

SARA AHMED



COMPLAINT!

"Complaint!" is precisely the text we need at this moment"—ANGELA Y. DAVIS

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PRAISE FOR *WHAT'S THE USE?*

“In this close reading of *use*, Sara Ahmed leads the reader from object to object at a pace that moves with the deliberateness of a philosopher and the grace of a literary scholar. With this and other books, Ahmed has established herself as one of the most important feminist thinkers in the world.”—ROSEMARIE GARLAND-THOMSON, author of *Staring: How We Look*

“A well-written, engaging text. Highly recommended. All readership levels.”—C. R. McCALL, *Choice*

“As with many of Ahmed’s writings, *What’s the Use?*, with feminist solidarity radiating from its pages filled with her characteristic rhetorical and language-repurposing writing, will allow readers to question and contest their lived realities and surroundings. . . . Ahmed leaves another landmark impression on intersectional feminist thinking, praxis, and pedagogy, and develops new modes for examining the co-constitution of spaces, bodies, and social relations that will animate feminist and queer geographical study.”—JAMES D. TODD, *Gender, Place and Culture*

“Ahmed sought to write a text that intervenes in the everyday, that elevates a threadbare backpack to a place of unbound theoretical play. And she has done so. . . . Accessible and innovative, *What’s the Use?* will be of serious interest to activists, artists, and academics working at the intersections of queer and critical race studies.”—CAITLIN MACKENZIE, *QED*

PRAISE FOR *LIVING A FEMINIST LIFE*

“From the moment I received Sara Ahmed’s new work, *Living a Feminist Life*, I couldn’t put it down. It’s such a brilliant, witty, visionary new way to think about feminist theory. Everyone should read this book. It offers amazing new ways of knowing and talking about feminist theory and practice. And, it is also delightful, funny, and as the song says, ‘your love has lifted me higher.’ Ahmed lifts us higher.”—BELL HOOKS

“Beautifully written and persuasively argued, *Living a Feminist Life* is not just an instant classic, but an essential read for intersectional feminists.”—ANN A. HAMILTON, *Bitch*

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“Anyone at odds with this world—and we all ought to be—owes it to themselves, and to the goal of a better tomorrow, to read this book.”—MARIAM RAHMANI, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

“*Living a Feminist Life* is perhaps the most accessible and important of Ahmed’s works to date. . . . [A] quite dazzlingly lively, angry and urgent call to arms. . . . In short, everybody should read Ahmed’s book precisely because not everybody will.”—EMMA REES, *Times Higher Education*

“Fans of bell hooks and Audre Lorde will find Ahmed’s frequent homages and references familiar and assuring in a work that goes far beyond Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, capturing the intersection so critical in modern feminism.”—ABBY HARGREAVES, *Library Journal*

“*Living a Feminist Life* offers something halfway between the immediacy and punch of the blog and the multi-layered considerations of a scholarly essay; the result is one of the most politically engaged, complex and personal books on gender politics we have seen in a while.”—BIDISHA, *Times Literary Supplement*

“*Living a Feminist Life* hopes we can survive doing feminist theory, and energizes us to do so.”—CLARE CROFT, *Feminist Theory*

“Undeniably, Ahmed’s book is a highly crafted work, both scholarly and lyrically, that builds upon itself and delivers concrete, adaptable conclusions; it is a gorgeous argument, crackling with kind wit and an invitation to the community of feminist killjoys.”—THEODOSIA HENNEY, *Lambda Literary Review*

“Ahmed gifts us words that we may have difficulty finding for ourselves. . . . [R]eading her book provides a tentative vision for a feminist ethics for radical politics that is applicable far beyond what is traditionally considered the domain of feminism.”—MAHVISH AHMAD, *New Inquiry*

PRAISE FOR *ON BEING INCLUDED*

“Just when you think everything that could possibly be said about diversity in higher education has been said, Sara Ahmed comes along with this startlingly original, deeply engaging ethnography of diversity work. *On Being Included* is an insightful, smart reflection on the embodied, profoundly political phenomenology of doing and performing diversity in predominantly white institutions. As Ahmed queers even the most mundane formulations of diversity, she creates one eureka moment after another. I could not put this book down. It is a must-read for everyone committed to antiracist, feminist work as key to institutional transformation in higher education.”—CHANDRA TALPADE MOHANTY, author of *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*

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“This book offers a grounded and open exploration of what it means to ‘do’ diversity, to ‘be’ diverse. It challenges the reader, both in style and in content, to reconsider relations of power that stick to the multiple practices, meanings, and understandings of diversity, and to reconsider how we engage, reproduce, and disrupt these relations.”—JULIANE COLLARD AND CAROLYN PROUSE, *Gender, Place and Culture*

PRAISE FOR *WILLFUL SUBJECTS*

“Like her other works known for their originality, sharpness, and reach, Ahmed offers here a vibrant, surprising, and philosophically rich analysis of cultural politics, drawing on feminist, queer, and antiracist uses of willing and willfulness to explain forms of sustained and adamant social disagreement as a constitutive part of any radical ethics and politics worth its name.”—JUDITH BUTLER, Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature, University of California, Berkeley

“Ahmed’s insights, as always, are both intellectually fertile and provocative; *Willful Subjects* will not disappoint.”—MARGRIT SHILDRICK, *Signs*

“There is no one else writing in contemporary cultural theory who is able to take hold of a single concept with such a firm and sure grasp and follow it along an idiosyncratic path in such surprising and illuminating ways.”—GAYLE SALAMON, author of *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*

PRAISE FOR *THE PROMISE OF HAPPINESS*

“Ahmed’s language is a joy, and her work on each case study is filled with insight and rigor as she doggedly traces the social networks of dominance concealed and congealed around happiness. . . . *The Promise of Happiness* is an important intervention in affect studies that crucially approaches one of the major assumptions guiding social life: the assumption that we need to be happy.”—SEAN GRATTAN, *Social Text*

“*The Promise of Happiness* bridges philosophy and cultural studies, phenomenology and feminist thought—providing a fresh and incisive approach to some of the most urgent contemporary feminist issues. Ahmed navigates this bridge with a voice both clear and warm to convey ideas that are as complex as they are intimate and accessible. Her treatment of affect as a phenomenological project provides feminist theorists a way out of mind-body divides without reverting to essentialisms, enabling Ahmed to attend to intersectional and global power relations with acuity and originality.”—AIMEE CARRILLO ROWE, *Signs*

PRAISE FOR *QUEER PHENOMENOLOGY*

“Ahmed’s most valuable contribution in *Queer Phenomenology* is her reorienting of the language of queer theory. The phenomenological understanding of orientation and its attendant geometric metaphors usefully reframes queer discourse, showing disorientation as a moment not of desperation but of radical possibility, of getting it twisted in a productive and revolutionary way.”—ZACHARY LAMM, *GLQ*

“In this dazzling new book, Sara Ahmed has begun a much needed dialogue between queer studies and phenomenology. Focusing on the directionality, spatiality, and inclination of desires in time and space, Ahmed explains the straightness of heterosexuality and the digressions made by those queer desires that incline away from the norm, and, in her chapter on racialization, she puts the orient back into orientation. Ahmed’s book has no telos, no moral purpose for queer life, but what it brings to the table instead is an original and inspiring meditation on the necessarily disorienting, disconcerting, and disjointed experience of queerness.”—JACK HALBERSTAM, author of *Female Masculinity*

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments xi

Introduction: Hearing Complaint 1

PART I INSTITUTIONAL MECHANICS 27

1 Mind the Gap! Policies, Procedures, and Other Nonperformatives 29

2 On Being Stopped 69

PART II THE IMMANENCE OF COMPLAINT 101

3 In the Thick of It 103

4 Occupied 137

PART III IF THESE DOORS COULD TALK? 175

5 Behind Closed Doors: Complaints and Institutional Violence 179

6 Holding the Door: Power, Promotion, Progression 220

PART IV CONCLUSIONS 257

7 Collective Conclusions 261

by Leila Whitley, Tiffany Page, and Alice Corble, with Heidi Hasbrouck,
Chryssa Sdrolia, and others

8 Complaint Collectives 274

Notes 311

References 343

Index 353

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PRESS**

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My thanks and appreciation to everyone who shared their experiences of complaint with me, whether by giving oral or written testimonies or through informal communications. What you have given us, the description, the insight, the wisdom, is precious. It has been a privilege to bring your words to the world.

I completed this book during the coronavirus pandemic, a time that has brought home the abject cruelty and harshness of inequalities. It is also a time that has taught us that, when necessary, we can organize worlds in other ways. It should not take a global pandemic to learn that lesson. It is my hope this book can contribute to discussions of how to open universities up, to dismantle existing structures, to build alternative futures.

To make the kinds of complaints I discuss in this book, complaints that name and identify abuses of power, that confront hierarchies and inequalities, is very risky. My thanks to all who have risked so much and given so much by complaining for a more just and equal world. This book is for you.

xii

Acknowledgments

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INTRODUCTION

HEARING COMPLAINT

To be heard as complaining is not to be heard. To hear someone as complaining is an effective way of dismissing someone. You do not have to listen to the content of what she is saying if she is *just* complaining or *always* complaining. Consider how many self-help books teach you how not to complain or how to stop complaining. Titles are telling: *No Complaints: How to Stop Sabotaging Your Own Joy*; *A Complaint Free World: How to Stop Complaining and Start Enjoying the Life You Always Wanted*; *Stop Complaining: Adjust Your Mind-Set and Live a Happier Life*. Instructions to stop complaining are messages about complaint. The message received: to complain is not only to be negative; it is to be stuck on being negative. To complain is how you would stop yourself from being happy, to stop others from being happy too, complaint as a killjoy genre.

Who is heard as complaining? A hearing can be a judgment. A hearing can be a history. We can turn to the archives of Black feminism to hear how that judgment has a history. In one instance, Lorene Cary (1991), a working-class African American woman, is writing about her mother: “I always saw it coming. Some white department-store manager would look at my mother and see no more than a modestly dressed young black woman making a tiresome complaint. He’d use that tone of voice they used when they had *important* work elsewhere. Uh-oh. Then he’d dismiss her with his eyes. I’d feel her body stiffen next to me and I’d know that he’d set her off” (58). Cary “always saw it coming.” She has come to know her mother’s reactions; she can feel them as they happen. Earlier she describes how

her mother had “studied” the “rich white people” she’d worked for, as her mother’s mother had done before, and how Cary “studied” her mother (57). To study her mother is to learn what sets her off, the “rich white people,” store managers, employers, who dismiss her as a “modestly dressed young black woman making a tiresome complaint.” Cary can hear and see it herself: the “tone of voice they used,” how he would “dismiss her with his eyes.” She can also hear her mother hear it, see her mother see it. Cary shows how Black feminist knowledge can be passed down as intimacy with bodily reactions.

To be heard as making a tiresome complaint is to be heard as being tiresome, as distracting somebody from doing “*important* work elsewhere.” In that moment, it is history we hear, a history of how Black women are heard as just complaining, history as going on, history as going on about it. This story is not just about how her mother as a Black woman is heard as making “a tiresome complaint.” It is a story of how her mother reacts, how her body stiffens; how she is set off. Her mother refuses the message: this is not important, you are not important, what is important is elsewhere. Those 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.

What it takes, who it takes. I found Cary’s memoir because it was referenced in Patricia Hill Collins’s ([1990] 2000) classic text *Black Feminist Thought*. Collins draws upon Cary’s description to show how emergent Black women went about “surviving the everyday disrespect and outright assaults that accompany controlling images” (96). Citation too can be hearing. We depend upon what others can hear. Collins could hear what Cary’s mother could hear because of what Cary could hear her mother hear. Collins uses that hearing to show what Black women know about “controlling images” in the strategies they develop to survive them.

A complaint: how you show what you know. Later in the text, Collins evokes the figure of the complainer. With reference to the problem of color blindness, how racism is often reproduced by not being seen, she observes, “Black women who make claims of discrimination and who demand that policies and procedures may not be as fair as they seem can more easily be dismissed as complainers who want special, unearned favors” (279). Racism as such can be dismissed as a complaint.

There is history to *that* dismissal. A history can be made up of many instances. In another instance, Amrit Wilson ([1976] 2000) discusses a report written by Hamida Kazi in the feminist magazine *Spare Rib* in

1976.¹ The story is about an Asian woman who is assaulted by her husband. Wilson offers a subtle account of how such stories are framed by the media and delivered to a wider public. She writes, “When such stories are reported they are used to show how Asians are ‘uncivilised,’ and that they should be setting their community in order instead of complaining about racism” (188). This is a rather light use of the word *complaining*; it might not seem worth singling it out. Uses can be light when words are heavy. *Complaining, complaint, complainer*: we can be weighed down by words as well as judgments. We learn from a single sentence that to speak about racism is to be heard not only as complaining but as complaining about the wrong thing, to make racism a complaint as how some avoid addressing problems in their own community. Racism becomes that tiresome complaint, how some tire themselves out or tire others out, stopping themselves from doing what they should be doing (“setting their community in order”).

The judgment of complaint can also be an order: to stop complaining as a demand to set things right. Wilson shows that a story used for racist purposes (evidence of Asians being “uncivilized”) can be the same story used to dismiss racism as complaint. Racism is often enacted by the dismissal of racism as complaint. Stories about violence against Asian women are instrumentalized to demand allegiance to a national project. Allegiance would be enacted by being willing to locate the problem of violence in your community rather than in the nation; the latter violence we often summarize as racism. You can become a complainer because of where you locate the problem. To become a complainer is to become the location of a problem. Wilson, by hearing how Asian women activists are “answering back,” to reference the title of her piece, teaches us how some are willing to become complainers, to locate a problem, to become the location of a problem.

A FEMINIST EAR

It was important to me to open this book with how complaints are not heard or how we are not heard when we are heard as complaining. My aim in the book is to counter this history by giving complaint a hearing, by giving room to complaint, by listening to complaint. A history can become routine; a history can be how those who complain are dismissed, rendered incredible. I think of my method in this project as being about hearing, lending my ear or becoming a feminist ear. I first introduced the idea of a feminist ear in my book *Living a Feminist Life* (2017). I was

Hearing
Complaint

3

describing a scene from the feminist film *A Question of Silence* (directed by Marleen Gorris, 1982). In the scene, a secretary is seated at a table. She makes a suggestion. The men at the table say nothing. It is as if she has not said anything. A man at the table then makes the same suggestion. They rush to congratulate him on his good idea.

She sits there silently. A question of silence: she can hear how she was not heard; she knows how and why she is passed over. She is just a secretary; she is the only woman seated at a table of men: she is not supposed to have ideas of her own; she is supposed to write down their ideas.² To hear with a feminist ear is to hear who is not heard, how we are not heard. If we are taught to tune out some people, then a feminist ear is an achievement. We become attuned to those who are tuned out, and we can be those, which means becoming attuned to ourselves can also be an achievement. We learn from who is not heard about who is deemed important or who is doing “important work,” to return to the sharpness of Cary’s Black feminist insights. We learn how only some ideas are heard if they are deemed to come from the right people; right can be white. What would you say or do if you were the one being passed over? What would you say or do if your ideas were heard as originating with another person? Would you complain? Would you say something, express something? The question of complaint is intimately bound up with the question of hearing, of how we express ourselves given what or who is passed over.

To hear complaint is to become attuned to the different forms of its expression. We can pause here and consider the different meanings of complaint. A complaint can be an expression of grief, pain, or dissatisfaction, something that is a cause of a protest or outcry, a bodily ailment, or a formal allegation.³ In researching complaint, I began with the latter sense of complaint. But as I will show throughout this book, the latter sense of complaint as formal allegation brings up other, more affective and embodied senses. It was a feminist ear that led me here; it was what I could hear in complaint or from complaint that led me to the project. I was inspired to do this project after taking part in a series of inquiries into sexual harassment and sexual misconduct that had been prompted by a collective complaint lodged by students. Another way of saying this: the project was inspired by students. If my task in this book is to hear complaints, to listen to them, to work through them and with them, the book is a continuation of a task I began with students.

Where we hear complaint matters; when we hear complaint matters. I still remember the day I first heard from the students who had put forward a collective complaint. The students had requested a meeting. I was

asked to attend as a feminist academic from a different department. The students had requested this meeting because an inquiry into sexual harassment that had taken place over the summer of that year did not find sufficient evidence, or evidence that took the right form, to take their complaint further. The students I met that day had already formed a collective to write a complaint. I learned from them how and why they had formed that collective. You too will have an opportunity to learn from and about their collective in chapter 7 of this book. I also learned there had been a number of earlier inquiries prompted by earlier complaints. I have since found out how common this is: when you are involved in a complaint, you come to hear about earlier complaints. You come to hear about what you did not know about.

I attended the meeting with the students with another academic. Before the meeting, I wrote to her to say that it had been “stressed” to me that “the institutional will is such that any formal letters of complaint will have immediate consequences.” If I passed on this stress before the meeting, the students taught me to question it. By insisting that the students individually make formal written complaints, the university was asking them to give up their anonymity, to make themselves even more vulnerable than they had already made themselves. The following day I wrote to the colleague with whom I attended the meeting that if the position was that we needed formal written complaints by individuals to reopen the inquiry, then “strategically” we might need to try to “get that evidence.” But we also agreed that we needed to push for a change of position. We realized our task ought not to be to persuade the students to make formal written complaints but to persuade the university to hear the complaints that had already been made.

We wrote a report giving a full account of what the students had shared with us. We quoted a legal expert who had confirmed that formal written statements should not be necessary to establish “the balance of probability” that harassment has happened, which was all that was needed, by law, to establish. We concluded the report by stating that those who have been harassed “should not be made responsible for redressing it.” Listening to the students, we had realized just how much work, time, and energy they had already given to identifying and documenting the problem. As I will explore throughout this book, making a complaint is never completed by a single action: it often requires you do more and more work. It is exhausting, especially given that what you complain about is already exhausting.

The report we wrote up after the meeting led to further communications between academics and administrators, to the reopening of the

inquiry, and then to further inquiries. We can identify a problem in this sequence of events. For the students' complaint to be heard, or for the complaint to be heard with a stronger commitment to action, it had to be written up by academics. Complaints, it seems, go further the extent to which those positioned higher up in an organization express them or give support to them. The path of a complaint, where a complaint goes, how far it goes, teaches us something about how institutions work, what I call in part I of this book *institutional mechanics*. It should *not* be the case that support from those who are more established is necessary for a complaint to be heard. But when this is the case, that support can be vital to stop a complaint process from being stalled.

To work on a complaint is often to work out how a complaint is stalled. It was given how the process had stalled that we agreed on a compromise: students could make complaints anonymously. When the requirements for the form of complaint were loosened, more students came forward to testify in the inquiries. There was nothing automatic about this process; complaints did not rush out like water from a tap that had been unblocked. It still took a conscious and collective effort by students to make complaints that would be, in their terms, "legible to the university."⁴ It is not only that a complaint is not completed by a single action; you often have to keep making the same complaints in different ways before they will be heard or in order for them to be heard. Many of the students who testified in these inquiries shared their stories with me. Those stories remain their stories. I do not share their stories in this book. But I have written *Complaint!* with their stories in mind. I hear their stories alongside those I have collected for this book. To become a feminist ear is to hear complaints together.

A feminist ear can be understood as an institutional tactic. To hear complaints, you have to dismantle the barriers that stop us from hearing complaints, and by barriers, I am referring to institutional barriers, the walls, the doors that render so much of what is said, what is done, invisible and inaudible. If you have to dismantle barriers to hear complaints, hearing complaints can make you more aware of those barriers. In other words, hearing complaints can also be how you learn *how* complaints are not heard.

It takes work to hear complaints because it takes work for others to reach you. Becoming a feminist ear meant not only hearing the students' complaints; it meant sharing the work. It meant becoming part of their collective. Their collective became *ours*. I think of that *ours* as the promise of feminism, *ours* not as a possession but as an invitation, an opening,

a combining of forces. We worked together to confront the institution more directly about its role in enabling and reproducing a culture of harassment. The harder it is to get through, the more you have to do. The more we tried to confront the problem of sexual harassment as an institutional problem, the more we refused to accept weak statements about what the university was committed to doing, the more we questioned how they were changing policies without communicating with anyone why we needed to change policies (chapter 1), the more resistance we encountered.

Complaint: a path of more resistance. The institution becomes what you come up against. At times it felt like we were getting somewhere. At other times the wall came down and we realized that however far they were going to go, they were not going to go far enough. We could not even get public acknowledgment from the administration that there had been any inquiries. It was as if they had never happened. To hear complaint can be to hear that silence: what is not being said, what is not being done, what is not being dealt with. It was during one of those times, walls coming down, the sound of silence can be walls coming down, that I decided I wanted to conduct research on other people's experience of complaint. My own experience of working with students on these inquiries led me to this project. So much of what you do, the labor, the struggle, happens behind closed doors: no one knows about it; no one has to know about it. My desire to do this research came from a sense of frustration, the feeling of doing so much not to get very far. *Frustration can be a feminist record.* My desire to do this research also came from my own conviction that if you ask those who complain about their experiences of complaint, you will learn so much about institutions and about power: *complaint as feminist pedagogy.*⁵ Yes, frustration can be a feminist record. Another way of putting this: *Watch out, we have the data.*

The knowledge we acquire from being in a situation can sometimes require we leave a situation. What I learned about institutions from supporting a complaint led me to leave; at the time it did not feel like a choice but like what I had to do. I think back to that room where I first heard from the students. When you are involved in a complaint, you are still at work; you are still doing your work. I would keep entering that room, the same room in which we had that meeting. It was my department's meeting room, a much-used room. We would have other meetings in that room, academic meetings, papers shuffling, papers and persons being rearranged. It was the same room, but it might as well have been a different room; perhaps it was a different room. It was filled with memories, occupied by a

history that felt as tangible as the walls. What you hear in the room comes to fill that room. I could not just turn up at the same old meetings, doing the same old things.

COLLECTING COMPLAINTS

Introduction

I decided to undertake this research on complaint before I resigned, but I did not begin the research until over a year after.⁶ That I resigned changed the nature of the research as well as how I could do it. I shared that I resigned in a post on my blog on May 30, 2016. My resignation was widely reported in the national media less than two weeks later. While I found the exposure difficult, I was moved and inspired by how many people got in touch with me to express their solidarity, rage, and care. I received messages from many different people telling me what happened to them when they had complained. I heard from others who had left their posts and professions as a result of a complaint. One story coming out can lead to more stories coming out. I realized something from what came out: by resigning from my post, I had made myself more accessible as a feminist ear. Having become a feminist ear within my own institution, I could turn my ear outward, toward others working in other institutions. I think it was because I resigned in protest about the failure of the institution to hear complaints that people entrusted me with their stories of complaint. It remains my responsibility to earn that trust.

Given that my own resignation put me in a better position to collect other people's stories of complaint, I am not just telling the story; I am part of the story. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), I described my resignation as a snap, a feminist snap. "Snap" can be what you say when you make the same connection. A snap can also be the sound of something breaking. So often a complaint is understood as snapping a bond, breaking ties, connections, to a university, to a department, to a project, to a colleague. One of the reasons some people do not hear about a complaint or are not willing to hear about a complaint is because of how it would threaten a bond they have to a university, a department, a project, or a colleague. Snap: when a break becomes a connection.

Also snap: how we hear what each other can hear. A feminist ear can thus be a research method as well as an institutional tactic. I could write this book because of how many people shared with me their experiences of making complaints. I could write this book because of who I came to hear. My task is to hear *about* complaints *from* those who have made them. The data comes primarily from communications with academics

and students who have made or considered making formal complaints at universities (or comparable educational institutes) about unequal or unjust working conditions or abuses of power such as harassment and bullying.⁷ This book is a collection of their complaints. Of course, there are other complaints, other kinds of complaints, and thus other stories to tell about complaint. In order to hear the complaints that I collect *here*, I cannot hear *all* complaints.

How did I come to collect these stories? Most people who participated in this research got in touch with me through my website or blog.⁸ Not everyone who got in touch with me went on to tell me their story. Sometimes getting in touch can be telling enough. People gave different reasons for getting in touch. Some said they wanted to help or to help out. One student emailed, “I write because I went through a years-long complaints procedure that I would like to share with you if you are still in this phase of your project and/or if it might be helpful in your work.” Another wrote, “Thank you so much for doing this study. In order to help out, I want to share my own experience in submitting a formal complaint to my university’s reporting office after being sexually harassed by another student.” Some people got in touch with me because they felt I would or could hear them. One student wrote, “And so do bear with me as I write this to you. I know you’ll get it. You’ll get me, and what’s happened and where one might go from here.” Another student wrote, “I am writing because I need a feminist ear. Perhaps you can use this complaint in your work.” To become a feminist ear is to indicate you are willing to receive complaints. An academic wrote, “I want the story to go somewhere (apart from round and round in my head) which is why I am contacting you.” It can be hard when our stories of complaint go round and round in our heads. It can feel like a lot of movement without getting very far. Telling someone the story of complaint can be how the story goes somewhere. To become a feminist ear is to give complaints somewhere to go.

The project gathered momentum as I began to share stories of complaint in posts, lectures, and seminars. The more you share, the more you hear. I think some people offered to tell me their stories of complaint because they could connect their own experiences with the stories I had already shared. To share a story of complaint can be to make a connection. To share a story of complaint can be to add to a collection. A post-graduate researcher wrote to me, “I am happy to share my experience for your study if you are still collecting narratives.” To collect can mean to go to a place and to bring something or somebody back. To collect can also mean to bring something together from different places or periods

of time. To receive complaints, to hear them, is thus also to collect them; to go there is to go back; to bring something back is to bring us together.

That most of the people whose experiences I share in this book got in touch with me has shaped the tone and texture of this work. Those who contacted me often had to pay a high price for the complaints they made; in fact, this is why some people contacted me. One former professor wrote, “I took an off-the-record grievance pay-out (not massive) and a much-reduced pension to get out of academia two years ago after an unremitting fifteen years of sexist (and disablist) bullying. I would be willing to participate in your study if you can guarantee complete confidentiality. I had to sign a gagging clause when I got my grievance pay-out, which—as I’m sure you are aware—is how universities typically try to cover up the sexism that is rampant within them.” She needed me to keep her complaint confidential because of what the institution had covered up through the use of a gag clause, or an NDA (nondisclosure agreement). To cover up a complaint is to cover over what the complaint was about, in this instance, sexist and ableist bullying, the “sexism that is rampant” within universities.

You are more likely to share a story of complaint if you have been stopped from sharing that story. Another academic wrote, “I would be happy to talk about my experience of being pushed into an NDA.” Many people who contacted me did so because of what they were pushed into or how they were pushed out. In other words, much of the data in this book came out of complaints that led people into direct confrontations with institutions (and by “institutions” I would include the people employed by institutions, peers and colleagues as well as administrators and managers). We do not need to assume that complaints about unequal working conditions or abuses of power necessarily lead to such confrontations to learn from those that do.

There is so much to confront in these stories. I conducted interviews with forty students, academics, researchers, and administrators who had been involved in some way in a formal complaint process, including those who did not take their complaints forward, who started the process only to withdraw from it.⁹ The interviews for the project were conducted over a twenty-month period between June 2017 and January 2019. I spoke to many more people than I had originally planned. I could have spoken to many more people than I did. It was hard not to keep speaking to those who asked to speak to me, but I knew I needed to stop if I was to have any chance of doing justice to the material I had collected.¹⁰ In addition to interviews, I received eighteen written statements. I have over the

past years communicated informally with hundreds of other people by email, by phone, or in person. Some of these communications have also made their way into the book.¹¹ In this book I also draw on my own experiences of going through a formal complaint process. When you spend three years trying to get complaints through the system, you end up with a lot of data.

Most of the interviews were conducted by Skype. This decision was in part pragmatic: I did not have funding for this project to enable me to travel across the country. In fact, I did not apply for funding. Given that one of my main concerns was to explore how complaints can lead to confrontations with institutions in which they are made, it seemed appropriate for the project to be conducted outside the influence of institutions to the extent that was possible.¹² I want to add here that working as an independent scholar without access to institutional resources, I did not experience this situation as a lack, or only as a lack, but as an opportunity to conduct a project on my own terms and in my own way. Decisions made for pragmatic reasons, because of not having access to space, funds, or resources, often ended up being the right decisions from a research point of view as well as an ethical point of view. Let me give an example. I had asked for and was given permission to record all of these interviews.¹³ I did the transcription myself as I did not have the means to employ someone else. This transcription was a time-consuming process. But I am so glad I transcribed the interviews myself as I learned so much from listening slowly and carefully to each person's words. I needed my time to be consumed; there was so much to take in. I needed to be immersed in the material.

Although most interviews were conducted by Skype, I did speak to some interviewees in person either by using their offices or rooms at the university at which they worked or by borrowing offices from friends or colleagues. In one case, I interviewed two women who were no longer based at a university in a city in which I did not know anyone who had an office I could use. We ended up meeting in a large café. Although we found a corner that was relatively private, you could hear the hustle and bustle around us, the clattering of plates, sounds of laughter; clattering, chattering. Being there together made a difference; hearing life go on can be a reminder that life goes on. In the middle of our conversation, a very intense and difficult conversation, a ladybird (or *ladybug*) landed on the table. One woman said, "Oh, look, it's a ladybird." You can hear our murmurs of appreciation on the recording; *How cute, How sweet*. Then I said, "Oh no, it's fallen on its back." Then the other woman I was interviewing

said, “A person I know was recently bitten by a ladybird.” I replied, “They bite? They do not look like a creature that bites.” We laughed. The ladybird returned to our table at certain moments, and each time we remarked upon it with affection. I was reminded listening to the recording of their testimony how distractions can be necessary, also precious, so I am sharing the distraction with you. We can lighten the load by lightening the mood. I also learned from my in-person interviews how the room in which we conducted the interview became a talking point. I interviewed an academic in an office belonging to a colleague. When she talked about what happened to her many years ago, how she had been assaulted by a lecturer in his office, she compared the windows and doors of that office to the windows and doors of the office we were in.¹⁴ What surrounds us in the present can become a reference point, helping us to describe something that happened in the past. I will return to how the past returns.

Most of the people I spoke to on Skype were at home. I was listening at home. That too mattered. My dog, Poppy, for instance, came into view a few times, and thus into the dialogue, rather like that ladybird, a friendly landing and a helpful distraction in the middle of the intensity of a conversation. But this question was never far from my mind: What does it mean to be at home when you tell the story? People have different relationships to home. I knew that; I sensed that. There were advantages to being at home. One time a person stopped the interview to take a break, and I realized how helpful it was for her to be able to leave the conversation quickly and easily because we were not in the same space. I will return to how I made use of her break in due course. But there are also difficulties in sharing these stories while being at home that are not unrelated to the difficulties of making a complaint. I will explore throughout the book that however much complaints happen behind closed doors, for those who make complaints it can be hard to close the door on them; complaints can follow you home.¹⁵

On a few occasions I spoke to people by Skype when they were at work. One time I began a conversation with someone when she was on a bus. It was a bit difficult to hear each other over the noise of the bus, so we stopped and started again when she got to work. She rang me back when she was in a room, a seminar room. And she started telling me about a very difficult meeting that took place, to use her words, “in this exact room.” Being “in this exact room,” the same room, it matters. You end up telling the story of complaint in the same place you made the complaint.

COMPLAINT AS TESTIMONY

How we hear stories of complaint matters. How to describe what I was hearing? When I first imagined the project, I thought I would conduct semistructured interviews using similar sorts of questions that I had prepared for my earlier study of diversity. I remember arriving for my first interview with the first person who had contacted me. I had my prepared questions typed out neatly. This was an in-person interview and it was conducted at the university where she was now based. I realized very quickly, in the first minutes of that first interview, that the questions I had prepared were not going to work. Complaints tend to be too messy even for a loose series of questions. From the second interview onward, I asked people just one opening and very general question: I asked them to share the experiences that led them to consider making a complaint as well as their experiences of making a complaint if that is what they went on to make. I wanted the stories to come out, fall out, in whatever order they did. We then had time for a dialogue, a to-and-fro that was possible because I too had an experience of complaint.

Over time I came to think of the spoken words less as an interview and more as testimony.¹⁶ A testimony can refer to an oral or written statement given in a court of law. The purpose of a testimony in such a setting is to provide evidence; testimony is used to establish what happened, the facts of the matter or the truth. Testimony is also what is required to identify an injustice, a harm, or a wrong. Shoshana Felman (1992, 3) describes “the process of testimony” as “bearing witness to a crisis or trauma.” The accounts given to me had the mood of testimony, solemn statements about a crisis or trauma. Making a complaint is often necessary because of a crisis or trauma. The complaint often becomes part of the crisis or trauma. A complaint testimonial can teach us the nonexteriority of complaint to its object. In making a complaint you have already been called upon to testify, to give evidence. To testify to a complaint is to testify to testimony, or to what Felman calls “the process of testimony.” To testify to complaint is a *double testimony*.¹⁷ You are testifying to an experience of testifying although you are also testifying to more than that experience.

Testimony was thus in the accounts as well as being how they took form. And what has been so important to the process of receiving these statements as testimony is receiving them together. To hear these accounts as testimony is to hear how they combine to allow us to bear witness to an experience, to show what they reveal, to bring out what is usually hidden,

Hearing
Complaint

given how complaints are made confidential. I too was called upon to bear witness. And that I was called upon to bear witness is to point to the many ethical dilemmas of conducting research on complaint. To testify to a complaint, to what happened that led you to complain, to what happened when you complained, is almost always to testify to a traumatic experience. I was never not conscious of this. I was aware throughout that enabling people to share painful experiences was risky and complicated. How would it affect the person testifying? Where would sharing the story leave them? How would it affect me, given that my own experience of complaint was so entangled with the trauma of having had to leave my post?¹⁸ And what responsibility did I have to those who shared an experience of complaint not only as a researcher but as a fellow human being? Ethics requires keeping the question of ethics alive.

Most of the people I spoke to were speaking about past experiences. To speak about a past trauma can be to make that trauma present. One post-doctoral researcher began her testimony by saying, “What I remember is how it felt.” A memory can be of a feeling; a memory can be a feeling. In remembering, we make the past present; we make present.¹⁹ The past can enter the room in and with that feeling. I had, I have, an immense responsibility in creating a time and space that felt as safe as possible for each person I spoke to. It did not always feel right; I did not always get it right. An effort can be what matters, and that effort was shared. I think of the dialogues that followed each testimony as how we shared that effort by sharing reflections on what it does, how it feels to go through complaint. Going through complaint can heighten your sense of responsibility as it can heighten your sense of fragility; you are aware of how hard it can be, also how important it can be—what is hard is close to what is important—to share such shattering experiences.

Being shattered is not always a place from which we can speak. I did not talk to everyone who asked to talk to me. In some instances, people asked to talk to me in the middle of a complaint process. Mostly I explained why this would not be a good idea and offered to be in touch more informally instead. In one case I decided not to receive a testimony from someone who wanted to speak to me because I felt she needed the kind of support I could not give. I was conscious of what I could not provide: therapy or practical guidance. It was clear to me the limits of what I could do. I was an ear. That was my task. That was the point, to receive. But of course, even if reception was the point, it was not the end point. I was being called upon not only to receive stories but to share them. It was very important, then, that if complaints were given to me, I send them

back out in a different form than the form in which they were given but in a way that was true to how they were given. I did not want people to share their complaints with me only for me to sit on them. I did not want to become a filing cabinet. We have too many of them already.²⁰

Testimonies were given to me so that I could pass them on to you, readers, audiences, complainers. I had to find a way to pass them on in confidence. So much of the material I share in this book is confidential—many of those with whom I have communicated would fear the consequences for their lives and careers if they were recognizable from the data, whether or not they signed confidentiality or nondisclosure agreements. This book offers fragments from many different testimonies. A fragment is a sharp piece of something.²¹ Each quote is a sharp piece of illumination. A complaint can be shattering; like that broken jug, we can be left in pieces. In the book I pick up these pieces not to create the illusion of some unbroken thing, but so that we can learn from the sharpness of each piece, how they fit together.

A fragment of a story, a fragment as a story. How do we tell such stories? So many of those I spoke to spoke about what it meant to share their story. It can be hard to know where to begin. It can be hard to know where to begin a story of complaint because it is hard to know when a complaint begins. Let me share the opening words from a testimony offered by a senior researcher who made a complaint about bullying and harassment:

It is always so complex and so difficult and so upsetting still; even just knowing where to start is. And it's funny, even just starting I can feel emotion coming out, and all I want to do is I want to start crying. And I am also going to have to present a good front, professional and correct, and know I just can't let it affect me, and I am going to have to talk about this as something that is detached. And I think why I am putting so much effort into presenting something that is so much part of me.

Emotion comes out in telling the story; emotion makes it hard to tell the story. You make an effort to present something because it has become part of you, because it matters to you, to what you can do, who you can be, but how it matters makes it hard to present.

How do you pull yourself together to share an experience if an experience is of breaking apart? You talk about why you need to pull yourself together; you talk about how you pull yourself together. There are moments still, of falling apart, when something gets under your skin. The senior researcher described receiving the results of an independent investigation:

The conclusion of their report was that I participated actively in the conflict and that I monopolized the work. This word *monopolized*: I had so much rage and anger. Not only did they abandon me, but they made it my fault for monopolizing the work. And this is it: this thing, I have it inside me in my head all the time: I monopolized, monopolized, monopolized. The word stops me from doing anything, from writing something, writing a text, writing an article. What am I doing: am I monopolizing things again; how dare I even enjoy what I do now, who do I think I am, I am nothing, I am worthless, my work might be good but I am not, and I have completely internalized this in a way that is very, very, very damaging.

How we feel in a situation can be how we learn about a situation. We learn from what gets under our skin. The word *monopolized* gets under her skin; when it sticks to her, she becomes stuck, unable to write, to do her work. Words carry a charge; you can end up being made to feel that you are the problem, that the problem is you.

Words can chip at your sense of self, of your own worth. Words can carry the weight of injustices; they can transmit a history. To internalize such a history can be damaging, “very, very, very damaging.” The words we use to tell the story of complaint can be the same words that get under our skin, words like *monopolized*. A Black feminist student told me that the word that got to her was *unreasonable*. There were many words that could have stuck; she was conscious they perceived her as an angry Black woman, but it was that word that got under her skin, leading her to question herself: “I am constantly questioning am I being unreasonable?” Even if the word does not fit, it can make you question whether you fit.

We can share the experience of words getting under our skin, even if the words that do that or go there are different words. An Indigenous academic who described the racism she encountered from white settler colleagues described a word used by the chair of her department: “My chair constantly uses this word, in many things that she speaks about but in particular in my annual review and other meetings, she uses this word often, *inappropriate*, her qualifier, at my interactions. It causes me to put this big lens upon myself, how I am inappropriate, what does that mean, what does she see, how is that being defined?” You can hear how you are being heard in the repetition of the word *inappropriate*. And that hearing can be a lens on how you view yourself, you can feel inappropriate, or ask yourself, “Am I being inappropriate?” or you can ask, “What does it mean to be so?” How is she defining that word? How is she defining you? In

listening to those who make complaints, I am listening to how different words can get under our skin: *monopolized, unreasonable, inappropriate*.

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 to become attuned to sound, to how we sound, how we are heard as sounding, to how words sound, stories too. Many of those I spoke with conveyed a concern about how long they were taking to tell the story; I knew this because of how often people apologized for the length of time they were taking. I kept saying, "Take your time. Take the time you need to tell me what you need to tell me." Many of those I spoke with told me that they had to keep abbreviating, to keep shortening the story, because the story was always going to require more time than we could take given how much time it would take to tell the story.²² One person used the expression "to cut a long story short" seven times in her account; there is much cutting, so much shortening, so much consciousness of length, of time, energy too.

Another person described how she went through multiple complaints by going through them with me. You make or have multiple complaints if you encounter multiple situations you need to complain about. But even if you know this, that the multiplicity is a measure of what you come up against, you can be conscious about how it sounds, how you sound: "I'd changed quite a lot between the first time and this time. I know I sound like the people who had fifteen car crashes: then this happened, then this happened. It gets to the point, I have never told this story before, like the whole story, because I know I sound like that person and I don't trust the space to sound like that person." The whole story can be a story of crashing through. There is crashing in the story, wave after wave that I can hear, that transmit something, something difficult, painful, traumatic. We might need a space to tell that story, the whole story, the story of a complaint, a space that is safe because we know how it can sound, how we can sound; you can feel that you are the car crash, a complaint as how you are crashing through life. The word *complaint* too can sound like a crash, a collision, the loud sound of something breaking into pieces. The word *complaint* derives from Old French, *complaindre*, "to lament," an expression of sorrow and grief. *Lament* is from Latin, *lamentum*, "wailing, moaning; weeping." *Complaint* seems to catch how those who challenge power become sites of negation: to complain is to become a container of negative affect, a leaky container, speaking out as spilling over.²³ We can hear something because of its intensity. The exclamation point in the title of *Complaint!* is a way of showing what I am hearing, how a complaint is

heard as intensity, an emphasis, a sharp point, a sore point, a raising of the voice, a shrieking, a shattering.²⁴

Negation is quite a sensation. The word *complaint* shares the same root as the word *plague*, “to strike, to lament by beating the breast.”²⁵ Complaint can be sick speech. A body can be what is stricken. If in the book I approach the communications shared with me, oral and written, as testimonies, I also approach complaint as testimony in other ways, complaint as how we give expression to something. If a body can express a complaint, a body can be a complaint testimony. The word *express* comes from *press*; to express is to press out. I learn from the sense evolution of the word *expression*. It came to mean “to put into words” or “to speak one’s mind” via the intermediary sense of how clay “under pressure takes the form of an image.”²⁶ Expression can be the shape something takes in being pressed out. My approach to the material collected in this book is to attend to its shape, to listen to what is pressed out, what spills, what seeps, what weeps. In *Complaint!* I hear spillage as speech.

If attending to spillage can be a method, spillage can be a connection between works. I think of Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s (2016) *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, her ode to the work and wisdom of Hortense Spillers. Gumbs attends to Spillers’s words with love and care, to what spills, to words that spill, to liquid that spills out from a container, to being somebody who spills things. Spillage can be a breaking, of a container, a narrative, a turning of phrases so that “doors opened and everyone came through” (xii). Spillage can be, then, the slow labor of getting out of something. A story too can be what spills, which is to say, a story can be the work of getting the story out.

COMPLAINT BIOGRAPHIES

From fragments I have already shared, you will be able to hear that to tell the story of a complaint is to reflect on what it means and how it feels to tell that story, to bring into the present time an experience that is shattering. The data is experiential. The data is theoretical. Those I am speaking with are theorizing as they are speaking to me, reflecting upon their experience. It is a profound commitment of mine to show this: making a complaint within an institution often requires reflecting upon it. Reflection can happen in the same time, the same place, as action. To make a complaint can be to experience a profound change in one’s situation. That you complain is how you come to experience so much that you would not otherwise experience.

Complaint does not tend to be experienced as something that is or can be kept apart. We learn from the story of a complaint how complaint can be a way of apprehending what is around you: so much appears if you make or try to make a complaint that would not otherwise appear. This is why, in chapter 1, I describe complaint as a *phenomenology of the institution*. One lecturer talked about her experience of complaint as being able to see something: “It’s like you put glasses on, and now you can see it.” She emphasized that having seen the world through the lens of complaint, you cannot unsee that world: “It’s a bit like if you complain you get extra vision. It is suddenly like you can see in extra violet. And you can’t go back.” You can’t go back to the person you were before the complaint; you can’t unsee what you have come to see through complaint. Putting glasses on, being able to see what is going on, to see more, is also to see what you did not see before. Complaint can also give you a capacity to explain what is happening. As she describes, “The feeling of being able to name what is happening to you is very powerful.” In complaining about what is happening, you become equipped to explain what is happening. That equipment given to you by complaint, being able to name, to explain, can be “very powerful.”

Making a complaint can change your sense of self, what you can do, who you can be. She likened becoming a complainer to being “the problem child”: “In getting to that point, the complainer, you never shed it, it is like the problem child: having done it, you cannot go back.” A complaint becomes part of you, part of who you become, that problem child, you can’t shed it; you can’t shed her, having done it, made it, that complaint, “you cannot go back.” Perhaps it is a promise: having become a complainer, you cannot unbecome a complainer. Promises don’t always feel promising. That a complaint can take over your life, become your life, even become you, can be what makes complaint so exhausting.²⁷ When making a complaint changes your sense of self, it changes your sense of the world.

Telling the story of a complaint can feel like telling a life story. It wasn’t long into the research, in the middle of my fifth interview, that I began thinking of formal complaints as part of a much longer and more complicated story, a story of a person, a story of an institution, a story of relationships between persons and institutions. I was talking to a woman of color academic. She began with an informal complaint she made about racism and sexism in the department in which she worked. But then she talked about more: she talked about the experiences you are likely to have as a woman of color in a white patriarchal institution, all those incidents that happen, keep happening. In the middle of the interview, she asked

to stop for a break. I kept the tape on and began talking into it. I talked about what I could hear in what she had been saying. It was then I first used the term *complaint biography*. If the term was mine, the inspiration for it came from her. I had begun my project on complaint by thinking of complaints as having their own biography. I had thought of myself as following complaints around, the way I had followed diversity around (Ahmed 2012). I was interested in how complaints were put together, as documents, as files, where they were sent, where they end up.

I am still interested in these questions. I will show throughout the book how complaint files matter to the complainer as records of what you have done, where you have been. But by *complaint biography* I meant something quite different. The term *complaint biography* helps us to think of the life of a complaint in relation to the life of a person or group of people. A complaint biography is not simply what happens to a complaint, a story of how a complaint comes about, where it goes, what it does, how things end up; that is, it is not simply about the institutional life (and death) of a complaint. 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. And then what happens when you make a formal complaint (or don't make a formal complaint) affects what you might subsequently do. Some people decide not to make a complaint because of their past experiences of having made a complaint and not getting anywhere. Some people decide to make a complaint because they regretted a decision they had made not to complain before. Where a complaint goes, or what happens to a complaint, can affect whether we make them.

Decisions matter. The need to decide whether to complain is often experienced as a crisis. It is not clear what to do or what is the right thing to do. It might be you are uncertain whether what happened merits a complaint. That uncertainty is part of the story. Or it might be that you are certain what happened merits a complaint, but you are not certain that complaint is the right course of action. You might not trust the process; you might not trust the institution. A complaint biography would include those times we decide not to make complaints, not to say something or not to do something, despite an experience or because of an experience. A complaint can mean being prepared to talk about difficult and painful experiences, often over and over again, including to those with whom you have not built up a relationship of trust and those who represent an

organization that is implicated in some way in what you are complaining about. The decision whether to complain is usually made in the company of others; you will most likely receive advice, suggestions, and guidance from peers as well as friends, whether welcomed or not.²⁸ You might decide not to complain because you cannot deal with the consequences of complaint that have been made vivid to you through warnings. You might not feel confident that your complaint will be taken seriously when your complaint is about not being taken seriously.

Those of us doing feminist work or diversity work will have our own complaint biographies. How would you give your own complaint biography? I invite each of you to ask yourselves this question as you read the stories I have collected in this book. Approaching complaint biographically is also a way of picking up on the question of how we are heard when we are heard as complaining as well as who is heard as complaining. You might be heard as making a complaint even though you don't think of yourself as making a complaint; perhaps you are asking for a more inclusive syllabus or perhaps you are asking for an accessible room. Or you might think of yourself as making a complaint—perhaps you are complaining about sexist or racist jokes—and be laughed off, as if you don't really mean it. You might even submit a formal complaint, but your action is not received as a complaint; perhaps you don't use the right form, or perhaps you don't send the form to the right person, which means that a formal complaint process is not triggered. I learned quickly that when complaint is narrowed as genre, to complain as the requirement to fill in certain forms, in a certain way, at a certain time, many problems are not recorded. To keep the focus of the project on formal complaints would have been to narrow it too much, to miss too much.²⁹

Even what is narrowed at the level of form is not always contained. We learn from listening to those who do make formal complaints how hard it is to contain a complaint: a complaint becomes almost what you are *in*, a zone, a space, an environment. The formal process, the motions—sometimes complaint can feel like going through the motions—is time-consuming enough. But being in a complaint can also mean dealing with more than that, more than the motions necessary for the formal process. The difficulty of containing complaint includes the difficulty of leaving complaint behind. One student said of her experience, “It never leaves you.” This book comes out of complaint; it comes out of what does not leave. It comes from talking to those whose lives became deeply entangled with the complaints they had or the complaints they made, whether formally or not.

I have told you the story of the book. I have told you about the stories in the book. It is also important for me to share how I understand this book as participating in a wider sharing of stories. The #MeToo movement, at least the one inspired by the Twitter hashtag, began after I had already started the research on complaint. As a political campaign the Me Too movement began much earlier, in 2006, organized by the Black feminist activist Tarana Burke as a “space for supporting and amplifying the voices of survivors of sexual abuse, assault and exploitation.”³⁰ Many of those I spoke to after #MeToo went viral referred to it: sometimes as a source of inspiration for their own decision to speak to me; sometimes as what heightened their sense of vulnerability, as a reminder of the trauma and pain of complaint; sometimes as a way of reflecting on the status of their own complaint as a story. One senior researcher asked of her own testimony, “It is just another story. Another #MeToo?” It makes sense that #MeToo would become not only a reference point but a question, a question of what telling the story of a complaint can do.

This book in being *on* complaint is also *on* the university. By saying this book is *on* the university, I mean something more than that the university is my research field or site.³¹ I also mean the book is about working *on* the university. I write this book out of a commitment to the project of rebuilding universities because I believe that universities, as places we can go to learn, not the only places but places that matter, universities as holders of many histories of learning, should be as open and accessible to as many as possible. In working *on* the university, I am deeply indebted to the work of Black feminists and feminists of color who have offered important critiques of how power operates within universities, including M. Jacqui Alexander, Sirma Bilge, Philomena Essed, Rosalind Hampton, Sunshine Kamaloni, Heidi Mirza, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Kay Sian, Malinda Smith, Shirley Anne Tate, and Gloria Wekker. Their combined work has created what I think of as counterinstitutional knowledge of how universities work, for whom they work.³² Many of these scholars have also provided strong critiques of how universities make use of the rhetoric of diversity as a way of managing differences and antagonism. This book is indebted to these critiques in part because complaints procedures function rather like diversity: when offered as solutions to problems, they are problems given new forms. So many complaints about problems within institutions are resolved in ways that reproduce the problems. So many complaints end up being complaints about how complaints are handled.

So many complaints made within institutions end up being complaints about institutions.

Counterinstitutional work in Black feminist and feminist of color hands is also often *housework*, with all the drudgery and repetition that word entails; painstaking work, administrative work, care work, and yes, *diversity work*.³³ Institutions become what we work *on* because of how they do not accommodate us. My own experiences of doing this work as a woman of color academic have thus been an important resource in researching and writing about complaint. I noted earlier that this book came out of my experience of working with students at my former university (as well as on it; there is no question, *we were on it*). I think of this work as in conversation with the work of those former students, two of whom are now academics, Tiffany Page and Leila Whitley, as well as the many other student activists I have met since beginning this research who are trying to find new ways to address old problems of sexual harassment and sexual violence at universities. As Anne McClintock (2017) describes, “Furious with administrators for protecting their institutional reputations instead of their students’ rights, survivors bypassed obstructionist deans, invented new strategies of collaboration, taught themselves Title IX, and with unprecedented clout brought over two hundred universities under federal investigation.”³⁴ So much of the *inventiveness* of student activism comes *from* an intimate knowledge of how institutions work to protect themselves, comes *out* of an experience of being obstructed, whether by procedures or by people.

I have many debts to students. I am deeply indebted to the work of Black students and students of color who have pushed universities to address their complicity with slavery and colonialism by challenging the ongoing use of campus security and police, by asking questions like “Why is my curriculum white?” or “Why is my professor not Black?,” by calling for the removal of statues of slave traders or the renaming of buildings named after eugenicists.³⁵ Some of the students complaining against sexual violence are the same students campaigning against the glorification of slavery and empire. I am inspired by a new generation of Black feminists and feminists of color in the UK and beyond; I think especially of the work of Lola Olufemi, Odelia Younge, Waithera Sebatindira, and Suhaymah Manzoor-Khan.³⁶ A feminist ear needs to be intergenerational: we need to become each other’s ears. We have so much to learn from each other.

We have many struggles at universities because universities are occupied by many histories. If to complain within the institution is to struggle

against it, then complaint shows, to use Angela Y. Davis's (2016, 19) terms, "the intersectionality of struggles."³⁷ By taking complaints as the shared thread, this research also brings the objects of complaint into view. I noted earlier how complaints can bring a world into focus; you come to see more. Making the act of complaining my focus thus brings what complaints are *about* into focus. Complaint provides a lens, a way of seeing, noticing, attending to a problem in the effort to redress that problem.

We could describe the lens provided by complaint as an *intersectional lens*. Some of the words used to describe the complaint experience, I think especially of the word *messy*, are the same words used to describe intersectionality. We can return to my earlier description of complaint as a crash scene. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989, 139) describes intersectionality as like a collision of traffic coming from many different directions: "Consider an analogy to traffic in an intersection, coming and going in all four directions. Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens at an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them."³⁸ You cannot always tell who or what determines the crash; for Black women, it could be race *or* sex discrimination or race *and* sex discrimination. If intersectionality is a point about structures, complaints are often an experience of those same structures; we tend to notice what stops us from proceeding, from going somewhere, from being somewhere.

Power is not simply what complaints are about; power shapes what happens when you complain.³⁹ Complaint offers a way of attending to inequalities and power relationships from the point of view of those who try to challenge them. Although the focus of my study is on how people make use of complaint to challenge power, that is not all I will have to say about power. This book will show the complexities, contradictions, and complications of power through the lens of complaint. We will learn, for instance, how the same complaints procedures used as tools to redress bullying and harassment can be used as tools to bully and to harass. That this happens will not be surprising to feminist readers. We are familiar with how the tools introduced to redress power relations can be used by those who benefit from power relations. The issue is not just that complaints procedures can be used by those with more power, but that complaints are more likely to be received well when they are made by those with more power. Even complications have complications. It can be tricky to work out who has "more power" in this or that instance in part as many who have complaints made against them tend to pass themselves

off as victims of a disciplinary apparatus. When this passing is successful, there is a reversal of power.

If power is tricky, complaints are sticky. Those who make complaints and those who are heard as complaining are themselves more likely to be complained about, becoming what I call in chapter 4 *complaint magnets*. So much can stick to you because you complain or when you complain. In the pages that follow, you will read about many sticky situations. I will share stories of those who have made complaints about sexual harassment, racial harassment, bullying, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and racism. You will hear how complaints can be affected by the structural position of the complainer (and by *affected*, I am referring not only to where complaints go but whether and how complaints are made), by institutional precarity, poverty, mental and physical health, age, citizenship status, and so on. These phenomena all have distinct academic literatures. I will not be engaging substantially with these literatures within the main body of this book, although I use notes as pointers so you can find relevant sources. I think of myself in this book as thinking *with* those I have communicated *with*. The complainers are my guides; they are my feminist philosophers, my critical theorists, and also my collective.

The words I have collected not only *do* the work; they *are* the work. In the first part of the book, I explore how making complaints teaches us about how institutions work, or *institutional mechanics*. Most of the material I share in this part of the book is drawn from people's experience of going through a formal complaint process, with a focus on what happens early on in that process. My concern throughout this part is with the gap between what is supposed to happen in accordance with policy and procedure and what does happen. I consider how complaints are stopped or blocked by the system set up for handling them. In the second part of the book, I go back in time to explore some of the experiences that lead people to consider making complaints. I consider the significance of immanence: how complaints are in the situations they are about. In the third part of the book, I consider how and why *doors* come up in many of the testimonies. If complaints teach us about doors, doors teach us about power: who is enabled by an institution, who is stopped from getting in or getting through. This part of the book is premised on a simple point: to complain about an abuse of power is to learn about power.

The concluding part of this book turns to the work of complaint collectives. I mentioned earlier that I became part of a complaint collective begun by students. The first conclusion, chapter 7, is written by members

of that collective, Leila Whitley, Tiffany Page, and Alice Corble, with support from Heidi Hasbrouck, Chryssa Sdrolia, and others. They describe how and why they formed a collective, which was fluid as well as purposeful, created to push complaints through, to get them out. In the final chapter I reflect on what complaint can teach us about collectivity, how we can assemble ourselves, sometimes without even being in the same time and place. There is hope here; when you hear us together, we are louder. Although complaint can be a shattering—yes, I am picking up many sharp pieces—to make a complaint is often to fight for something. To refuse what has come to be is to fight to be. Doing this work has left me with a sharper sense, a clearer sense, a stronger sense, of the point of that fight.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. The piece is titled “It Is Not like Asian Ladies to Answer Back” and is included in *Writing Black Britain: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (2000). See also Wilson ([1978] 2018).

2. In this short description is a clue as to how a secretary can become a saboteur. See chapter 8 for discussion.

3. This definition is derived from the Merriam Webster dictionary, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/complaint>.

4. Please see in this volume chapter 7 by Whitley et al. They describe how, when they submitted individual complaints, they did so by working collectively. We can resist the demands of the institution to take form in a certain way by appearing to take form in a certain way.

5. #Complaintasfeministpedagogy became my Twitter hashtag for the project. Please feel free to use it to share your complaints!

6. I decided to research complaint about six months before I resigned on December 11, 2015. I wrote in a Facebook post, “I am thinking after my project on ‘the uses of use’ I want to write a book called *Complaint*. Just the one word. And I want to do some more empirical research by talking to those who have made complaints about harassment and bullying within the workplace. I think there is so much to learn from what happens to those who complain and what happens to a complaint.”

7. Most of the people I spoke to are, like me, based in the UK. My discussion of policy frameworks and complaints procedures is in this context. Given that those I communicated with mainly approached me and given I did not delimit my study by location, I have also communicated with people from outside of the UK. I have received written and oral testimonies from students and academics based in Turkey, Portugal, India, Australia, Lithuania, the US, and Canada. However, this research is not a comparative study. I made the decision not to locate the data although I have not removed references to national

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location from the data. There are many differences in how complaints are handled across national contexts as well as within them. I also didn't want to clutter or cramp the text by adding too many identifiers. I tend to introduce the material primarily with reference to the person's academic position at the time of a complaint (whether, say, they are a student or early career researcher). I follow how people identify themselves (so, for instance, if someone talks about an experience they had as a woman of color or as a lesbian, I will introduce them as a woman of color or as a lesbian).

8. My website included a page for the project as well as an email address (complaintstudy@gmail.com). That page and email will remain live for as long as I am.

9. Initially I did not intend to conduct interviews with administrators, although I had done so for my project on diversity, just because I wanted to focus on the experiences of those who make complaints. However, one administrator based in the UK asked to speak to me, and her testimony was immensely rich and valuable (see chapter 1). I have had many informal conversations with administrators, some of which are referred to in the chapters that follow. In addition, two people I spoke to had experience of administering as well as making complaints and shared valuable insights acquired from occupying different positions in the complaints process. One of these people gave me one of the best descriptions of best practice for how to receive complaints as an administrator. She said, "The way I would walk them through that process, my own version of it, of course, I tend to be very empathetic, a listener, what you're doing, I guess. I listen[ed] to the story first and then made a decision. Some of those turned into formal complaints, some of them did not. I always let the person choose. I never felt it was my place, especially having filed complaints and knowing the repercussions of what happens, I never wanted to push people into doing something or not doing something."

10. This is the second major study I have conducted using social science methods. I am by training a humanities scholar, and I have no doubt this shows in how I am making use of the data—with my close attention to words, sounds, figures, and images. Scholars working at the intersection of Black British feminism and cultural studies have influenced my methodology; I think especially of work by Avtar Brah (1996), Yasmin Gunaratnam (2003), and Gail Lewis (2000). This work recognizes, in Gunaratnam's terms, that "social discourses are enmeshed in lived experience and institutional and social power relations that have emotional, material and embodied consequences for individuals and for groups" (7). My approach is also influenced by my sustained engagement with the phenomenological tradition, which has shaped scholarship in the humanities as well as social sciences.

11. I always specify when quotes are from an informal communication (such as an email sent to me or a conversation). If not, the quote will be from spoken or written testimony.

12. My previous empirical study of diversity in higher education institutions had been funded. We ended up constrained by what the funders wanted from the research: they wanted to use the research to tell a story of how well the sector was doing in promoting race equality. We refused to tell that story, because that was not what we found. Our report was too much of a complaint—they even said we had focused “too much” on racism. They did not publish our report, which now circulates only unofficially. So I arrived at this project well aware that doing the work of institutional critique, or institutional complaint, can be, will be, constrained when that work is resourced by institutions.

13. I created my own consent form, which was sent to each participant along with a project description before the interview. I also talked to each person about the recording and how I would make use of the stories they shared.

14. I am referring to the first door story in chapter 5.

15. Please see the powerful description in chapter 1 from a woman professor who made a complaint about bullying by her head of department. She talked about how, when you make a complaint, you fear what is going to come through the door.

16. I became interested in testimony as a cultural form early on in my academic career, when I was based in women’s studies at Lancaster. Please see the special issue “Testimonial Cultures” (Ahmed and Stacey 2001), which I coedited with Jackie Stacey, based on contributions to a conference held at the Institute for Women’s Studies in 2000, *Testimonial Cultures and Feminist Agendas*. In this book I am especially interested in whose testimony is rendered incredible. See also Leigh Gilmour’s (2016, 1) important account of testimony and witnessing, which considers how “judgment falls unequally on women who bear witness.”

17. With thanks to Sarah Franklin for this formulation.

18. I return to how listening to these testimonies affected me in the opening to chapter 8. When I think “affected,” I think learning. It is impossible for me to separate what I learned from this study from how I was affected by the stories I share.

19. The sense of complaint being in the present matters so much in the telling of these stories. For this reason, I have chosen mainly to use the present tense in writing about the experiences shared with me even though these experiences are in the past. At times, I will shift between tenses in order to convey the quality of the experience being narrated. I am aware this might be an unsettling experience for readers.

20. See chapter 8 for a discussion of how complaint activism turns the filing cabinet into a political object.

21. I considered giving those I spoke to pseudonyms and presenting each story more fully, but it did not feel right as a way of presenting the material. My aim is to reflect on complaint collectively, so I think of each quote as a fragment of a collective story as much as an individual story. In some instances, I connect different fragments of the same individual story when connecting

the fragments allowed me to show something I would not otherwise be able to show. See my chapter 8 on how complaint provides an “old and weathered lens” on collectivity.

22. Most interviews took around ninety minutes. The longest, which was an in-person interview, took just under three hours.

23. My emphasis on the affective nature of complaint connects with Lauren Berlant’s (2008) consideration of female complaint. Berlant describes complaint as “a way of archiving experience and turning experience into evidence and evidence into argument and argument into convention and convention into cliché, clichés so powerful they can hold a person her entire life” (227). My discussion is more about feminist than female complaint. (I shared a post titled “Feminist Complaint” on my blog in 2014, well before I decided to conduct the research.) Feminist complaint can also “hold a person her entire life,” although perhaps less through convention and cliché. With thanks to Lauren Berlant for the inspiration of her work. See also Green (2017) and Washick (2020) for discussions of feminist complaint that draw on Berlant’s approach to female complaint. While I do not situate this book in relation to academic work on the literary genre of complaint, the question of feeling connects my concerns with more literary ones. Just consider this description of complaint as a literary genre: “The complaint is a literary genre based on seemingly interminable lamenting (in contrast to elegy, which, after pointing out sorrow, aims at putting it in its place, mourning and then moving on). When a poet writes a complaint, he or she uses the poem to prolong the experience of loss, not, like the elegist, to frame the loss and put it into perspective” (Mikics 2010, 67). A complaint is often framed as the failure to get over loss or as holding on to loss, a complaint as how some are deemed stuck on being negative.

24. In *What’s the Use? On the Uses of Use* (2019) I explore exclamation marks, first by considering how they can be overused, then by considering how they become warnings, and finally by reflecting on how diversity workers are often heard as exclamation points.

25. The root is **plāk*, Indo-European, meaning “strike.”

26. Definition from Online Etymology Dictionary, accessed November 16, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/express#etymonline_v_14105.

27. I will explore in chapter 4 how unbecoming complainers becomes a project for those exhausted by complaint.

28. Chapter 2 discusses the kinds of conversations people have in the early and informal stage of a complaint process, which I describe as “institutional,” as they are conversations with people with an official role in the complaint process. Chapter 3 considers the conversations people have when deciding whether to make complaints with friends and peers. I learn so much from hearing about these different conversations together.

29. Although I use the idea of complaint biography as a way of *not* reducing complaints to formal complaints, most of the data in this book comes from those who made or considered making formal complaints. Academic studies of

formal complaints are scattered across different fields. One of the best-known studies of a complaint system is of complaints against the police (Maguire and Corbett 1991). There is a more extensive qualitative literature on the experiences of complaint (from the point of view of the complainant) in health and medicine than in other sectors. See, for example, Mulcahy (2003). The scoping project on existing research on complaint funded by the UK's Health and Care Professions Council has many additional sources for complaints in health and medicine and can be downloaded from their website, accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.hcpc-uk.org/resources/>. There is not much qualitative research into people's experience of making complaints within universities, although there are a number of first-person accounts of making complaints. Anna Bull and Rachel Rye (2018) conducted a study of student complaints about staff sexual misconduct in the UK, drawing on interviews with students. Valerie Sulfaro and Rebecca Gill (2020) offer some practical guidance on filing formal complaints on sexual harassment using Title IX, drawing on their own experiences of sexual harassment in the academy. Carolyn West (2010) writes compellingly of her own experience of making a complaint about sexual harassment. She reflects specifically on how Black women experience racialized sexual harassment. Jennifer Doyle (2015) offers a feminist analysis of what complaints do (and how complaints can lead to countercomplaints), which begins with her own experience of filing a complaint against a student via her university's Title IV office. Julia H. Chang (2020) offers a very powerful description of what happened (or did not happen) when she filed a complaint about racism and gives helpful advice on "things to be mindful of" (267–68). See also Enakshi Dua's (2009) important research into antiracist policies in Canadian universities, which is based on interviews with antiracist practitioners, some of whom had responsibility for handling grievances and complaints. She discusses how and why complaints about racism do not go forward despite commitments to race equality at the level of policy.

30. Quote is from Andrea Garcia Giribet, "Tarana Burke: The Woman behind Me Too," Amnesty International, August 21, 2018, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/education/2018/08/tarana-burke-me-too/>. That #MeToo went viral when it was popularized by a white woman about sexual harassment in the entertainment industry might have something to tell us about whose complaints get "taken up." See chapter 4 for a discussion of "take up" and Alison Phipps (2020) for a critique of how mainstream white feminism took up the hashtag #MeToo with more stress on the Me than the Too. For reflections on sexual violence in the academy that take #MeToo as a reference point, see the essays collected by Karuna Chandrashekar, Kimberly Lacroix, and Sabah Siddiqui (2018) and by Laura A. Gray-Rosendale (2020).

31. I noted earlier that this book is not about *all* or *any* complaints. This book is also *not* about *all* or *any* complaints made within universities. I do not consider complaints that relate to the quality of teaching or course provision. Having said this, I show how complaints about harassment can be managed

and filtered by being treated as if they are complaints about the quality of teaching or course provision (chapter 5). I also do not deal with complaints relating to administrative processes, such as examinations. Having said this, my book includes an example of how a disagreement about examination regulations ended up in a disciplinary action (chapter 1). It can be hard to untangle what happens to complaints made within universities from relations of structural inequality and power. Given that this book is about complaints made *at* the university, and is thus *on* the university, it could also be situated in relation to the field of critical university studies. Although I have not positioned my work in relation to this field, I very much appreciate learning from Tseen Khoo, James Burford, Emily Henderson, Helena Liu, and Z. Nicolazzo (2020) about some of the connections.

32. I think of the following texts by Black feminists and feminists of color as offering the companionship of the counterinstitutional: Alexander (2006), Bilge (2020b), Essed (1996), Hampton (2020), Kamaloni (2019), Mirza (2017), Mohanty (2003), Sian (2019), Smith (2010), Tate (2017), and Wekker (2016).

33. *Diversity work* is work because of what diversity can be used not to do. In *Living a Feminist Life* (2017), I use *diversity work* in two senses: the work we do to transform institutions by opening them up to those who have been excluded; and the work we do when we do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution. These two senses often meet in a body: those who do not quite inhabit the norms of an institution are often given the task of transforming these norms. In chapter 4 of this book, I explore *complaint as diversity work*: the work we do when we are not accommodated; the work we do in order to be accommodated. This way of approaching diversity work has also been shaped by listening to disabled academics and students talk about the work of securing reasonable adjustments and making complaints about ableism and inaccessibility.

34. McClintock is challenging Laura Kipnis's critique of student activism around sexual violence in the US context. Her critique of the critique is such a sharp description of so much student-led activism around sexual violence at universities in the US and beyond. With thanks to Anne McClintock for the inspiration of her work. See also Rentschler (2018) for a discussion of the innovative nature of student activism around sexual violence.

35. I am writing this introduction in June 2020, as Black Lives Matter protests in response to the police's murder of George Floyd on May 25 promise to change the landscape of the universities. Decisions have been made to remove statues and to rename buildings with relative speed after years of resistance to student-led protests and demands. It is important to think of these earlier struggles as the enabling condition for what is happening now. See the final few paragraphs of chapter 8 for a discussion of complaint as slow inheritance.

36. See Olufemi et al. (2019) for a powerful collection of essays about the experiences of Black women and women of color at elite universities. This

collection could itself be read as a form of complaint activism. See also Olufemi (2020) for an important new articulation of a radical Black feminism.

37. Davis (2016, 19) also suggests that “behind the concept of intersectionality is a rich history of struggle.” With thanks to Angela Y. Davis for teaching me to appreciate how concepts come out of activism and into academia rather than the other way around. I have tried to keep her insistence in mind when writing about complaint: when complaints are part of an effort to modify the world, those who make them come to know the world differently.

38. With thanks to Kimberlé Crenshaw for her important work. Intersectionality is one of *many* vital contributions of Black feminism. See Holland (2012) and Nash (2018) on the importance of not reducing Black feminism to intersectionality. For a critique of how intersectionality can be “whitened,” which is especially convincing in its analysis of what happens to intersectionality when it travels into European gender studies, see Bilge (2013). I find intersectionality a profoundly useful way of understanding the complexity of social experience because of how intersectionality enables us to show how people’s relation to one social category is affected by their relation to other social categories. A useful elaboration of how intersectionality can be used to challenge “additive models” is offered by Brewer (1993). For a cartographic approach to intersectionality, see Brah (1996). For an elaboration of how intersectionality can be understood as a “bottom-up method” rather than originating top down from the work of a single theorist, see Phoenix and Bauer (2012). For a discussion of the significance of intersectionality for qualitative research informed by grounded theory, see Cuádriz and Uttal (1999). Although I am primarily approaching intersectionality as a method, I appreciate Collins and Bilge’s (2016, 37) suggestion that “intersectionality is more than a research method, it is a tool for empowering people.” The lenses we use to show and make sense of the complexity of social worlds can be research methods as well as tools for empowerment.

39. In chapter 6, I explore how, when Black women and women of color raise issues other than sexism or racism (Black women and women of color do have other issues!), sexism and racism can still shape what happens. For a wonderful collection of essays on Black women and women of color “surviving and thriving in British academia,” see Gabriel and Tate (2017).

ONE. MIND THE GAP!

1. I have used the concept of nonperformativity in different ways over the years. The term first came to my mind during a discussion at an event on racism and the university that took place in 2002. It was during the time in which universities were writing racial equality policies and statements as a result of changes to legislation. *Nonperformative* seemed to capture how saying something was not doing something. I first made use of the term in a written publication to make sense of how declarative speech acts are used in critical