

Sara Ahmed

Complaint! Durham: Duke University Press, 2021. 376 pp.

Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* takes complaints as its subject, specifically the gap between what is supposed to happen when complaints are made in the context of academic institutions and what actually happens. Drawing on oral and written testimonies from academics and students who have made complaints about harassment, bullying, and unequal working conditions at universities, Ahmed applies a feminist phenomenological perspective to the complaint. She uses her "feminist ear ... as an institutional tactic" (p. 6) to become sensitized to what is required in seeing a complaint through. In so doing, Ahmed recognizes that the complainer's process of working a complaint through the system is a labour of its own, and often one which is thankless, fruitless, and requires resilience in the face of institutionalized power. There is a politics to complaints. For Ahmed, complaints are a unique communicative form, which locates the problem in the one who speaks out and turns the institution into what the complainer is up against. Certainly, as complainers experience it, being at the helm of complaints is to experience the inscrutable inner workings of the institution. As Ahmed reasons, because of the institution's demands on the complainer, the process of complaining often becomes part of the crisis or trauma they experience.

As a paralegal form that has gone underappreciated in academic literature, the sustained treatment of "the complaint" is an accomplishment of its own. Through Ahmed's treatment, complaints are positioned as a unique focal point of the study of institutions, with distinctive methodological and conceptual implications. As Ahmed sees it, the formal pathway of complaints places the complainer in a position of direct observation of the organization's mundane, routinized, and institutionalized form of power. The emphasis on the complainer's experiences enables Ahmed to appreciate the affective dimensions of the formal and informal institutional mechanisms that work in tandem with one another as complaints are processed by the system. Ahmed does not take for granted the fact that "making a complaint is never completed by a single action" (p. 5). It is significant that the complaints process is lengthy and often "exhausting, especially given that what you complain about is already exhausting and the institutional environment that processes the complaint often requires considerable tactical facility to navigate it and weather its challenges" (p. 5). Power is experienced by the complainer, whose affinity with the complaint puts them in the path of *more* resistance.

Sara Ahmed observes that complaints, by their nature, undergo an institutionally structured death. The book usefully chronicles the ways an institution's review of a complaint can take on "nonreceptive" forms of recognition to accomplish this goal. Sometimes complaints are processed through mechanisms that simplify or compartmentalize them so that they become trivial or unactionable. Other times, complaints are stifled and abandoned by the institution's bureaucracy. In other instances, complaints are reviewed in a venue with the purpose of diffusing the

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affect that produced the desire to complain. Complaints may be digested in a perfunctory, clinical matter by the complaints body. In this outcome, the complainer's dissatisfaction with the outcome and lack of recourse is revealing of the asymmetry of power produced by the institution's complaints system. In others, the institution may respond in its duty to *hear* a complaint by deploying certain "nonperformative speech acts," such as through nodding, which substitutes for apology and other substantive action. Here, Ahmed's sensitivity to the symbolic dimension of complaint resolution draws out the fetishized quality of the hearing.

The book will appeal to socio-legal scholars interested in the phenomenology of organizations and institutions, especially academia. Ahmed, in initiating a conversation about how people employ the complaint in order to work within and challenge the power structure of an institution, draws from an undercurrent of thought from feminist and black radical traditions. Though Ahmed's own experience is not treated directly, her reflections on the subject reveal her personal stakes in prizing apart the complaint. According to her unique positionality, she is both a witness and party to the community of people who supply the knowledge and encouragement complainers rely on to see their complaint through. In Ahmed's decision to treat the testimonies about complaints on their terms, she weaves an intrinsic activist sensibility through the book. With an unmistakable tone of encouragement, Ahmed advises us that "[t]hose deemed tiresome complainers have something to teach us about complaint, to teach us about the politics of how some are received, to teach us what it takes to refuse a message about who is important, what is important" (p. 2).

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