

CANADIAN JOURNAL OF

Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association

Association Canadienne des Études sur le Handicap

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo.ca

“Hap Walk”:

A Reading of *Living a Feminist Life* by Sara Ahmed and
“Docile Bodies” in *Discipline and Punish* by Michel Foucault

Patricia Ki
Doctoral Student, Critical Disability Studies
York University, Toronto, ON
ki.patricia@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper grew from the imagining that Sara Ahmed and Michel Foucault, both influential scholars in my ever-developing understanding of the world, met face-to-face one ordinary day, discussed their ideas, responded to each other's queries, reflected on historical and ongoing social injustices, and shared hopeful imaginings for the future. In this imaginary account, through the form of dialogues, I compare, contrast, and examine concepts in Foucault's and Ahmed's works—specifically, the chapter “Docile Bodies” in *Discipline and Punish*, published in 1977, and the book *Living a Feminist Life*, published 40 years later in 2017.¹ Following Ahmed, I use path, walls, and tables as both metaphors and material effects of disciplinary power to link theorizations from the two texts regarding the embodiment of discipline, through which white, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal norms persist. Further, I ask questions of Foucault's text about the seeming invisibility of women and disabled people in its discussion of docile bodies and disciplinary power and echo other feminist scholars in arguing that it is through the perspectives and experiences of those who have been cast out of belonging and rendered invisible that we may find the means to expose the most cemented and hidden structures and techniques of domination and to imagine forms of resistance and subversions that point to a different future.

For the purpose of clarity, direct quotes from Ahmed's and Foucault's texts are italicized within the dialogues, accompanied by in-text citations.

Keywords: gender, disability, feminism, disciplinary power, embodiment, capitalist relations, heteropatriarchy, whiteness, resistance, imagination

¹ This paper and the accompanying images were originally presented as an artist's book, which is 8.5” x 5.5” in size with hand-sewn binding.

I have noted how the word happiness derives from the Middle English word hap, suggesting chance. One history of happiness is the history of the removal of its hap, such that happiness is defined not in terms of what happens to you but of what you work for... The narrow scripts of happiness are precisely about the violence of the elimination of the hap. (Ahmed, 2017, p. 265)

Historians of ideas usually attribute the dream of a perfect society to the philosophers and jurists of the eighteenth century; but there was also a military dream of society; its fundamental reference was not to the state of nature, but to the meticulously subordinated cogs of a machine, not to the primal social contract, but to permanent coercions, not to fundamental rights, but to indefinitely progressive forms of training, not to the general will but to automatic docility. (Foucault, 1977, p. 169)



Image Description: Black and white photograph of a park with short grass and a path in the centre lined with large trees; a single park bench is perched along the path and appears small beneath the trees.

I imagine meeting Michel Foucault on a park bench. The kind of park benches with statues of famous and important people sitting on them, where one can pose for photos pretending to be in conversations with figures who have long passed. I imagine encountering Foucault on such a park bench on which he is a statue, the great significance and authority of his work and his status forever cemented and perpetually reinforced by the fact that such a statue of him exists. I would sit beside Foucault the statue, and we would exchange words, for although his actual body no longer exists in the world of the living, he appears all the time in the minds and conversations of those within and outside of academia, influencing thoughts and shaping knowledge every day.

What would I say to him, and what would he say to me? I think I'd like to ask, "what for? Why all these theorizings? All these minute details? This time-consuming intellectual labour? Surely, it's not just an intellectual exercise. What made you so interested in discipline, the production of the docile body, the genealogy of that production? What did you hope to happen if we were to adopt your thoughts, your theories about society, about our bodies?"

"Change," I imagine him saying. "Change that would free those who are confined, not only on the ground but also in the mind. There isn't a separation of the two, only we think there is... we think these thoughts for change, *ma chère*."

My dear. He might call me my dear because he is a man. A white man and I'm an Asian woman. And if I didn't know better, I wouldn't flinch at the infantilizing remark that rolled off the tongue so easily. I think of what he calls "*the instrumental coding of the body*" (Foucault, 1977, p. 153).

I think of gender norms as tools that make and remake the world, like “*barrel, notch, hammer, screw, etc.*” (ibid.) in military manoeuvres or factory assembly lines. “*Over the whole surface of contact between the body and the object it handles, power is introduced, fastening them to one another*” (ibid.). He’s right. Every part of our bodies can be shaped by and fastened to these norms, including the tongue. The words we say, not even thinking. No one is immune from the disciplinary force of norms and structures, not even Foucault. It is “*the way this diseased society has infused our very blood systems*” (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1983, p. 63). But I flinch, instead of sitting pretty as a dear, because I’ve had other teachers.

Luckily, in this dialogue of thoughts, I have control over what I communicate and what I reserve for myself, much like regular speech. So. Foucault doesn’t seem to notice that I cringed. And he doesn’t seem to notice how gender difference requires further treatment in his analysis, with only occasional mentioning of female prisoners in *Discipline and Punish* (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011). Lengthy analysis, spanning volumes, but only scarce attention to gender, even in his study of sexuality (Federici, 2004). It’s true. In Foucault’s detailed descriptions of the discipline of the students, the factory workers, the military, the docile bodies, their gender, and race are not described. Genderless? Not marked by race? Of course not. Race as a ruling concept developed hand-in-hand with colonization in the 1600s (ibid.). The bodies described in Foucault’s examples were most likely cisgender, male and European. In the 17th and 18th centuries, children assigned male at birth were likely given priority access to education, expected to work, deal with matters outside of the home and fight in wars and conquer other nations. Those assigned female at birth were expected to embody obedient domesticity. Anyone whose gender defied these socially constructed norms and binaries, whose sexualities defied compulsory heteronormativity and/or

whose behaviors defied established behavioral norms were persecuted, in some contexts as witches. Racialized others were enslaved in those same wars and conquests (ibid.). I know that. “We know that,” a voice cuts through the space between me and Foucault. Sara Ahmed appears suddenly before us as the figure of feminist killjoy, offering a stable hand to a less sure-footed killjoy-in-training. I imagine that she would be delighted to interrupt Foucault’s moment of teaching by pointing out a wrong: a profoundly important point grossly neglected in a widely revered set of theories.

“When a whole world is organized to promote your survival, from health to education, to the walls designed to keep your residence safe, to the paths that ease your travel, you do not have to become so inventive to survive.” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 237)

Foucault squints at Ahmed, puzzled by both her sudden appearance and her words. Ahmed sighs and explains. “When your gender is understood as the universal, the ideal, you don’t have to look at gender. You don’t have to think about it. You don’t think it makes a difference. But we live with the difference. We can’t not notice it. We must carefully look at it, because if we don’t, we get hurt. We will perish. Our *wills* perish.”

She turns to me, “let’s go for a walk.”

We leave the statue of Foucault on the park bench perched along a paved path, smoking his pipe, perhaps shaking his head. But perhaps also in deep thoughts, mulling over what was just said, tentatively allowing our words to seep into the walls around some of his conceptualizations.

“Wait, I want to hear this,” he might say, standing up from the bench, leaving behind his bronze shell. “If you’re going to talk about something different from my work, then I want to hear what change you think can come of it.”

We divert from the path, and meander into the woods.



Image Description: Black and white photograph of the woods, and a faint path in between densely planted trees is made visible by protruding roots and rocks.

PATH

We followed a faint path in the woods marked by protruding roots and rocks. Foucault directs a comment at me with a sideways glance. “I understand you only read the chapter on docile bodies in *Discipline and Punish* for this comparative texts paper.”

“Yes,” I reply, treading carefully, feeling the soft earth beneath my feet, finding my ground. “In

resistance to the mode of discipline and self-discipline in the academy,” I add. “And the protestant work ethic,” I add further, then feel a bit deflated falling back into the good student mold. I don’t tell him that I read Ahmed’s *Living a Feminist Life* in its entirety, for the same paper.

“Discipline does have roots in religion, yes,” says Foucault, gazing at the ground thoughtfully as he strolls, his voice softened slightly. Perhaps sensing my efforts. Perhaps sensing the myriad power relations between us that demand such efforts. “You’re a student, so you would understand when I talk about how *the education space function[s] like a learning machine, but also as a machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding.*” (Foucault, 1977, p. 147)

I venture out. “Individuals are distributed according to particular arrangement of space, in classrooms, corridors, courtyards, according to each pupil’s rank based on a hierarchy of ability and knowledge... each pupil is assigned a place in a series — and by this, I think you mean both a series of physical space and a series of distinctions, like character, academic progress, cleanliness, and economic status.” Finding my steps. “And yes, you wrote that this attention to details for the purpose of social control is not a sudden discovery or invention, but has a long history in theology and asceticism since God knows and wills every detail in human life. The economic and political changes in the 18th century and the development of capitalism merely accelerated the use and expansion of this mechanism of control and classification of individuals. I appreciate being pointed to this genealogy.” Borrowing his words.

“*Bien,*” says Foucault, “then it wouldn’t be hard for you to see how the monastic ordering of space and distribution of individuals are also replicated in the manufactories and barracks.”

“Yes, but you keep writing about people who fit in these series of space and classification. What about people who don’t? Like women, and trans men. Like people who live outside of the dichotomy of male versus female gender norms. Like immigrants. People of Colour. People whose bodies and minds can’t be shaped to fit in these colonial, heteronormative orderings. People whose bodies aren’t expected to show up in these serial spaces in the 18th century.” Words tumble out of my mouth. A burning question. I feel my face burning; how dare I.

“Well, you should read my work on *Madness and Civilization*. Or at least the rest of *Discipline and Punish*.” Eyebrows raised. “I talked about, for example, the insane, children and the colonized.” (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011)

“But we’re here now,” Ahmed interjects sharply, “and it *was* a valid point she raised.”

Feeling encouraged, I continue, carefully. “The gates you describe at the factories control the coming and going of workers with precise timing. Same with the corridors in schools and factories. The particular ways of how rooms are set up and bodies are placed according to rank and purpose, making it easier to supervise the effectiveness, location, and trajectory of these bodies and their activities (Schwan & Shapiro, 2011). And to measure each one against each other, to make sure each one is up to par. I think this relates to how Ahmed talks about power, *how power works as a mode of directionality, a way of orientating bodies in particular ways, so they are facing a certain way, heading toward a future that is given a face.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 43)

“In ‘Docile Bodies,’ these are specific disciplinary techniques in confined spaces of schools, factories, the barracks. Surely it didn’t take long for these regulations and rules to become just natural, ordinary parts of the day, or even become habits that no longer feel like rules imposed,” searching my brain for intelligent words; talking with Foucault and Ahmed isn’t part of everyday ordinary life, after all.

“In *Living a Feminist Life*, I think Ahmed talks about a very similar operation of disciplinary techniques, but now we’re not just looking inside these institutions, we’re looking at how people live their lives every moment, disciplined by pervasive social norms, being carried along like in a river current, or in a flow of traffic,” borrowing words. “Going with the flow saves you energy. The flow claims to direct you down a straight path, towards the happy ends of a nuclear, heteropatriarchal family and accumulation of wealth. So it’s a path of heterosexual norms. Also, a path that brings people in closer proximity to whiteness. And a path of gender arrangements that ease the travel of cisgender men by subordinating and devaluing women and everyone else who falls outside of this narrow, idealized category of cis men. So if you’re not heterosexual, if you’re not white, not middle-class, not cis, not male, then you will have a harder time going with that flow. Then it’s not so much a flow but a push, or a press, pressing you to become someone you’re not.” Speaking from experience, I find it easier to breathe.

Ahmed gives an example about travel: “*Gendering operates in how bodies take up space: think of the intense sociality of the subway or train, how some men typically lounge around, with their legs wide... Women might end up not even having much space in front of their own seats; that space has been taken up. To become accommodating, we take up less space.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p.

25)

“Our bodies shrink. Women’s bodies are literally shaped and pressed by relations of power,” I add, “and violence. *Being girl is a way of being taught what it is to have a body: you are being told; you will receive my advances; you are object; thing, nothing.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 26)

“I see how you’re drawing on my theory of *political anatomy*,” (Foucault, 1977, p. 138) Foucault mutters, half to himself, more thoughtfully than righteously.

“I think of feminism as a figure, stopping in the middle of the flow, or going against the flow of docile bodies, refusing to step aside or shrink. Imagine her in the factory, the corridor of a school...” I want to say that she will inspire many by her counteractions, but my imagining is suddenly stopped by a feeling of terror, knowing the long history of violence perpetrated against women who counteract.

“The figure of a stranger,” Ahmed says, with tenderness. “And this is where we come up against walls.”



Image Description: Black and white photograph showing the close-up of a brick wall in the woods, in the distance are more brick walls with window openings, which appear to be remnants of a house.

WALLS

Suddenly, before us is a remnant of a wall, part of a ruin of a building. So engrossed we are in our discussion, we don't notice this wall until we are right up against it.

Ahmed walks up to the wall and places her palm on it, "*those hardenings of histories into barriers in the present*. Look at how histories are cemented every time a norm is enacted.

The flow becomes a wall against you when you're not flowing that same way." (Ahmed, 2017, p. 135; p. 215)

“It’s true,” she turns and addresses Foucault, “the discipline you wrote about is not like torture, it is not just beating someone to death if they’ve gone astray. Discipline is to make bodies useful, effective, purposeful. There is a purpose. If you are seen as not serving the purpose or threatening the collective purpose, walls come up to stop you from going where you want to be going, or stop certain bodies from passing through. *We could think of whiteness as a wall... you walk into a room and it is like a sea of whiteness. A sea: a wall of water,*” she slaps her palm on the wall beside her, “*You would stick out like a sore thumb. So you might leave the situation voluntarily... What one body experiences as solid, another might experience as air.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 146)

“Discipline. Both body and mind,” Foucault squints, leaning against the wall. “*From the master of discipline to him who is subjected to it the relation is one of signalization: it is a question not of understanding the injunction but of perceiving the signal and reacting to it immediately... it is a technique of training, of dressage, that ‘despotically excludes in everything the least representation, and the smallest murmur.’*” (Foucault, 1977, p. 166)

“The wall is a signal! For us to leave, to stay invisible,” I remark, perhaps a bit too excitedly. Ahmed nods. “It’s also about perception, isn’t it. Not only of the signal but also of the subject. When some bodies are perceived as strangers, *as dangerous in advance of their arrival... The immediacy of bodily reactions is mediated by histories that come before subjects... You can be stopped by a perception. You can be killed by a perception.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 145)

“The killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman,” Foucault gazes downward and adjusts his glasses, “an unarmed black youth shot because ‘*he looks black.*’ Yes, I read about that on a paper someone left on the bench a few years ago” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 144)

Walls are also tangible, material realities, just as the figure of the stranger is not merely figurative. “So you might also have read about the US president’s insistence to massively extend the border wall barring people from entering from Mexico. *A wall becomes necessary because the wrong bodies could pass through... some bodies are allowed to pass through, which means that the wall does not come up in the same way even if a wall is there, literally, actually. A wall is not encountered as a wall: it is an open door, a passage through.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 145)

Another brick wall comes to mind. “Comparable to the outer walls confining the barracks in the 1700s, for the purpose of *maintaining the troops in ‘order and discipline’*, and the walled factory town, *to protect materials and tools and to master the labour force.*” (Foucault, 1977, p. 142)

“Yes, I saw that too,” Foucault shakes his head. “It seems things haven’t changed, or even made a turn for the worse since I last walked this earth. But perhaps not all things,” he looked at me and Ahmed. “You are keeping up with this work, this digging, this analyzing beyond the positivist search for facts. Like Schwan and Shapiro (2011) who wrote the companion book (but beware of the temptation to just read that and not the original source), you understand that this is ‘*not simply a matter of antiquarian interest in the past, but is also a ‘history of the present’, a history that wants to intervene in the current social policies and politics by revealing the ways in which current society is constructed*’ (p. 48), as I have done in 1971 and 1972, exposing the operations of French prisons to protest against the inhumane treatment of prisoners, to challenge

domination.”

“But let’s not forget your question,” Foucault continues, holding up an index finger, “in the examples of discipline I analyzed, how about people who didn’t fit in the first place. Let me ask you this: is it necessary for me to analyze all perspectives? Is it possible for anyone to analyze all perspectives?” His tone inquisitive rather than defensive.

“Well, seeing that many people have made use of and built on your concepts to analyze a lot of different groups and situations since you published your work... and obviously one cannot analyze all perspectives...” I catch my inclination to agree, to waver, to turn around when I encounter a wall. So, I lean into the wall, to examine more closely the histories cemented in it.

“But women are a significant group. Significant not just statistically, but more importantly because of the restrictive, hierarchical binary between the discursive constructions of men and women, of men versus women, and the gender norms that uphold such binary, are primary organizing structures in many societies since time immemorial. So, to lump everybody in one disciplined mass, without consideration to how bodies are gendered, and particularly how bodies that are gendered as female are subjugated and exploited, and further, how bodies and sexualities that defy these male/female norms are demonized, persecuted and systematically erased, we miss looking at the crucial contexts and techniques through which dominating structures like capitalism develop and evolve.” (Federici, 2004)

“Huh,” says Foucault, squinting his eyes, furrowing his brows.

“Might there be walls around your writing then, that you didn’t see? *Race might seem immaterial or less material if you are white; gender might seem immaterial or less material if you are a cis man... (dis)ability might seem immaterial or less material if you are able-bodied,*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 148) carefully sidestepping reference to sexuality in my citation, knowing he wrote extensively on that topic.

“So, some of us, women of colour, draw from and cite different sources,” Ahmed explains, “as you were careful in choosing your sources, we too were particular about ours, precisely the ones that can teach us about what and who have been missing in what we read, and why. *I cite those who have contributed to the intellectual genealogy of feminism and antiracism, including work that has been too quickly (in my view) cast aside or left behind.* They give us tools to dismantle old walls and bricks from which to create new dwellings.” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 15)

Tired of standing in one place, we begin walking around the walls, weaving through the remainders of what might have once been a house, or a barn, or a storage shed. What was its use? It’s hard to tell anymore. Walls become reified, divorced from its histories and contexts, its purpose of domination hidden. The docile body is conditioned and trained to obey promptly and blindly, “*few words, no explanation*” (Foucault, 1977, p. 168), in the military as it is in schools. So to the everyday passerby, they’re merely walls, they’re just norms. *Just* norms. Justified by how normal and natural they appear.

Ahmed continues, “our work, then, requires us *to become conscious of that which tends to*

recede... walls are the material means by which worlds are not encountered, let alone

registered.” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 18) Like the patriarchal social order that has rendered both itself and female bodies invisible in Foucault’s massive undertaking of the genealogy of social and political discipline, I think.

We walk over a few stone steps. Ahmed tells a story. “Remember Molly, from *Adam Bede* by George Eliot, who is criticized as too slow by her mother when she was drawing ale, so she hastens her steps, and falls, and breaks the jugs of ale. Her mother,” Ahmed pauses to step over a large rock in her way, “says, ‘*It’s all your own willfulness, as I tell you, for there’s no call to break anything.*’” (Eliot, in Ahmed, 2017, p. 167)

“Yes,” I think of Molly, a child, cheeks burning with shock, regret and undoubtedly fear of being punished. “You’ve talked about how we can see Molly as someone who is out of sync with the flow, who is too slow, who is inefficient, and clumsy. Her mother’s urging is not seen as the cause of her nervousness which leads her to stumble, so the urging is representative of those expectations and ideals that are not revealed. Therefore when we come up against walls that others can’t see, *it might be assumed we have tripped ourselves up, that we have wrong-footed ourselves; that our willfulness is behind our downfall.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 175)

“You see, this is what I mean,” I turn to Foucault, “your description of discipline stops at saying (just in this chapter, I’m fully aware) *an appearance of indocility, the least delay would be a crime.* There is no discussion of people who appear to fail in going with the flow despite trying to do so,” (Boussanelle, in Foucault, 1977, p. 166) I add, “*bodies with differing capacities and*

incapacities, rhythms and tendencies... [in] a world that has assumed a certain kind of body as a norm." (Ahmed, 2017, p. 167)

"Bodies that simply cannot fit into these formulas of *the best relation between a gesture and the overall position of the body, which is its condition of efficiency and speed,*" (Foucault, 1977, p. 152) I further make my point. "You quote La Salle and give the example of good handwriting, and teachers placing students in particular ways at their desks. But what about people whose bodies cannot conform to these normative uses of hands. Or arms. What about people who don't fit in chairs and desks?"

A long pause. I fix my gaze on my shoes, trying not to trip over my words. "For one thing, they get blamed. Like Molly. They get blamed for being the problem, the burden, the uncooperative, the unwilling, the willful. They become the target of disdain so that we don't see the operations of what you call *[s]mall acts of cunning endowed with great power of diffusion.* This is why their stories require attention; the specific ways of how they — and how we as women — are perceived and treated are crucial to the operation *and* concealment of control and power." (Foucault, 1977, p. 139)

"Sometimes we even need to shatter the stories we tell ourselves," Ahmed pushes further, "those internal walls that *lead you to doubt what you perceive; it can lead you to try to modify your own perception. That doubt is then turned inward.*" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 170)

Foucault nods, finally responding. "The meticulous series and classification about the most minute details of *each individual, according to his level, his seniority, his rank, the exercises that*

are suited to him, administered in subtle arrangements, apparently innocent, will surely drive his focus and scrutiny toward himself, and the group's collective attention towards the individual, thereby obscuring the infiltration of power through the regiments they are subjected to."

(Foucault, 1977, p. 158; p. 139)

"Details are important," he continues, "*it is impossible to erect any building or establish any method without understanding its principles. It is not enough to have a liking for architecture. One must also know stone-cutting,*" (Saxe, in Foucault, 1977, p. 139) gesturing back to the walls, "or masonry."

"To dismantle the master's house, and to build a different kind of dwelling, is impossible with the master's tools," I recall Audre Lorde's words, so frequently cited in Ahmed's writing. "And it's impossible to avoid using the master's tools if we don't know what they are."

"*We want to shatter the foundations. It is not surprising that if we try to shatter the foundations upon which we build something, what we build is fragile,*" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 176) Ahmed picks up a small rock as she walks. She rubs her fingers around its jagged edges and puts it in her pocket. "But we can also see *shattering as the beginning of another story.*" (Ahmed, 2017, p. 266)



Image Description: Black and white, bird's eye view photograph of an empty outdoor café and a person walking past it; the small square tables their accompanying chairs are loosely arranged in a grid-like fashion.

TABLES

Our footsteps lead us out of the woods. We find ourselves in an outdoor café, with tables loosely arranged in a grid formation. We sit down around one of the tables as the sky begins to dim across the horizon.

A wait staff approaches. “Afternoon tea time!” She says cheerfully. I order a pot of tea and ask for three teacups. “Okay,” the wait staff nods; she quickly glances at me, then at Ahmed, before walking away.

“Oh, don’t worry about me,” says Foucault. “But isn’t it interesting, this tea time.

The *partitioning of time*, becomes more and more detailed, from the manufactories that *laid down the exercises that would divide up the working day*, to the schools, activities *governed in*

detail by orders that had to be obeyed immediately: 8.45 entrance of the monitor, 8.52 the monitor's summons, 8.56 entrance of the children and prayer... a time of good quality, throughout which the body is constantly applied to its exercise... extracting, from time, ever more available moments and, from each moment, ever more useful forces," (Foucault, 1977, p. 149-151; p. 154) shaking his head and smiling, "and now, it's tea time, and everybody knows that it can only take place after certain hours of work is completed following lunch time."

"The body knows, indeed," Ahmed chuckles, "when the caffeine craving hits at precisely 7 am, 10 am, 3:15 pm, to boost productivity in between. Then again at 5:30 pm, but that's when I say, oh I better not, I've got to sleep and get up at 6 am tomorrow for work. But one might say the same even when there is no work. I have to sleep so tomorrow I can be useful. Lives and bodies gather around the time-table of capital."

"Which is based on the regiments that governed soldiers, which grew from monastic rules," Foucault doesn't let us forget about histories.

The wait staff returns, sets the teapot and teacups on the table and walks away silently. "As you wrote, *the disciplinary space is always, basically, cellular,*" (Foucault, 1977, p. 143) nodding at Foucault as I distribute the teacups, and pour tea in each cup, "the table, the cellular order of arrangement, is not just temporal but material as well. Like the factories you talked about in the 18th century, the floor plan was arranged such that it was possible *to observe the worker's presence and application, and the quality of his work; to compare workers with one another, to classify them according to skill and speed... All these serializations formed a permanent grid:*

confusion was eliminated.” (Foucault, 1977, p. 145)

“*Merci.* That’s right,” Foucault takes a sip of tea, “*the disciplines create complex spaces that are at once architectural, functional and hierarchical.*” (Foucault, 1977, p. 148)

I start to see Foucault’s time-tables, school progress reports and hospital charts converging with Ahmed’s family table. “Everybody has a fixed position,” I turn my gaze from the tables to Foucault, “each position marked with values, the values indicate the body’s place in the hierarchy. It transforms presumably unruly and therefore potentially dangerous living beings through rational classifications in order to observe, supervise, regulate the circulation of labour for the increase of wealth. And to eliminate desertion, dissent, and disorder.” I look to Ahmed, “in your book, at the dinner table, everybody has a fixed place. Again, similar operation of discipline, but not just for the accumulation of capital. It’s more broadly for the persistence of norms and social order... but then I guess those are never fully divorced from capital.”

She nods, “*so much of life is assembled around tables... the mechanisms of social gathering,*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 202) gazing into the distance, “*Always we are seated in the same place... as if we are trying to secure more than our place... So much you are supposed not to say, to do, to be, in order to preserve that we.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 37)

“To preserve not only the family as a unit but also as an institution, to ensure the persistence of patriarchy, heterosexism, whiteness,” I comment as I pour everyone another round of tea, enacting another kind of norm at Chinese dinner tables.

“Thank you. Well, and then the feminist killjoys show up,” Ahmed grins, “*the strangers, as bodies out of place, as not belonging in certain places*, like the dinner tables, or meeting tables,” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 143) sipping her tea, “Refusing to subsume our wills under those of white men (and by white men I mean the institution, but often also white men as people), refusing to disappear, refusing to allow institutional wrongs to disappear. We *wiggle to make room in a cramped space*, in those narrow cells in a table that assume a certain kind of body as the norm. But then, we are seen as *being wrong for pointing out a wrong. You become a spoilsport*. Spoiling the dinner, the meeting” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 231; p. 73).

“Going against the grain was often a lonely pursuit,” Foucault sips his tea.

“*[T]o be unseated by the tables of happiness can be to find yourself in that shadowy place, to find yourself alone, on your own*,” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 259) she looks down at her tea, slowly turning the teacup, “*but we persist by finding the company of other killjoys*. And then, we assemble a different kind of army, counter to the kind of army that is conditioned to follow precise measurements of time and gestures to be useful for the production of wealth and norms,” she looks up at Foucault. “*Imagine an army of one-breasted women: What would happen? What could happen? A queer crip army would be assembled, made out of bodies without parts, or even parts without bodies... Crip and queer, both these words have hurtful histories... They are words that are claimed, becoming pointed, becoming ways of pointing to something, because they keep alive that history*. To quote Alison Kafer, we are to *shake things up, to jolt people out of their everyday understandings of bodies and minds, of normalcy and deviance*.” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 259; p. 185)

“Marvelous,” his eyes smile behind the sunset reflected on his glasses.

“And then,” Ahmed continues, “we also *assemble ourselves around our own tables, kitchen tables, doing the work of community as ordinary conversation. And then, [a] kitchen table becomes a publishing house*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 259; 231), she looks at me, “and then, our words are found, encountered, interacted with, carried in pockets and minds, fueling writings and actions.”

I imagine the docile bodies and the feminist killjoy seated at the table. The docile bodies show the histories that they embody, the feminist killjoys bear witness and plot a revolt with the knowledge shared. But maybe, the docile bodies and feminist killjoys are not entirely different figures at all times.

For a moment we sit in silence, gazing into the horizon as night falls upon us. This is one table I wish we can sit around forever.

“I don’t know what’s in front of me,” so many more words caught in my throat, this is all I can muster.

“You know where to find us,” says Foucault, reassuringly.

“That’s right,” Ahmed sets down her teacup with a clink. “There’s so much more I will tell you,

in time. And at the same time, our work is about *losing confidence in ourselves, letting ourselves recognize how we too can be the problem*. We can be wrong, we will get it wrong, no matter whose words you read.” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 175)

We get up from the table, Foucault let us know he is retiring to the bench for the night. We wave goodbye. “I’m grateful for your work,” my last thought transmission, for now; what I have also wanted to say to him from the very beginning. He waves back.

Ahmed and I followed the sidewalk toward the city. “*When I go for a walk without knowing where I am going, I call it a hap walk. To affirm hap is to follow a queer route: you are not sure which way you are going... You wander, haphazardly, at times, but then you might acquire a sense of purpose because of what you find on the way... To proceed without assuming there is a right direction is to proceed differently. To say life does not have to be like this, to have this shape or this direction, is to make room for hap,*” she looks me in the eye. “Remember, discipline wants to make lives exactly predictable. *To make a case for a feminist life can be about keeping open the question of how to live.*” (Ahmed, 2017, p. 197)

“Thank you for finding me...” I begin to say. “Do your thing!” Ahmed says at the same time, then steps off the sidewalk and crosses the road. I lose sight of her in the flow of people passing by. I divert from the road as well to cut across a grass field, holding on to all our words.



Image Description: Black and white photograph of a grass field at dusk from a distance, with a few people sitting and walking on the field, and trees and a city skyline in the background.

References

- Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. London: Duke University Press.
- Federici, S. (2014). *Caliban and the witch: Women, the body and primitive accumulation* (2nd Ed.). Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and punish*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Moraga, C., & Anzaldúa, G. E. (Eds.). (1983). *This bridge called my back* (2nd Ed.). York: Kitchen Table: Women of Colour Press.
- Schwan, A., & Shapiro, S. (2011). *How to read Discipline and Punish*. London: Pluto Press.

Images:

- Park bench: Mike Benna on Unsplash, Attribution 1.0 Generic (CC BY 1.0)
- Path: Author (near Owen Sound, ON)
- Walls: Author (near Owen Sound, ON)
- Tables: Gavin Allanwood on Unsplash, Attribution 1.0 Generic (CC BY 1.0)
- Grass field at dusk: Author (Central Park, NYC)