

Thus, 'Abolition is a totality and it is ontological...but it is not struggle's *form*. To have *form*, we have to organize'. Understood this way, Abolition is a potent example of the negation of the negation, 'abolition is a fleshly and material presence of social life lived differently...figuring out how to work with people to make something rather than figuring out how to erase something. It's about making things'. Her insistence that there are more human possible futures is rooted in what 'dialectics requires us to recognize[:] that the negation of the negation is always abundantly possible *and* hasn't a fixed direction or secure end. It can change direction, and thereby not revive old history but calibrate power differentials anew'.

There is no easy way to summarise Ruth Wilson Gilmore's thought, and that is why volumes like this, that enable us to follow her train of thought, are so valuable. The book's co-editors – Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano – have done a tremendous favour for activists and thinkers worldwide by uniting these pieces, previously scattered across an array of journals and media. The editors' thematic arrangement of the essays is nearly made superfluous by the connective threads weaving through Gilmore's thought, yet there are some especially instructive editorial choices, such as opening with 'What Is To Be Done' from 2011, and the placement of the sparkling transcribed interviews near the end, after a reader has gained familiarity with Gilmore's patterns of thought and theoretical categories. The editors' introduction contains a strong outline of Gilmore's work and themes, and could be read before, during, and after contemplating

Gilmore's own words. The index, while good, is incomplete on some key entries, and it would help with the dialectic specificity of the essays to have printed the year of their initial publication somewhere on each entry's initial page. But these are minor complaints. The editors' labor is too often invisible and thankless, but deserves to be made visible and applauded.

One lesson that I have learned from reading, studying, and listening to Ruth Wilson Gilmore, is that a world and life of scarcity is not our fate, but a construct foisted on us by those who are hoarding the resources. The fact that those same hoarders would put us in cages, or murderously attack enemies to be 'hurled into eternity' became the central theme of her work. But what emerges in *Abolition Geography* is that the opposite, the negation of the negation, a world in which life and creativity are valued, is 'always abundantly possible,' and we can catch glimpses of it in our own activity. It is her 'stamina, agility, flexibility' that lead me to conclude that Gilmore is the Steph Curry of dialectics. I can watch a highlight reel of Curry three-pointers, analyze them, see how he did it and understand it. But what is astounding is not the physics itself, but the actual doing of it, in real time. Gilmore does this in analyzing contemporary movements for freedom, as the currents and flows shift around us, at great speed. It inspires more than awe – it leads to the shock of recognition in our own lives, bodies, and places, as we ask what are the transformations in which we participate. Read the book, think and make change.

Jennifer Rycenga

Feminist snap

Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (London: Penguin, 2023). 336pp., £10.99, 978 0 24161 953 7

For a few years I taught an undergraduate module called Feminist Killjoys, a title I took from the work of theorist Sara Ahmed. The figure of the 'feminist killjoy' has since come to define Ahmed's intellectual project and gives her name to Ahmed's latest work, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. The feminist killjoy is a willing troublemaker who refuses to let social norms or institutional pressures get in the way of doing what is right. Ahmed repurposes

this insult as a badge of honour, mirroring earlier reclamations of queer and crip. Each year my students adopted the name with pride, finding in Ahmed's words a new way to reframe difficult and painful experiences, and delighting in telling their horrified families what they were studying at university. They found the appeal of the killjoy hard to resist.

As a fellow killjoy, but more importantly, as an over-

worked university teacher, I loved this class. It had that magical combination of revelation and reliability: it sparked conversation like nothing else, created bonds that sustained us through some tricky texts, and always worked. But last year, teaching in Ireland, it didn't. While my English students had embraced Ahmed's call to snap social bonds that harm, my Irish ones were more hesitant to speak out at the family table, more cautious about this form of conflict and more sceptical of its efficacy. Mulling it over, I grumbled about Irish cultural conservatism and feminine socialisation. No doubt my students were inhibited by Ireland's housing crisis; most lived with their families, unlike my students in England. I thought about Ireland's communal fractures: the colonial and sectarian violence since papered over by neoliberalism, and more recently, two bitterly-fought referenda on abortion and equal marriage. The context pushed me to think about what happens next. I asked: what comes after the killjoy?

The Feminist Killjoy Handbook is published with Penguin's imprint Allen Lane, rather than Ahmed's usual Duke University Press. The switch indicates her desire to reach a wider audience, as does the title, which echoes the post-Brexit and post-BLM trend for politicised self-help books. The success of Ahmed's 2017 *Living a Feminist Life* suggested the potential for a crossover hit. It inadvertently rode the wave of the post-#MeToo popular feminist revival and was ubiquitous at the time on social media. Every self-respecting feminist academic snapped a photo of its cover next to a latte and a pen to show she meant business. The rainbow-coloured *Handbook* is finely-tuned to look good on an Instagram grid, and Ahmed has promoted the book on a lengthy tour. Having heard her speak a number of times, I went to the Edinburgh date, hosted in a packed lecture theatre by Lighthouse Books. The atmosphere was like no other academic talk I have ever attended. It felt more like a gig by an indie band about to break the mainstream, or, perhaps, a sermon at an evangelical church. The audience whooped; Ahmed grinned. In the Q&A, voices quivered as they shared painful stories, seeking solace and advice.

It's hard to begrudge Ahmed – or her fans – some joy. In 2016, she publicly resigned her professorial post at Goldsmiths over the university's failure to tackle staff harassment of students. Her most significant treatment of this experience appears in her 2021 book *Complaint!*, which describes how she subsequently became a 'listen-

ing ear' for other survivors of harassment and abuse in the sector who sought her out to tell their stories. Ahmed has also spoken out prominently on her blog about a range of lightning rod issues that few scholars want to touch, from trigger warnings in universities to transphobia in British culture. These entries often appear reworked in later books. Ahmed has always done intellectual work in public, although refashioning herself as a public intellectual has presumably become more pressing since she became an independent scholar.

The Feminist Killjoy Handbook is not a book that tries to persuade the unconvinced. It addresses a reader who has internalised the epithet as a source of pride and wants to be bolstered in their conviction. Ahmed urges her readers to continue being feminist killjoys and acknowledges the challenges of doing so, notably the reactions of others. She offers a mantra that will be familiar to her readers: 'If you expose a problem, you pose a problem; if you pose a problem, you become the problem'. This is a 'killjoy truth', the 'core truth' of them all. These 'truths' appear in bold throughout, alongside 'killjoy maxims', 'killjoy commitments' and 'killjoy equations', reproduced at the end in a handy list. The book begins with chapters on 'Introducing the Feminist Killjoy' and 'Surviving as a Feminist Killjoy' – the latter including 'killjoy survival tips' in bold – before chapters on the feminist killjoy's roles as cultural critic, philosopher, poet and activist. It ends with a reading list of books primarily by Black and women of colour scholars and activists, and reading group discussion questions. The questions remind us that one of Ahmed's goals is to generate killjoy solidarity to sustain us when we become depleted. Though she doesn't note it here, Ahmed's project is in the second-wave tradition of consciousness-raising. The second wave, and anti-social queer theory, helps Ahmed hold on to negativity. As she writes elsewhere, drawing on Betty Friedan, making women happy is not the point of feminism. Instead, Ahmed urges us: stay unhappy with this world!

Ahmed's first book explicitly aimed at a popular audience is a culmination of her broader intellectual project in topic and method. Her method might be described as distillation. Ahmed returns to the same themes, and often the same phrases, anecdotes and even literary analyses, in a distinctive style characterised by repetition, rhyme and paradox. As she turns over words and phrases to show them from unexpected angles, her method ex-

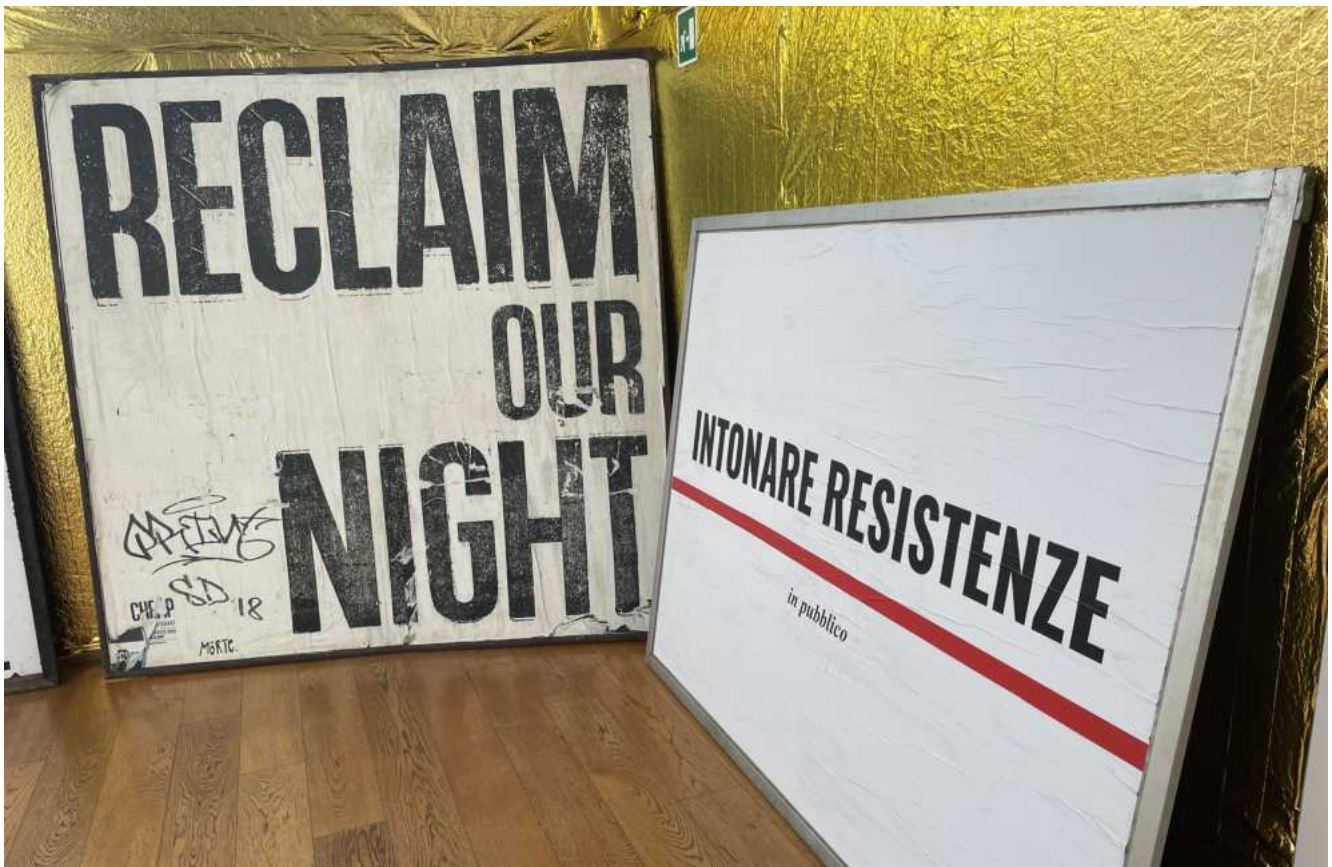
emplifies the core message: don't move on, don't let go. At its best, the difficulty of Ahmed's style intensifies her points, embodying her injunction that we have to become what we are judged as being. At other times, it frustrates. Her wordplay can feel like shuffling cards, a trick that thrills the first few times but leaves us wanting. That said, more densely theoretical texts like *Willful Subjects* (2014) reveal the origins of concepts later refined to the point of truism in a detailed, if sometimes slightly motivated, reading of the Western philosophical canon. For instance, Ahmed's notion of the 'feminist snap', the breaking point, derives from Lucretius' notion of the atom that swerves to 'snap the bonds of fate', while her account of the invisibility of forces that align with our will draws on Heidegger's hammer and Schopenhauer's stream. Ahmed, who once wrote a book citing no white men, may raise an eyebrow or roll an eye at my restoration of the white men cited in her earlier work to defend the seriousness of her later work.

The new book cleaves closely to Ahmed's earlier works, with chunks that are recognisable from elsewhere. She adds references to topical issues and newer films, from the politics of commemorating empire to *Everybody's Talking about Jamie* (2021). A new feature is fan mail: readers who have written to Ahmed to say how her writing has changed her life that suggest to the reader: it might change yours. The style is less poetic, perhaps a necessity in writing for a trade press, but not necessarily more direct. Ahmed formulates generalisable maxims, yet in spite of references to her personal life and wider culture, her body of evidence comes most substantially from the university, and her research on diversity work and university complaints procedures. The modern university is certainly worthy of sustained investigation. Its overuse of non-disclosure agreements against staff and students who disclose harassment and discrimination, protection of superstar abusers, and persistent use of casualised contracts, among other things, ruins lives and corrupts any claim it might make to being committed to the noble goal of education. The 1752 Group, which campaigns on these issues, was founded at Goldsmiths the same year Ahmed resigned. Their name is a reference to the £1752 allocated by Goldsmiths for a 2015 conference on staff-student sexual harassment, by which the university hoped to make the problem go away.

Activists outside the academy may wonder about the

broader relevance of Ahmed's insights. The university is a distinctive space, with quasi-judicial systems of laws and regulations for which Ahmed elsewhere developed her own language of walls, doors and corridors. Activists have safe spaces policies (often), accountability processes (sometimes), and transformative justice practices (rarely). The rest of society – poor them – has the civil and criminal justice systems, which occasionally, invited or not, enter into these worlds. Unions, too, operate across these spaces, but for all her praise for complaint collectives, Ahmed always gives this one short shrift. She says little about the relationships between the different systems through which a complaint might pass, and as a result, it's rarely apparent in her work what she wants to happen, or if she thinks change is possible at all. Ahmed entreats her readers to join her in declaring: 'When critique causes damage, I am willing to cause damage.' 'I am willing to snap a bond that is damaging to others'. The subtitle of Ahmed's blog is 'killing joy as a world-building project'. But activists committed to social justice may wonder what kind of world is being created here, as we righteously kill someone else's joy, while accepting the inevitable fact that we will have our own killed joy in turn. In earlier work Ahmed anticipates, but never fully dispels, a concern derived from Wendy Brown that she makes a fetish of the wound.

The Feminist Killjoy Handbook is notable for what I think is the first mention of the police in Ahmed's work. This comes in the context of Black feminist Kirsten West Savali's comments on the Women's March NYC after the election of Trump. White attendees in their pussy hats snapped photos with cops, and organisers celebrated afterwards that no arrests were made. Ahmed, paraphrasing Savali, notes that 'a positive relation to the police as protectors is only possible for white women', before claiming that killjoy politics necessitates police abolitionism. This came as a surprise, since what should be done with racists, abusers and others who say and do bad things has long felt like an open question in Ahmed's work. Abolition does not seem implied by her earlier books on diversity policy so some dots needed to be joined here for regular readers. For the women in academia who wear Ahmed's mantras on t-shirts and pin badges as they insist that their cleaner address them as 'Dr', this radical position will also come out of the blue. In this brief section, Ahmed includes a lengthy quote from



Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners and Beth Richie's *Abolition. Feminism. Now* (2022). But abolitionist politics invites a more difficult question than Ahmed seems prepared to address: what are the killjoy's responsibilities to the people whose joy they kill?

This section comes in Ahmed's chapter on 'The Feminist Killjoy as Activist', and seems prompted in part by the need to address topical issues in a popular book. The chapter is the closest Ahmed gets to solutions, which she has long refused to be drawn on. Perhaps this is right; a political movement, least of all feminism, should not expect answers to be handed down from a sage on the stage, as some desperate people at the talk I attended seemed to hope. Still, this feels a little like false advertising in a handbook. One wonders whether Ahmed's promised *Complainer's Handbook*, which she is currently writing, will follow the same path. Ahmed may refuse the model of an instructor, yet her reading group questions do little to destabilise her authority. They are primarily exegetical, asking the readers to interpret their experi-

ences in the light of her concept, or to find more evidence. Nowhere in the list does Ahmed ask her readers: what will you do now? Or: what did I get wrong? The list ends with an invitation for readers to email her their stories. To her credit, even in a popular book, Ahmed still makes time to listen to people who have not otherwise been heard.

The killjoy, the complainer; before this, the unhappy queer, the melancholic migrant. Ahmed has moved increasingly towards figures. This has led over time to a more celebratory style that irons out the interesting and instructive hesitation of her earlier work. In *Willful Subjects*, she warns that the book is not a mere celebration of the will and wilfulness; in *The Promise of Happiness*, she notes the 'risk [of] overemphasising the problems with happiness by presenting happiness as a problem'. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* comes with some caveats, notably that we can't always assume we're the killjoy, and therefore right, because we have been in the past. This shapes Ahmed's discussion of transphobia in feminism.

Ahmed is keen to stress that transphobes are not feminist killjoys, even if they, too, believe themselves to be ‘difficult women’ speaking against the grain. For Ahmed, they have in fact ‘taken the place of the patriarchal father’. Yet there seems little in the concept that prevents it from being claimed by transphobes, should they wish to. Ahmed

even uses Mary Daly’s description of the ‘hag’ to define the feminist killjoy. Daly is author of *Gyn/Ecology* (1978), which is most politely described as doing what it says on the tin. Without a strong theoretical scaffolding to guide us, we’re left with one arbiter of who is or isn’t a feminist killjoy: Ahmed.

Hannah Boast

Real movement

Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program: New Translation* (Oakland: PM Press, 2023). 99pp., £10.99, 978 1 62963 916 1

Why republish Karl Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Program* today? In the introduction to this new translation, Peter Hudis gives two reasons: the new translation contributes to our understanding of Marx’s views on post-capitalist society and it is intended as a political intervention. Providing a clearer understanding of what communism would look like is vital for struggles today.

The Gotha program was the unifying document of the two main working-class parties in Germany. In 1863 the former collaborator of Marx and Friedrich Engels, Ferdinand Lassalle, founded the General Union of German Workers (ADAV). Marx had fallen out with Lassalle in 1862 due to political and theoretical differences, specifically Lassalle’s efforts to form an alliance with the dictatorship of Otto von Bismarck. Wilhelm Liebknecht, a former member of the ADAV and August Bebel, both supporters of Marx, founded the Social-Democratic Party (SDAP) in 1869. Both parties were around the same size in 1875 when Liebknecht and Bebel enter negotiations to unify with the ADAV without consulting Marx and Engels. The Gotha program was the founding document of what was now called the Socialist Workers Party of Germany (SAPD). Marx and Engels originally saw the event as a retrospective capitulation by Liebknecht and Bebel’s party to the views of Lassalle, who had died in 1864. What later became known as the *Critique of the Gotha Program* was an internal letter Marx sent to Liebknecht, Bebel, Ignaz Auer and August Geib.

Reading the *Critique of the Gotha Program* is vital for any understanding of Marx’s conception of communism. It demolishes numerous myths related to Marx’s views that have developed since his death and that have

since grown into dogma. Firstly, the idea that Marx’s contention that communism is a living movement embedded in the self-activity of the working class, and made possible by the contradictions within capitalism, meant that he rejected all forms of speculation about a future communist society is only true up to a certain point. Marx discussed the outlines of a communist society throughout his career to a greater extent than is usually acknowledged. While acknowledging the early contributions of those grouped together as ‘Utopian Socialists’, including Saint-Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, Marx in *the Communist Manifesto* explicitly rejects prescribed plans for a future communist society which lack or have defective strategies for arriving at their end goal. In the letter that contained his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx declares: ‘every step of real movement is more important than a dozen programs’. Nonetheless, Marx believed a correct theoretical understanding of the communist goal directly influenced the effectiveness of parties. He was hardly benevolent towards rival tendencies, spending large amounts of his time producing works like *The Poverty of Philosophy*, a critique of the anarchist Pierre Proudhon. As Hudis points out it was often in his more directly political interventions that his positions on communism were outlined.

Secondly, Marx rejected the ‘iron law of wages’, the idea supported by Lassalle among others that wages would be driven to subsistence levels under capitalism. Marx outlined in *Wage Labour and Capital and Value, Price and Profit* that his notions of immiseration should be measured against the expanding wealth within capitalism. In contemporary terms, he was discussing relative