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**Title:**

Not Getting Over It: The Impact of Sara Ahmed's Work within Critical University Studies

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**Abstract:**

This forum-style paper presents contributions by scholars from the area of Critical University Studies (CUS). It articulates the ways that particular concepts from Sara Ahmed's scholarship have influenced or been useful in CUS. Across her scholarship, Ahmed offers intersectional perspectives on exclusionary practices and structures that many within CUS have drawn upon. The contributors to this paper hail from and research across a diverse range of fields that include cultural studies, queer studies, education, critical race studies, and organisational studies.

**Keywords:** Critical University Studies, conferences, racialisation, shame, intersectionality, gender studies, queer studies, academia, critical race studies.

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## **Not Getting Over It: The Impact of Sara Ahmed's Work within Critical University Studies**

**Tseen Khoo\*, James Burford, Emily Henderson, Helena Liu, and Z Nicolazzo**

### **Introduction**

This forum-style paper marks the contribution of Sara Ahmed's work to the interdisciplinary, international field of Critical University Studies (CUS). Across many of her works – most specifically *On Being Included* (2012) and her ongoing blog *Feminist Killjoys* – Ahmed grounds her critique within the university, using it as a context from which to theorise queerness, race, feminism, and inequality. Across her scholarship, Ahmed offers intersectional perspectives on exclusionary practices and structures that many within CUS - a field often characterised as taking an activist positioning against neoliberalisation, managerialism, and the proliferation of audit cultures in higher education - have drawn upon.

CUS takes on varying emphases across different country contexts. Announcing the 'birth' of Critical University Studies, US scholar Jeffrey J. Williams (Williams 2012) ties it to a renewed focus on academic capitalism and academic labour among work done by literary and cultural critics, as well as educationalists, legal scholars, sociologists and labour researchers. In contrast, Liz Morrish, an independent CUS scholar based in the UK, describes CUS as having roots in Critical Management Studies with a focus on the 'critique of power, control and inequality in universities' (Morrish 2018). The UK's University and College Union strikes in 2018/19, driven by changes to the universities' superannuation scheme and the general deterioration of academic working conditions, proved to be a flashpoint for CUS activity.

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In our reading across CUS scholarship, we note the extent of Ahmed's influence. We have observed that Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life* (Ahmed 2017) and posts from her *Feminist Killjoys* blog (for example, Ahmed 2016) are frequently cited across collections of feminist CUS work (for example, Crimmins 2019). Liz Morrish draws upon Ahmed's concept of 'feminist snap' (Ahmed 2017) in order to theorise her resignation from an academic role in response to disciplinary proceedings that were taken against her because of her writing and teaching about the effects of growing neoliberalisation in higher education (Morrish 2020), and The Res-Sisters, a collective of nine early career feminist academics based in the UK, take up Ahmed's thinking about institutional 'brick walls', the position of the 'feminist killjoy', and the importance of self-care for feminists of colour as they consider strategies for challenging inequities within the neoliberal academy (Res-Sisters 2019). *On Being Included* (2012) is also commonly cited, such as in Stein's work on the 'conditional inclusion' of indigeneity in higher education institutions in settler colonial contexts (Stein 2020), and in Rohrer's and Stern and Carey's work on the institutionalisation of the interdisciplines and the need to confront neoliberalism (Rohrer 2018; Stern and Carey 2020). In Australia, a recent special issue of *Australian Universities Review* focused on activism in the academy and sought to 'recuperate a sense of purpose for universities as activist institutions for a difficult world' (K. Bowles, Bosanquet, and Luzia 2017: 3), and scholars in that issue drew on Ahmed's politics of emotions work (Harré et al. 2017; Burford 2017).

The global pandemic moment we are all writing in generates a set of particular anxieties for this field, given the significant impact of COVID-19 on universities around the world, and across the English-speaking higher education sector more specifically (Witze 2020). Alongside the documented tensions and pressures in academic life brought about by

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increasing university corporatisation and performance metricisation, universities face significant attrition in potential student numbers (and income) and many are making consequent cuts in their staffing. It is a fraught time for many academics, one where critique is ever more essential *and* risky. Sara Ahmed's rich oeuvre provides a range of conceptual tools to aid and further CUS' critique of higher education, as the contributions in this Forum demonstrate.

The authors for this paper are located in the United Kingdom, the USA, and Australia, and bring with them the specific demands and priorities of their institutional and national contexts. Each contribution presents a facet of influence that Ahmed's work has had within our broad endeavours in CUS. Burford and Henderson track Ahmed's engagement with the liminal spaces of academic conferences, Khoo interrogates feelings of indebtedness around participation in a leadership in diversity initiative, Liu discusses how some scholars use Ahmed as 'an ornamental fixture', and Nicolazzo presents a critical vignette and commentary focused on shame and the concept of the 'gender confession'.

## **Looking Askance at Universities: Tracing Conferences through the Work of Sara**

**Ahmed**

**Emily F. Henderson and James Burford**

A major contribution of CUS is its critical bent toward denaturalising the institutional processes which seem to inhere to universities and the world surrounding them (Morrish and Sauntson 2019). CUS encourages university inhabitants to *look askance* at these structures, and to query why they endure, how they came to take their current form, and whom they serve (for example, Petersen 2020). Sara Ahmed's important oeuvre includes many such

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manoeuvres of looking askance, both in terms of critiquing university processes and taking up a critical position in relation to a wide range of social and cultural phenomena. In this piece, we look askance at the university via Ahmed's work, while also looking athwart (across, in an oblique direction) Ahmed's work. This is a classic Ahmed manoeuvre: to follow an idea to see where it takes us.

Our first move is to explore academic conferences as a means of looking askance at the university. Conferences are events which open up questions about the borders between the personal and impersonal, proximity and distance, connection and disconnection, being there and not being there, as Ahmed explores in the final chapter of *Strange Encounters* (2000). They are also liminal, extra-institutional spaces which are both of and beyond the university (Henderson 2015); analysing conferences as a vantage point from which to critique the university is an oblique move of the type exemplified in *Queer Phenomenology* (Ahmed 2006). Conferences are spaces where academic structures are reproduced and even exaggerated, and they are important spaces for knowledge fields that are marginalised in university departments (Bowles 2002; Krishna 2007). This introduces our second move: to look at Ahmed's work by tracking representations of academic conferences across her books. For conferences arise throughout this oeuvre, and Ahmed uses them to illustrate distinctive moments in the enactment of academic knowledge production. Importantly, the conferences that appear are not always mainstream disciplinary conferences. Instead, they are often spaces convened with the express intention of addressing social justice. These conferences (for example, feminist or sexuality studies conferences), however, are shown to be highly exclusionary spaces (Pereira 2017). Following conferences around in Ahmed's work, we explore how conferences feature in her critique of academia, and what can be taken from this for wider applications of CUS.

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Looking across representations of conferences in Ahmed's works, it is apparent that a different type of discourse is being surfaced to the dominant ones deployed to construct the in/significance of academic conferences. These dominant discourses are the 'conference fatigue' and the 'defining moment' framings (Henderson 2020). The 'conference fatigue' discourse serves to diminish the importance of conferences, portraying them as boring and/or wasteful. The 'defining moment' framing, on the other hand, sets up particular conferences as turning points in a field or discipline. These discourses are mutually exclusive in a way that can foreclose nuanced analysis. Moreover, the discourses are also marked by power, in that those most likely to evoke the 'conference fatigue' discourse are those most able to access conference spaces for financial and visa reasons; those who evoke defining moments discourses have also been privileged enough to gain entry to important conferences for their field. Ahmed's representations of conferences exceed these two discourses. Her conference moments, or perhaps we could call them strange encounters (Ahmed 2000), tend to evoke micro-level interactions – a single conversation, an arrival into a room, an email sent. Rather than remaining at the micro-level, Ahmed explores the significance of such examples for looking askance at academic processes and practices. This is both distinctive of Ahmed's work in the style of analysis, as well as resonant with the legacy of generations of feminist and gender scholarship, where conference moments are frequently evoked as illustrations of power-play in the academy (Lorde 1984; Stryker 2006). Arguably, Ahmed's mobilisation of conference incidents in her analysis of academia creates a new kind of 'defining moment' – where what seems to be a minor exchange, a momentary occurrence, takes on an elevated significance when held up for examination. Indeed, some of these incidents appear in two or more of Ahmed's texts, perhaps acting as nodes in her cumulative theorisation of the

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academy. The airing and repetition of such key incidents also works to validate such experiences of delegitimisation.

Ahmed's conference moments most often refer to the whiteness of conferences – and the ways in which unmarked conference spaces (in Global North academia, one assumes) are unmarked *as white*. For example, the same conference anecdote is shared in both *Queering Phenomenology* (2006) and *On Being Included* (2012). In this account, conferences emerge as spaces that 'acquire the "skin" of the bodies that inhabit them' (Ahmed 2006: 132). As Ahmed argues, public spaces are shaped via their orientations to some bodies more so than others. Ahmed reflects on the whiteness of institutions, where 'white bodies gather and cohere to form the edges of such spaces' (Ahmed 2006: 132), sometimes forming a 'sea of whiteness' (Ahmed 2006: 133). She describes a conference she helped to organise where 'four black feminists all happened to walk into the room at the same time' (Ahmed 2006: 132). As Ahmed argues, the fact that such arrivals are noticed reveals more about what is already in the space than who is arriving to it. Sometimes, such arrivals prompt recognition of who was not there before: 'a retrospective reoccupation of a space that I already inhabited' (Ahmed 2006: 133). Conferences emerge as sites where whiteness remains invisible (for those who inhabit it, or are used to its inhabitance) and as spaces that are oriented around whiteness: 'we do not face whiteness; it "trails behind" bodies as what is assumed to be given' (Ahmed 2006: 133). In both *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) and *On Being Included* (2012), conference moments also relate to the practice of challenging conference organisers about the lack of diversity among invited speakers, particularly in terms of women and/or people of colour. Gathering these incidents together, it becomes clear that CUS ought to look askance at the university through conferences, reflecting on the critical questions they raise about the politics of representation in academia.

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The overwhelming whiteness of conferences is also revealed when exceptions occur.

In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), Ahmed describes being at a conference convened by the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association in 2007: 'it was the first time I had been to a conference in Australia as a person of color from Australia where I felt at home' (Ahmed 2010: 20). In *On Being Included*, Ahmed describes the 'sea of brownness' that she encountered attending policy events on equality and diversity:

when you inhabit a sea of brownness as a person of color, you might realize the effort of your previous inhabitation, the effort of not noticing what is around you. It is like how you can feel the 'weight' of tiredness most acutely as the tiredness leaves you (Ahmed 2012: 36)

Academic gatherings are extremely important for establishing belonging in academia, as we and others have argued elsewhere (Henderson and Burford 2020; Kuzhabekova and Temerbayeva 2018). Ahmed's analyses of the dominance of whiteness at conferences shows how moments of embodied recognition and/or isolation figure in the ongoing process of developing a sense of un/belonging in the academy (Rassool 1995).

Inspired by Ahmed's tendency to proceed obliquely, in this short piece we have tugged CUS inquiries in the direction of conferences. Perhaps, given the liminal status of conferences, this is an unexpected location for CUS inquiry to travel. In their re/surfacing across Ahmed's oeuvre, conferences emerge as critical incidents which illustrate her cumulative theorisation of academic de/legitimation. For Ahmed, conferences matter because '[w]hen bodies gather, it creates an impression. We can think of the "convene" in convention. A convention is a meeting point, a point around' (Ahmed 2012: 37). Ahmed's own work is also an important point around which so much CUS work is shaped. Her writing calls CUS researchers to look askance at the ideas and practices that adhere to universities

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and the extra-institutional spaces that emerge around them, giving us tools to imagine  
academia anew.

## **Caught in Indebtedness**

**Tseen Khoo**

To speak about racism is to labor over sore points.

(Ahmed 2012: 171)

Diversity and inclusion continue to be widely promoted and benchmarked elements in higher education, whether the 'diversity' in question is among cohorts of students or staff, or strives to focus on socioeconomic contexts, gender, culture, or race. Many researchers have discussed the limited and sometimes contradictory nature of these kinds of diversity initiatives (for example, Aguirre 2010; Jones and Calafell 2012), and how universities are often only shallowly committed to addressing inequity in the academy – what Ahmed describes as the 'tick-box approach' (Ahmed 2012: 106). Despite decades of critical work that challenges the efficacy of these programs, they continue to proliferate as part of organisational development portfolios, especially in the area of leadership. Recent critical analyses of human resource development (for example, Hutchins and Kovach 2019) remain caught in the contradictory logic of aligning with existing organisational cultures while advocating for institutional changes with a social justice agenda.

In terms of diversity and inclusion, the focus in Australian university workforce initiatives has been mostly on gender equity initiatives and Indigenous inclusion and

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recruitment programs, with an emerging focus on culture or ethnic diversity (Oishi 2017).

The advent of the SAGE Athena Swan program (which is an adapted version of the UK's Athena Swan charter) in 2015 brought another set of badges that institutions could apply for to signal their commitment to issues of gender equity and diversity in the areas of STEMM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine). My institution chose to extend this adapted program to all disciplines and created a leadership program that sought to develop future university leaders using the 'gender diversity' lens.

My contribution to this forum-style paper is a reflection on my experiences with this leadership program. While necessarily critical, this section is less about dwelling on a particular program's flaws and more on the effects of participating in such a program (which proliferate across Australian universities), and thinking through how I was encouraged to feel 'indebted' to the university. Ahmed describes the concept of how '[d]iversity becomes debt' (Ahmed 2012: 153) through the expectations placed on diversified, minoritised subjects to be grateful for institutional equity commitments, evoking a prescribed, conditional position for inclusion – one that is marked by passivity. Ahmed articulates similar effects when discussing the discourses of multiculturalism and nationhood, noting that it is the '[d]ifferences that can be consumed are the ones that are valued' (Ahmed 2000: 131); some strangers are more palatable than others.

I first encountered the program in which I participated through a general institutional call for applications in 2018. Its remit was to empower individuals to build their capacity to undertake leadership roles at the university. This inaugural program, managed through an organisational development unit, ran through ten months of 2019 with a university-wide cohort that included academic and professional staff. I applied to participate as I was well aware of the underrepresentation of minoritised academics in leadership roles, particularly

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Asian Australians. Knowing that universities and their leaders can enact a number of white supremacist discourses in their everyday activities (Helena Liu and Pechenkina 2016), I did not approach the opportunity with high expectations. I was ambivalent about leadership programs as projects that 'measured and evaluated in relation to [white] male norms of the ideal academic and understandings of participation, and achievement' (Lipton 2017: 495). In addition, the program in question depended heavily on external management consultants in its conceptualisation and delivery, a fact that only increased the likelihood that the course would be a highly corporatised endeavour.

As the first iteration of an avowedly 'transformational' staff development course, issues were perhaps to be expected. These issues, however, proved to be stark examples of the socio-political and material debt we, as the ones to be developed, were made to feel we owed the institution. I speak to three of these instances for this section.

The first instance of feeling this indebtedness arose when participants expressed frustration at not having the opportunity to know more about their colleagues in the program. This was an issue because we did not feel that a safe space for sharing could be created if we did not know who each other was and what kinds of motivations were in play. Learning more about our colleagues meant we found out that some participants had been directly approached to participate while others – like me – had applied to be part of the program. This meant that I felt 'allowed in' and granted a privilege from the start, which gave rise to feelings of being already obligated.

The second instance involved speaking out at the lack of intersectional awareness and language when discussing issues of representation and institutional leadership. A colleague had already spoken up several times during the program to signal the hostility of an environment that referenced gender constantly as a binary. When I brought attention to the

need for intersectional work in the program, its foundational assumptions, and the Whiteness of its reference points, I felt that the facilitator's response was a form of what Ahmed referred to as 'overing' (Ahmed 2012: 179). I thought that the facilitator, having felt they had 'dealt with' my colleague's critique, considered my subsequent criticism an also-ran because it referenced the same problematic elements of the program, with a different lens. Ahmed writes that '[w]e are even heard as the ones who are oppressive, in our influence or existence, because we point out the existence of oppression' (Ahmed 2012: 179). My 'ungratefulness' in suggesting the program needed to be more inclusive in a holistic sense – not just along certain axes of familiar identity politics – led to a subsequent carefulness with my participation that made me uneasy.

The third instance occurred during a major re-focus for the program, when the facilitators received negative feedback from the cohort on a range of issues and brought us together in smaller focus groups. Instead of these sessions seeking to recalibrate the program, I soon realised that they were, in part, to recalibrate the participants. For me, this meant having a section of my application read back to me by one of the facilitators, an act that I interpreted as re-emphasising the boundaries of program inclusion and putting the weight of expectation back on me to be a good participant. To paraphrase Ahmed (2000: 127), this act by the institutional facilitator sought to define the limits of the diversity program's hospitality.

I recount these instances to demonstrate the power that these institutional scripts had in confounding my attempts to be a program participant, albeit an ambivalent one. Blackmore argues that '[g]reater diversity in, and of, leadership requires not just changing aspirants to 'fit' the academy, but rethinking how equity can inform a more transformative role for the university' (Blackmore 2014: 95-96). In rethinking how we might work towards diversity in

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leadership in academia, we need to look beyond the always-already fraught diversity and inclusion programs that are managed by units that propagate institutional values. Ahmed, even as she calls for us to 'be the cause of obstruction' (Ahmed 2012: 187), confirms the constancy of institutional cooptation and our universities' generation of ongoing structural inequities. For me, then, working in the areas of activism and the academy within CUS, making space for the work and myself requires 'not so much... "heroic resistance" as... quotidian refusals and acceptances' (Grant 2019: 132). In this resistance, however, we must remember Ahmed's observation that:

What we become to withstand can become something that hardens us from others, those who might be closest, who might too have to survive the weather. We can damage each other in how we survive being damaged. (Ahmed 2014b: 190)

The challenge remains, then, to be open to and active in finding solidarity in the institution, even as the institution's boundaries constrict and marginalise minoritised subjects.

## **Surviving Whitewashing in the Academy**

**Helena Liu**

For those of us who live at the shoreline  
standing upon the constant edges of decision  
crucial and alone  
for those of us who cannot indulge  
the passing dreams of choice  
who love in doorways coming and going

in the hours between dawns

(Lorde 1978: 31)

In her blog, *Feminist Killjoys*, Ahmed invokes these seven lines in Audre Lorde's 'A litany of survival' (Ahmed 2018). The poem speaks to the struggles of 'those of us' marginalised in the white heteropatriarchal world as Lorde recognises herself and the other beleaguered queer Black and Brown bodies living at the edges and loving in the doorways (Lorde 1978: 31); those of us who were 'never meant to survive' (Lorde 1978: 31).

In her own litanies of survival, Ahmed has railed against the institutional problem of whiteness and its attendant racism that attacks the Black and Brown Other. Her writings pay homage to the rich lineage of women of colour thinkers, activists, and artists before her: Lorde, Mohanty, Alexander, hooks, Davis, Anzaldúa, Mirza. She acknowledges the Black feminists and feminists of colour scholar-activists whose in-roads into the academy gave us 'paths to follow' (Ahmed 2018; Dar et al. 2020). Ahmed recalls academic life in Australia and the United Kingdom, the world she eventually left behind, as a turbulent 'sea of whiteness' (Ahmed 2012: 35). The racialised body in this world is subjected to intense and persistent white violence through which we must fight to survive (Fujiwara and Roshanravan 2018; Gabriel and Tate 2017; Johnson, Joseph-Salisbury, and Kamunge 2018; Mukandi and Bond 2019; Stockdill and Danico 2012).

Ahmed describes how, as women of colour, we cannot always afford to name these violences (Ahmed 2018); that, when we do, we are often heard as being aggressive and divisive (Griffin 2012; H Liu 2019; Srivastava 2006). Yet over time the racism wears us down and 'not challenging what undermines your existence can undermine your existence' (Ahmed 2018). More valuably, Ahmed's extraordinary body of work surfaces possibilities to

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take up space in a world not made for us, where some bodies are stranger than others (Ahmed  
2000: Chapter 2) — the possibilities for our survival.

Despite Ahmed's unambiguous struggles for anti-racism, her interventions are  
habitually whitewashed in the academy. The 'feminist' life she exhorts us to live is  
stubbornly read as white; her poetic words appropriated into quotable affirmations for white  
(cis-gender heterosexual middle-class able-bodied) feminism.

In this regard, Ahmed joins a long line of radical women of colour who find their  
words co-opted into 'totemic symbols' (Mohanty 2013: 980) within writings that in the same  
breath perpetuate white racial violence. Reading articles in feminist organisation studies and  
diversity studies, she is cited but not used, reduced to ornamental fixtures in white  
scholarship. As a reviewer, I have challenged the use of racist stereotypes in manuscripts only  
to have the authors assure me that they could not possibly reproduce whiteness because they  
are 'big fans' of Ahmed. Citing Ahmed then becomes performative allyship (Saad 2020), a  
quick show of diversity by casting a triple minority as a supporting character. Ahmed herself  
has reflected on her model minoritisation in white spaces:

How easily we can become poster children for diversity, how easily we can be 'held  
up' as proof that women of colour are not 'held up'. Being a diversity poster child: it  
can make the world you come up against recede as if you bring it to an end; as if our  
arrival and progression makes whiteness disappear. ... When black feminists or  
feminists of colour write books, when we introduce terms and concepts, how quickly  
our work is separated from our bodies. ... But then the words, concepts become  
neutralised and appropriated; re-worded into other people's stories, domesticated,  
funded, and you feel angry and sad: all over again. (Ahmed 2014a)

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The model minority myth designates certain people of colour, notably Asians, as so-called 'good' examples who prove that a minority group can overcome structural oppression to be professionally successful and materially prosperous (Chae 2004; Yeh 2014). The goal of this myth is to fracture cross-racial coalitions between communities of colour; dangling the illusory promise of inclusion to middle-class Asians while undermining the sustained challenges against white capitalist institutions from Black and Latino groups (Roshanravan 2010).

Ahmed's prominence and prestige as a woman of colour scholar are upheld as proof that racism does not exist in academia. All while her anti-racist critiques — and those of other Black, Indigenous, and women of colour — are domesticated by the white academy (H Liu 2018). In citing Ahmed, self-professed 'fans' of Ahmed perpetuate white spaces and white knowledges that marginalise women of colour while deflecting racial critique.

Whitewashing is to 'wash away' the undesired markings of racial politics (Reitman 2006). Within the prevailing racial logics of the academy, whiteness represents intellectual, social, and moral superiority. So, when Ahmed writes about how leaving the 'sea of whiteness' (Ahmed 2012: 35) of academia allows her to let go of the "weight" of tiredness' (Ahmed 2012: 36) and find lightness, joy, and humour in spaces of colour, this politics of refusal is too threatening to white power (Dar et al. 2020). Rather than rejecting Ahmed altogether, her name is used, but her Brownness (and queerness) are washed away so that she may blend in with the institutionalised whiteness of our discipline.

As a woman of colour, Ahmed's work is then often introduced to us through whiteness, a case of when "the stranger" becomes "the truth" insofar as it exists to confirm the ability of the [White] Western self to find the truth' (Ahmed 2000: 148). 'Have you heard of Sara Ahmed? You'd love her!' This laboured pronouncement from white scholars can feel

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like another violence. It is as though we, as women of colour, are seen as one and the same.

Professing their love for Ahmed is as though they are professing love to me, all while closing the door of academia in my face.

In the conclusion of *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed offers a hopeful sentiment: 'when willfulness has priority, we can and do wander away from the subject of will, and by wandering away, *we take her with us*' (Ahmed 2014b: 173, emphasis in original). Ahmed's words remind us that we do not need to remain in place in the sea of whiteness, waiting to be washed away. We can abandon our duty to carry whiteness, to absolve white shame, and soothe white tears. We can be wilfully anti-racist, wilfully queer, wilfully feminist. As women of colour, we can choose our survival. We can wander away from the white academy, and we can take Ahmed in all her beautiful radical Brownness and queerness, with us.

## **Gender as Confession**

### **Z Nicolazzo**

*There was a moment a couple years ago when a faculty member approached me at a social gathering. She was a tenured nontrans Latina, and I was a pre-tenure white trans girl, still trying to get my bearings in a new job after having just moved a few months prior. I remember her lipstick (a deep maroon befitting the evening event), which framed her smile as she walked over to me. After opening pleasantries, she told me she had been in my departmental hallway the other day and had noticed what was once a women's restroom was changed to being all gender. She expressed that at first she was confused—'can I still use it?', she opined, talking me through her thought process. She then told me she came over her*

*initial confusion and used the restroom. The tenor of her voice and bodily comportment lifted, signaling a triumphant feeling. She felt she had achieved something and wanted me to acknowledge her, to approve of her feat. In her retelling her journey to, in, and through the all gender restroom, she was confessing to me her gender transformation. She was expressing that before, she was confused, but now she understood the importance of gender expansive praxis. Furthermore, in confessing to me, the only openly trans faculty member at the party—and in the College of Education at the time—she was seeking a form of absolution and redemption. Through my acknowledgement, she could realise being cleansed of her past shame in adhering to the gender binary.*

Since moving to the University of Arizona, and doing so through a first-of-its-kind transgender studies faculty cluster hire, I have been exploring how shame animates many of the interactions I have with nontrans colleagues. Although never acknowledged as having such an affective root, colleagues often feel a need to unload previous examples of adhering to the gender binary to me. These stories—always uninvited, and always focused toward me as a trans person—act as form of what I have come to call *gender as confession*, or a way of confessing past gender transgressions to seek and gain absolution from me, the ‘gender expert’ (who is an expert not because of my area of study, but because of my lived experience as trans). As Foucault (1990) articulated, the ritual of the confession ‘produces intrinsic modifications in the person who articulates it: it exonerates, redeems, and purifies him (sic); it unburdens him of his wrongs, liberates him, and promises salvation’ (Foucault 1990: 62). In using gender as confession, then, my colleagues were seeking to transform their gender shame into gender salvation.

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Furthermore, Ahmed expressed an essential understanding of shame, namely that it can be used to both expose and, at the very same time, bury harms. Specifically, she stated, 'Despite its recognition of past wrongdoings, shame can still conceal how such wrongdoings shape lives in the present. The work of shame troubles and is troubling, exposing some wounds, at the same time as it conceals others' (Ahmed 2015: 102). Here, one can make out a gesture toward her future work on nonperformative speech acts (Ahmed 2012), as she provided language to express how the confessing of shameful acts may (not) bring about their stated desire: that of repair and redress. And, not only may they not bring about repair and redress, but they may actively work against such. In other words, the confessing of shame may be a way of occluding ongoing investments in harmful ideologies, such as gender binary discourse (Nicolazzo 2017; Nicolazzo 2016).

The work of CUS is not just to recognise how power and (in)equities orient people throughout the project of the University, but to interrogate the way these (in)equities are promoted through structures of feeling (for example, shame). When one feels through power, there become different traces, different pulls that then may promote new reorientation toward/in/through institutional life, particularly for those who the institution deems to be askew (for example, trans girls and women). In relation to the discussion of shame, Ahmed's affective work becomes all the more important in CUS through her reminder that shame requires a witness. A witness, or the act of witnessing, becomes central to the machinations of shame because, without it, shame continues to reside within the individual and cannot be resolved/absolved. As an interior-oriented affective response, shame literally requires other bodies to work through the shameful subject's own body. In the opening vignette to this section, then, my colleague needed me not because she wanted me to feel better, but because she wanted herself to feel better. She wanted to excavate her shame by using gender as a site

of confession through which she could feel better by having me see/recognise that she was better, and to then have me confirm as much by my telling her. However, this projection of shame was not ever about me, with me being the synecdoche for all trans people. Instead, it was about her, and specifically, her desire for absolution for past, present, and future investments in normative gender regimes. Moreover, using Ahmed's articulation of shame offers a window into how gender as confession operates as a distancing tactic, one that not only separates the individual from their own accountability to address gender oppression, but also creates a divide between them as nontrans and me as trans. As Ahmed wrote, 'The histories of racism as well as sexism are littered with good intentions and bad feelings' (Ahmed 2017: 151), and I would argue she and I may agree, too, that such affective juxtapositions spills over into trans oppression and transmisogyny.

*It has been over a year since the previously discussed moment between me and my nontrans colleague. She is now in an upper-level administrative role overseeing faculty affairs at my institution and has a role in the promotion and tenure process. In my letter notifying me I had achieved promotion with tenure, I was deadnamed. After speaking with my department head and dean of my college about the situation, I learned they had noticed this, too, and had requested I be sent a new letter with my name. In a particularly important intervention, and one that was not initiated by me, my department head wrote a damning email to said colleague and the provost (her direct supervisor at the university) reminding them why their actions were particularly egregious. Of note, my department head noted how my proper name was used throughout all dossier materials, and that following suit in my promotion and tenure decision letter should not have ever been a question. After being issued a new letter with my proper name, the aforementioned colleague emailed to 'follow up about*

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*the promotion and tenure decision letter.' She continued, writing, 'We want to do our best to  
make sure that we do not make the same mistake in the future. So, I am sharing with you  
here, our plan. I welcome any feedback or insight that you might have to improve our  
process.' She was using the words 'we' and 'our' to denote an institutional process outside of  
or beyond me; as if I was not a part of the institution, but was being tasked with healing the  
institution—and, by proxy, her—of their damaging misunderstandings of gender. 'I am  
sharing with you here, our plan' was another way of distributing normalcy, worth, and who  
was deserving of institutional care. She was using the gesture of an email as a signal of her  
shame, which she transformed into institutional shame by hinting at 'our plan,' but really she  
was just reinforcing a rupture between her and me, and by proxy, between the institution and  
me. Her use of the email as a way to confess her gender shame in front of an audience (she  
CCed several institutional agents, even) was also a way to conceal her lack of care, for if she  
cared, the issue would have never arisen.*

*After detailing this new 'plan,' she then briefly apologised and congratulated me on  
earning promotion with tenure.  
I deleted the email without replying.*

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