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The question, “what’s the use?” is the engine that drives Sara Ahmed’s queer feminist critique of use and usefulness in her latest book, *What’s the Use? On The Uses of Use*. This is the third book in a trilogy that started with *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014). All three share a similar methodology, digging into and expounding upon a single word. While “happiness” and “will” were the subjects of Ahmed’s previous inquiries, here she focuses on the word “use”.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (third edition) defines “use, n.” as:

The act of putting something to work, or employing or applying a thing, for any (esp. a beneficial or productive) purpose; the fact, state, or condition of being put to work, employed, or applied in this way; utilisation or appropriation, esp. in order to achieve an end or pursue one's purpose.

Ahmed’s book is concerned with deconstructing and complicating this definition of use to reveal its underlying meanings. Ahmed not only delves into how a thing—an object or an idea—is put to work, but also how “use” itself is put to work towards specific ends. The analysis of the “uses of use”—how use is employed or applied in everyday life and as an organisational concept in philosophy, biological sciences, social theory and educational systems—is among the most compelling parts of the book. Ahmed convincingly demonstrates how use and usefulness are unevenly distributed, such that, the burden of being useful falls disproportionately on certain bodies, while the benefit of that usefulness is appropriated by others. When only some are enjoined to be useful, it frees others up from that requirement or allows them more creative forms of use. Ahmed contends that there is a complex history to this specific evolution of use and the uses of use that is intertwined with colonialism and capitalism, and embedded in race, class and gender hierarchies. The book is, thus, a catalogue of the multiplicity of the word “use”. It examines how use is called upon to do certain kinds of work, or nudged towards certain kinds of associations by combining three interconnected approaches—by paying attention to the use of everyday objects; by tracing the genealogy of use as an idea and a technique; and by undertaking an ethnographic study of how evolving uses of use are built into the modern university.

Beyond the individual word, the phrase “what’s the use?” signals exasperation. Ahmed explores and contextualises this exasperation through the female characters of Virginia Woolf’s novels. As sisters, wives and mothers, they question the use of living life within the narrow confines of what is usual or prescribed, the use of speaking their minds only to be dismissed, and the use of existing in the world only to disappear into the roles of wife and mother. This exasperation is most clearly articulated by Woolf herself when she questions the point of her own writing and whether it can enable a different way of living. It is a question born out of a crisis of confidence as the woman writer seeks to craft an individual identity in a world wherein she is usually cast as sister or wife. Woolf and her fictional creations are exasperated with the limited nature of use as it applies to them—their usefulness and sense of being are always already defined in relation to men and tied to their limited identities as wives, mothers and sisters, foreclosing other possibilities of use.

Ahmed argues that this is precisely why we need to “keep the question of use alive” (223) because it allows us to examine, challenge and subvert normative definitions and uses of
use and usefulness. The book’s main insight is that questioning use can be the starting point of a queer feminist project of “living differently”, imagining possibilities that lie outside the confines of what is allowed (3).

In this, Ahmed’s work is inspired by and interacts with queer, feminist, anti-racist and critical theory scholars like Judith Butler, Nirmal Puwar, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and Gloria Wekker who write from the position of “bodies out of place”, “misfits”, and “troublemakers”. While Butler (1999) explores how certain bodies become troublemakers when they refuse to confine themselves within heteronormative expressions of gender and sexuality, Puwar (2004) is concerned with how women and racialised minorities become misfits or ‘space invaders’ when they enter public spaces where the white male body is the somatic norm. Garland-Thomson (2011) extends this argument from a disability studies perspective. She argues that this normative figure is also an able body, turning those who carry “traits called disabilities” into misfits who must work harder to fit in. From a critical race perspective, Wekker (2016) theorises a “white innocence” in the Dutch context that remains wilfully ignorant of race and colonialism, singling out those who engage in critiques of structural racism as “anti-racist killjoys” (the term is linked to Ahmed’s own theorisation of the feminist killjoy in her previous work). These subject positions—troublemakers, misfits, killjoys and bodies out of place—are also generative. By refusing to fall in line, by overstepping the boundaries, they make possible new ways of being in the world. This is precisely Ahmed’s project in this book. Her interrogation of use is ultimately directed at discovering alternate uses of use which will enable different ways of living. Those who question use are often those the world is not used to, those ascribed as “unusual”, who are most at home as misfits and troublemakers. Ahmed herself writes from this positionality.

What’s the Use? draws on a variety of interdisciplinary influences, including biology, psychology, architecture and design. The first chapter takes us through a ‘usefulness archive’—a medley of objects at different stages of use—a well-used and unused path, a used book and a used bag, a used-up tube of toothpaste, an out-of-use postbox, an overused exclamation point, and usable and unusable doors. The biographies of use of these everyday objects become entry points to talk about race, class, gender, colonialism, capitalism, trans rights, and disability rights. One criticism of Ahmed’s approach to these topics is that the range of the discussion is somewhat meandering, leaving the reader, at times, both intrigued and bewildered.
The book becomes more grounded in the subsequent chapters as Ahmed explores how use became associated with life and strength in nineteenth-century biological and social thought, such as how utilitarianism offered a set of educational techniques for shaping individuals by directing them toward useful ends. The second chapter has a very broad scope. Here, use is deployed as a conceptual tool as Ahmed links biological theories of evolution, inheritance of acquired characteristics and natural selection with industrial capitalism, colonialism and slavery, and race and class. Just as the shape of individual organisms was determined by the usefulness of certain organs, so also capitalism and colonialism were dependent on the usefulness of certain categories of people. Ahmed extends this argument to trace a complex genealogy of use and disuse to show how, over time, use became coupled with life and health, and disuse with degeneracy, waste, and death. The chapter concludes with how these linkages, in turn, contributed to and interacted with eugenicist ideas.

The third chapter is a more specific examination of use as an educational technique aimed at creating a ‘useful class’. Drawing on Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster’s work on monitorial schools, and Jeremy Bentham’s Chrestomathic school based on the panoptical principle, Ahmed shows how the requirement to be useful fell unevenly on the poor, the working-class, and the colonised. These diverse and interconnected narrative threads come to a head in the compelling fourth chapter which examines how the modern university has been shaped by the classed, racialised and gendered legacies of use and usefulness. Ahmed draws on data from her own research on diversity work and complaint procedures in universities to offer an account of how institutions enable some while thwarting others. Her main argument is that while policies that welcome diversity or complaint procedures against sexual harassment do exist, they are not necessarily in use and the underlying processes are often difficult to access/navigate. This makes the university an unwelcome space for women and racial minorities, who are then often required to do the painstaking work of diversifying institutions in the face of the invisible walls and closed doors erected by institutionally racist and sexist policies.

With the genealogies and contemporary uses of use thus laid out, the final chapter is dedicated to undoing the racialised, classed and gendered inheritances of use—by “queering use”. According to Ahmed, to queer use is to use things “in ways other than for which they were intended or by those other than for whom they were intended” (199). It is a recurring theme, addressed somewhat cursorily in previous chapters, but brought to a head in the conclusion as Ahmed teases out the “queer potential” of the objects and ideas discussed earlier. Queer use is posited as a “willingness to be perverse, to deviate from the straight path” (201), as vandalism or “a willful destruction of the venerable and the beautiful” (208), as a failure or a refusal to use something properly, as an act of disobedience, and an act of survival and creativity. Ahmed sees queer use reanimating the project of diversity work, decolonising the curriculum by deviating from the much-cited work of establishment scholars in favour of fresh voices and new perspectives, and reinventing complaints as acts of intergenerational intimacy. By focusing on the slippages and the gaps between intended and actual use, Ahmed’s work echoes Jack Halberstam’s “queer art of failure” (2011), José Esteban Muñoz’s theory of disidentification (1999), and Martin Manalansan’s study of queer migrations.

Like its predecessors in the trilogy, this book too requires a patient reader who is willing to stay with the text as Ahmed delves into what may at first seem like disconnected archives. To an extent, the use of connecting devices—the doorway, the postbox, the wall—helps to join the dots and anchor the argument. Ultimately, patience pays off in this rousing text which is at once a rejection of the master narrative of use and usefulness, and an introduction to the painstaking, collective and creative work of queering use. It is a story told from the point of view of those who are not accommodated within normative institutions, structures and practices. By crafting different routes, travelling lesser-known paths, and finding alternate ways of telling stories about use, Ahmed invites her readers to see the world from these non-normative subject positions and to rethink and reshape their own worldviews in the process.