Intersectional feminisms: Reflections on theory and activism in Sara Ahmed's *Living a feminist life* (2017)

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Abstract

This essay traces intersectional feminisms in the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, through a contextualised reading of Sara Ahmed's (2017) *Living a feminist life*. Sensational and structural oppressions are discussed, with the interlocking 'walls' of race, gender, and class exposed through local and historical photographs and texts. Māori women's writings are drawn on to re-articulate agendas for feminist theory and activism in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This focus on mana wāhine occurs within a broader discussion of intersectionality, as this emerged from black American and third world feminist movements. It is thus proposed that voicing and redressing colonial violence remains at the forefront of feminist work, with Māori women such as Ngahuia Te Awekotuku and Whina Cooper offering us ways to move forward and carve out wilful feminist subjectivities.

Keywords
Intersectional feminism, theory, activism, Aotearoa/New Zealand, mana wāhine, Sara Ahmed

Introduction

In 2016, Sara Ahmed publicly resigned as Professor of Cultural and Diversity Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London, in protest against the institution's denial of sexual harassment claims made by female students against their male professors. *Living a feminist life* (2017), the publication which Ahmed subsequently produced, is a personal and passionate plea for feminist thought and activism in everyday life. Written from her own position as a feminist critical theorist, a woman of colour, and a lesbian, Ahmed explores the complexities and controversies surrounding intersectional feminism, going beyond intersectionality as a theoretical or epistemological position (Warner, Settles, & Shields, 2016) to demonstrate the lived reality of intersecting oppressions in her own life. Ahmed emphasises the contextual and embodied nature of intersectional feminism, which she proposes has the potential to inspire a 'feminist army' at work in the world (p. 86).

In this essay, I reflect on Ahmed's *Living a feminist life*, contextualising her arguments within the terrain of Aotearoa/New Zealand to ask: How is feminism experienced in Aotearoa/New Zealand, by diverse women? How has intersectionality changed as it has travelled in time and space (Said, 1983)? And what are the implications for mana wāhine of ongoing agendas for feminist theory and activism? I write from the position of a Pākehā feminist with a background in psychology and history. Within this essay, I have reproduced Ahmed's unique style of sub-headings, which are propositions beginning with '*Feminism* = …' I begin by charting Ahmed's key theoretical points regarding the embodied nature of intersectional feminisms, and follow with an overview of feminist theory and activism in Aotearoa/New Zealand, especially as it

pertains to mana wāhine. I then consider the structural nature of intersectional oppression, as it is manifested through walls and traffic systems. I end by considering possibilities for becoming wilful feminist subjects (Ahmed, 2017, p. 83) through lived commitment to feminist theory and activism.

Feminism = sensation(al)

Ahmed begins *Living a feminist life* (2017) by discussing the processes by which feminist consciousness emerges. For Ahmed, this process is inherently bound to our lived experience in the world, and unfolds through our embodied responses to violence. Feminism is sensational because it is experienced through the senses; feminism is also sensational because it causes a stir or disruption in the world. Here, intersectionality problematises the taken-for-granted 'body' in which these feminist reactions are expected to occur, with this body not necessarily being white, middle-class, physically able, heterosexual, or biologically delineated as female. The result is an infinite score of women's possible lived experiences, occurring within an interconnected array of contextual sites, producing no singular or universal feminist consciousness, but rather a multiplicity of diverse feminist *consciousness-es* (Brah & Phoenix, 2004). Ahmed describes the visceral sensations which come with an emergent feminist consciousness; in her own experience, these include sensations of heat, anger, and flushed skin, all of which are 'sensible reaction[s] to the injustices of the world' (p. 21). We are aroused by injustices, we 'register something in the sharpness of an impression' (p. 21), and through this sensing we begin our journey toward living a feminist life – a life which inevitably involves agitation, or the stirring up of sensations in the world.

Ahmed uses the word 'violence' to describe not only physical and sexual harm to women's bodies, but also the structural, oblique violence of institutional discrimination, speech acts, and the ever-present white+/-male gaze. As girls and young women, the first injustice we may become conscious of is 'unwanted male attention' (p. 22): we are looked at, touched, or spoken to in ways that may set us on edge. Perhaps this violation is disguised by a smile, or is delivered as a compliment. Perhaps it comes from another woman – our grandmother, or our female teacher – and is an instruction, a pedagogy of how to be a girl in the world. Nevertheless, it burns. In its muddling confusion it registers as a trespass, a warning bell. Intersectionality has the potential to draw us back to the very origins of our feminist consciousness as they unfolded in our early childhoods, helping us to consider the nuances not only of our own but of other women's early experiences of violence. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, for example, a Pākehā woman, no matter what degree of empathy she invests in the process, can never know what it is to *be* a Māori girl. And for Māori girls, it is likely that the consciousness of being Māori in a white, colonised world comes before the consciousness of being a kōtiro in a patriarchal world.

Intersectionality cannot entirely bridge this gap of phenomenological understanding, but it can orient our attention to differences in how women's bodies are perceived and positioned in space. This pertains to Māori and Pākehā women's historical positioning in Aotearoa/New Zealand, as well as to the positioning of Pacific, South East Asian, and other ethnically diverse women, such as refugee women from Afghanistan and Bhutan, in Aotearoa/New Zealand's increasingly multicultural society. In describing her own experience of being 'othered' as a brown girl in a white, Australian landscape, Ahmed emphasises the importance of articulating our differences in order to understand them:

> I was brown, visibly different but with no real account of that difference; no real sense of where it or I was coming from. I kept feeling wrong, being treated as in the wrong, but I did not know what was wrong. Something was wrong. How to acquire the words for this something? (Ahmed, 2017, p. 33)

Feminism = shattering

This leads to Ahmed's discussion of our histories of fragility, as they are stored in collective and individual memories. Feminist consciousness, Ahmed argues, is brought about through shatterings: 'The histories that bring us to feminism are the histories that leave us fragile. Feminism might pick up (or more hopefully pick us up) from the experiences that leave us vulnerable and exposed' (p. 22). In Aotearoa, the shattering of Māori through colonisation remains at the forefront of any intersectional feminist consciousness, and is informed by our commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi and tino rangatiratanga (Hoskins, 2000). As Ani Mikaere (1999) has proposed, Māori society may not have been patriarchal prior to colonisation, and, along with the loss of land and cultural resources, Māori mythological and spiritual worldviews were suppressed. Mikaere presents this worldview as matriarchal, with the collective interrelationships (whanaungatanga) of all living things balanced by the strength, sexuality, and reproductive power of Māori women. It was through colonisation and the Christian retelling of Māori mythological narratives, Mikaere argues, that the female body was repositioned as a source of sin and corruption, shattering mana wāhine and throwing out of balance whanau structures. The womb symbols of Te Kore and Te Pō, which formerly represented the origins of life, were replaced by a male, monotheist, all-supreme god, Io, and his son, Tāne, with Hine-ahu-one, the first Māori woman, demoted to a passive, receptive role (Mikaere, 1999). Thus, 'violence becomes instruction when it is accompanied by a narrative, an explanation' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 24).

This view of a pre-colonial Māori society free from the prohibitions of patriarchy is not accepted by all Māori women scholars, however. Ngahuia Te Awekotuku (1991), for example, argues that the historical experiences of Māori women can only ever be 'precariously reconstructed' (p. 75), with Māori society being by no means unitary in its treatment of women. Rather, she points to differences in tribal prohibitions made against Māori women, and the need to challenge patriarchy both as a weapon/wound of colonisation and a present-day practice endorsed and utilised by male Māori leaders. Retelling Māori myths has been central to Te Awekotuku's own efforts to reclaim mana wāhine. In her short-story collection *Ruahine: Mythic women* (2003), she carves out new spaces for Māori women to emerge, not through recourse to a pre-patriarchal past, but by shattering the mythological moulds within which Māori women have been cast. In one instance, she retells the story of Haumapuhia, the daughter of an abusive chief, who, when she is drowned by her father for being disobedient, is transformed into a taniwha; longing for the sea but unable to reach it, Haumapuhia thrashes her taniwha body against the earth until she forms a lake, Waikaremoana. Despite Waikaremoana representing 'a lake of tears, a place of magic, a lake of tragedy' (p. 45), it also becomes, through Te Awekotuku's telling, a landmark of defiance.

Feminism = mana wāhine

As Te Awekotuku (1991) argues, (re)claiming mana wāhine need not be divorced from feminist theory and action. Challenging the assumption that feminism is an 'imported Pākehā idea about being female and being put down for being female', Te Awekotuku takes an intersectional stance, suggesting that 'feminism is what we make it; it's a matter of how we determine it for ourselves, in terms of our own oppression as women' (p. 10). As shown, this Māori 'making' of feminism in Aotearoa often goes beyond textual and academic resources, utilising Māori mythology, artwork, song, dance, and storytelling to provide new forms of voicing resistance (Diamond, 1999). I liken these forms to what Sara Ahmed calls feminist tools, which she links to Audre Lorde's proclamation that 'The master's tools will never dismantle the master's

house' (Lorde, cited in Ahmed, 2017, p. 160). In recognising that mana wāhine has its own tools and its own raw materials to work with in the fight against intersectional oppression, we move away from the suggestion that Māori women have been invited, rather benevolently, into the Pākehā feminist movement. It also helps us to stop essentialising Māori women and the nature of their struggle(s). Returning again to Ngahuia Te Awekotuku, Bach, Luh, & Schult (2011) demonstrate how her writing fractures the often taken-for-granted heterogeneity of Māori women's femininities and sexualities, adding and revealing layers of complexity. For example, as there is no word in the Māori language for lesbian, Te Awekotuku herself crafts a new term, 'wāhine takatāpui,' in order to describe herself as a Māori lesbian (with 'takatāpui' referring to a 'close companion of the same sex' (Bach, Luh, & Schult, 2011, p. 28)).

In this sense, ongoing agendas for intersectional feminisms in Aotearoa/New Zealand involve allowing Māori women to speak for themselves, and, most of all, *hearing* what Māori women have to say (Simmonds, 2011). This can be difficult to do when those words are painful to hear – and when, as Ahmed suggests, 'White fragility works as a defense system … as if to say, we won't hear what we can't handle' (p. 179). In talking about their experiences of not being heard as Māori women in academic spaces, Waitere and Johnston (2009) make clear that this is not due to any passivity on their part, for 'By all accounts Māori women are noisy. They have historically spoken about a variety of things, across numerous contexts' (p. 14). Rather, they emphasise the oppressive, silencing structures of the institutions themselves, especially white, male academic structures. For Waitere and Johnston (2009), if wāhine Māori are not going to be heard, the most powerful action they can take is to leave the room, or to protest through negation: 'To not participate through choice as a means to mark dissatisfaction, to be silent and be saying no (instead of yes) … are other forms of cultural practices that pay heed to who we are' (p. 29). By leaving these spaces, Māori can begin to build their own structures of knowledge, for example through kaupapa Māori research and Māori-operated educational institutions, such as Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiārangi.

Feminism = noticing the structures of sexism and racism

For Ahmed, we notice such 'silencing structures' because of the bodies we have. As she puts it, 'becoming feminist puts us in touch with a world through alienation from a world' (p. 43). This alienation is achieved through walls, which can leave women bruised, sore, cold, hungry – and locked out. As Waitere and Johnston (2009) describe it, 'We continue to struggle to mark our presence, to find normative entry points into places that continue to struggle to see us as normal …' (p. 28). Ahmed blurs the distinction between speaking metaphorically and literally about walls. Drawing on post-structural theories of discourses and power structures, she instead argues that the oppressive power of walls operates through their very ability to appear invisible. Thus, to speak of 'walls' as though they are lingual constructions which do not impede bodies and actions in the lived, material world is to perpetuate that invisibility, and the discrimination which operates through it. To emphasise this point, Ahmed presents photographs of walls throughout her text. They are made of brick, representing '"the hardenings of history," the building materials of power' (p. 91). Below, I present my own series of walls and structures, which signify the hardenings of history in Aotearoa/New Zealand, through institutions of power which have discriminated by gender and race.

Figure 1 (next page). Interior of Te Whai-a-te-Motu meeting house, Mataatua, c.1910. Blue album. Ref: PA1-o-042-15-2. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22699547.

In Figure 1, what is most striking is the lack of divisional walls. The structure of the wharenui symbolises the embracement of the collective whānau, and has been built to resemble a living body: the tāhuhu, or ridge beam, is the backbone; the heke, or rafters, are the ribs; and the poutokomanawa, or central column, is the heart (Brown, 2014).

Figure 2. State house, Levin, 1945. Pascoe, John Dobree, 1908-1972: Photographic albums, prints and negatives. Ref: 1/4-001183-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22307813.

The New Zealand state house shown in Figure 2 is individualistic in design: it is divided into distinct spaces, with the sections between the houses delineated by straight, white fences.

Figure 3 (left). Detail of a kitchen interior, 1932. Ref: 1/1-015728-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22743243.

Figure 4 (right). Kitchen interior [n.d.]. Burt, Gordon Onslow Hilbury, 1893-1968: Negatives. Ref: 1/1-015754-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22647861.

In Figures 3 and 4, the Pākehā women are facing away from the camera, and their bodies are positioned into passive, powerless poses. Through the photographer's gaze, we have the sense of observing these women as if they are on display. In their engagement with the domestic items around them (crockery, tea towels, taps, stove, pots, pans), they appear to be objects themselves, dominated and contained by the walls of the buildings.

Figure 5. Activities at Massey College, 1951. The Evening Post (1865-2002): Photographic negatives and prints of the Evening Post newspaper. Ref: 114/408/20-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/23047512.

In the photograph of Massey Veterinary College (Figure 5), the power and privilege of the structure are evidenced by the wall height, the generous electrical lighting, the portraits on the far wall, the trophies, and the bookcases lined with heavy texts. The postures of the men are confident and relaxed. In the far right is a woman, though we barely see her – she is turned away from the camera, not called into view.

Figure 6. Nurses, Wellington Hospital, 1953. Crown Studios Ltd: Negatives and prints. Ref: 1/1-030414-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22857781.

In Figure 6, the women themselves appear to be part of the wall. Each woman can be thought of as a brick within this wall, cemented together by their identical uniforms and appearance.

Figure 7. Dormer Beck Caltex Campaign, 1970. K. E. Niven and Co.: Commercial negatives. Ref: 1/2-223258-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22799617

In Figure 7, it is the men who serve as the wall. Their bodies point toward the woman, so that she is confined by the men's height, arms, and shoulders. She smiles, while they are expressionless; her commodity is white skin and white teeth, while the men are professional, fully clothed, and possessing objects of power.

Figure 8. Scenes from Waitangi Marae, 1963. Ref: AWM-0284-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/36062280.

The Māori women in Figure 8 contrast sharply with the woman in Figure 7. Their position on the marae is not one of passivity or confinement, but of responsibility and agency. Our attention is drawn to the kuia, who is adorned with ceremonial objects of power. She faces forward, her head tilted upward, and the strength of her posture is reinforced by the framework of the wharenui behind her.

Although these are historical images, the ways in which women are positioned as objects and subjects amongst these structures and walls persist in modern media (Wilkes, 2015). For example, in her analysis of how gender and ethnicity are depicted and constructed in New Zealand television advertisements, Michelle (2012) found that white women were almost always targeted in advertisements for 'household products, personal products, and medical products, and featured predominantly as homemakers' (p. 21). Echoing the depictions of white men in Figures 5 and 7, white men were found to represent financial, corporate, and legal services, while Māori and Pasifika men were found to dominate athletic advertisements. 'Non-White' women, not including Māori or Pasifika women, were targeted in advertisements for personal grooming and frequently appeared as glamour models, while non-White men were depicted as blue-collar workers. Most strikingly, Māori and Pasifika women were all but absent from the advertisements, representing the 'multiple axes of subordination' encountered by these women in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Michelle, 2012, p. 21).

Feminism = naming and unnaming

As we come up against the walls, structures, and institutions which continue to enforce such discriminatory practices, we learn to name these structures. Thus, words such as 'sexism' and 'racism' and 'ableism' and 'transphobia' become not only descriptions of our social environments, but ways for us to practise activism within our daily lives. Ahmed (2017) often returns to the example of sitting around a table, be it a dining table or a board table or another type of table. At this table, there are things which are at stake. Perhaps it is the harmony of the family, or the agreement of the members, or the signing of an agenda. Enclosing this setting are walls. The group gathers in order to protect and preserve the thing which is at stake; but the feminist woman senses, even if she still struggles to articulate it, that this 'thing' contains waves of violence, that its survival depends upon the silence of those who have been shattered. She ventures to interrupt, to voice her own biography of violence. She says, 'But that *[-----]* is sexist,' or 'That *[-----]* is racist.' Immediately there is a disruption. The group shifts, alters its orientation, turning in defence against the woman who has spoken. 'You are being dramatic,' it says, 'You are being sensational.' The group recoils into its own safety net, protecting the thing which has been threatened. But the word 'racist' remains, hovering in the corners of the room. The dust has been raised.

Ahmed reintroduces Audre Lorde's description of words such as racism and sexism as 'grown up words' (Lorde, as cited in Ahmed, 2017, p. 128), with these words being retrospective: they never manage to catch up with what has been encountered in the world during our childhood and beyond, before we had the words to articulate our experiences. But *the act of naming* in and of itself can bring us closer to understanding what it is that we have experienced. By naming we make manifest the invisible structures. We throw the names at the walls and wait for the names to bounce back, like balls. 'Feminist and antiracist consciousness involves not just finding the words, but through the words, how they point, realizing how violence is directed: violence is directed toward some bodies more than others' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 34).

In the current wave of feminism, as we encounter a political and social climate in which feminism and women's rights are treated as a 'thing' already achieved, and hence no longer requiring institutional support, continuing to voice resistance is as necessary as ever (Eagley & Riger, 2014). This comes as women's studies programmes are increasingly coming under threat in universities. For example, Victoria University closed the longest-standing women's studies programme in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 2010, claiming that it was no longer sustainable, and that 'gender studies' were being implemented more successfully through other programmes, such as psychology (Fisher, 2010). As Ahmed notes, 'This sense of feminism as "past it" is how feminism ends up not being taught; there is a fantasy of feminist digestion, as if feminism has already been taken in and assimilated into a body and is thus no longer required' (p. 112). As Mandy Morgan (2005) writes of her struggle to articulate the histories of embodied domination through *dis*embodied, technologised 'psy-discourse':

> *... could I say, for example, that my questions formed in the cells of a woman's body – flesh thick with unshed tears, yellowed and browned with bruises, undulating rose in the scar-tissue? Would rhetorical competency erase from my memory the poetics of lived embodiment?* (italics in original) (Morgan, 2005, p. 326)

In this sense, our efforts at naming both enable and constrain our ability to live a feminist life. As Ahmed suggests, the more that feminist and diversity policies become textually embedded within institutions, through what she refers to as 'diversity documents' or policies, the less pressure those institutions come under to implement concrete change. Rather, the emphasis shifts onto writing a good policy, similar to an advertisement campaign, while gender inequality still continues unabated in unacknowledged, invisible ways – as in Ahmed's own experience at Goldsmiths, the University of London, with unacknowledged, unrelenting sexual harassment finally prompting her to leave the room. 'The fantasy of feminist digestion is a little bit like diversity: a fantasy fold … A fantasy of being folded in is how some bodies are kept out' (p. 112). Thus, we chip at the walls with words, all the while recognising the inherent possibility of the words becoming part of the wall – just as in Figure 6 the nurses appear to have become bricks in a wall, cemented together by their uniformity.

Feminism = tracing trajectories across space and time

Moving beyond individual structures and walls, Ahmed describes women's lives as being directed by traffic systems. The purpose of traffic systems is to ensure flow, with human beings moving forward in a steady, continuous, singular direction. What is planned against is disruption: accidents, reversals, break-downs, and protests. Institutions, supported by walls, buildings, and networks of streets and highways, can work to minimise such disruptions by channelling the traffic in certain directions, and fining those who disobey the rules. These fines become increasingly severe the more the tides of social conventions are contravened.

Heterosexuality, marriage, the nuclear family, religion, morality, education, advertising, politics, health-care, policing, prisons, psychology, and many other structural, discursive institutions are imbued with explicit and implicit 'traffic rules.' Furthermore, what these rules are, and what it means to break them, are insolvably tied to economic systems (Inglehart & Baker, 2000).

Figure 9. Maori land march, Porirua motorway, 1975. The Dominion: Photographic negatives and prints of the Evening Post and Dominion newspapers. Ref: EP/1975/4333/21-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/23185344.

Figure 10. Women marching to protest against the abortion laws, Willis Street, Wellington, 1973. The Dominion: Photographic negatives and prints of the Evening Post and Dominion newspapers. Ref: EP/1973/4154/19A-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. / records/22304496.

Figures 9 and 10 visually present such embodied disruption of traffic systems. The provocation of the protestors necessarily occurs within a neoliberal context which thrives on the privatisation and individualisation of poverty, discrimination, and crime (Roberts, 2014). Thus, activism involves *collectively* getting in the way of mechanised systems, occupying spaces which were not intended for certain bodies. In her summary of intersectionality, Ferguson (2017) laments the description of intersectionality through an 'unfortunate traffic metaphor, wherein intersections are discrete points where lines cross' (p. 271). She suggests, instead, the metaphor of a 'sprawling marshland fed by many different resources, which themselves shift and pulse within larger mobile systems of tides and currents' (p. 272). Her imagery does offer a welcome sense of breadth and multiplicity to intersectionality, but it undermines the material realities of human existences, as they tend to be situated amongst built structures.

Intersectionality = a travelling theory

Here, Salem's (2016) analysis of intersectional feminism as a travelling theory (Said, 1983) fits appropriately with Ahmed's (2017) argument on 'being directed.' Salem argues that 'the context of the neoliberal academy plays a major role in the ways in which intersectionality has lost much of its critical potential in some of its usages today' (p. 1), with this critical potential rooted in the radical origins of intersectionality in Black and Third World feminisms. For Black and Third World feminists, intersectionality was a way of disrupting the traffic flow of White feminism. It was a protest against the invisibility of racism and classism in the works of many neoliberal, W.E.I.R.D.[1] feminists, who, in their efforts to attain equality with their male counterparts, neglected to extend their gains to the women of colour and working class women in their communities. These radical roots are what continue to give intersectionality its critical power; however, just as human beings are directed by traffic systems, theories that enter the mainstream also become directed by traffic systems, with costs exacted for disrupting the flow. Salem (2016) traces intersectionality's trajectory through time and space, arguing that as intersectionality has become a 'catch-all' feminist theory, it has inevitably been watered down. Thus, intersectionality becomes a tool for *claiming* to attend to diversity, whilst subtly disguising the racist and classist inequalities which continue to exist between women.

> It is these moves to stretch intersectionality and make it an approach that fits all feminist ontologies that has undermined its radical potential. Precisely because conflicting approaches use intersectionality, and precisely because intersectionality works to hide these conflicts, feminism ends up being presented as a field devoid of power relations, a field of 'diversity'. (Salem, 2016, p. 4)

Feminism = wilful female subjectivity

For Ahmed (2017), addressing intersectional oppression requires that we become wilful subjects. Ahmed draws us to the embodiment of this wilfulness through the imagery of a woman's arm, as it appears in the Grimm story of 'the wilful child.' In this story, a girl is so wilful and disobedient to her mother that God wishes her to fall ill and die; however, this little girl is *so* wilful that even in death she disobeys: as her body is lowered into the grave and covered with soil, her arm jerks back up again and again, in a last act of defiance. The story ends with the mother going down into the grave and striking her daughter's arm down with a rod, at which point the child is finally stilled. In Grimm's patriarchal Western telling wilfulness (or, the inclination to cause disruptions, to disobey) is depicted as a grave sin, one which will lead to death – to being stricken down by the rod of authority. Ahmed draws a connection between this 'wilful arm' and the wilful female subjectivity required to push, scratch, and bang against the brick walls of white male supremacy. She transforms wilfulness from a source of shame into a source of strength: to keep on being wilful is to keep on disrupting the status quo, to risk the punishments and consequences which come with voicing resistance.

According to Ahmed, this wilfulness takes on a new meaning when understood within the context of intersectionality's radical roots. Drawing on Alice Walker's concept of 'womanist,' which has its origins in American slavery and black feminism, Ahmed distinguishes a *wilful womanist* as being considered disobedient for even daring to have a will (black slave women were considered to be property, and hence not in possession of their own wills). Furthermore, to be a wilful woman in black slave culture was considered to be responsible and serious, not irresponsible or childish, as 'wilful women' are depicted in Western culture. Thus, 'Womanism gives expression not to the disobedience of the female child, but to how she is becoming

woman' (Ahmed, 2017, p. 79). Ahmed posits that this reclamation of wilfulness along Walker's womanist lines is fundamental to ongoing feminist agendas. It stretches beyond individual experiences of violence, reminding us that:

> The violence that we have to survive is not only gender-based violence, or violence that might take place at home; although it includes these forms of violence. It is the violence of enslavement, of colonization, of empire. It is the requirement to give up kin, culture, memory, language, land. We reclaim wilfulness in refusing to give up; and in refusing to forget the severances that have been performed ... (Ahmed, 2017, p. 80)

Ahmed suggests that the tension caused by the historical trajectories of colonisation can be bridged by wilful womanist dialogue: for to be womanist is also to be loving, and to seek loving connections with other women whom we recognise as adopting similarly wilful stances (p. 82). Through this dialogue, histories of violence can be voiced *and* heard, not for the sake of absolving guilt or blanketing differences under the broadcloth of 'diversity', but for the sake of staying close to our collective and individual 'scenes of violence' (p. 84). It is this close reflexivity to our histories that can enable women (all women) to bring together their fragments and their shattered selves, and to seek better conditions for each other, not in isolation but in what Ahmed describes as a wilful feminist army, made up of arms which keep thrashing both in life and in death.

Figure 11. Whina Cooper addressing the Maori Land March at Hamilton, 1975. Heinegg, Christian F, 1940 - : Photographs of the Maori Land March. Ref: 35mm-87529-13-F. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. /records/22700614.

Conclusion

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, mana wāhine serves as a similar, albeit different, form of wilful womanism. The upheld arm of Te Rawara leader Whina Cooper as she undertook the 1975 hīkoi from Mangere to the Wellington Parliament (King, 2000) serves here as an embodied symbol of perseverance and wilfulness. Over the 1,000 kilometre walk, it is the figure of 79-year-old Whina Cooper which stands out, as she wilfully leads Māori into the spaces and structures from which they had been institutionally shut out. As bell hooks (2015) states at the end of her classic text, *Feminism is for everybody*, 'To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality' (p. 110). Just as Whina Cooper is rooted in her concrete reality, her upheld arm offers us possibilities for imagining what lies beyond that reality. Though these possibilities are still in formation, and will require a great deal of wilful disobedience to be brought about, it is the embodiment of theory within activism which gives intersectional feminisms their realist and aspirational qualities.

In this essay, I have attempted to cover a broad terrain, reflecting on Sara Ahmed's *Living a feminist life* (2017) to articulate my own emergent feminist consciousness in the context

of my homeland, Aotearoa/New Zealand. This articulation cannot begin or end without acknowledging the historical debts which Pākehā owe to Māori. Through intersectional feminisms, and particularly mana wāhine, it is hoped that Pākehā feminists such as myself can learn to listen more intently to other voices of resistance, and, through this active listening, redress a fraction (though never all the fractures) of our colonial histories of violence. Regrettably, my discussion has not found room to consider other intersectionalities, especially those pertaining to class, transgender, and disabilities. Such considerations belong to other essays, and other explorations of walls.

LEOLA MURPHY is currently completing her Honours degree in Psychology at Massey University, Manawatū. In 2017 she completed a research project titled Women Blogging About Depression, in which she analysed the narrative spaces and articulations available within women's online depression texts. In 2018, she will undertake a Master's thesis on the experiences of mothers with schizophrenia. She hopes to contribute to feminist psychology work in her community, and is currently part of the group re-establishing Thursdays in Black on the Massey University Manawatū campus.

Note

1 Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

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