



Review of Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!*

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Ahmed, Sara. *Complaint!* Duke UP, 2021.

There are things that we who labor in academic institutions know. We know these things from our unique positions on the hierarchy, which might be undermined or expanded as a result of who we are perceived to be. For those of us who labor on the lower rungs of that hierarchy and have managed to survive them long enough to remain, we know how things work and we know how those things might work against some and not others. Some of us have arrived and remain even as our bodies and histories were never anticipated by the institutional space and therefore struggle to fit in the space enough to remain (Sharpe 2016; McKittrick 2020). Others know things about academic institutions because we are among those who *were* anticipated by the institutional space—those who do not need signs saying that they are welcomed because it is known and assumed that this is already the case. *Complaint!* by Sara Ahmed (2021) describes how those differences come to matter by focusing on how complaints work as they are entangled with academic and social hierarchies alongside differently positioned bodies. She describes how policies, procedures, cultures, and complaints move around bodies and spaces, ultimately reproducing the same institutional hierarchies. Put differently, *Complaint!* details the massive waste of time, energy, and labor that marginalizes some to the benefit of others.

Complaint! pays attention to the utility of doors and how doors serve to maintain institutional hierarchies and violence. Doors are opened and closed in ways that align with how power is operationalized. Those who are meant to be kept in or out are done so by literal and figurative doors. The text is timely in that many academic institutions and other organizations are currently experiencing a demographic and culture shift: things that were permissible in the past have become less so and people who have behaved in ways that were widely tolerated now must reflect. There are mandates and commitments for equity, diversity, and inclusion—even if much of that is what Ahmed calls *non-performative*.

Many colleges and universities are prepared (under some duress) to allow historically excluded people into the building but have not yet been willing to address the culture, which is a social context that determines *how* work is done. And how work gets done is often in inequitable ways. Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* clearly and convincingly names, describes, and analyzes how laboring bodies differently take up institutional space and how complaints arise in such a milieu and are often dismissed or weaponized against the complainant.

The book is an extension of some of the issues Ahmed takes up in previous work, which she refers to through the book. She does not just describe experiences that people have in institutions—experiences of normalized and widespread violence—but also how those experiences are the result of a cluster of norms that facilitate certain kinds of behavior and stop other kinds of behavior. She does this in such a way that attunes the reader to how differently bodies labor in academic institutional space—naming many of those differences as the outcome of institutional violence, “All of the chapters in this book are concerned, in one way or another, with institutional violence” (Ahmed 180). A strength of the text is that Ahmed refuses to consider that the culture, the norms, or the distribution of power is inevitable, and the price one pays for being included. The book is deeply critical of how power operates in institutions of higher education, but also in all the pages, one can see how it might become different.

In all four sections of the book Ahmed draws on a series of diverse and wide-ranging experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate students [students who already have one degree] and professors differently positioned on the academic hierarchy to discuss how institutions work by focusing on formal and informal complaints. Using a series of interviews, she details a variety of experiences with violence including discrimination, bullying, sexual harassment, mistreatment, and abuse. Some of the interviewees file formal complaints and some do not. All the people who experience abuses of power must labor in ways that are recognized by the institution. The labor is varied, but often results in painful and unsatisfying outcomes. Ahmed discusses the following:

1. The unpaid affective and emotional labor required when one experiences the event of harassment and/or a culture that normalizes harassment, even if one is not directly targeted.
2. The repetitive and exhausting labor required to navigate an institutional structure that is hostile to meaningfully responding to such harassment while also continuing the work required of the job that they are paid to do.
3. Finally, the labor of coping with the initial harassment or abuse alongside fresh abuse—being characterized in ways that limit access to resources, opportunity, mentorship, and physical space.

In detail Ahmed describes how this pattern happens to postgraduates, lecturers, and professors repeatedly and how those loops are produced by institutional culture and hierarchy. Some are entitled in ways that make

others vulnerable to violence and academic institutions are broadly unprepared to engage this unevenness. It is important to note that the interviewees included, people of color, women, queer, and trans people. The people interviewed are precariously positioned because they are not the people who are historically entrenched in the institutional structure. They have not made up the rules and must labor in ways to change the rules in order to be accommodated by the institution. Ahmed calls this *nonreproductive labor*. This is “the labor of trying to intervene in the reproduction of a problem” (163). The problem might be the absence of a clear policy; patterns of harassment and abuse; a culture of transphobia, racism, and misogyny; or a senior scholar abusing their power over junior people and/or students.

Nonreproductive labor is the labor of complaint. Ahmed describes other kinds of labor, including the labor of *not* complaining and how that can also activate the same disciplining behaviors that complaining might. In one example, a postgraduate student does not laugh at a sexist joke when everyone else laughs. In this non-action she identifies herself as not being aligned with the others who are laughing. She is then further harassed as a result of this non-action. This example and others show how institutional power works, and is maintained through academic hierarchy, culture, systems, and norms that protect some at the direct expense of others.

Ahmed identifies and names all the labor involved in maintaining a culture that produces some as vulnerable and others as protected at all costs, alongside the resistant labor. The difficult thing is much of the labor that Ahmed discusses is not regarded as labor in higher education settings. This refusal to recognize makes some particularly vulnerable to abuse. Those of us in higher education are facing unprecedented changes in the ways we work and there is potential in the cultural shifts that cannot be ignored. This cannot be separated from how hierarchies are constructed and maintained. Those of us with stakes in the future higher education can labor against change, or we can labor in ways that facilitate a change with consequences.

Works Cited

McKittrick, Katherine. *Dear Science and Other Stories*. Duke UP, 2020.
Sharpe, Christina *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Duke UP, 2016.

