

Book Review: Complaint! by Sara Ahmed

In Complaint!, Sara Ahmed follows the institutional life of complaints within the university, exploring how they begin, how they are processed and how they are ultimately stopped, thereby reproducing systems of whiteness, violence and silencing. Proposing complaint as a feminist pedagogy and a form of collective and social action, Ahmed's work should provoke change to a resistant institution and culture, writes [Anna Nguyen](#).

Complaint! Sara Ahmed. Duke University Press. 2021.

A few years ago, I leave my first position at a university. There, I dealt with external committees, whose mission statements mirror legal jargon, yet all conduct 'informal' procedural methods. I have grown tired of hearing the words 'neutral' and 'good faith'. After I compile all the emails that I consider to be harmful and to exhibit asymmetries of power, these external members suggest that they can't actually see any harm or toxicity. While I contemplated my next steps, a professor from a different university emailed me and warned that I should expect that professors will always take the side of professors. If I wanted to stay in the department, he suggested, I would have to find a way to 'submit' in the least humiliating way for myself. I didn't take his advice, but I have never forgotten those foreboding words, especially now that I have heard from other professors that I should keep my head down and do my work. Never am I explicitly told that my wellbeing and status are tied to professorial power.

In [On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life](#), Sara Ahmed had already begun an institutional ethnography on the language of diversity and how diversity and its initiatives are institutionalised performative acts. Rereading the book alongside Ahmed's most recent monograph, [Complaint!](#), and relating my own experiences above, the recurring issues she raises point to the radical need for deep structural change in universities. On the first page of her acknowledgements, Ahmed writes that she completed *Complaint!* during the COVID-19 pandemic amidst ongoing global cruelties and violence. She, like many others, has written that we can organise our worlds in other ways, that we can dismantle existing structures and build better alternative futures, noting wryly that a global pandemic shouldn't have been the reason for this lesson to be learned (xi). But *who* is not learning these lessons? Or who has heard these complaints but has not tried to collectively help shape better futures?

Ahmed begins *Complaint!* by emphasising how 'complaints are not heard or how we are not heard when we are heard as complaining' (3). Those who follow Ahmed's work will be well aware that she traces the genealogy of words – verbs, nouns, as subjects or as objects – and how their meanings may change depending on their uses. Complaining as a speech act may have negative connotations, but Ahmed draws our attention to [complaint as a form of feminist pedagogy](#).

Ahmed does this by offering a 'feminist ear', a method she's introduced in [Living a Feminist Life](#) (3): 'to acquire a feminist ear is to become attuned to the sharpness of such words, how they point, to whom they point. To be heard as complaining is often attuned to sound, to how we sound, how we are heard as sounding, to how words sound, to how we sound, how we are heard as sounding, to how words sound, stories too' (17). More specifically, Ahmed is observing complaints as testimony (13) and as 'formal allegation' (4) in the space of the university that, as I note in my own fragments and experiences, offers informal procedures that mimic legal language and formalities to avoid any real accountability.





Image Credit: Photo by [Tim Mossholder](#) on [Unsplash](#)

For this project, which she had already begun before [resigning from her university post in 2016](#), Ahmed's institutional ethnography is based on interviews with 40 students, academics, researchers and administrators who were involved in a formal complaint process, including those who withdrew (10), eighteen written statements as well as conversations held in person, by email or by phone (11).

The first three sections of *Complaint!* follow the institutional life of a formal complaint: how they begin, how they are processed and how they are ultimately stopped. In Part One, 'Institutional Mechanics', Ahmed analyses the language, policies and procedures as well as other 'nonperformatives' (see also [Judith Butler, 1993](#)): institutional speech acts that do not bring into effect what they name (30, 80), such as nodding (80). Complaints follow a particular procedural pathway, and they are filed and placed in a record, a record that is not only indicative of what happens to a person but also what happens in institutions (38) – or what can be considered the 'phenomenology of the institution' (41). The mechanics of the institution not only tell us how institutions work by going through long procedural processes, but also how they reproduce these systems of whiteness, violence and silencing (99-100).

The complaints compiled in the book range from institutional violence (the focus of Part Three, 'If These Doors Could Talk?'), racism and sexism, bullying and harassment, including sexual harassment, ableism, precarity, the aftermath of challenging whiteness and the power structures of the university ('the canon' is a topic that obviously comes up), the paradox of committees on diversity and equality, silence and bribery (see especially pages 99-100) and lack of support, as evidenced by unkind reference letters for jobs post-graduate life.

A year later. I leave another university and department. I knew the procedures better than my then supervisor, who has never had a PhD student and never taught a class, yet he determines my work is not scientific and I write like a 'political leader'. I disagree. He sends an email that states I would have a hard time if I continued writing as I do. And so I email him to end the supervisory relationship. His last words were that this was for the best and that I had to take advice from professors. More professorial wisdom. I still disagree with these sentiments. A dean whom I've never met asks to meet with me and discuss what happened via email. I never respond.

In the first chapter of the first section, Ahmed notes that some words already carry a complaint; ‘all you have to do is use a word like *race* and you will be heard as complaining’ (65). Words like ‘inappropriate’ and ‘unreasonable’ (17) I have also heard, by professors interpreting my own complaints. In the next section, ‘The Immanence of Complaint’, we see how ‘institutional blinds’ are lifted when complaints make violence visible; yet, acts of violence are also justified by what Ahmed calls ‘theoretical justifications’ (133). These theoretical considerations are themselves violent (134; [read, too, an example of a Title IX case at Harvard University, where theoretical assumptions are harmful](#)). Or, when discourse is contested, professors will hurl ‘you can’t handle criticism’ (126), which I also hear quite often, a phrase that requires a lot of elaboration in situations involving power.

In addition to the analysis of complaint as a method, Ahmed illuminates how institutions like the university are designed for precisely the people who can and continue to flourish while miming theoretical righteousness and perpetuating violent norms. Many of us know professors who fit this categorisation, those who perform critical analysis but insist on sovereign lecterns or using the traditional classroom space to ‘objectively’ teach. Ahmed astutely writes: ‘We learn not only from *who* is supported but from *how* they are supported, how ideals (such as academic freedom or criticality) can be reused to justify ways of speaking or acting that are not only the object of a complaint but what most universities say they are committed to opposing’ (135).

But it’s the third section of the book that is most troubling, especially for those like myself who feel that they have no other option but to leave while departments and the university continue with their everyday approach to research as business. A scholar’s or a student’s departure does not end institutional violence. As many of Ahmed’s participants shared, once they lodge complaints against their supervisors, there can be instant ‘institutional death’ (223).

Ongoing. I have been discussing a position with another department. I disagree with the role of the proposed supervisory arrangement, in which my would-be supervisor suggests I should satisfy her expectations for a dissertation. My writing should be legible to her. I make it clear that I welcome feedback with which I can engage and even reject, but I suggest that a dissertation is a project that I shape that does not belong to her expectations. I unflinchingly say the word ‘whiteness’ to discuss her arbitrary expectations and she then asks me to explain how I perceive the situation as racist or about whiteness. Before the conversation ends, I have already decided, once again, to leave.

It is difficult not to compare one’s own experiences whilst reading *Complaint!*, especially when I and others have seen many complaints go through institutional processes that led to nowhere or are ‘buried’, as one participant shared (38). Ahmed likens complaints to biographies that tell a particular life story, reminding us that data is as experiential as it is theoretical (18): ‘The term *complaint biography* helps us to think of the life of a complaint in relation to the life of a person or a group of people [...] To think of a complaint biography is to recognize that a complaint, in being lodged somewhere, starts somewhere else. A complaint might be the start of something – so much happens after a complaint is lodged, because it has been lodged – but it is never the starting point’ (20).



Photo by [Kelli McClintock](#) on [Unsplash](#)

This observation makes space for the penultimate chapter of the concluding section. In Chapter Seven, other contributors wrote 'Collective Conclusions', detailing their first collaboration on a report on their department which documented the sexualisation and abuses of powers they witnessed or experienced during their studies (264). The role of lived experiences moves from individual problems to ones that confront structures. Complaint, then, becomes a form of social and collective action.

Ahmed's last sentence is a gesture to a similarly framed sentiment about citations: that they are 'how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow' (2017, 15-16). Complaint is complementary to citation, in that 'a complaint can open the door to those who came before' (310). Both concepts recognise the need for collectivity.

[Some months have passed since Harvard's letter scandal](#), one that captivated our attention because of recurring predatory behaviours, professorial networks that sustain power and the role of 'star scholars'. On Twitter, I saw scholars proclaiming the need to purge letter signatories from their citational practices, a statement that I find gestures to an individual response and practice rather than a structural one. And, of course, Ahmed's work was in constant circulation, which I find both encouraging as much as it raises suspicion. This observation is not an indictment of Ahmed's incredible work – I don't think she needs to solve the problems on which she writes and reflects so thoughtfully. She, after all, has left the physical spaces of academia and continues to write without institutional support. But I question the role of citations and their strategically performative and nonperformative use by those who have power in universities.

Solidarity and actual institutional change must move beyond citations. Creating lists of important books to read to educate oneself is just a starting point. Creating Equality, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives does not actually include those who remain opposed to and harmed by the neoliberal university. White women proclaiming their departments as inclusive and safe spaces lack awareness. What, then, is the function of the university, these external committees and the role of a professor? I ask these rhetorical questions with Ahmed's poignant gesture to the role of power in mind: 'those who challenge how power works come to know how power works' (47). Many of us have encountered these acts of power many, many times, and I'm certain we will see more demonstrations and manifestations of it despite what Ahmed's work should be provoking, which is change to a particular but resistant institution and culture.

- This review first appeared at [LSE Review of Books](#).
- Banner Image Credit: Photo by [ron dyar](#) on [Unsplash](#).

[Please read our comments policy before commenting.](#)

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of USAPP – American Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.

Shortened URL for this post: <https://bit.ly/3NxSd9n>

About the reviewer

Anna Nguyen – *Leibniz Universität Hannover*

Anna Nguyen is a PhD student and instructor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Leibniz Universität Hannover in Germany. She hosts the podcast Critical Literary Consumption.