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Speaking truth to power

A conversation on *Complaint!* and *Experiences of Power Abuse in Academia*

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For those with a chance to make themselves heard, storytelling can be an empowering act that exposes injustice. Storytelling can forge a path toward better endings. By daring to tell our stories, we enter into a process that is larger than ourselves. (Hansen & Nilsson, 2022, p. 1)

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. (Ahmed, 2021, p. 4)

The abuse of power in academic settings has many faces. It can manifest itself when a person in a position of power (e.g., a professor) pursues a student and sexually assaults them behind closed doors. If the student makes a formal complaint, a committee may convene to decide on it; but if the committee is made up of the professor's colleagues, then these colleagues can ignore or dismiss the complaint, further perpetuating abuse through inaction. At the same university, another professor might be engaged in bullying and harassment of a new colleague. In the departmental meetings, he might take credit for her ideas and be applauded by other attendees. The new colleague would then be unlikely to complain about the situation for fear of losing her job or being labeled as someone who complains about everything.

However, power abuse in academia can hardly be dismissed as a matter of (few) isolated cases; the issue is systemic. This can be seen when, for instance, a dean spreads her arms helplessly, saying that she cannot do anything about a complaint until it passes through several separate offices. "This is just how things work here," she may add, in an effort to explain the situation. In this case, the person using official channels to report abuse may simply not receive any response from anyone, for weeks, months even, after filing the report. The complaint is ignored by the institution, the system, not just by individuals.

Both individual cases and systemic sources are the subject of two recent books: *Complaint!* by Sara Ahmed (Duke University Press, 2021), and *Experiences of Power Abuse in Academia*, edited by Julie Hansen and Ingela Nilsson (Brill, 2022; this work is Volume 7 of the *Critical Storytelling* series). Ahmed's book concentrates on complaints against power abuse and it is written from the position of an independent researcher, without funding from

any institution. The data for the book came from forty interviews and eighteen written statements Ahmed received, as well as her own experience of the complaint process, she participated in at Goldsmiths College, University of London. She experienced first-hand the university's failure to address harassment and the high cost of being involved in the complaint process. The book consists of four parts, eight chapters in total, which reflect on and analyze different aspects and phases of complaint-making and how this process impacts those who want to file, or have filed, formal complaints. Ahmed closely analyzes her material, revealing tactics and techniques used by institutions and individuals to silence, discourage, dismiss, and tire out those who complain in academic settings.

The other work, *Experiences of Power Abuse in Academia*, focuses on stories of abuse itself and its aftermath. The book has been co-edited by Julie Hansen and Ingela Nilsson, professors at Uppsala University—the Department of Modern Languages and the Department of Linguistics and Philology, respectively. It consists of twenty-two chapters (not including an introduction and two epilogues), and the authors mostly represent the humanities—in particular literary studies, with a focus on the classical and late antiquity, medieval, and early modern periods. Of the twenty-four authors, eight remain anonymous; the others have academic ties mostly in Belgium, Sweden, or the USA. The named authors are usually active academics (early-career and established in similar proportion) but a few non-academics or post-academics have written their chapters as well.

In this conversation, we weave the two books together around their shared purpose: to *listen* to the stories of those affected by abuse in academia. Both works are significantly more personal than standard academic writing, and for anyone in academia reading them can also be personal, depending on the reader's position, their individual experiences, and the stories they have heard. In the same spirit, we would like to describe our own positions, which we believe impact the way we read and experience the two books. After we had obtained our doctoral degrees in 2019, we met in Poland as members of the Scholarly Communication Research Group in Poznań. We are both currently early-career scholars, working at universities in Poland. Neither of us has ever filed a formal complaint but it is relatively easy for us to sympathize with those who have, given that people whose status is similar to ours (or lower) are disproportionately likely to find themselves experiencing the abuse of power. We have also found echoes of stories of abuse that we witnessed, heard through the grapevine, or read in the news. At the same time, the fact that we have never handled

complaints—and we have never made any formal decisions related to power abuse—means that we would find it difficult to look from the perspective of senior academics and official committees.

An obviously important context in which these two books might be located—and one which they themselves reference—is the literature on power abuse and inequality in academia. A less obvious context would be the calls for a renewal of English-language academic writing. These calls have been repeated time and time again, be it through an examination of peer-reviewed papers in higher education studies (Sword, 2009), through an analysis of the whole system of scholarly publishing (Alvesson, Gabriel, Paulsen, 2017), or through concise commentaries on various aspects of the writing process (Kostera, 2022). We had not intended to focus on writing itself when we began to talk about *Complaint!* and *Experiences of Power Abuse...*; looking back, though, we think this may well be an important context of our conversation. The way one writes about abuse matters, and we believe the authors of both books have done a good job. For all those who tackle this difficult topic in their publications, these two works are a resource not to be missed.

We are reviewing the two books through a dialogue, which we initially held online and then continued on paper. To an extent, this approach mirrors the unusual character of the books themselves. While we make no attempt to disallow the publications that examine emotionally charged matters in a strict, impersonal way, we are convinced that academic writing on power abuse can benefit from exploring the different potential of more experimental and less official forms. Our conversation goes through several distinct themes, from storytelling itself, to the issues of anonymity, form, and genre, to the intersectional perspective and finally the possible lessons from academic abuse.

Sharing stories

Storytelling may be considered to be an act against power abuse. Speaking out publicly and loudly against abuse in academia, and specifically against the cases that in the past were “swept under the rug”, is quite recent. Sharing stories of abuse encourages others to do the same, although that very act puts the survivors of abuse in precarious situations.

Aleksandra: Neither of these books would exist if it was not for the people who are willing to share their stories. In Hansen and Nilssen's collection we hear directly from those affected by abusive academic environments, whether as the survivors of harassment, bullying, or misconduct, or indirectly as their mentors, supervisors, peers, or partners. The focal point in that collection is not formal complaints, but rather the experience of abuse. As Ahmed states, hearing such stories and actively listening to complaints, whether they are formally lodged or not, has an important function. Her method of using a *feminist ear* means actively turning towards stories or complaints that are typically silenced, rendered invisible and inaudible. In their curated collection, Hansen and Nilssen engage the readers in the practice of becoming a feminist ear, or an audience, for the stories of abuse and misconduct.

It is a very powerful and heavy experience to intentionally hear these stories one by one, unlike in life, where they slowly trickle down into our attention, interspersed with the mundane pace of life. Actually, at every university I worked at, I heard stories of professors or graduate students engaging in abusive behaviors, with some culprits being fired and some just put on administrative leaves. But hearing these stories in itself does not allow you to see the patterns not only in the behavior of the perpetrators, but also the administration and people around you. These patterns are made visible in Ahmed's project, which critically analyzes numerous stories of complaints in academic settings, hearing them all together.

Stanislaw: Ahmed's book was the first in the chronological sense, but logically, it is the second stage: after the stories have been collected, she provides a more general reflection on them. Almost like a *theory* of complaint, though Ahmed herself does not use that term (and she is probably right: her writing is systematic, but not that systematic).

We should probably take a moment here to distinguish between a story and a complaint. Taking the two books into consideration, I would say a complaint is what happens on the ground, when someone is reporting unjust treatment. And a story is a report on a complaint (or on other things, for that matter). A report, an account, a testimony. Both stories and complaints feature in either book, but *Experiences of Power Abuse...* focuses on the former and *Complaint!* focuses, well, on the latter.

Aleksandra: Talking about stories also reminds me of the value of the #MeToo movement, where hearing personal stories opened more people up to sharing even more, a snowball effect for sharing intimate stories of abuse. Ahmed comes back to the question of what happens when complaints are shared publicly, and in Chapter 8 “Complaint Collectives” she refers to #MeToo herself:

A story about a present-day case of sexual harassment can be a trigger to a series of conversations that might not otherwise have happened. #MeToo as a movement can be understood in these terms: how the release of a story can trigger a process of further releasing: the *too* points to *you*; the point of the *too* is *you* (p. 280).

Both these books have the potential to be such triggers for more conversations happening. Even if the speakers remain anonymous.

Anonymity

In many cases a complaint can only be made safely if it is anonymous. Those who complain openly may face various consequences, often related to the specific nature of the academic workplace.

Stanislaw: Anonymity is clearly an important issue in both books. Several authors in *Experiences of Power Abuse...* remain anonymous, as do most interviewees and statement authors in *Complaint!*—for a good reason.

Aleksandra: Anonymity can serve the obvious role of protecting the storyteller from retaliation, identity erasure, impact on career or education, all while the storyteller is sharing difficult experiences. And *critical* storytelling, as Nilsson writes in the epilogue, plays an important role of exposing oppression and raising questions about narratives and norms. But in Ahmed’s Chapter 7 “Collective Conclusions”, co-authored with Leila Whitley, Tiffany Page, Alice Corble, Heidi Hasbrouck, Chryssa Sdrolia, and others—a few members of the student complaint collective she joined—we learn about collective anonymity as a strategy to push against institutional tactics created to bury the complaint and exhaust the individuals who complain. The collective nature of complaint, with multiple perspectives represented anonymously, is a testament to the abusive environment at the university, rather than individual transgressions of particular members. Removing the name from a story shifts the

focus from “a matter of dispute between two equal parties” (Ahmed, 2021, p. 266) to the experience itself: experience that could happen to anyone.

Stanislaw: Ahmed already mentions this collective in the introduction. At first, she explains, the university authorities only accepted signed written statements about harassment. However, she and her fellow academic wrote a special report, in which they also quoted a legal expert who had said that such statements were not necessary to establish “the balance of probability” that harassment had happened. In further communications, the authorities were convinced to accept anonymous accounts, too. Ahmed notes here that the support of people higher up the ladder should not be needed for student complaints to be heard, and I could not agree more.

Aleksandra: What I find valuable in these books is also how they highlight the particular challenges that victims of abuse face because they are in higher education, rather than in another professional context. Mobility, for one, is what makes working in academia different from working in the industry. Academics at any level of career—from PhD students to professors—are often in precarious positions, and fairly limited in terms of being able to move between institutions. Then, when abuse happens, the choice can become leaving academia or tolerating abuse or harassment. In *Experiences of Power Abuse...*, what stands out to me is Chapter 15 “Benevolence or Bitterness” by an anonymous author, a tenure-track assistant professor who struggles in a hostile environment until the tenure is granted, or Chapter 12 “Fragments of Missed Opportunities...”, where an international academic creates a fictional dialogue with his past advisor and abuser, who took advantage of the student’s precarious situation: the student depended on the advisor for income, as well for immigration status. When someone has that much power over you, complaining might mean that you will no longer continue your studies and will have to leave the university, and the country. Ahmed even writes about a student who was groomed by a lecturer, a known harasser, and took her own life. The lecturer, on the other hand, continued his career until retirement, without repercussions. Names and anonymity play an important role in both books, and that is not only about who speaks and who is spoken of; in *Complaint!* we learn how institutions work to keep their name clear too.

Form and genre

The books deviate from the dominant academic conventions. They do so in different ways but they both demonstrate that effective writing in academia may incorporate more literary or humanistic elements than is usually the case.

Stanislaw: The many chapters of *Experiences of Power Abuse...* make use of all kinds of genres: from poems, to a report from a diversity workshop complete with the workshop's schedule, to a satirical transcript of a fictional administrative meeting. There are even some striking visual elements, like the drawing of a red button that summons up the word "Inappropriate!" (a button that one author wishes was present in each academic setting to ward off unwanted behavior). Although traditional academic prose is still prevalent, the overall impression is one of diversity. It might be the case that the more traditional chapters are more distant from the original experience—more distant in the emotional if not chronological sense, expressing reflections more than feelings. The conventional academic style seems to be less suited for talking about personal, intimate matters.

Sara Ahmed also writes in a distinctive manner. She repeats words or phrases often to make her point; she is fond of wordplay; and she devises her own conceptual framework, ripe with metaphors, to talk about complaints. However, her book is somewhat more conservative in its use of genres.

You have said earlier that Ahmed allows us to see patterns in the stories. I still agree. But there is something that Hansen and Nilssen do, and Ahmed does not. Namely, *Experiences of Power Abuse...* offers us stories that are less raw and more literary. There is value in that, too.

Aleksandra: To me, even though many of these stories are creative and literary, they are more "raw" to the readers, because they have not been transformed by critical analysis. At any rate, I would call Ahmed's writing humanistic, even philosophical. She uses language as a method to uncover and describe the gargantuan nature of complaints in institutional settings. This work of repetition with slight changes reminds me of looking at a sculpture in a museum, where in every slight move you change perspective and new insight can be gained with such minimal movement.

In hearing the stories of multiple complaints, Ahmed is able to hear much more: how the institutions use the complaint process as a silencing tactic, how making complaints is tied to economic punishment (as some people cannot afford to complain), or how responses to complaints threaten immigration status or academic careers. Ahmed's writing does not remind us of the dry academic prose we are so used to. And, given that the book was published in 2021, you can see how much it resonates with the academic community. If you look at Google Scholar, you will find that *Complaint!* has already been quoted more than two hundred times since its release in September 2021. Citations are a poor measure of importance or value, but at the very least, the academic community is listening to, and engaging with, Ahmed's work. It is often quoted in academic journal articles, which are written in a very conventional style.

One thing I would add about *Experiences of Power Abuse...* and its genres is what Nilsson mentions in the epilogue "The Privilege of Writing One's Story and Reading Those of Others": that the form and structure of the narrative is as important to the authors as being heard (p. 132). In fact, she cites work by psychologists who have found that there is something therapeutic about giving structure and meaning to an experience, which can release the victim from rumination and obsessive thoughts. For readers of both books, I think, the forms and the language used to talk about power abuse can serve as, if not templates, then a starting point to think about and name our own experiences.

Intersections

Power abuse in academia is a complicated issue. On the one hand, academics bring complex identities to academic settings, and on the other hand, the academic workplace has historically been welcoming to people with a very specific identity (e.g., white, male, heterosexual, cisgender). Universities are not yet ready to respond effectively when abuse happens.

Stanislaw: You can never tell everyone's stories, and it is fine to emphasize certain types of abuse. In this case, I believe the focus is on the specifically academic hierarchy—and most stories and complaints come from people who are (or were at the time of abuse) students and early-career scholars rather than senior researchers. Of course, this hierarchy intersects with other hierarchies, particularly with the one based on gender: the higher you look, the more likely you are to find influential men willing to take advantage of others. However, the books are not limited to these two structures of abuse and inequality.

Aleksandra: We have mentioned (im)mobility as one powerful factor that impacts how people in academia experience harassment. Both in Ahmed and Hansen and Nilsson, class and economic status clash to further show how abuse can be devastating to those more vulnerable. Ahmed amplifies the voices of those in precarious situations and discusses precarity as an important factor in abusive situations—for example, a single mother on low income whose complaint process impacts her earnings (p. 125). She shares testimonies of people whose identity is marginalized in multiple ways, by being a member of a certain class (i.e., working class) or by issues of gender, ability, race.

Stanislaw: Still, it appears to me that some types of abuse and inequality should be represented a little more. First, the perspective of class is nearly missing from *Experiences of Power Abuse...* I think the only major exception may be the anonymous Chapter 17 “Harassment and Abuse of Power from a Global Perspective”. With regard to an environment that stresses cultural capital so much, and that is so plagued by financial difficulties, you might expect class analysis to be more salient (one possible analytical opposition here would be between first-generation and legacy students in the USA). This analysis is more marked in *Complaint!*, though I would still like it to have more spotlight. Second, I have found very few mentions of transgender persons—and these mentions are only there in *Complaint!*—which seems a bit strange when gender itself is examined so often.

A way forward: learning from abuse

Complaints demonstrate that the university system does not change easily, but they also demonstrate that it is not set in stone. An important step to its reform is finding the right words to talk about abuse. Another step would be to learn more about the situations in which abuse has been handled well.

Stanislaw: Ahmed stresses the fact that complaints are an important source of knowledge about the university. Not only do they bring out abuse and underlying inequality, but they also show that universities tend to be unwilling to change. I believe that this inertia is only exacerbated by the financial troubles of the university, as well as by its economization (for instance, the increase in accounting and administrative work leaves people with less time and energy to deal with other problems). Two chapters in *Experiences of Power Abuse...*, titled “On the Occasion of My Retirement” (Chapter 7, by Cecilia Mörner) and “How to Be a Professor in the Twenty-First Century” (Chapter 8, by Wim Verbaal), deal with just that.

Aleksandra: Universities might be unwilling to change, or the university system was not designed to change. As Ahmed suggests, “A system is reproduced by rewarding those who are willing to reproduce the system” (p. 100). This self-reproduction provides an opportunity for a researcher, at least, to name the practices that occur across institutions and situations. So, what these two books do really well is teach us, the ones who work within these structures, the language that can be used to name the processes related to power abuse and what happens behind closed doors.

A good example is the exploration of incompetence and inefficiency as abusive.

In *Experiences of Power Abuse...* Chapter 6, “Phantom Libraries: Unspoken Words, Untold Stories and Unwritten Texts”, Moa Ekbohm lists the ways abuse works in academia: malice, incompetence, or silence. While malicious action or complete inaction (silence, including inaction of colleagues) are on opposite sides of the spectrum, incompetence as abuse has many dimensions. Ekbohm calls out administrators who either claim that nothing can be done about harassment or pretend that nothing has happened. Ahmed defines the concept of *strategic inefficiency*, where on the one hand the process of going through a formal complaint takes forever, because things go missing or are misfiled. On the other hand, a person can be strategically inefficient. Ahmed shares a story from one of her workplaces where Professor X was known for such extreme inefficiency, leading his colleagues to step in and take on his workload, just to protect students from the effects of his strategically deployed incompetence in marking papers or doing administrative work. Or another strategy, called *nodding* (p. 80), where the person filing a complaint is met with a response—possibly a meeting, during which there is the impression that a complaint is supported, welcomed, and well-received (the listener is *nodding* in understanding), but after which nothing happens, there is no change or no action. The meeting was held to diffuse the situation and give a false sense of support or understanding. This exact strategy was used at one of the institutions I worked at, where students complained about a graduate program being shut down. Now, I can name what happened to all those who protested: our case was *nodded* away by the dean. Nothing came out of it: although he met with us to “hear” us out, it made no difference.

Stanisław: As an assistant professor at a Polish university, I am wondering what the books can tell us—indirectly—about Poland. It just so happens that I have recently seen one Polish scholar comment on anonymous student evaluations. He has written that his university already has all the committees, procedures, and policies, so the students should feel free to

sign their names while commenting on the faculty's work. Ahmed shows why this is not the case. If a faculty member treated a student badly because of a signed negative evaluation, then this student could try to complain, sure. But it could take them a lot of effort just to get to the formal stage, and even then, the complaint's fate would be unpredictable at best. In the meantime, unpleasant things might happen: for instance, a complaint might stick to the name of the student, branding them as a troublemaker for a long time.

I am sure that identical comments have been made virtually everywhere, and I would not want to self-exoticize. But if I could speculate: formal procedures against abuse seem to be relatively new at Polish universities (this is certainly the case with equality ombudspersons), and it is more likely that some academics will not even make the pretense of caring about their actual effectiveness. Paying lip service to these procedures will be the most that some people do, and some will not even do that. However, in comparison with more established systems, this might mean that we have a chance to avoid the ossification that is so clearly and painfully noticeable in the stories from *Experiences of Power Abuse...* and *Complaint!*

Aleksandra: These books certainly challenge the notion that abuse is always easy to spot and respond to. By really listening to all of the testimonies, either through the chapters in *Experiences of Power Abuse...* or by the deep interrogation of complaint biographies, we are left feeling really heavy with all the injustice and abuse that happens globally in academia. It is like taking a bitter medicine: it can cure you, and what it cures from is looking at higher education through rose-colored glasses. I feel like I wish I had read these books before I decided to pursue my PhD or even the first year of graduate school. It would not have necessarily deterred me from pursuing graduate education, but it would have made me feel more prepared for what was to come.

Abuse and speaking out about it are not easy topics, and it is already a feat that the books offer a diagnosis. What is a natural expectation for a sequel is the hope for stories of how institutional and individual abuse can be responded to with care and competency. We do not see many stories like that in either of the books. As an early-career scholar in precarious position, my hope is that we, as a community, are now shining light on the abuse, and with time, institutions and the academic community will become better at spotting and stopping abuse, rather than stopping the survivors of abuse from speaking out.

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