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Complaint! A Book Review

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ABSTRACT
Sara Ahmed's *Complaint!* provides a feminist analysis on how complaints move through systems within organizations. This book review offers insight as to how this analysis might impact the work of ombuds and their philosophies of working with visitors.

KEYWORDS
ombuds, systems, complaint, feminism, activism

One discussion that does not often happen in the organizational ombuds field is how we come to the philosophies of our work. Philosophies are self-reflective statements outlining our beliefs about how ombuds practice. In 2014, Howard Gadlin posited that "One can think of ombudsman programs as arrayed along a continuum ranging from reactive at one end to activist on the other (p. 388)." However, as ombuds, how often are we given an opportunity to truly reflect on that continuum and where we may fall in practice? As an ombuds with over ten years' experience in the field, these reflections often come in engaging with literature that is tangential to the field. One such recent publication is *Complaint!* written by the independent feminist scholar, Sara Ahmed.

Published in 2021, *Complaint!* provides an opportunity to reflect on the structures and supports (or lack thereof) in navigating complaints within organizations. One of the most striking quotations for me was in the very first lines of the book: "To be heard as complaining is not to be heard. To hear someone as complaining is an effective way of dismissing someone (p. 1)". This statement alone highlights the importance of the role of the ombuds. When I first started my role as an ombuds, I had colleagues ask why I wanted to listen to individuals complain all day. In the phrasing of that very statement, they were dismissing valid concerns of individuals within the organization without ever truly hearing them. The ombuds office offers a space of listening and empathy first. However, that is not all we do. Ahmed's work also shines a light on several other aspects that ombuds should consider in reflecting on their philosophies as ombuds, whether reactive or activist. Ahmed states this is particularly true as it relates to women of color, as this was the population focused on within the text. Not only does Ahmed discuss what it means not to be heard, but also discusses three concepts (among many others) that should be considered in an ombuds' philosophy: the feminist ear, complaint collectives and complaint narratives.

The "feminist ear", as Ahmed describes, "is to hear what is not heard, how we are not heard." Further, she speaks to how one learns from "who is not heard about who is deemed important or who is doing the 'important work' (p. 4)." In our work as ombuds, this is something that I reflect on often. Those that come to our offices often feel that they are in positions to safely bring their concerns forward, but there are also many others that, despite the articulation of our independence, impartiality, confidentiality, and informality that do not. What then, within our organizations or even within our own offices, hinders them from coming forward? Is there something in the ombuds office structure or position within the organization, its reporting lines or in colleagues' perception of attending to the International Ombuds Association Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (IOA, 2023) that prevents them? Does our abandonment of justice as a standard of practice (Shelton, 2011) and our fears related to the appearance of impartiality inhibit our ability to help them be heard? While we claim our independence, there is a contradiction in claiming that we are also a part of the organization's conflict management system. How do our offices reify a visitor's experience with the system? How do we break away from it?

In breaking from the system, an ombuds office also provides a space for what Ahmed describes as "complaint collectives". She highlights that complaint systems do not allow for collective complaints that would protect the identity of those being harmed and that this is another means by which the system silences those that have been treated inequitably.

> We knew that if we followed the institutional path, we'd be separated from each other. We would be required to write individual, named complaints. And we knew that even if we made multiple complaints, stacking ourselves together, the complaints process was designed to keep us separate. Each complaint would be taken on its own, and each person would be on her own. Keeping us separate would be a way to cut between us. It would be a way to make less visible what we could see when we looked at it not individually but together (p. 265).

Ombuds break from the system in that they offer a space to pull these complaints together, these stories together, and provide systemic feedback to the organization while providing anonymity for

those who seek our counsel. We can provide a space of accountability where other offices may be bound to the organization. It is where we bear witness to those who have not been heard and whose silence has become part of their "complaint narrative".

Complaint narratives are an individual's history with complaint. These narratives can either work to further silence one who is harmed or urge them forward to seek justice and accountability. As ombuds, we are often asked to focus on "impartiality" as set forth by our code of ethics. To quote: "The Ombuds is a designated neutral and impartial resource who does not take sides or serve as an advocate for any person or entity (IOA, 2023)." While laudable on the surface, it does not necessarily provide the ability to act in ways that best serve our visitors given their narratives and histories with complaint systems. In reflecting on my own philosophy as an ombuds, I often reframe our role as one of "passionate multipartiality" defined by the deliberative democracy space. While one still strives to adhere to impartiality around the topic at hand, passionate multipartiality supports "democracy and the values it entails, such as freedom, equality, inclusion, transparency, trust, and mutual respect (Carcasson & Sprain, 2010, p. 3)." Passionate multipartiality allows us to see more expansively how individuals are impacted by the systems at hand.

These are only a few of the concepts Ahmed discusses throughout *Complaint!* My hard copy is dog-eared with notes in the margins and many sections underlined. I have also purchased it on audiobook. It has become one of the foundations of my philosophy as an ombuds and if it is not evident by now, I lean towards the end of the continuum described by Gadlin (2014) as activist.

> At the center of this orientation is a concern with matters of fairness and justice—an interpretation of the ombudsman role that commits the ombudsman to raising questions of fairness and justice when responding to a situation in a way that no other unit or person within the organization does… By activist, we also refer to three aspects of our interpretation of the role: we act on our own initiative, we provide direct conflict intervention, and we do conflict prevention work within the organization (p. 389).

Thus, I encourage colleagues to read Complaint! and reflect upon how they may act to provide direct conflict intervention and do conflict prevention work within their organizations, especially as it relates to those who feel dismissed or unheard within the current conflict management systems. What frames one's ombuds philosophy? One may find that *Complaint!* urges and challenges one to rethink their philosophy and place within their organization.

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Shannon Lynn Burton, PhD became the University Ombudsperson at Michigan State University in July 2018 after serving previously as both the Assistant University Ombudsperson and later Associate University Ombudsperson. Shannon serves the broader professional community through her work as one of the International Ombudsman Association's (IOA) inaugural co-chairs for the Research and Assessment Committee, Editor for *the Journal of the IOA* (JIOA) and an Editor for IOA's first book, *The Organizational Ombuds: Foundations, Fundamentals and Future* to be published in 2024. Shannon earned her Doctor of Philosophy in Higher, Adult and Lifelong Education with a Specialization in Global Urban Studies from Michigan State University. She also has a Master of Science in Academic Advising (Kansas State University), a Master of Arts in Student Affairs Administration (Michigan State University), as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Russian Studies, a Bachelor of Science in Sociology, and a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish (Grand Valley State University). She is trained in dialogue & deliberation, restorative justice, compassionate communication, social justice mediation and trauma-informed practices. Shannon is also co-ombuds for the American Education Research Association and is an Adjunct Professor of Management at Aquinas College where she teaches conflict resolution, ethics, and group dynamics. (sburton@msu.edu)