

Sara Ahmed

NO
*IS NOT
A LONELY
UTTERANCE*

*The Art and Activism
of Complaining*

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Contents

<i>Preface: A Complaint Biography</i>	ix
<i>Introduction: A Feminist Ear</i>	1

PART ONE

Making Complaints

1/ Complaints as Coming Out Stories	39
<i>Letting it In, Hitting the Doors, Unintentional Complaints, After Complaint</i>	
2/ A Complainer as an Institutional Plumber	71
<i>From Informality to Formality, From Warnings to Threats, From Bribes to Blanks, Administrative Violence</i>	

PART TWO

Changing Institutions

3/ Complaint as Feminist Pedagogy	111
<i>Institutional Power, Loyalties and Legacies, Policing the Critic, A Will to Power</i>	
4/ Complaint as Diversity Work	159
<i>Diversity Workers, Hostile Environments, Changing Policies, Forced Change</i>	

PART THREE

Dismantling and World Building

5/ Complaints as Activism	215
<i>Becoming Complaint Activists, Complaint Collectives, Research and Activism, Complaint to Protest</i>	
6/ Complaint as a Queer Method	259
<i>False Positives, Institutional Closets, Communicating Complaints, Survival as Complaint</i>	
<i>A Complainer's Survival Kit</i>	309
<i>A Complaint Curriculum</i>	317
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	327
<i>Notes</i>	331

This content warning is a dedication.

No is Not a Lonely Utterance is dedicated to everyone who needs to take care in reading it because of what they have been through.

It tells stories of harassment, bullying, assault and hostile environments from the point of view of those who have said *no* to them.

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Preface: A Complaint Biography

A complaint can change your life. It does not even have to be your own complaint – the complaint that changed my life was made by students where I used to work. What I learnt about the institution from what happened to their complaint, what it did and did not do, where it did and did not go, led me to leave not just my post but my profession.

I shared my reasons for resigning on my blog. I wrote that I was leaving because the university had failed to address sexual harassment as an ‘institutional problem’. I called my resignation ‘an act of feminist protest’. If it sounds dramatic, it was. If I sound bold, I wasn’t. I also wrote that I resigned ‘because the costs of doing this work have been too high’. I did not feel bold, more sad and tired and shattered.

I remember the day I moved out of my office. I chose a day I knew colleagues were less likely to be there because I was not sure I would be able to sustain a conversation. I sat in my office and packed my books, files and papers quietly, boxing my work up, getting it ready to be removed. Getting myself ready. I felt myself begin to fall apart when an administrator asked me how I was doing, her kindness almost unbearable. I left through the back door, quietly, trying not to look behind me.

Well, that's one way of telling the story.

There are other ways.

A complaint, in leading me to leave one profession, is how I took up another. A complaint is how I became a writer. By withdrawing my labour from an institution, I became freer to express myself. I think of leaving and I think not just of those boxes, all packed up, but of the connections I formed, the collectives I became part of, the urgency we felt in taking up the task of trying to change the institution. I think of how that urgency travelled into my writing, my communications, my world. When I left, I took so much with me – not just knowledge, but a sharpened sense of the point and the purpose of fighting for change.

There are many ways of telling the story of a complaint.

They can all be true.

A back door, an opening to another path.

For those of you who picked up this book because of your own experiences of complaint, how would you tell the story? Would you begin with the moment you first felt something was wrong, or when you consciously recognized something was wrong, or when you decided to complain after not being sure whether to or not, or when you found the right forms, or when you filled them in, or when you began to express your complaint by putting words on paper or by saying them out loud to yourself or to others? It is hard to know how to begin the story of a complaint when it is hard to know when a complaint begins.

The word *complaint* might bring to mind a formal

and bureaucratic process; forms filled in and submitted in accordance with procedures laid out in advance. Many complaints take form in this way. You might be obliged to follow the procedures in order for your complaint to be registered as one. But a complaint can also be an expression of grief, pain or dissatisfaction as well as a bodily ailment (especially a minor one). A complaint can be how you let other people know something is wrong. Or how your body lets you know. A complaint can be that pain in your neck. Or a lump in your throat.

There can be an art to how we express our complaints. There can be art in where we express them. Take, for example, the Guerrilla Girls, a group of anonymous artist activists formed in 1985, who used 'disruptive headlines, outrageous visuals and killer statistics to expose gender and ethnic bias and corruption in art, film, politics and pop culture'.¹ Curator Sarah Urist Green called the Guerrilla Girls 'expert complainers'.² I would call them creative complainers. They ran an exhibition titled *Complaints Department* at the Tate Modern in London, in October 2016, in which participants were invited to 'post their complaints', or to make their complaints 'face to face' during office hours.³ The Guerrilla Girls teach us the art of complaining, how we can create our own platforms, by evoking the typically banal settings in which complaints are made, whether that's a specially designated department or a faculty of Human Resources.

I hope to show in this book that more creative forms of complaining do not necessarily take place in a separate sphere



Guerrilla Girls, *Complaints Department*
(Tate, London, 2016, copyright © Guerrilla Girls)

from administration. A formal complaint can require you to keep telling the story, to explain what happened that led you to complain. And you might have to keep telling that story to the different people tasked by the organization to receive complaints. The need to keep complaining can be exhausting; it might feel far from creative. Some people compare complaining to talking to a brick wall. We can still turn that wall into a testimonial. One member of the Guerrilla Girls describes how they took their 'complaint departments all over the world' and would 'paint a wall and invite people to come in and complain about anything they want'. They then gathered these complaints together to create 'a time capsule of discontent at a certain time and in a certain place'.⁴

The creativity of complaint is more apparent when we bring our complaints together. Since I left my post in 2016,

that is what I have been doing: collecting complaints and bringing them together. This book is itself a collection of other people's complaints. Some of you might find your complaints in here. Or you might hear in other people's complaints something of your own.

In the past few years, I have been sharing stories of complaints in lectures and in an academic monograph with the pithy title *Complaint!* (the exclamation point capturing something of the intensity of the work).⁵ I am sharing them again in a more accessible form because of what I learnt from sharing them before: hearing about other people's complaints helps us to handle our own. Other people can best explain why. One person wrote on social media, '[it] makes me (and probably a gazillion other people, sadly) feel as if you've been listening at my door/reading my texts/being copied on the email I sent, gosh, just this morning, to say, "Uh, the guy I've been reporting for the past six years is still at it, surprise."' It helps to know that our complaints are not so singular. Otherwise, it is hard not to feel that we are the problem, that when the same things keep happening, we made them happen.

Another person wrote to me, 'I thought that I had had a unique experience. It's so therapeutic to know what I experienced is real – that it actually happens to other people . . . that it wasn't just in my head. But it's also infuriating that my experience is generalizable, and it feels disillusioning as hell that I'd never heard about this happening to other people.' It helps to know that the problems you are having are not mental, just in your head. Reality

can be therapy, at least sometimes. It can still be infuriating to learn that what happened when you complained happened to other people.

You might recognize yourself in someone else's complaint or you might recognize an institution. A reviewer of my monograph on complaint wrote, 'I kept thinking, "She's writing about me, about my former institution." It made it even more painful that she wasn't.' It can be more painful to hear yourself and your institution in other people's complaints because it tells you there is more *to* what you experienced; more people, more violence, more pain.

That we *don't know* the continuity of other people's complaints with our own is why we need to share our stories. Complaints are mostly confidential; they are made behind closed doors. In listening to each other's stories of complaint, we put our *ears to the door*, overhearing conversations that would otherwise be kept secret ('it makes me . . . feel as if you've been listening at my door').

Complaints, once made, have their own lives. But their lives remain entangled with ours. I use the term *complaint biography* to describe this entanglement. I kept noticing how people would begin by telling me about a specific complaint they had made, the one that had brought them to be in conversation with me, but would then digress, telling me about other complaints they had or had not made before. I learnt something about complaint from this tendency to digress. A story of one complaint ends up as a story of another because their lives are as messy as ours. I invite each of you reading this book to put your ear to your own past,

to think about your own complaints, those you made, those you didn't make, so they can join the stories collected here.

Do you remember the first complaint you made? I remember mine. I was at school. School had always been a difficult space for me; the lessons seemed to be more about the power of those who taught them than the content of what they taught. In primary school, I had a teacher who would repeatedly hit students on their hands with his ruler. He singled out those of us who did not give him the respect he did not deserve. I remember another teacher who would insist she was right even when she was wrong. I was being taught authority meant the right to be wrong.

Mostly, I did not complain about the teachers, just catalogued instances in the firmness of my resolve about who I did not want to become. But there was one time I did complain. It was after a physical education class. The teacher did not think we were paying attention to her properly. She suspected some students were causing a disruption. Some of us probably were. Her punishment was to cancel the whole class. We were sent from an outdoor sports field to the library and told to write essays about sport instead. I happened to prefer the new activity to the cancelled one. I wrote an essay on horse riding; the books piling up around me, shiny pictures of horses. I could hear the sounds of annoyance, shuffled papers, and sensed sideways glances, directed at those of us who had deprived others of an activity they would have enjoyed. I am not sure who was being disruptive on that day. I am not sure anyone was sure. So, the sideways glances fell on those assumed to be the likely cause.

I felt them fall on me. I knew I was supposed to feel ashamed. And I did. I also felt a sense of indignation. The annoyance of my classmates helped me to understand how discipline is achieved by encouraging people to adopt the attitude that those who disobey are in the way, stopping them from getting what they want. It was not just that the other students were *not* annoyed with the teacher but that they identified with her, sharing her annoyance with the students who were disruptive. I did not identify with the teacher because I thought she was wrong. So, in a paragraph in the middle of the essay, I made a complaint. I wrote that it was unjust to punish everyone for the misdemeanours, whether real or perceived, of a few.

The teacher read the essay and found the complaint. I was sent to the headmistress's office. When I think back to this experience, my first experience of complaining, or at least the first complaint I remember making, it is the feeling I recall mostly, how it *felt* to be sent to the headmistress's office, which was not just, at least in the consciousness of students, an actual room but a dreaded destination. Complaints can be a story of where we end up, those dreaded destinations, offices with closed doors, the conversations that happen inside of them; atmospheres, stern, solemn. The headmistress asked me to explain my actions, perhaps also myself. I said that I had complied with the punishment, but that I thought it was wrong and that I had a right to say what was wrong. She said I would not be allowed to go to an art class unless I apologized to the teacher. I really wanted to go to the art class; it was where I could best express myself.

And so, I apologized to the teacher. And then, I was allowed to go to that class. I was learning how compliance works; we are told to protect our relationship to those with authority, or to be willing to repair any damage to those relationships, to get where we want to go.

Looking back, I am struck by how I inserted my critique of the teacher's action into the essay. My complaint was *almost* hidden in an act of compliance. Perhaps I did not expect anyone to find it. Perhaps the point was just to express myself, to put on paper what I felt and thought. Or perhaps I did not have the confidence to be more direct, to confront the teacher. That we express our complaints obliquely or indirectly, not quite coming out with them, is a consequence of a central problem addressed in this book: those receiving our complaints are often who we are complaining about.

And by *those* I am not just referring to a person or persons but to institutions. Complaint procedures designed by institutions seem to be used primarily to protect them and those whom they value most, their most senior employees. This problem of institutions handling complaints made about them is the origin of the *ombudsman*. That word was borrowed from Sweden, the first country to appoint an independent official to investigate complaints made against government officials and agencies. The existence of an ombudsman does not resolve the problem of complaints remaining internal to organizations for the many complaints that don't make it to one.

We can complain at work without filling in forms or addressing institutions. And it is because complaints can be

made in so many different ways that it is not always clear whether an action is a complaint. You might think of yourself as making one – perhaps you complained about a sexist or racist comment made during a meeting – and be laughed off as if you don't really mean it. Or you might think of yourself as not complaining but be heard as if you are – perhaps you answered the question 'Is that Miss or Mrs?' with a polite but firm 'Ms', or asked a colleague not to keep calling you 'darling'. Requests for change, including in the informal ways we address each other, are often heard as being negative or mean-spirited.

In this book, I use the term *complainer* rather than the more legalistic term *complainant* because of how it is filled by negativity as well as feeling. The negativity of a complaint is directed outwards: it is how we say *no* to an existing state of affairs or refuse to accept things as they are. But when you become a complainer, negativity is assumed to come from within. The word *complainer* is thus rather akin to *killjoy*; in fact, *killjoy* is typically listed as a synonym for *complainer*. The killjoy and the complainer are both used to diagnose a problem as being one of character: as if you complain *because* you are a complainer or kill joy *because* you are joyless.

I have written about killjoys, specifically feminist killjoys, many times before. In *The Promise of Happiness*, published in 2010, they had a chapter of their own. In *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*, published thirteen years later, I gave them a whole book. I began that book by setting a scene: I am at a table with my family, having polite conversations, trying hard not to react to sexist comments made by my father.

Invariably I would fail and end up saying I had a problem with what he said. And then, the atmosphere would change, becoming tense, as if I had created a problem rather than pointed one out. I heard these words often: 'Sara, another dinner ruined!'

If I was a complainer at school, I was a killjoy at home, not quite willing or able to be silent or compliant in order to keep the peace with a patriarch or to sustain the illusion that all was well. I did not call myself a feminist killjoy back then. The feminist killjoy is, in fact, a stereotype of feminists: those miserable feminists who make misery their mission. Misery is not our mission. So why claim the name? A conversation I had with Patricia, a professor, gives clues as to why. Patricia had supported students who made a collective complaint about sexual harassment by another lecturer in her department. She explains how their complaint was framed: 'You feminists come along, and you just spoil the fun.' We claim the name *feminist killjoy* not because we intend to cause misery. That's the stereotype. We claim that name because if doing our work causes misery, that is what we might need to cause.

I now think of becoming a feminist killjoy as another thread in my complaint biography. *No is Not a Lonely Utterance* can thus be read as a companion text to *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* not least because the complainer and the killjoy are themselves companions; their stories, our stories, tangled together. Claiming the name *feminist killjoy* means being willing to be heard as a complainer, heard as negative for not wanting to reproduce the same things, heard as destructive for the same reason.

To complain is to be a *killjoy at work*. I mean by this: complaining is both a job we end up doing, and what we learn on the job. That's why, in this book, I make use of some **killjoy truths** and **killjoy commitments** introduced in *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*, as well as offer some new ones. They appear throughout as sentences written in bold. **Killjoy truths** are what we learn from our efforts to change institutions. They are flashes of insight, which often come from encountering resistance to change (and that can include our own resistance). **Killjoy commitments** are what we are willing to do to bring about change. We might need to be willing to say *no*, whatever the consequences.

You would be right to ask: *no* to what? *No* can be a simple utterance, an answer to a question, yes or no. But, as you will hear in the chapters that follow, saying *no* within an institution, or to one, is no simple matter. When we say *no* to institutions and the conduct they enable, often in contradiction with their own policies, and are called killjoys or complainers, that *no* is dismissed as deriving from ill intent. We learn on the job how hard it is to say *no* or how hard it is made to say it. We learn from what comes back at us when we say it. We hear how we are not heard.

To be heard as complaining is not to be heard.

If you became a complainer in one situation, you might become rather cautious about complaining in another. Let me return to Patricia's experience. She told me what

happened in her next job when she tried to complain about sexism and misogyny she experienced at an away-day. She made an informal complaint, but when nothing happened, she let it drop. 'It does shake you,' Patricia said. 'You think, oh, I am making a fuss.' She turned that worry into a question: 'Should I make a fuss?' She worried all the more because she had 'already made a massive fuss at my previous institution'. Still, she regrets not pursuing it: 'That's why I am so cross now, I didn't say anything.'

If you can regret not complaining, you can regret complaining. One student, Andrea, told me about her experience of making a complaint about harassment and bullying by a professor in her department. Her complaint did not get anywhere. She said, 'Maybe you could make an argument that somehow it is therapeutic to air one's woes, but, to be perfectly frank, I haven't found it therapeutic at all and it continues, and I am finding it difficult to move on with my life.' It is hard to put a complaint behind you when what you complained about continues. Experiences of complaining or not complaining can have knock-on effects on our sense of ourselves. But not just on our sense of ourselves. Andrea left the institution with a sharp critique of how it 'weeded out anyone who thinks a bit differently'.

A complaint biography can thus be about our changing relationship to institutions. That's why my first complaint (or at least the first one I remember making) was not the beginning but in the middle of my complaint biography. What led me to complain at that moment was more structure than event, how I had come to feel alienated from

the school as one of only a few students of colour. All my teachers at the school were white; in fact, I have never had a teacher who wasn't. I was not only schooled in whiteness by teachers. When I answered my peers' questions about why I had a 'funny' surname by explaining my father was from Pakistan, I was left feeling it was 'funny' to come from somewhere else.⁶ Their parents would make anxious references to colour; I remember one saying, 'Well, at least you must tan easily, dear,' another saying it was such a shame I was not given more lines in *The King and I* (that Orientalist play set in Thailand) because I 'looked the part'. Yes, these were little comments, not worth complaining about. But in adding up, they might have had something to do with why I eventually complained, albeit about something else.

As a university student, I complained more. I complained about how our courses were organized around a narrow body of work (I called it: 'all white men until week ten'). I did not use formal procedures but complained informally through what I said in and out of seminars. I probably became known as a complainer during this time. And there were consequences, as you would probably expect: more resources were given to my peers who had more positive relationships with the senior people in the department.

My first academic job was in Women's Studies. It felt rather like a feminist bubble. I had less to complain about because we were creating our own feminist courses, our own resources. When I became co-director of the Institute for Women's Studies in the year 2000, I began to attend more university committees. Some of them took place in

the top room of the fanciest building on campus. I remember my feeling of alienation as I entered that room and saw what was on the walls, who was on them, paintings of old white men, former vice-chancellors; they were modern in style but not content. I remember women coming around in uniforms serving tea and cake. But what really stood out was how the secretary and the chair of the board engaged in sexual innuendo throughout the meeting. I remember feeling shocked by how everyone else seemed to be laughing along.

My feminist bubble had burst. Our complaint biographies can include moments like this, when reality intrudes, and illusions shatter. We do not always make complaints at those moments, which is why our complaint biographies include the times we don't complain.

You can have a complaint without making one.

If I didn't complain back then, the critiques I've offered of institutions since might be how I made that complaint later in another way. I did not make these critiques on my own but in conversation with others.

How I ended up in these conversations is another story of complaint, involving yet more meetings. I became co-director of Women's Studies the year before the Amendment of the Race Relations Act (2001) came into force. The Act required all public authorities to have a race equality policy and action plan. Many of the meetings during the

year 2000 involved discussions of how our university was going to write its policy (and who would write it). Usually, I was the only person of colour in these meetings. In one, a professor from another department claimed the whiteness of the university 'was just about geography'. In another, the dean said that racism was 'too difficult to deal with'.

I knew enough to realize I would become a problem person if I said anything and did not yet have the confidence to become that person. So, I sent the dean an email, in which I argued that racism is reproduced by being treated as 'too difficult to deal with'. I also said that the whiteness of the university was an achievement (I probably had that statement about geography in mind). In response to this informal complaint, the dean put me forward to be a member of a new group, which had been set up to write our Race Equality and Action Plan. A complaint, whether made formally or not, can be how you end up taking on an institutional role that is about (or seems to be about) institutional change.

Whatever this role was about, I learnt so much from taking it on. It was how I ended up in conversation with diversity practitioners about the work of trying to change institutions. I was so fascinated by these conversations that I ended up doing an empirical study of diversity work based on interviews with practitioners. It remains interesting to me that some of the strongest critiques of institutions I've heard have come from diversity practitioners who, in the UK, are usually administrators. Practitioners, tasked by institutions to bring about change within them, collect evidence of resistance to change.

That is how, over a long period of time, in one way or another, I have been listening to people's stories about trying to change institutions. It wasn't until my second and last job as an academic that I participated in a formal complaint process. That I had already been involved in the effort to change institutions *before* participating in that process mattered. It helped me to realize that complaining is how we gather even more information about the institution we are complaining about, most of which is never revealed by it. Complaints are *missing data*. To collect that data creates a very different picture of the institution. As soon as I began to release the data, people told me that the picture it was creating was not *specific* to universities; that the same kinds of things were happening in other workplaces. At a recent event, someone came up to me and said, 'It doesn't *just* happen at universities, you know.'

I did not have to share stories of complaint to be reminded of this. One time, I was dropping off our dogs to our sitter, Sally. I was on route to give some lectures in the US. Sally asked me what I was lecturing on. I told her: complaint. She then shared with me what happened when she made a complaint about bullying at her former workplace. She said, 'They locked the door, and I knew I was in trouble.' I did not tell her my lecture was entitled, 'Closing the Door'. Sally kept her hands on her face when she shared what happened, showing as well as telling me how hot and bothered it still made her feel to talk about it, even though it had happened a long time ago. Whenever I've talked about complaints, difficult experiences like this have been

shared with me, brought into the conversation and also my consciousness.

In the past decade, I have collected many fragments of different complaints. And I have learnt from each sharp piece. But people need dedicated time to tell the story, to explain how different pieces fit together. So, in this book, the stories of making complaints at universities, shared with me in detail and in confidence, retain an exemplary status. Rather than focus on what they tell us about universities, I pull out their significance for an understanding of institutional power and institutional change. I make connections between these stories and those that have entered the public domain because they ended up in courts or were shared by whistle-blowers or investigative journalists.

In sharing stories of complaint, I have taken care not to turn them into a moral message. My task is not to tell you to complain or how to complain. Complaints can be used in problematic ways, and they are not always the right course of action. Instead, I listen to each *no*, each utterance. I think again of one reader who said it felt as if I had 'been listening at [their] door'. I hadn't, of course. But we learn from how much of our own experiences we can hear in each other's stories. I call the task of listening to complaint *becoming a feminist ear*.

Introduction: A Feminist Ear

On 14 June 2017, Grenfell Tower, in west London, caught fire. Seventy-two people lost their lives that day. Seventy-two people had their lives stolen. Prior to the fire, the residents of Grenfell Tower had formed a collective, the Grenfell Action Group, because their individual complaints about fire safety had either been ignored or treated as malicious. In 2013, the Westminster council threatened one resident, Francis O'Connor with legal action, accusing him of 'defamatory behaviour' and 'harassment' after he blogged about fire safety concerns. Another resident, Edward Daffarn, observed, 'Most people would engage with KCTMO's [Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Association] complaints process once, and they would find out it wasn't worth complaining.'¹ Whilst some residents stopped complaining because of what happened (or did not happen) when they did, Mr Daffarn persisted; he made seven complaints about fire safety before that fatal fire. He said he was 'stigmatized as a troublemaker'.²

Behind many disasters are unheard complaints.

Journalist Peter Apps begins his vital book *Show Me the Bodies: How Grenfell Happened* with a scene of devastation. 'It should have been a normal flat fire,' he writes, but 'this fire would be different.' Most readers probably assume at this point that Apps is referring to Grenfell. He is not. He is referring to a fire that destroyed another tower block in Southwark, south-east London, eight years earlier on 3 July 2009. Six people died in that fire. Residents had also raised concerns about fire safety: there were no communal fire alarms, no sprinkler systems. One resident was quoted by the *Evening Standard*: 'Every time we complained, they told us they had taken our concerns on board, but nothing ever happened.'

When 'nothing ever happened' in response to residents' complaints, the same thing happened. Grenfell happened. Apps stresses that Grenfell was not just an accident waiting to happen. It was *allowed* to happen or *let happen*. That's why Grenfell 'tells us something about how we are governed', demonstrating the lack of priority given to 'human life, especially when those lives are likely to be poor, immigrant and from ethnic minority backgrounds'.³ When the residents' complaints were not heard, they were told their lives did not matter. And when their complaints were not heard, history was repeated.

It can be a disaster not to hear complaints.

Having your complaints heard is not just about getting your opinions validated or stories acknowledged. It is about more than being given a voice or a say. Having your complaints heard is about being able to change the conditions in which you live or work.

Unheard complaints mean unchanged conditions. You don't have to complain about unsafe conditions unless you have them. If this seems too obvious to say, the obvious needs to be said. This is why it is important we don't *neutralize* complaints as if they are just tools that do different things for different people. Some people do not have to complain to get what they need. You don't have to complain about not being able to access the building when you can access the building. You don't have to complain about being harassed and bullied when you are not harassed or bullied. You don't have to complain about not being promoted when you are promoted. You don't have to complain about not being protected when your neighbourhoods are as protected as you are. To be more valued is to have less need to complain. But when those who are more valued complain, their complaints might also be more valued.

It is the people who have more need to complain who are more likely to be stigmatized as troublemakers. The stigma relates not only to the complaints but the conditions that make them necessary.

The people who make these complaints still end up stuck

with the sign ‘troublemaker’. Or by it. Catherine Mayer, co-founder of the Women’s Equality Party, who made a complaint about age and sex discrimination at *Time Magazine*, describes ‘troublemaker’ as ‘the sign you’re hanging around your neck’.⁴ Cricketer Azeem Rafiq described how he was ‘labelled a troublemaker’ after complaining about bullying from another player on his team.⁵ Elizabeth Taylor, interviewed for *Panorama* special ‘Is this Church Racist?’, comments: ‘The issue that came up again and again and again was the feeling that [church members] were not safe within the Church, that it was not safe to complain, that, in taking that complaint of racism further, that will mark them out as a troublemaker.’⁶ When you have been told that it is not safe to complain, or when you have internalized that message as a feeling of risk or danger, you hear another instruction: to accept the conditions, to suffer them in silence.

And yet some complaints are encouraged or just relatively routine. Consumer complaints, for instance, a familiar genre, are usually quite easy to make, however much we might experience having to make them as a source of frustration. The earliest recorded written complaint, from about 1750 BCE, a tablet addressed to Ea-nāšir, was in fact a consumer complaint. It was from a customer named Nanni who complained about the quality of copper delivered to his servant (and also about the rudeness of the merchant).⁷ Consumer complaints can be treated as a useful form of feedback or a nuisance. They can be ignored or dealt with. This book is more focused on workplace complaints than consumer complaints, although I discuss how

complaints about harassment and discrimination are managed and filtered by being treated *as* consumer complaints, as if not wanting to be harassed or discriminated against is the same thing as not liking a product or finding it faulty.

Not all complaints are made *to* someone. Complaints can be made *with* someone. They can be how we interact with each other, shared rather cheerfully. Complaints about the weather, for instance, can be a form of social bonding. We might rather enjoy grumbling about another cold and rainy day because it gives us the feeling of being in it together. It does not follow that we are all in it together. If some people are given permission to complain, or even a right to complain, other people, those who are not from here, or assumed not to be from here, complaining about *anything*, even the weather, risks being heard as being ungrateful.

You might complain, only to be told to go back to where you came from. I remember another fire, that took place at the Yarl's Wood detention centre on 14 February 2002. The centre had opened the previous year. Emma Ginn, from the Campaign to Stop Arbitrary Detentions at Yarl's Wood, stated, 'Since the camp opened there have been daily complaints about the delays in access to medical treatment and delays in moving people to hospital. There have also been complaints about limited association times, bad food, delay of incoming phone calls, the use of handcuffs when detainees are taken to court, the dentist's or to hospital, unequal distribution of a weekly £2 telephone card to all detainees. Neither detainees nor visitors are allowed pen and paper during visits and children's access to education is very poor.'⁸

Before and after the fire, multiple complaints had been made about sexual harassment, sexual assault and intimidation by guards, the invasion of privacy and unsanitary conditions.

The fire caused extensive damage to the building. Harmit Athwal, from the Institute for Race Relations, wrote that ‘the Fire Brigades’ Union criticized the decision to keep the remaining 250 asylum seekers at the centre in “unsafe” conditions and it also criticized the Home Office’s original decision not to fit sprinklers at the centre.’ Athwal also noted that the officers were ordered to ‘lock the detainees in the burning building’, concluding, ‘Maintaining the “security” of the site was, apparently, more important than the lives of asylum seekers detained at the centre.’⁹ So, how was the fire reported in the press? The headline from the *Sun* was: ‘This Is How They Thank Us’.

The fire is framed not only as caused by the asylum seekers but as a consequence of ingratitude. The trope of the ungrateful asylum seeker is still with us. Take an exchange between Tory MP Lee Anderson and the then Home Secretary Suella Braverman in 2022. They both used the language of ‘invasion’ to describe the impact of those seeking asylum in the UK. Anderson claimed that ‘Albanian criminals’ were leaving safe countries only to complain about their accommodation. He asked, ‘Does the Home Secretary agree with me that if the accommodation is not good enough for them, they can get on a dinghy and go straight back to France?’ Braverman agreed and replied, ‘Any complaints that the accommodation isn’t good enough is frankly absolutely indulgent and ungrateful.’¹⁰

The ungrateful asylum seeker is assumed to be bogus, falsely receiving benefits, taking what is ours. Such stories could be called complaints about complaints. These complaints (about complaints) do not tend to be heard *as* complaints, becoming instead a stock of oft-made statements about how things are, or who we are, or who they are. We can and do challenge that stock, statement by statement. But they surround us like an atmosphere. Many people who enter a country as migrants or refugees do not feel that they can complain because of how it would be used against them as yet more evidence they do not belong here.

You can be born in the UK and still feel like this. Those of us whose parents come from other countries (especially countries formerly colonized by Britain) are constantly reminded that our acceptance is conditional on our conduct. Black British writer Musa Okwonga describes how, as the child of refugees from Uganda, he had initially internalized the expectation of gratitude but then began ‘to notice more and more that the very moment immigrants were seen as contributing anything less than wholesomely to the national effort, they were viewed with contempt.’¹¹

The harder it is to complain about living or working conditions, the more vulnerable people are to exploitation. And the more vulnerable people are, the harder it is for them to complain. This feedback loop between vulnerability and complaint is another hard lesson of the Covid pandemic. As Zubaida Haque, then deputy director of the Runnymede Trust declared, ‘We know that BME [Black and Minority Ethnic] NHS staff can’t complain as much because they’re

worried about the recriminations of complaining. They're much more likely to be harassed and face discrimination compared to their white counterparts. There is the question of, did they have the appropriate PPE equipment? If they didn't, did they feel they could complain or were they worried about the recriminations from complaining.¹² The expectation of gratitude can be turned into a demand for sacrifice. I think of the title of the powerful poem 'You Clap For Me Now', by artist Darren James Smith, a 'coronavirus poem on racism and immigration in Britain'.¹³ You might be cheered when you are useful, only to be told to go home when you are not. To hear a complaint is to hear through *that* cheer, to what it covers over, the toil.

I call listening to a complaint *becoming a feminist ear*. I first used the term *feminist ear* to capture what I could hear from being in an audience for the screening of the feminist film *A Question of Silence* (1982, dir. Marlene Gorris). It was shown during the London Feminist Film Festival at the Hackney Picturehouse on 30 November 2012. It was so cathartic to be in that audience. It was so loud! There was one scene when the audience became especially rowdy. It is a meeting. A woman is seated at a table of men; she is the secretary. She makes a point and is ignored. And then a man makes the same point and is congratulated loudly by the other men. She sits there in silence. Silence can be a space we fill. And the audience filled it, groaning loudly; a sound that increased until it became a feminist roar.

There was one other time I heard a feminist audience be that loud. It was during an academic talk by anthropologist

Sarah Franklin at the inaugural conference for the Centre for Feminist Research at Goldsmiths, in London, on 9 May 2014. She was exploring sexism in the academy by discussing a professor's rather extreme response to one of her essays, a feminist critique of the sociologist Émile Durkheim. The professor's scrawling marks were mostly made with red pen, turning her essay into a 'bloody document'. Franklin had kept the essay at least in part because it is a time-piece, telling us not just about the past but how it endures, 'a reminder of a problem the academy has yet even to acknowledge fully: the everyday institutional sexism that grows like grass all over campus – unchecked, unacknowledged, and indeed largely unchanged *because* it is ignored'.¹⁴ When Franklin showed that 'bloody document' on a PowerPoint slide, with some of her sentences vehemently crossed out and his words scrawled in large print, some capitalized, in the margins (such as 'slovenly' and 'dreadful' and 'WRONG!'), the audience shouted out in recognition. The atmosphere was riotous. There was a palpable sense of energy as well as relief.

Why relief? Maybe it is because when our work elicits extreme reactions like this, the sexism that tells us we are wrong, we often sit with them on our own. Or maybe it is because sexism can be so subtle that even when it stops us from doing something, or being something, it is hard to put our finger on it. It can be a relief to have displayed right in front of us what usually works by not being so visible or audible. To shout out in recognition is to be released from the prism of our experience. We are louder not only when

we are heard together, but when we hear together. Feminist recognition is loud.

It can also be hard to put your finger on racism. Sociologist Shirley Anne Tate uses this exact expression for the way racism ‘melts into thin air’ in organizations even as it ‘permeates their very spaces, their very walls’, how Black and brown people come to know we are not meant to be here.¹⁵ We can know it, feel it in our bones, without always being able to show it. It is cathartic to be with others who know it without needing to be shown it. When recognition is loud, so too is solidarity. Mary, an Indigenous academic, told me how she and other women of colour created a space for themselves in the middle of their very white department; their voices were louder (her own ‘a little louder’ still as she is hard of hearing) with ‘expletives coming out of our mouths all the time’. Raising the volume of our voices might be how we hear each other over the racism that permeates ‘their very walls’.

To listen to a complaint might mean to become more attuned to our differences, some of which manifest in sound. Many meanings of the word *complaint* relate to sound. In early uses, to complain had the sense of ‘to cry out’, a complaint as a lament, a lament as ‘wailing, moaning, weeping’. To complain can be to seep as well as weep. It is not only humans that are heard as complaining. The creak of a ship has been called complaint, in the sense of ‘to strain or groan from over-straining’. Complaints can be the sound of being over-stressed or under pressure. To listen to a complaint is to hear these sounds, these moans, these groans as speech, as saying something, or doing something.

Complaints can be expressed without words. I think of a conversation I had with Stephanie, a lesbian professor, about the complaints she made and did not make over her career. She could hear herself complaining as she was talking about complaining. She said, 'I am moaning now, I can feel that whining in my voice [*makes whining sound*].' I replied, 'We have plenty to moan about.' We can hear the complainer arrive in our own voices as well as each other's. Stephanie also said, 'If you have a situation and you make a complaint, then you are the woman who complains, the lesbian who complains.' The situations she kept ending up in were hard to untangle from who she was and how she was seen, as a woman, as a lesbian. The negativity of complaint is sticky; it sticks to some people more than others. Stephanie added, 'And you can feel the change in your voice and the dynamic in meetings. And you don't like to hear yourself talking like that, but you end up being in that situation, again.'

I hear so much in that 'again'. To be a feminist ear is to *hear again*. A complainer is heard as a *broken record*, as if she is stuck on the same point.¹⁶ We learn to hear repetition not as beginning with the complaint but with what the complaint is *about*.

**You have to keep making the same complaints
when the same things keep happening.**

I became a feminist ear by listening to the students' complaints.

Let me share a little more of that story.

I heard about the students' complaints before I heard from the students. I was sitting in my office with a colleague on the afternoon of 6 July 2013. We were chatting whilst our PhD student was having a viva in the department's meeting room. My colleague asked me if I had heard about what had been going on in another department. I said I had no idea. She shared with me what she had been told by a student, who was being sexually harassed by an academic in that department. I felt myself sinking into my chair. She told me incident after incident, involving more students and more professors. One still stands out: a professor had assaulted a student on a bus on their way back from an event. It was especially disturbing to hear that other people, staff and students, had been on that bus, had seen him force himself on her, without saying anything or doing anything.

I knew I needed to say something. I could not sit with this information like I was on that bloody bus. I emailed my head of department. She told me to get in touch with a senior administrator. That is what I did. The administrator emailed me back. 'There is an ongoing inquiry,' she said. We spoke on the phone. I told her what I had been told, conscious of my role in relaying information, that I was sharing stories of what had happened to other people without having spoken to them. She was not surprised. It turned out that stories like this were coming out all over the place. But there was something in her response that disturbed me, as if what was happening was not noteworthy, was even to be expected.

Later that year on 3 November, I was called to a meeting

with students from that department. The inquiry that had taken place over the summer had not found enough evidence of sexual harassment. The students wanted to meet with a feminist academic about what to do next.

The meeting was held in my department's main room. You had to have a key to get into it, so I waited outside in the corridor for the students to arrive along with another academic from their department. I felt nervous. I knew I was being called upon not only to listen but to participate in an action, to find a way to get their complaint moving again. I worried about becoming upset. I knew I had to hold myself together, to give the students a chance to express themselves.

We sat down together. And then, the students spoke. They told us not only what happened that had led them to complain but what had happened when they complained. They told us about previous inquiries, how they had been put under pressure not to complain or to withdraw their complaints. When I sat there, listening to the students, so eloquent and clear in their delivery despite their trauma, possibly even because of it, I knew that my relation to my place of work would not be the same. It should not be. It could not be.

It would not be. The day after I met with the students, I talked to the other academic who had been at the meeting. She explained that when she became director of Postgraduate Studies, young women started coming to her office with their complaints. She told me that there had been even earlier inquiries, involving yet more academics from the same

department. To complain is often to go back: you hear about other complaints, earlier complaints. It is like discovering a secret room, full of untold stories.

The week after I met with the students, another feminist colleague came to my office. I shared with her some of what the students had disclosed to me. She burst into tears. She said something like, 'After all of our work this still happens.' There was so much feminist grief in this *still*, that the same things happen, despite everything, all that work, our feminist work, to try to change the culture of sexual harassment. We need time, also space, to express this grief, to turn it out and, sometimes, to turn it into complaint.

Many more students came to my office in the weeks that followed. One student wrote to me, 'We're all concerned that your office has become something of an emergency drop-in centre for women in various states of crisis. I hope you're all right.' I am still touched by her concern. The students did not come to me because I had any special training or skills. I didn't and I don't. They came to me because I said I was willing to listen. They came to me because they had nowhere else to go.

They had already tried to hold the institution to account, combining their knowledge and experiences to make a collective complaint. Leila Whitley, Tiffany Page, Alice Corble, Chryssa Sdrolia and Heidi Hasbrouck (as well as others who remained anonymous) have since shared their story, explaining how the complaint brought them together. They began their studies 'at different times and in different year groups'. They did not 'all have the same