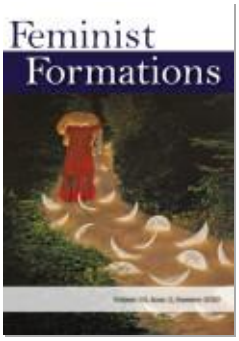
What's the Use? On the Uses of Use by Sara Ahmed (review)

Eden Kinkaid



Feminist Formations, Volume 32, Issue 2, Summer 2020, pp. 264-267 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/ff.2020.0037*

What's the Use? On the Uses of Use by Sara Ahmed. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019, 296 pp., $99.95 hardcover, $26.95 paper.

Eden Kinkaid

What's the Use? On the Uses of Use is Sara Ahmed's latest book, the third title in her trilogy composed of *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014). Broadly defined, *What's the Use?* is concerned with the uses of the "use"—the way "use" as a concept and normative principle informs modern institutions and social projects and, in the process, shapes bodies and worlds. Ahmed follows an unexpected and fascinating pathway through the history of use, one that brings together scientific theories, institutional histories, and everyday life. For Ahmed, use is everywhere: in objects, spaces, and bodies, and at the heart of the modern university.

Readers familiar with Ahmed's work will detect much continuity with her other books. *What's the Use?* carries forward and reconsiders themes from Ahmed's other works, including issues of happiness, will, institutions, diversity, and complaint. Her methodological approach is also familiar: in her characteristic style, Ahmed seeks to reapproach philosophical, scientific, social, and embodied histories through the ordinariness of everyday language and practice. She describes: "I follow words around, in and out of their intellectual histories. To follow a word is to ask not only how it acquires the status of a concept in philosophy but how that word is exercised, rather like a muscle, in everyday life" (3). Readers should expect, then, the kinds of reflexive, illuminating, and, at times, challenging uses of language that Ahmed often makes use of. What is methodologically new, however, is the inclusion of a set of images that reoccur throughout the book. These images serve as visual metaphors that link the wide-ranging chapters back to a few key observations that Ahmed makes of use.

By tracing the appearance of use through scientific tracts, archival materials, and everyday institutional life in the academy, Ahmed makes "use" the object of her analysis; that is, she seeks to understand how the term is "called upon to do certain kinds of work" (4). This investigation takes place on a number of registers: Ahmed is interested in how scientific and social theories have used "use" as an organizing principle; how utilitarianism, a philosophy of utility, has shaped social and institutional life; and how everyday language and practice encode gendered, classed, and racialized histories of use and utility. For Ahmed, use is a technique that shapes worlds as well as bodies, and it does so in a necessarily uneven way. Use becomes a "conversation about the value of things" (14), with use and value being distributed unevenly between bodies, things, and ways of being and doing.

©2020 Feminist Formations, Vol. 32 No. 2 (Summer) pp. 264–270

Chapter 1, "Using Things," examines everyday linguistic uses of the term "use"—use, in use, out of use, used, unused, overused, used up, usable/unusable. Here, Ahmed establishes the different meanings of use, looking to everyday objects and spaces for traces of use. Taking a phenomenological approach, she considers how use is not only a relation we have with objects, but also a way of arranging worlds. Use, then, temporally exceeds and conditions us: use is built into our bodies and environments such that "to inhabit a world is to be inhabited by use" (26). Examining the histories of use in particular spaces shows how these spaces are oriented toward particular uses and thus particular bodies. At the same time that use shapes spaces and who can inhabit them with ease, ideas of use and usefulness shape bodies: throughout the book, Ahmed traces how usefulness became an assignment for some bodies and not others, and how this moral imperative encodes classed, ableist, racialized, and gendered social orders. This differential distribution of use becomes a recurring focus of Ahmed's genealogical project in the book.

In chapter 2, "The Biology of Use and Disuse," Ahmed explores how use has been conceptualized and deployed in biological accounts of evolution. She is interested in how, in the theories of Darwin and Lamarck, use links form and function and operates as a kind of directionality for a species through natural selection. Here, "use becomes an accumulated somatic history, a history of qualities that are acquired over time" (81). While Ahmed is interested in the *idea of use* in biological theories, she also considers the *use of biological ideas* by tracing how these ideas of use and natural selection were articulated within social philosophies of the late nineteenth century. These ideas were used to justify and naturalize the social order (in particular, projects of industrial capitalism and eugenics). Within these imaginaries of use, race and class come to shape how bodies will be used, made useful, and used up through their labor. In this chapter, we begin to see how use becomes embodied and how, through dominant discourses of use and utility, the requirement to be useful became assigned to some bodies and not others.

Ahmed extends these concerns with use and social order in chapter 3, "Use as Technique," by considering how ideas of utility shaped the missions and practices of educational institutions in early nineteenth-century England. She explores how monitorial schools for working-class English children were organized around principles of utility and virtue. Here, virtue was understood as being better at fulfilling a preordained function—a function that necessarily derived from one's location in class hierarchy. Ahmed describes: "We can begin to understand how what seems to be a general or even universal requirement to be useful falls on some and not others; utility while presented as a universal value . . . is a system of extracting life even from the death of those deemed a lower class" (138). Ahmed traces this necropolitical impulse of utilitarianism through these educational institutions and out into the broader realm of social policy of the time, showing how ideas of use were used to stabilize and naturalize a racial, classed, and colonial hierarchy.

Having established that education and other social institutions are thoroughly entangled with questions of use and utility, Ahmed then turns her attention to the origins of the modern university in chapter 4, "Use and the University." She argues that the university emerged as a utilitarian project and that "[r]ecognizing this long history helps challenge any notion that utility arrives late to the university, as if utility is a foreign policy imposed on universities by governments" (143). In this chapter, Ahmed considers how long histories of use—institutional and embodied histories produced by certain bodies and not others—shape the conditions we inhabit in universities. By reapproaching her work on "diversity," she both names the history of use that produces the "problem" of diversity and shows how "diversity" is put to use in institutions (usually to maintain the status quo). Here, Ahmed brings discussions from her *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) and *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) together with her current work on complaint to show how histories of use shape academic cultures and reproduce the differential distribution of value within them. It is these histories of use that condition the present: the historical inheritances of the university reproduce the uneven distribution of the assignment to be useful, allow some to inhabit the university and "usefulness" with ease, and, in the process, naturalize regimes of racialized and gendered labor.

Given these scientific, social, institutional, and embodied histories of use, what are we to do with use? How might we rework use to different ends? How might we challenge dominant conceptions of use and the normative social and political projects they underwrite? In her conclusion, "Queer Use," Ahmed dwells on the possibility of queering use. For Ahmed, queer use refers to "how things can be used in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended" (199). To queer use "is to make use audible, to listen to use, to bring to the front what ordinarily recedes into the background" (198). While queering use describes Ahmed's methodological approach in *What's the Use?* it also represents a vision of a political project. Queer use, much like Ahmed's queer phenomenological project, entails reworking the relations between our bodies and our worlds, calling into question the straight paths and proper uses that condition our past, present, and possible futures. Our political work, then, might be to rework use, to disrupt use, to call attention to the histories of use that mark our present conditions. Queer use means rejecting and deviating from the norms of use, norms that touch all aspects of our lives. Simply put, queer use means not getting used to it.

I'll close with a few notes on the utility of *What's the Use?* The text would be an interesting, albeit challenging, text to include in graduate courses on utilitarianism and social philosophy or the history of modern education. Given the ambitious scope of the work, readers might find that the text is most useful in pieces, as an unconventional meditation on the phenomenology of things, a social history of biological theory, a critique of educational philosophy, or feminist intervention into the politics of the academy. However you end up

using it (or not), Ahmed's *What's the Use?* is worth engaging if only for its methodological and conceptual creativity. Ahmed's explorations are animated by a spirit of reinvention that challenges both the conventions of philosophical practice and the taken-for-granted boundaries of feminist thought.

Eden Kinkaid *is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography at the University of Arizona. Eden's research engages various themes at the intersection of geography and gender and women's studies, including queer space and embodiment, feminist geography, and critical phenomenology. Eden's work has been published in various academic journals, including* Gender, Place, and Culture, Progress in Human Geography, Environment and Planning D: Society and Space, *and* GeoHumanities, *among others.*

We Are Dancing for You: Native Feminisms and the Revitalization of Women's Coming-of-Age Ceremonies by Cutcha Risling Baldy. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018, 183 pp., $90.00 hardcover, $30.00 paper.

Kylie Gemmell

Indigenous scholars and activists are frequently confronted with the narrative of the vanishing Indian, a story that has been told by anthropologists, linguists, and archeologists whose main goal was to document what they believed was a disappearing and dying culture. Through processes of assimilation, eradication, and multiple federal Indian policies, American Indian communities have lost part of our culture, traditions, and belief systems. Many communities were forced to adopt white, heteropatriarchal structures of hierarchy and gendered roles in communities. Indigenous scholars and activists currently face the challenge of how to revitalize and reclaim these histories that have been erased by Western anthropological narratives of our culture, histories that are often dictated and recorded through a non-Indigenous lens.

In her first book, Cutcha Risling Baldy (Hupa, Yurok, and Karuk) uses the revitalization of Hoopa Valley Tribe women's coming-of-age ceremonies as a point of intervention into anthropological narratives of California Indians. Risling Baldy argues that "anthropologists, archeologists, linguists, and other scholars became interested in documenting Indian life to preserve what they perceived as a 'dying culture'" (5). As resistance to this cultural narrative, Risling Baldy argues that Indigenous people can learn from and pull from those archives in ways that (non-Indigenous) scholars often cannot: while scholars document what they see from an empirical perspective and an objective point of view, Indigenous people can look at these same archives through a different lens, pulling out histories and stories left by our ancestors. Risling Baldy uses Mishuana