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Complaint as disobedience: a creative method

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Abstract

This paper considers complaint not as an administrative procedure but as a creative method—something that can be staged, performed and co-sensed with others. Adapted from a performance lecture first delivered at the ACUADS 2025 Conference, held under the theme disobedience, the paper draws on Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* (2021) to think through complaint as a form of disobedience, particularly for women of colour racialised into scripts of subservience and compliance within cultural and higher education institutions. Rather than offering a resolved theory of complaint, we present three creative tactics developed, borrowed and improvised across our collective practice—eating together, reading together and workshopping together—as counter-institutional methods for redistributing the risk of complaint and making structural harm visible. We close by returning to the provocation that animated the original performance: what does an institution owe the disobedience it invites?

Keywords: Complaint, feminist method, infrastructural critique, creative practice, higher education, collective practice, arts-based interventions.

Introduction

This paper is early thinking. Not early thinking about complaint itself but early thinking about complaint as a creative method—as something that can be staged, performed and co-sensed with others rather than filed, processed and closed. It began as a performance lecture, between two colleagues and co-authors of this paper (Leong and Nguyễn), and what follows is a translation of that live event into this written form: a testing of a method still taking shape, now tested again in a different medium.

We want to be clear about what this paper is not. It is not about any one institution. It does not offer a series of case studies. Instead, we think with the complaints we have shared, carried, overheard and made across our collective years working in cultural spaces and

higher education—complaints that rarely appear in the record because they were never filed, or because filing them was never safe.

Following feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, we approach complaint as a form of disobedience: a refusal to participate in harm, a refusal to let silence smooth it over (Ahmed 2021). For us, as women of colour who have been racialised into scripts of subservience and compliance, complaint becomes an even sharper disobedience. We write from within the Australian higher education and cultural sectors, where this dynamic has particular institutional histories and stakes, and it is this terrain—rather than any single institution within it—that the creative tactics in this paper responds to. We are not meant to object. We are certainly not meant to disrupt. Institutions often rely on our presumed obedience—our willingness to absorb friction quietly—to keep things running smoothly. To complain is to withdraw that labour of smoothing.

It is also not without risk. For many Culturally and Racially Marginalised (CARM) workers, including ourselves, as Ahmed reminds us, the risks of complaint are real: complaints are reframed as negativity, reinterpreted as personality flaws, or submerged in bureaucratic quicksand (Ahmed 2021). We know this terrain. We have felt its heat. And yet we persist, because as Ahmed writes, 'if they hadn't complained some of us wouldn't be here. If we don't complain some of us won't be here' (Ahmed 2014). Complaint, in this sense, is not incidental to survival within institutions—it is one of its conditions.

Ahmed also describes complaint as filled with doors: doors that won't open, doors we are not meant to pass through, doors behind which complaints are kept quiet. The image on the cover of Ahmed's seminal text, *Complaint!*, shows a cast of two doors. The work, called *Double Doors* (2016/2017) by artist Rachel Whiteread is rendered by Whiteread to show the negative space around a threshold—holding entrance and exit at once. Complaint makes these doors visible. We notice a door most clearly when it refuses to open.

This paper is interested in what happens when we notice the door. We are not here to resolve complaint, or to propose a mechanism for making institutions more responsive to it. We are here to experiment with complaint as a creative method: to ask what it looks like when complaint is *practised* collectively, creatively and outside the channel's institutions provide for it. We will share three tried-and-tested tactics to reflect on what complaint might make possible as a shared creative practice.

Thinking with Ahmed: Or what is there to complain about

The performance lecture opened almost wordlessly: a compilation of newspaper headlines, dating from 2020 to 2025, presented across slides while we (Leong and Nguyễn) drank tea together in front of the conference's online audience, offering no commentary, no resolution, just the accumulation itself. The point was not the content of any single headline—which described reports of racism, discrimination, bullying and institutional failure—but the effect of the accumulation, and the ordinariness of sharing it over something as mundane as tea.

We reproduce that gesture here only partially in the form of images (see Figures 1, 2 and 3), because what we want to preserve is the underlying claim: that the material of complaint is rarely singular or dramatic. More often, it gathers through the accumulation of small, repeated encounters—a comment dismissed, a workload quietly redistributed onto the person least able to refuse it, a pattern of exclusion nobody names directly. Individually, each incident is deniable in its isolation. Together, accumulated and witnessed over time, they become patterned, structural, systemic.

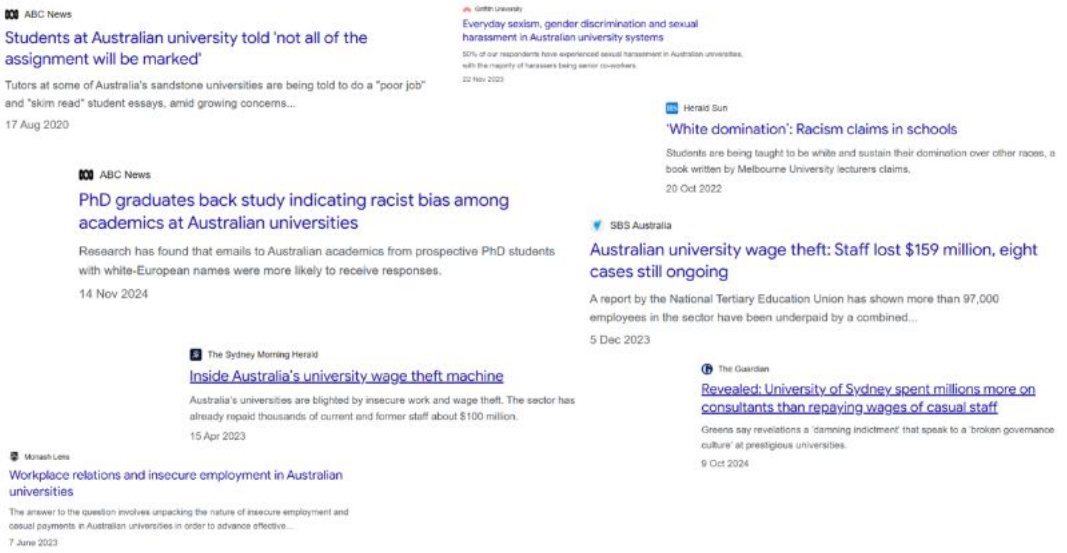

Figure 1: A series of headlines presented by Leong and Nguyễn during their 2025 ACUADS Conference presentation.

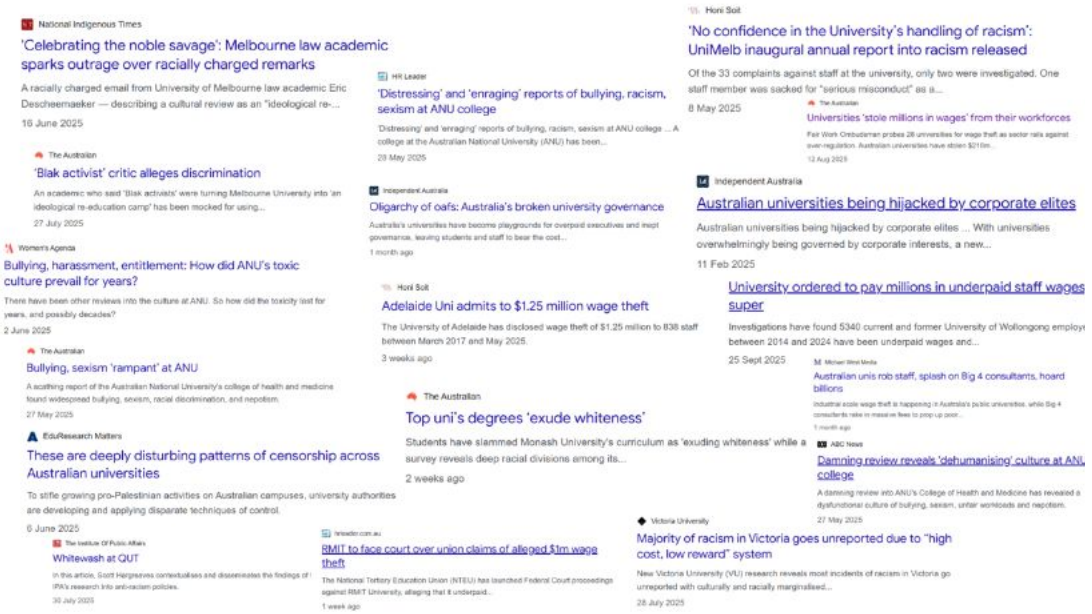

Figure 2: A series of headlines presented by Leong and Nguyễn during their 2025 ACUADS Conference presentation.

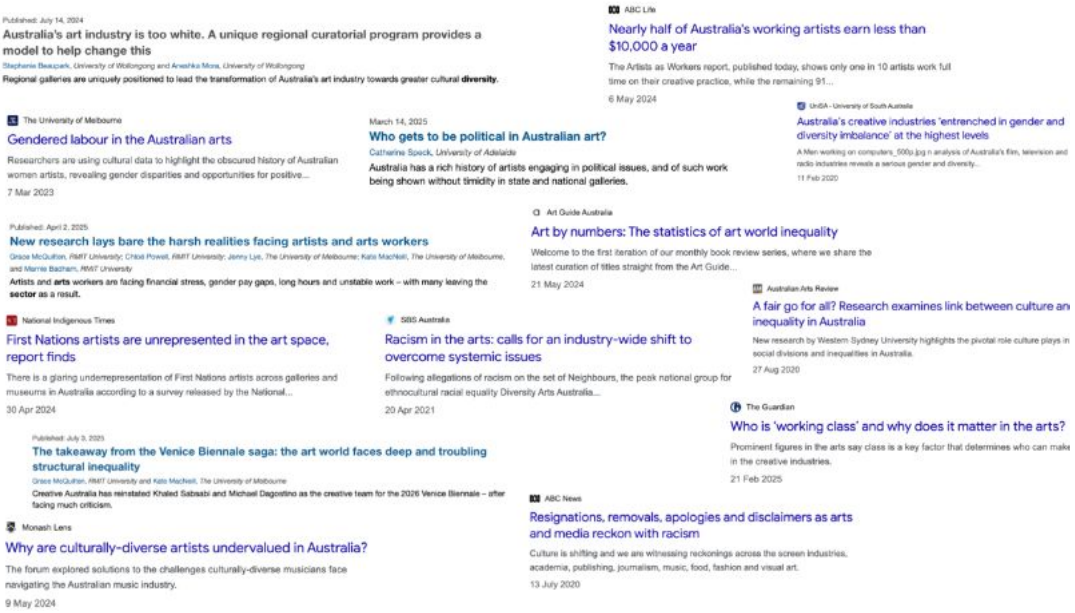

Figure 3: A series of headlines presented by Leong and Nguyễn during their 2025 ACUADS Conference presentation.

To understand why complaint might function as a creative method rather than only a bureaucratic one, it is worth dwelling further on the theoretical framing Ahmed builds across *Complaint!* and her earlier work (see also Ahmed 2012; 2014; 2017; 2019; 2025).

Complaint! grew directly out of Ahmed's own institutional history. In 2016, she resigned from her position at Goldsmiths, University of London, citing the institution's failure to address sexual harassment committed by academic staff against students (Ahmed 2016). The book that followed is built from a substantial evidentiary base: interviews and written statements gathered from students, academics, researchers and administrators who had gone through formal complaint processes. Ahmed describes her method as a kind of phenomenology of the institution (Ahmed 2021:21)—an attempt to understand institutions not through their stated policies but through what happens to those who come into contact with their complaint procedures.

Several concepts offered by Ahmed have been generative to our thinking about complaint as a creative method.

First, Ahmed's account of *complaint biography* (2021:20). Ahmed likens complaints to biographies, arguing that a complaint lodged in one place actually begins somewhere else—earlier, elsewhere, often long before the formal complaint is ever filed. This matters for how we think about the tactics described in this paper. Eating together, reading together

and workshopping together are not preludes to 'real' complaint, nor are they informal venting that happens before the serious business of a formal process. They are part of the complaint's biography—the accumulation of recognition, corroboration and named experience that a complaint is already made of, long before (if ever) it takes institutional form.

Second, *non-performativity*, a concept Ahmed develops from her earlier work on diversity in *On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life* (2012) and carries into her account of complaint. For Ahmed, institutional commitments—to diversity, to safety, to addressing harassment—function as non-performatives: statements that do not bring about the thing they name. A university's stated commitment to a safe and respectful workplace does not, by virtue of being stated, produce one. This gap between institutional language and institutional action is precisely the terrain complaint navigates, and precisely why complaint is so often experienced as exhausting: the complainant is required to prove that a stated commitment has failed, against an institution whose formal position is that the commitment holds.

Third, the metaphor of the *brick wall*, developed originally through Ahmed's interviews with diversity practitioners and extended in *Complaint!* (2021:26) to complainants more broadly. Practitioners doing diversity work inside institutions frequently describe their labour as the physical and emotional effort of repeatedly encountering a wall (or door as canvassed earlier) that does not move, regardless of how much effort is directed against it. Naming the wall does not remove it. But refusing to name it—proceeding as though the resistance were not there—does not make it disappear either; it only makes the labour of hitting it invisible. This is close to what we mean when we speak, in the tactics that follow, of 'noticing the door.' The door, like the wall, is not new. What changes is whether its presence is acknowledged, and by whom.

Fourth, Ahmed's account of *institutional death* (Ahmed 2019:195)—the ways formal complaint processes are structured to end complaints rather than resolve them. Complaints are frequently absorbed by mechanisms that compartmentalise or simplify them until they become trivial or unactionable, or are stalled and left unfinished within institutional bureaucracy. Even where a complaint is heard, it may be processed in a manner designed to defuse the affect that motivated it in the first place, leaving the complainant with a procedurally 'closed' file and an unresolved sense of harm. This is one reason complaint, pursued only through formal institutional channels, so often produces exhaustion rather than change: the institution's mechanisms are built to metabolise complaint into closure, whether or not anything has actually shifted.

Finally, and most directly relevant to the tactics section of this paper, Ahmed's concept of the *feminist ear*, first introduced in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) and revisited as a methodology in *Complaint!*. To listen with a feminist ear is to listen for what or who tends to be tuned out—what or who is not heard, diminished, or dismissed under ordinary institutional conditions. This is a mode of listening that has to be practised, precisely because institutions are not neutral listening environments: as Ahmed observes, to be heard

as complaining is, in a sense, not to be heard at all—the label 'complaint' itself often functions to pre-empt genuine reception of what is being said, recasting the speaker as the problem rather than the harm they are naming.

Taken together, these concepts describe complaint as something structurally resisted by the institutions it addresses, and yet also—crucially for our argument—as something that does not depend on institutional reception to matter. A complaint's biography exists before and beyond any formal record of it. Feminist listening can happen anywhere a feminist ear is present, not only in a grievance office. It is this insight that opens the space for complaint as *creative method*: if institutions are structurally organised to blunt, absorb, or end complaint, then complaint's most generative work may need to happen elsewhere—in rooms the institution does not control, using forms it did not design. The tactics that follow are our attempt to describe what that elsewhere can look like.

A note on method and form

Before turning to the tactics themselves, it is worth naming the shift this paper performs. As flagged, the material presented here originated as an online performance lecture—a form that could enact its argument in real time. The audience was addressed directly, invited into the online room as co-witnesses rather than passive recipients of an argument. A page cannot do this. What it can do is hold the argument still long enough to look at it more carefully, and be explicit about the parts that were live, embodied, or relational, and are now necessarily represented rather than enacted.

We think this gap is itself instructive. Complaint, as we argue throughout, loses something when it is extracted from relation and flattened into a record—a form, a transcript, a list of grievances stripped and detached from the bodies that made them. Converting a performance into a paper, we are aware, risks reproducing that same flattening. Our response is not to pretend the performance can be reproduced on the page, but to keep the register of address—the 'we,' the direct naming of risk and positionality—intact where possible, and to reflect openly on what changes when complaint moves from being *staged* to being *written about*.

What follows are three tactics we have learned, borrowed, invented and improvised in response to the ineffectiveness of formal complaint processes. None of them originated as a deliberate method of complaint. Each emerged from necessity, and each has since become something we can name, teach and offer to others.

Eating together

Over the years working across the arts and higher education sectors, co-author Nguyễn has participated in and witnessed countless conversations—most often among queer, CARM and women friends and colleagues—that take place beyond the confines of institutional space. Scheduled innocuously in calendars as 'coffee' or 'lunch', these gatherings occur in cafes, restaurants, bars, or each other's homes. They function as counter-institutional spaces (Bolatagici 2021) where our experiences with the institution can be shared without the fear

of surveillance or having their narratives appropriated and reframed by the very systems they seek to name. This stands in stark contrast to formal complaint processes, which are frequently held in an office or meeting room, are documented and recorded, and mediated by human resources who are, more often than not, there to *protect* institutions from complaints rather than protect complainants *from* institutions. Such environments can make disclosure intimidating and unsafe for the complainants.

Sharing a meal or a cup of tea offers something different. Hospitality, as a practice of care, can nourish relational networks and become informal sites for information sharing, community protection and resistance. Within creative practice, these approaches can take many forms, including 'Ramen and Rant' sessions, problem potlucks and supper clubs where eating together becomes a methodology for sharing, listening and witnessing. Australian Yindjibarndi York-based artist Kathy West's *We hold you close* (2022) at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts exemplifies this methodology: visitors are invited to sit and drink tea with the artist. West's practice slows down the encounter of the work, and makes relation a precondition of disclosure. Our own performance lecture, in which we drank tea together in front of an online audience while headlines accumulated silently on screen, draws on this same logic. Such practices resonate with Jody Haine's practice-led research, in which she observes that 'tea seemed to have magical powers that helped people bond and talk' (2025:45). Haine's insight highlights how ordinary acts in ordinary places of sharing food and drink, can create the conditions for trust and conversation that formal institutional settings rarely afford.

Reading together

In July 2025, co-author Nguyễn hosted a reading group session at First Site Gallery, held within the Nguyễn's exhibition *ten tôi* (July 15–Aug 10) where a small group of people collectively read and discussed the introductory chapter 'Hearing Complaint' from Sara Ahmed's book *Complaint!* (2021).

Situated within the exhibition, the reading group invited participants to reflect on how personal and collective experiences of complaint can resonate across spaces of art, activism and community. Reading Ahmed together offered a shared language to collectively process our experiences and to understand the challenges and roles of complaint beyond our single perspective. That is, Ahmed's theorisation of complaint enabled us to situate our own experiences within broader patterns of institutional power. To see one another's faces, learn each other's names, and recognise shared or similar experiences of institutional harm was to resist the isolation that institutions so often produce. As Ahmed (2021) demonstrates, complaints in institutions are often handled quietly and treated as isolated and individualised issues.

Together, we read, but in gathering we were also performing the politics of the texts, and in so doing, recognised public group readings as a practical tactic for creative collective complaint. Pivotal texts such as Ahmed's *Complaint!* can offer a way to notice patterns of institutional harm and to subvert the silencing, siloing, and compliance which allows it to maintain its power.

Workshopping together

In workshops co-author Leong has facilitated for arts workers since 2020, participants often arrive carrying what Leong has come to recognise as 'leaks' (Neimanis 2019). These workshops are not designed as complaint sessions. Participants are not asked to bring grievances. The invitation is simply to share experiences of the institutions they work within, and to think through the tensions of practice—its limitations and accountabilities, its possibilities and potentialities (Leong 2023).

But once people begin speaking, something shifts. Stories that begin as 'just part of the job' become, on closer articulation, descriptions of exclusion, of racialised or gendered assumptions, of normalised toxicity, of precarity treated as an inevitability rather than a design choice. No one in the room is trying to complain, and yet what emerges collectively is analysis: a shared mapping of how institutions actually behave, as distinct from how they describe themselves as behaving.

In one such workshop, this dynamic became particularly clear when a colleague paused mid-conversation and named something directly: that his position of leadership protected him, that as a white cis male he could speak openly in ways others in the room could not, and that this protection carried a responsibility he had not previously articulated to himself. His recognition did not resolve anything in the moment. But it made visible, again, that complaint is always entangled with power, and that participants do not stand in the same relation to the risk of speaking. These workshops surface how differently people are positioned—who can name harm safely, and who must speak in code to stay protected. In these moments, complaint stops functioning as an administrative act and becomes instead a way of knowing: a creative method for revealing the structures shaping our working lives, structures that become visible only when noticed together.

Complaint as creative method

What the three tactics above share is a refusal to let complaint remain individualised, procedural, or confined to the channels an institution provides for it. Read together, they describe complaint as a way of making structure visible—precisely what Ahmed argues complaint accomplishes when it is heard rather than absorbed (Ahmed 2021). Across eating, reading and workshopping together, we were practising several overlapping methods at once:

- Complaint as noticing—attuning to what is usually minimised or dismissed as incidental.
- Complaint as refusal—declining to smooth harm over in the name of professionalism or collegiality.
- Complaint as solidarity and allyship—recognising that no one should have to name structural violence alone.
- Complaint as care—the care of speaking so that others do not have to carry the cost of speaking silently.

We were also, in each of these spaces, practising what Ahmed calls ‘feminist ears’: listening for what is difficult to say, for what has been coded, for what cannot be spoken safely within institutional walls, and holding space for that difficulty as a form of hospitality in itself (Ahmed 2021).

These are small practices. None of them, alone, changes an institution's policy or its record, and they are not offered as a substitute for unionised and organised political action. But together they build groundwork: for naming harm collectively rather than in isolation, for confronting it with honesty rather than deflection, and for imagining alternatives from a position of connection rather than silence.

Why we keep complaining

Collective complaint is already happening around us, constantly, if we know how to recognise it as such. Since we presented our performance lecture, the accumulation has continued: further reports of institutional racism, harassment and discrimination have appeared across the media. It is in this same accumulating pattern that, in Australia, the Australian Human Rights Commission’s *Respect at Uni: Study into Antisemitism, Islamophobia, Racism and the Experience of First Nations People* (2025) documents experiences shared across institutions—more than 76,000 students and staff from 42 universities across the country participated in the study, with key findings including: 70% of survey respondents reporting experiencing indirect racism and 15% of respondents reporting experiencing direct interpersonal racism at university, with particularly high rates of racism experienced by students and staff from First Nations, African, Asian, Jewish, Māori, Middle Eastern, Muslim, Palestinian and Pasifika backgrounds (Australian Human Rights Commission 2025). These are instances of complaint scaled beyond the individual, redistributed across a collective body. There is, it seems, every reason to keep complaining.

We end where the original performance ended, because the provocation has not resolved itself in the writing of this paper.

Disobedience, as a conference theme, asks something of presenters. We offered our time, labour, expertise and vulnerability voluntarily; no one required it of us. But disobedience as a theme also asks something of the organising body that invites it—in this case, ACUADS (Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools), the peak body for university art, craft and design disciplines.

To call presenters together under the banner of disobedience is to open a threshold. It is a door that cannot be closed again without consequence. To those who were not only present, but who are listening, it asks:

- How will you hold the disobedience you have invited?
- What will you change because of what you hear?
- What new passageways will you open for those who come after us?

We do not think these questions have easy answers, and we are wary of any paper—including this one—that closes them prematurely. What we offer instead is the method itself: eat together, read together, workshop together, notice the door. Complaint, staged this way, is not a demand for resolution. It is an ongoing practice of refusing to let the door go unnoticed.

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