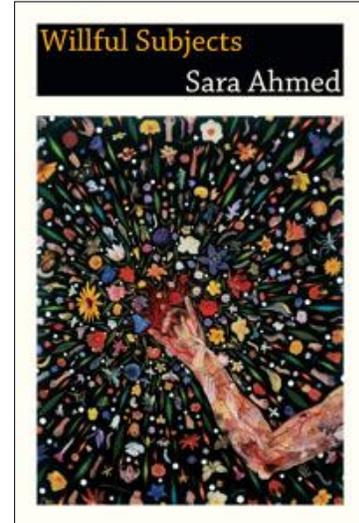


Sara Ahmed, **Willful Subjects**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014, 320 pp., \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Ayanna Serenity Dozier,
McGill University, Canada



Who Among Us Is Willful? Structure

The costs of being willful are high, even deadly. **Willful Subjects**, by Sara Ahmed, gives a queer cultural studies critique on the philosophical concept of the will. Ahmed opens the book with a short tale by the Grimm brothers titled the “The Willful Child.” The willful child is young girl whose willfulness is articulated by her idiosyncratic actions, “her arms outstretched,” and through her disobedience. Her willfulness is so displeasing that the “authority”—what Ahmed calls the “chain of command,” that is, God, the doctors, and the child’s mother—could not correct her behavior. The child’s willfulness is only treatable through death, but even then “her outstretched arm” (p. 1) would not cease to rise from the grave, and it is finally subdued only by her mother with a rod. By opening *Willful Subjects* with this tale, Ahmed not just casts admiration for the willful child, but asserts that “to be identified as willful, is to become a problem” (p. 3) that needs to be straightened out.

A philosophical book written for those who do not practice philosophy, Ahmed has described *Willful Subjects* as the second book of a queer trilogy that includes *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *What’s the Use*, which is a manuscript in preparation. *Willful Subjects*, as part of this queer trilogy, traces subjects who fail to live their life on the conditions of others, specifically heteronormative constructions of subjectivity. Like *The Promise of Happiness*, the feminist killjoy becomes a “kin of kin” of the willful subject who is “unwilling to participate” and who is often deemed assertive because of the unwillingness to “be with” others. The figure of the willful subject, and by extension that of the feminist killjoy, is assertive and willful because their existence “is willful work for those whose being is not only not supported by the general body, but deemed a threat to that body” (p. 160).

Willful Subjects, then, in part assembles a willfulness archive that is composed of characters and individuals from philosophical texts, fairy tales, and literature whose willful behavior reveals the unhappiness of their situations. In establishing a willfulness archive, Ahmed shows the shared historical itinerary between willfulness and unhappiness and provides a counter, embodied, and “more affective political history” (p. 175) of willfulness. This archive informs willful subjects of an alternative history to subjectivity that is informed by resistance of the “outstretched arm,” for “following willfulness around is one way we can move toward a more impulsive, less intentional model of subjectivity” (p. 175).

To get at this, Ahmed critiques Western philosophy’s conception of will through her philosophical project of *not philosophy*. *Not philosophy* “is practiced by those who are not philosophers and aims to

create room within philosophy for others who are not philosophers" (p. 15). Following this conception, the first three chapters offer an overview and critique of Western philosophy's construction and argument of the will. The latter two chapters, including the conclusion, offer a perspective on how willful subjects can be informed by this willfulness archive of unhappiness that amasses the stories of individuals who have conceived themselves against the philosophical "chain of command" of the conditional will of others. The intended audience for this book is quite broad, but scholars of queer studies, critical theory, feminist studies, philosophy, cultural studies, and the like will find this book of interest.

The Will to Will: Chapters

Chapter 1, "Willing Subjects," draws on phenomenology and philosophy to consider willing as a way individuals experience inhabiting a world with others. Through a detailed analysis of Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886/1997), Ahmed argues that willing "becomes described in terms of bodily sensations as well as orientations" (p. 26). Nietzsche critiques will as a causality of error, willing behavior potentially reveals a "body in action" as the body obeys the command of the will "towards and from objects," which can affect the limbs of the body as they "might be assumed to be lagging behind, obeying a command given by a will" (p. 26). Thus, the willing subject is always behind or ahead of itself, and is at variance with itself: "The price of Will's omnipotence—self variation—could be retheorized as an escape valve, a way of not carrying out what has been given as a command" (p. 29).

Ahmed's most convincing theoretical argument in *Willful Subjects* focuses on memory, temporality, and embodiment in relation to willfulness. The willing subject's self-variance invoke, not only a body in action but also a body that obeys memory in conjuring the remembrance of "situations in which willing seemed necessary" (p. 31). She writes, "If the will makes itself into an object, the object is not present: if the will is willing itself, then the will is bringing something into existence that does not yet exist, which includes in some way 'the will' itself" (pp. 31–32). Here, Ahmed fleshes out the speculative imagination that plays into the will. Willing acts on the desire of the will; such behavior is what presents the will at variance with the body as it conjures up behavior not yet present and sets it apart from others who "will with." If the causality of will is the creation of bodies that lag behind, then these bodies are driven by their memories or the archive of willfulness.

Ahmed further establishes will as a fluid entity that produces subjects of the wrong bent in chapter 2, "The Good Will." In this chapter, Ahmed examines the role pedagogy plays in teaching individuals the way of the "good will." The good will is always conditional based on the will to "will with others" (p. 53). In thinking of this book as part of a queer trilogy, the reader may be able to see how the condition of willing with others follows a similar point of concern found in *The Promise of Happiness*, where happiness is posited as being conditional based on the happiness of others. Furthermore, Ahmed makes a convincing connection between queer subjects and willfulness in relationship to disciplinary rhetoric against the will found in educational "poisonous pedagogy" (p. 62) that is deployed as a means of "straightening" queerness. She describes the willful child as the child that is of the wrong bent, physically and mentally driven astray by their (impulsive) willful desires: "Eliminating willfulness could be understood as a method of negation: a way of stopping a certain kind of subject from coming into existence . . . a perversion of the right path of the will" (p. 68). Educating children in the good will will usher a specific

subject into existence as an intentional, nonperverted, nonimpulsive, straight subject. The goal of education is thus to “break the will” (p. 66), so that willfulness would not occur in the subject as it ages—to produce a straight will that wills with other straight objects.

Chapter 3, “The General Will,” turns to an analysis of prosthetics as practice and technology, a regime of bodily straightening that reproduces “ableist” and heteronormative modes of subjectivity. Using prosthetics as an example, Ahmed cites how the prosthetic was discussed as a device used to “correct the body” (p. 109), to restore it to its functional capacity of a laboring body. Willfulness in the context of the laboring body is not that of not working with, or refusing to be “restored” to a functional capacity. Willfulness is not making your hands handy. It is crucial to note that Ahmed’s use of nonabled bodies and limbs should not be misconstrued as opposing prosthesis, but rather as a way of revealing the ableist language used in support of prosthesis in the 19th century. The arm is a tool, and the tool cannot function if it refuses to fall in line. Ahmed uses this analysis to make a key, yet brief, connection to the limbs—and purposes they serve—that the colonizer extract from the body of the colonized. This pivotal connection demonstrates how the colonizer, as a tool of the state, utilizes the limbs and labor of the colonized to produce the general will.

With Arms Outstretched: Conclusion

In the last two chapters—chapter 4, “Willfulness as a Style of Politics,” and the conclusion, “A Call to Arms”—Ahmed centers the willful subjects that were the basis of the willfulness archive amassed in the first three chapters. In “Willfulness as a Style of Politics,” Ahmed builds on her previous work to situate that our “traditional” approach to philosophy needs to be reexamined and challenged. It is here that she turns to the work of Black feminist thought as a counterargument. She describes the thought and practices of Black radicalism as “charged with willfulness” (p. 142), composed of agents whose bodies lag behind and who refuse to budge. Thus, Black feminist thought or that of the Black radical tradition—through its centering on embodiment, lived experience, and intersectionality—functions as the antithesis to traditional white cis male philosophical thought. In this way, Black radicalism is conceptually treated as a deferral as oppose to a detailed ongoing critique and engagement with the concept and condition of the will. While Ahmed is strategic to work through willful subjects using a rigorous critique of philosophy—that is her practice of *not philosophy*—it bears noting that Black (feminist) thought is often sidelined as a “cure” and is rarely taken into equal consideration of evaluation as the problem is. Thus, I must ask what would a Black feminist engagement of the will and its histories look like?

The lack of depth to colonialism and the scholarship of critical race, more specifically Black feminist theory, is a missed opportunity. Although Ahmed does make a useful analogy between scholars who do “Diversity Work as Willful Work” (p. 143), the individuals and the histories that inform their work, like colonialism, could have been more thoroughly incorporated in the book. For the figure of the willful subject, in Ahmed’s argument, is not just a figure who presents a threat to the general body, the progressive body, but to how we pursue time itself. Ahmed’s goal of creating a willfulness archive situates the act of remembrance as a key instigator for willful behavior. In being driven by our will, willful subjects are guided by their memories and add to the archive of willful behavior. Ahmed’s turn to Black radicalism as an occupier of the willfulness archive reveals the tangible, not fictional, stakes that are involved when

"willfulness might be required to act when you do not have the right to act" (p. 142). Their bodies, lives, and histories remind the reader of just how high the cost of willfulness is. Understanding the conditions and demands—that is, to include a detailed discussion of colonialism and the technologies of racialization—as to why a willfulness archive needs to exist is critical for not just *Willful Subjects*, but for subjects who are willful. To conclude, "A memory of will might be not only how the will persists as an idea (as an idea of persistence) but also how the will is charged with affective value: in remembering willing, we might also be remembering situations in which willing seemed necessary" (p. 31).

References

Ahmed, S. (2010). *The promise of happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Nietzsche, F. (1997). *Beyond good and evil* (Helen Zimmern, trans.). New York, NY: Dover. (Original work published 1886)