

Spring 2022

## Decentralizing Feminist Theory From Academia: Bringing Transfeminism and Disability Justice Home with Sarah Ahmed.

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### Recommended Citation

Conway, Maeve E.. 2022. "Decentralizing Feminist Theory From Academia: Bringing Transfeminism and Disability Justice Home with Sarah Ahmed.." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 20 (Spring): 75-76. 10.23860/jfs.2022.20.08.

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### Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank professor Carey Sojka for the help and encouragement they gave me during the process of writing this paper. I would also like to thank my university's resources including our alt-text specialist, Equity Coordinator for Gender and Sexuality Justice, student writing center, and school librarians for the immense help they provided that influenced the project and the process of writing this reflection.

# **Decentralizing Feminist Theory From Academia: Bringing Transfeminism and Disability Justice Home with Sarah Ahmed**

**Maeve Conway, Southern Oregon University**

It was January 2021, amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, when my involvement with The Bodylogues began. The Bodylogues is an annual in-person event at Southern Oregon University hosted by the Feminist and Queer Theory in Action class that showcases poetry, spoken word, song, dance, and artwork related to embodiment. Through the process of creating The Bodylogues with a transfeminist and disability justice methodology, I realized the power of expanding feminist theory beyond academia in creating a more feminist world. My contributions to The Bodylogues centered on accessibility needs, including co-creating an online asynchronous gallery in the form of a website, since the usual in-person format was not possible during a pandemic. We took time to explore what we were unfamiliar with, which included guidance on access needs (Sins Invalid 2017) and multiple meetings with an alternative technology specialist. Within this short paper, I will be exploring the implementation of a transfeminist and disability justice methodology on an activism project during the COVID-19 pandemic. From this experience of Bodylogues 2021, we empowered each other and our community to live in a more feminist world.

As I worked to decentralize feminist theory from academia, guidance and inspiration by Sarah Ahmed's (2017) call to bring feminist theory home was centered in my mind. Ahmed's feminism is not about taking on a set "of ideals or norms of conduct," but rather the unfaltering process of asking critical questions about how we can all "live better in an unjust and unequal world" (Ahmed 2017, 01). Living amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, it felt like Ahmed was speaking directly to me, like she knew and understood that my activist space would be constrained to the four imperfect white walls and looming brown roof of my too-small apartment. Feminist theory should constantly adapt to reflect the needs of our ever-changing world (Bunch 1983)(Ahmed 2017), and we put theory into action by deciding how best to interact and work together, supporting disabled folks through our commitment to accessibility and ultimately by showing our vision of the world we want to live in through theory.

Going into this year's Bodylogues, we knew that having an accessible website was a top priority. Informed by Tamsin Kimoto, we intentionally disoriented ourselves from ableist norms and systems and instead oriented toward disability (2018). We used restiveness as an orientation toward our feminist goals and simultaneously disoriented from "guideposts" that typically orient us toward ableism (Kimoto 2018, 144). Restiveness "entails an examination and unsettling of that place one is in" and does this by the "refusal to recede into the background [as] a way of staying at home" (Kimoto 2018, 145). We strove for a restive orientation toward disability through the rejection that disability is abnormal, that disability and beauty cannot coexist, of supercrip narratives, and of practices and systems that exploit disabled people. Through this (re)orientation toward disability, we brought feminist theory home for myself and other disabled people by centering accessibility needs as a top priority and reflecting bodily diversity. By doing this kind of "homework," disabled community members became more at home in the world by bringing activism to their lives in an accessible way that might otherwise be unavailable during a pandemic (Ahmed 2017, 07).

Bringing theory home also entailed intersections of transfeminism and disability justice through alternative-text and image descriptions. When describing images of bodies, we avoided categorizing bodies as male or female to avoid harmful and reductive stereotyping. Instead, we used anatomical terminology

when needed (e.g., vulva, penis, breasts). However, I began to ponder our decision when thinking about our intersex, trans, and gender-nonconforming students and the ways people find new names for their bodies outside the gender binary. In consultation with our Equity Coordinator for Gender and Sexuality Justice, we discussed such contemplations (Sylvester 2021). Making sure to work side-by-side with the artist or subject in the photo when creating alternative text can result in more accurate language to describe bodies and their parts (e.g. cunt, trans cunt, trans genitals, or trans cock) (Sylvester 2021). These questions demonstrate what Ahmed calls for us to engage in: an unfaltering process of asking critical questions about how we can all “live better in an unjust and unequal world” (2017, 01).

Bodylogues has been an in-person event at Southern Oregon University. When working to put together this event during the COVID-19 pandemic we knew that how the past years did Bodylogues would be unsafe. I was disappointed that I could not connect and build community through Bodylogues like the years prior had. I let myself feel this disappointment, but not for long as the benefits of creating community online quickly presented themselves. Queer and trans people have always built strong community in online spaces because of the anonymity it permits and the opportunity to connect to those that may be far away from oneself. An online Bodylogues in the form of a website created a space for people to share their experiences anonymously if they wanted to. We were also able to reach a wider audience since the artist submissions will stay online, instead of the typical one-night event. While not ideal, switching to an online platform gave us the opportunity to stay safe and continue to build feminist community when most are feeling the effects of isolation from their friends and family.

Bringing feminist theory home during a pandemic was not easy, especially when it came to making sure we were bringing it home in accessible and inclusive ways. With a transfeminist and disability justice methodology of creating Bodylogues 2021, we realized the power of decentralizing feminist theory from academia and bringing theory home. Through this intentional process, we engaged in a kind of activism that, hopefully, helped people feel more at home in the world (Ahmed 2017).

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