

Complaint! SARA AHMED, 2021. Durham: Duke University Press

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Waiting in a senior manager's office, I notice the University's bullying and harassment policy printed on A3 paper. I laugh, horrified, through my tears. The complaints policy, printed out so large as to be obscene, had been ignored and would continue to be ignored.

As I started reading *Complaint!*, Sara Ahmed's recent compassionate and incisive account of how complaints work, move, and are stopped in universities, I had just finished counselling in the aftermath of the mishandling of my complaint over bullying and harassment during my PhD. At the same time, *Al Jazeera* released their *Degrees of Abuse* series, documenting abuse in universities (Howlett and AJI Unit, 2021), and several months later, Margaret Czerwiński, Lilia Kilburn and Amulya Mandava's fight to sue Harvard University for its handling of sexual harassment accusations against an anthropology professor, John Comaroff gained international attention. Throughout *Complaint!*, Ahmed makes it clear that 'Complaints, including those about scenes of violence, can be scenes of violence' (125). Violence does not end with a complaint. A complaint is often just the beginning.

I'm stood outside of a building on the edge of campus with my union rep. It's a building I've never been to before, only accessible with a swipe card that neither of us have. Inside is the first meeting investigating my complaint about the bullying and harassment I'd been subjected to for months. When we want to return to the meeting, however, we must wait to be escorted in.

Doors are a recurring theme in *Complaint!*. Ahmed uses the door as a spatial and temporal lens on complaint; complaint closes doors to careers, to education, to promotion. These doors – the doors of complaint – create *work*: 'a closed door might itself be imperceptible; it might seem that there is nothing stopping anyone from getting in or getting through. Or it might be that the effects of the actions are perceptible, but the actions are not' (232). Complaining can feel like a shameful secret, and keeping it behind closed doors is, Ahmed shows, a deliberate strategy used by universities to prevent a record of resistance being made by feminist complainers (7).

Eighteen months before the first "formal" meeting of my complaint, I sat in the office of the then head of education of my then department making the

very same complaint. Recounting the months of bullying and harassment, he nods at me. He empathises. I reply, “this is really just the tip of the iceberg for a place that is institutionally racist and sexist.” The atmosphere changes. The nodding stops.

In going behind the closed doors of complaint, Ahmed brings to light the processes and experiences that complainers in universities share, showing how institutional power crystallizes not only at the institutional scale, but the interpersonal. ‘If nods can be withdrawn in time, they can also be withdrawn in space. Nodding can be about recognizing a problem insofar as the problem is safely construed as being somewhere else or as coming from someone else. A nod can be how a problem is enacted by the appearance of being heard’ (86). *Complaint!* records the affective and atmospheric shifts that complainers in universities have been subjected to; Ahmed has mapped connections between otherwise atomised experiences. When people complain, they have often reached a point of no return, and failed to find support. Complainers become unwelcome, but in this archive of complaint, a messy map of resistance is formed.

During the years of my complaint. I felt like I was losing my mind. I cried to my supervisor and to my friends. I kept asking why, what I had done? The ground became unsettled. Panic gripped my chest. I lost my footing. When I set foot on campus, I was physically disoriented, off-kilter, wrong.

Complaints in universities often become matters of procedure, matters of bureaucracy. Complaint policies are framed by universities as the end of the suffering, and the beginning of a resolution. But, as Ahmed and the complaint collectives in this book illustrate, complaints have affective, emotional, and physical lives of their own. They can transform and destroy lives: ‘complaints can come out as expressions of doubt ... everything becomes questionable; you feel questionable; your intuition is no longer a guide, no longer giving you clear instructions, about what to do, where to go. You cannot trust anything, anyone, yourself, other people’ (108). Complaint does not stop, not least because of the protracted strategies that universities tend to use to stop complaints from progressing. When the university stops complaints, it reproduces the violence that is being complained about.

While writing this review, I decided to open a file that has remained closed on my computer for two years. My “complaint” file. As I read through it – the emails, the misdirections, the

failures – I am struck by how I was expected to keep track of every moving piece. *I was expected to become my complaint*, to embody it, while others moved on. This movement is important, Ahmed shows, as ‘the time taken can be registered retrospectively as a feeling of guilt, a feeling as a questioning: How could I let this happen? How could I have gone along with it? A complaint can feel sticky: the longer it takes to make it, the more it sticks to you’ (117). When things move, when things and people can be moved - when they can be filed away - problems can be moved, through space and through time. This file, so unassuming on my computer, is a record of those movements, but is also a kind of feminist archive that Ahmed illustrates in this book.

The investigation found evidence upholding my complaint. The department had failed in their duties, had failed to follow the policies meant to protect people. The outcomes of my complaint were, supposedly, disciplinary action and policy changes. I was not allowed to be told what these were, when or even if they happened. I suspect – I know – they did not. On the day of my PhD graduation, the department promoted one of them.

Over the last few years – and particularly the last few months – it has felt as if many academics and higher education workers are approaching a breaking point – a *snap* (Ahmed, 2019). There is a collective movement of refusal, of coming out, of disclosure, of making the secret known even amidst the retraumatizing effects of making abuse known. But these new legacies and histories that Ahmed is archiving are largely the accounts of those who have left academia. As Ahmed reminds us, ‘those who complain might leave because of what or who remains. And when those who complain leave, what or who they complain about remains. The escalation of violence against those who complain about violence is how violence remains’ (136). Ahmed’s *Complaint!* is thus a challenge to the people who remain, a voice for those still struggling, and accounts for those who are no longer in the academy. It is a powerful intervention in institutional silence.

It's a couple of years since my complaint was *resolved*. I have a new job in a different university. I find it hard to be involved in department life. Around every corner, danger. I walk on eggshells, never quite knowing what is happening. I won't survive another complaint, but I can't make myself disappear. I wonder if I have become too sensitive, if I am imagining things. I wonder how I am supposed to survive.

The account of an early career lecturer in Chapter Three reflected my own experiences back to me and led me to pause in my reading and consider what lies next for me, after complaint. At the crux of *Complaint!* is a question of inheritance: what happens to those who complain? What mark do they leave? Where do those who complain go? Do they survive? ‘When violence gets *in*, a complaint comes *out* ... you have to keep coming out; you have to come out as somebody that this happened to, to come out as somebody who is complaining that this happened’ (119). Afterlives of complaint do not simply stop when a complaint is said to be “resolved.”

Sara Ahmed’s work has much guidance and wisdom to offer those who have been or are going through complaints, and those supporting them, not least by revealing how the structures of the university are *working as intended*. Throughout, *Complaint!* shows how institutional mechanics and structures work to suppress, hide, and ignore complaint, and how they protect those who are complained about. Complaint is never just individual. Complaint can be taken as a direct attack on the institution. By drawing out complaints processes, universities are waiting for complainers to give up, or leave. This is not an accident, but a strategy to enforce acquiescence.

Complaint! is also deeply critical of how diversity work continues to cover up violence and shows how new forms of power and coercion are playing out in the neoliberal university. In Chapter Seven, *Collective Conclusions*, a complaint collective of Leila Whitley, Tiffany Page, Alice Corble, Heidi Hasbrouck, Chryssa Sdrolia and others attest to how a shift from individuals to collectivity has the power to move. By collecting stories, through friendship and solidarity, ‘gathering together not only with one another but for one another, and for those we don’t yet know’ (264), the collective conclusions of complaint are at once hopeful and heart-breaking.

Sat in the audience of a talk, between the friends who had supported me and who I had tried to support in return, I once again found myself crying. This time, though, I’m listening to Sara Ahmed talk about *Complaint!* and realising that there is a community of complaint – of solidarity – next to me and beyond these four walls. *Complaint* can be how we find one another.

Overall, *Complaint!* offers catharsis, collectivity, and care. It is an archive of complaint, it is a radical call to action, and it is a feminist record. It is also beautifully written, deeply painful,

and absolutely necessary at this very moment. Ahmed has opened the door for those of us who have complained, if not as a way back in or through the academy, then as a door to finding one another, to telling and sharing our stories. Until now, complainers have been atomised and forced out – doors slammed, sometimes literally – but with this book and her wider commitments to feminist, queer, and race studies, to challenging institutional cultures, and to creating feminist worlds, Ahmed has illuminated a path of resistance through universities using complaint as a connected archive. Bringing together vulnerable and powerful testimony with feminist and queer theory, this book challenges institutional silence, demands answers, and creates a complaint collective. *Complaint!* is, as Ahmed hopes, ‘a reminder: we are not alone’ (277) and the creative, leaky, overflowing, hopeful, hopeless complaint activism will continue to haunt universities, a ‘slow inheritance’ (310) that surely will, eventually, be realised.

References

Ahmed, Sara (2019) *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham: Duke University Press

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