradoxical if we assume that suffering is stifling. We learn from what Braidotti rightly points out: those who have been undone by suffering can be the agents of political transformation.

We might need to attend to bad feelings not in order to overcome them, but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings as a political as well as life resource.

I think what can be underestimated even within some feminist work is the difficulty of giving our attention to – and sustaining our attention on – certain forms of suffering. The desire to move beyond suffering in reconciliation, the very will to 'get over it' by asking others to 'get over it', means those who persist in being hurt become causes of general unhappiness. Their suffering becomes transformed into disappointment that we cannot simply put such histories behind us.

My exploration of the figure of the melancholic migrant in *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed, 2010a) was also about how some forms of hurt become understood as what stops us from just 'getting along'. The melancholic migrant is the one who is too attached to their own injury; who won't let go. And from the mobility of this figure, we can hear an injunction: let go! Just let go!

The scripts often imply more; they attach the problem of bad feeling to how those who are the problem understand that feeling. The melancholic migrant is the one who won't let go of the pain of racism by letting go of racism as a way of understanding that pain. It is as if the insistence on being hurt by racism is what stops racism from just 'going away'.

This is why I think the refusal to let go of an injury might require a certain willfulness. We might have to become stubborn just to hold on.

And I keep wanting to say: slow down. Listen.

Bad feelings are creative responses to histories that are unfinished. They are not the only responses. And we are not finished.

NOTES

- 1 This essay is reprinted with the kind permission of Sara Ahmed. Originally published as: S. Ahmed, 'Feminist Hurt/Feminism Hurts', *Feministkilljoys.com*, 21 July 2014, <http://feministkilljoys.com/2014/07/21/feminist-hurtfeminism-hurts/>.
- 2 Some recent anti-feminist writings (think vampire's castle, think 'the politics of denunciation') have implied feminism is problematic when it/we 'call out' individuals (because we need to focus on structures rather than individuals). My

arguments here are a refutation of these modes of analysis. Structures when imagined as 'without' individuals can be very easy places to be! You can do anything, and say: the structure did it! This is why 'institutional racism' can also be limited as a frame: if individuals tend to dis-identify from structures (especially structures of governance), then they do not see themselves as implicated in racism. The most extreme version of this argument I have read implies that women who are survivors of rape or assault should not name those who assaulted them because to name would be to individualise violence and to disrupt the possibility of working collectively. This example shows us what is at stake. The individual disappears at the moment he is called to account. Perhaps he then reappears as the one who can save the left from the moral demise caused by feminists amongst others. I will be returning to how individualism has historically been used as a charge against those who question existing social norms (such as the family) in future posts.

- 3 I do recognise that when a call, or even a demand, is transformed into a mandate, things change. But let's be clear: anything can become a technique to manage difference. In *On Being Included* (Ahmed, 2012), I explored how equality becomes part of audit culture: something that can be measured. It was tricky to make this critique. Equality becomes a political idea and ideal because of inequalities. Feminists amongst others have struggled against the institutionalisation of inequalities. And yet equality has become part of the bureaucracy, without question. It is important that we do not make equality into a symptom of bureaucracy. This would precisely negate or obscure our political work in challenging inequalities. And indeed, this negation and obscuration is evident in how some can dismiss equality as 'just another part of audit culture'. My research explored the consequences of the ease of this dismissal. Equality is treated as something imposed by management that radical academics (who tend to dis-identify from institutions) can thus ignore. As I explored in an earlier post (Ahmed, 2014b) feminism itself can be identified with the management/state, as those who are imposing social norms on otherwise free radicals. You can see here how important it is that critiques of how equality can become part of audit culture do not reduce equality to audit culture. I would suggest we need the same level of nuance in response to trigger warnings: if they can become a management technique we should not reduce them to a management technique. The reduction would be a failure to respond to, and be responsible for, other histories of struggle that are at stake in the very arrival of these terms, including struggles around disability.
- 4 One question I hope to explore is whether neoliberalism is now functioning in a similar way to narcissism: as a diagnostics (and dismissal) of the political struggles of feminists, anti-racists and queers as being 'just about' identity (rather than structure), as being 'all about me', and as thus causing the demise of the family, community, the left, and so on. I will return to this question in future posts.
- 5 In *The Promise of Happiness* (Ahmed, 2010a), I explored the figure of the easily offended Muslim. The Muslim who is offended is the one who would restrict our freedom of expression. This is how freedom of expression then becomes the freedom to be offensive. These political figures, by being charged with bad feeling, are doing something: they are enabling some freedoms to become re-assertions of the right to occupy space.
- 6 See the section 'feminist tables' in Ahmed (2010b) for further discussion.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, S. (2010a). *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2010b). 'Feminist killjoys (and other willful subjects)', *The Scholar and Feminist Online*, 8:3 (Summer), http://sfonline.barnard.edu/polyphonic/print_ahmed.htm (accessed 3 September 2018).
- Ahmed, S. (2012). *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2013a). 'Black feminism as a life-line', *Feministkilljoys.com* (27 August), <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/08/27/black-feminism-as-life-line/> (accessed 3 September 2018).
- Ahmed, S. (2013b). 'Breaking points', *Feministkilljoys.com* (8 December), <https://feministkilljoys.com/2013/12/08/breaking-points/> (accessed 3 September 2018).
- Ahmed, S. (2014a). 'Imposition', *Feministkilljoys.com* (14 April), <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/04/14/imposition/> (accessed 3 September 2018).
- Ahmed, S. (2014b). 'Problems with names', *Feministkilljoys.com* (25 April), <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/04/25/problems-with-names/> (accessed 3 September 2018).
- Ahmed, S. (2014c). 'Practical phenomenology', *Feministkilljoys.com* (4 June), <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/06/04/practical-phenomenology/> (accessed 3 September 2018).
- Ahmed, S. (2014d). 'Hard', *Feministkilljoys.com* (10 June), <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/06/10/hard/> (accessed 3 September 2018).
- Ahmed, S. (2014e). 'Fragility', *Feministkilljoys.com* (14 June), <https://feministkilljoys.com/2014/06/14/fragility/> (accessed 3 September 2018).
- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a Feminist Life*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Braidotti, R. (2006). *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Lorde, A. (1978). *Black Unicorn*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Lorde, A. (1984). *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. London: Sheba Feminist Publishers.
- Tyler, I. (2007). 'The selfish feminist', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 22:53, pp. 173–90.
- Williams, R. (1977). *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks.