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Book Review: Sara Ahmed's Complaint!

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Ahmed, S. (2021). *Complaint!* Duke University Press. 376 pp. \$29.95 paperback. ISBN: 9781478017714

Aptly named, Sara Ahmed's (2021) *Complaint!* exposes the institutional processes through which feminist complaints and allegations of racism and sexism, among other forms of oppression, are silenced, redirected, and displaced. Drawing from her own experience as a woman of color who resigned from her university post "in protest about the failure of the institution to hear complaints," as well as narratives from others who have complained, Ahmed seamlessly interweaves testimonials and lived experience with theory (p. 8). This poetic and nuanced interplay of theory and praxis constructs a vision of institutions as simultaneously complaint graveyards and complaint collectives. In the face of institutional strongholds against complaint, Ahmed asks her audience to consider enacting a "feminist ear" or being attuned to mechanisms that enable feminist complaint—those who make them, and those who refuse to listen (p. 3). *Complaint!* offers readers three ways to enact a feminist ear, highlighting its methodological significance as a mode of witnessing feminist complaints, dismantling institutional barriers, and calling into feminist histories. Below, we briefly trace these functions, highlighting just a few of the valuable and timely insights with which Ahmed leaves us.

First, *Complaint!* is organized with stories, interviews, and testimonials that Ahmed has collected and analyzed, detailing the phenomenology of institutions that render complaints, or the complainer, illegible (p. 4). A feminist ear, for Ahmed, means witnessing testimonials of complaint to provide space for collectivity. Thus, *hearing* functions as witnessing, as caring for, and as remembering complainers who are rendered institutionally invisible (p. 267). Such witnessing reveals how higher education institutions codify complaint as negative and in fundamental opposition to happiness. The weight of complaint is not, however, applied universally, with testimonials highlighting how arguments about institutional oppression are dismissed as, for example, mere complaint, and complainers as mere problems. *Complaint!* and Ahmed's notion of a feminist ear, therefore, offer feminists both in and out of the university a strategy for reviving complaints and complainers who were filed away by the institution.

Institutional responses to a complaint and to the complainer, including performative appeasement, re-traumatization, and vilification, are not, however, reasons to forego either complaining or participating in higher education institutions. Rather, they reflect the feminist imperative to shape and reshape institutions and their policies (p. 58). In learning complaint procedures and policies, the listener enhances their ability to change problem points—what Ahmed calls *sore points* (p. 37, emphasis added)—in the procedure, and ease the process for those who complain after. A feminist ear attunes the listener to the paths that complaints follow once they have been made, the institutional barriers that they encounter, and the institutional mechanisms employed to ensure it lands safely in a complaint graveyard, doing no harm to the institution itself (p. 6). *Complaint!*, by tracing institutional processes and operations, may be especially useful for those working in higher education and administration who are committed to reshaping their institutional responses to complaints.

Finally, history, or what is routine (p.3), has legitimized and constituted the current matrix of complaint within modern higher education institutions. Instead, Ahmed advocates for recalling feminist histories and collectivities as a strategy—for readers to share the work of complaints (p. 6), to be open to receive complaint stories (p. 9), and to resist institutional collegiality that upholds whiteness (p. 200). *Complaint!* is one example of compiling and sharing (new) feminist histories. Ahmed notes that interviewees reached out to share their complaint

stories because they needed a feminist ear. Her duty was to share them with readers, illustrating how a feminist ear enables individual complaints and complainers to become part of a network and complaint collective (p. 14). Highlighting her indebtedness to her feminist predecessors, particularly feminists of color and Black feminists, as well as contemporary student activists (p. 22), Ahmed constructs a feminist genealogy to which all feminist writers, scholars, and activists should aspire. Thus, when asked, “what do we do now?” Ahmed responds succinctly: listen and share.

Complaint! proffers countless applications for feminist scholar-teachers, several of which we have noted above. Its practical insights in reviving complaints and reshaping institutional policies, as well as its work highlighting complaint as communicative and administrative labor (p. 34), exhibit its utility for classes on organizational or meso-level structures, where it may provide unique insights into organizational mechanics and procedure. In addition, courses that explore administrative leadership and/or leadership studies would benefit from reading *Complaint!* as a significant compilation of case studies and evidence on policy failures. In terms of research and teaching, Ahmed’s feminist genealogy offers a valuable starting point for feminist scholar-teachers seeking to adopt intersectional, feminist citational practices, such as women, gender, and sexuality studies instructors constructing a course syllabus, writers researching for a literature review, and young scholars just beginning to learn to contours of their field.

Complaint! maps a nuanced landscape of higher education that brings complaint as an institutional failure to the surface. Ahmed’s insights remind us that complaint-in-practice is not only misaligned with institutional policies but, importantly, that the praxis of complaint intersects with larger structural questions of oppression and discrimination. She reminds, for example, that “complaints are contained because of what they threaten to reveal” (p. 257). Because a complaint is often the only route for institutional recourse against, for example, sexual harassment, feminist collectives *must* continue reshaping policies, providing space to listen, and sharing the complaint stories that arise.