

## **Book Review: Complaint! by Sara Ahmed (2021)**

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Over the past few years, we have witnessed an increased focus in libraries to institutionalize commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion into our librarianship. What has rightfully followed, due to the large gaps between the purported commitment by institutions and lived experiences of all involved, is a renewed effort by individuals and groups to enact change in our institutions, often through formal means of complaint about racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of misconduct. However, rarely do all parties find a satisfactory end to that process. This necessitates that our institutions reassess their approach to complaints, both philosophically and systematically, in order to evolve and improve. Enter Sara Ahmed's intensive research into complaint and diversity work, which has now been published in her latest book, *Complaint!*. Ahmed draws on her own experiences with complaint in institutions as well as through interviews with victims of institutional grievances. Ahmed carefully examines how we perceive and even feel complaint as members of academic institutions. She argues that we must learn to view complaint as a pedagogy and, through her use of enlightening prose, helps the reader also gain a better understanding of power.

### **Book Overview**

From the opening of the book, Ahmed works to reframe our understanding of complaint. She begins, "To be heard as complaining is to not be heard," as we tend to dismiss others for complaining or seeming as if they are always complaining (p. 1). To add to that burden of being dismissed, complaint is rarely a single action or experience, but rather an exhausting process that can exacerbate the original trauma experienced by those who complained. Ahmed proposes a new tactic, which she has named the 'feminist ear' (p. 6). By hearing complaints, we can be made aware of institutional barriers as we learn about power within the institution. Using her 'feminist ear', Ahmed introduces readers to complaint as a feminist pedagogy. *Complaint!* is composed of four parts, which I have summarized by each section.

### **Part I: Institutional Mechanics**

Ahmed discusses 'institutional mechanics' and how figuring out how the institution and the complaint process functions essentially serves to make the system part of the complaint (p. 27). We witness policies and procedures not functioning as designed, strategic incompetence, retaliation, and much more as a result of navigating the process. What is meant to help only leads to a disorienting experience that is often more harmful than helpful. Ahmed uses Audre Lorde's iconic words, "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house"—and these policies and procedures are the master's tools. From her own experience and the many interviews she conducted, we learn that policies are meant to apply to and constrain others, not the institution. In fact, the creation of new policies can be a performative action that makes us believe the problem has been dealt with. She goes on to discuss how the individual filing a complaint is

transformed into being the problem themselves. Employees are warned by others to "think about their career" or they're promised happiness as long as they don't complain further. By framing complaints as self-damaging, the institution ensures that only those with the least to lose (and therefore the least need to complain) can actually afford to complain. This institutional resistance to challenges of established norms results in the loss of faith in our institutions.

### **Part II: The Immanence of Complaint**

The word "immanence" refers to being entirely within something, which describes how a complaint can consume us. Ahmed argues that the frustrating effect of the (otherwise ineffectual) bureaucratic processes can actually be the point of the process. If you have a complaint, you carry its effects whether you formally make the complaint or not, as typically the environment itself is a cause of complaint (p. 59). Ahmed compares complaining to the coming out process—it's not a one-off event (as you have to "explain" yourself, multiple times, to different groups), you risk being outed by certain people, and you need to come to a self-realization before you can tell others. If you decide it is best to keep it to yourself and not come out with a complaint, you still endure another type of institutional labor as you might feel the need to actively work to not be seen as a problem or being what you caused: an inconvenience to the institution. When you complain that you were wronged, you instead are treated as if you are wrong. Finally, should you choose to leave the institution, you may be viewed as the problem itself disappearing, when in fact, the problems or perpetrators remain at the institution.

### **Part III: If These Doors Could Talk**

However, Ahmed points out that institutional culture is not inert, but rather it is actively maintained. As she explained in Part II, "power works by making it hard to challenge how power works" (p. 125). Ahmed recognizes the many ways in which we witness power being actively maintained. For example, collegiality is weaponized as a strategy to stop complaint (p. 202). Rather than deal with the person who wronged, the harassed are expected to reconcile (p. 210). Otherwise, they may be seen as committing career suicide by going against the institution. What you're told you need to do in order to further your career and progress in the system actually serves to reproduce the very system that harms so many members. Even worse, when you are enabled by the system, you become indebted to it. It is easy to see why Ahmed warns that not supporting someone is often enough to stop someone (p. 254).

### **Part IV: Conclusions**

"You can be faced with abuses without being able to name them, let alone complain about them," Ahmed states (p. 262). With that in mind, collectivity is proposed as a way to share the 'cost' of complaint. By utilizing complaint as activism, we can work collectively to transform our institu-

tions. It is how we create momentum to dismantle institutional barriers and create support for change.

### Application for Instruction Librarians: Complaint as Pedagogy

Ahmed has long framed complaint as feminist pedagogy. She defines pedagogy as how we teach, so in these instances, complaint is the teacher. If we understand that “we learn *from* complaint *about* the world,” it’s no surprise that ‘learning’ is one of the most frequently used words in this text (Duke University Press, 2021). With this in mind, how can we learn from Ahmed and reframe our understanding of complaint as it relates to our role as teaching librarians in our institutions? While not all complaints rise to formal reporting, Ahmed’s concept of a ‘feminist ear’ can help instruction librarians navigate student complaints within the classroom without dismissing them. For instance, I reflected on how I had handled repeated undergraduate student complaints about the difficulty of specific requirements for their assignments. In the past, I likely would agree in private with the student’s frustrations about rigid application of academic citation style rules impacting their grade and urge them to provide feedback to their instructor. Instead, I should use my power to discuss with the instructors how these requirements are not having the intended instructional benefit or intellectual rigor on behalf of the students. After all, hearing students’ complaints also helps you learn how complaints are not heard by their professor, school/department, or administration. I may still face the same resistance to change as the students have, but I will try. We have all heard complaints from learners that we’ve dismissed, but understanding complaint and power can help us moving forward.

### Application for Instruction Librarians: Complaint in the Institution

It shouldn’t be overlooked when reading *Complaint!* that when building on Lorde’s work, Ahmed is referring to not only a brilliant mind, but a queer WOC who left librarianship. Lorde can be viewed as “a librarian who chose to depart from the library as a means of survival” (Smith-Cruz, 2018, p. 279). Therefore, it is clear how relevant these discussions are for librarians as members of institutions. For example, Ahmed discusses how a complaint for more time and room to do her work ended up costing the complainant more time and less room for work to be done. As academic instruction librarians we can be saddled with frustrating requests for one-shot instruction, or we might have faced misconceptions regarding our role as instruction librarians lacking pedagogical frameworks. We may have considered making complaints or even formally complained in an effort for more time and more room to do our teaching. I was reminded of the University of Arizona’s model for providing curriculum-integrated library instruction rather than “one-shots” (2021) and the power structures Nicole Pagowsky (2021) argues must be deconstructed in order to improve our service models. Emily Drabinski (2017) reminds us that our efforts are often framed in a neoliberal demand for quantitative evidence of our contributions to librarianship and teaching. If we simply report the number of classes or students taught, that time loss directly impacts our quantitative demonstration of our worth to the institution. Many instruc-

tion librarians may even wonder if we hurt our image by advocating for ourselves to teach fewer sessions in order to teach better sessions. Even beyond the implications for instructional librarians, all librarians could compliment Ahmed’s work with Fobazi Ettarh’s conceptualization of vocational awe and its negative impact on librarianship in order to reframe our understanding of how librarian complaint can function in regards to issues of discrimination, burnout, job creep, etc. These important discussions that librarians are having can benefit from Ahmed’s framing of complaint and power in the institution, and I believe most readers will recognize their own experiences within *Complaint!*.

### Conclusion

I think we owe it to ourselves to follow Ahmed’s example and reframe how we approach complaint. This book demands your introspection as a librarian and a member of an institution. If academic libraries are to close the gap between their commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion and the lived experiences of their employees and users, institutional change is necessary. Collective action and complaint activism are necessary. If you share your complaints or experiences with institutional responses to complaints, as I remember my former coworker JJ Pionke (2019) bravely sharing his struggle for reasonable accommodations at the University of Illinois Library, we can begin to unravel the institutional barriers we face. Without doing so continues to enable existing power structures to the impediment of all.

According to Ahmed, “Transforming institutions can be necessary if we are to survive them, but we still need to survive the institutions we are trying to transform” (p. 301). When I finished reading *Complaint!*, I was surprised that I felt more hopeful, or at the least less apathetic, towards the potential of collective action improving our institutions and libraries, despite our frustrations and continuing societal failures. I credit that optimism to Ahmed for reframing my understanding of complaint, and I do believe that we can all learn from Ahmed’s powerful book.

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