

For the (broken) record

The dominant figure of the complainer, its origins, effects and function as a policing instrument

Nena Maria Ackerl

Bachelor Thesis Philosophy of a Specific Discipline

Main study: Management of International Social Challenges

Student number: 535750

Supervisor: Dr. Maren Wehrle

Advisor: Dr. Awee Prins

Erasmus University Rotterdam

Wordcount: 12,609

Date: January 19, 2024

Content

Foreword.....	2
Introduction.....	3
1. The <i>as</i> of complaining	7
2. The dominant figure of the complainer	10
3. <i>The complainer</i> , a defective subject.....	14
3.1 The culture of positivity	14
3.2 The rational & self-sufficient subject.....	18
4. <i>The complainer</i> and their structural position	24
5. <i>The complainer</i> as a policing instrument	27
5.1 The concealment of benefits and reasons.....	27
5.2 Isolation.....	28
5.3 Epistemic injustice	29
5.4 The disguise of violence.....	31
5.5 Depoliticisation and (self-)policing.....	32
Conclusion	35
Bibliography	38

Foreword

Turning my attention to the topic of complaining made me experience the omnipresence of complaining. I started to talk about complaining, I started to complain more. I learned how difficult it can be to articulate your complaints. I learned what others think and feel about complaining. I learned what it means when others associate you with complaining. I had many great experiences talking about complaining and complaining with friends and comrades. I also had many bad experiences with the reactions of other friends and tutors or professors at the University. This is the position I wrote this thesis from. I want to extend my gratitude to those who shared their experiences and thoughts with me and to all my fellow complainers. Perhaps this thesis will make some of you feel heard. Thank you to those who supported me in writing this thesis. Especially to you, Maren Wehrle, for your elaborate, inspiring and motivating supervision. You supported me in believing in myself and the learning process of this thesis and I feel so lucky and grateful for that. Thank you. I want to acknowledge the personal position from which I am writing this thesis as (amongst many other things) a white, able-bodied, European, queer, cis-woman, university student, feminist, activist and complainer.¹ I hope my openness will transmit what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o states in the preface to one of their books: “Inevitably, essays of this nature may carry a holier-than-thou attitude or tone. I would like to make it clear that I am writing as much about myself as about anybody else.”²

¹ I would like to use this self-description to make some notes on the use of words pertaining to race and gender in this thesis. I follow Ruby Hamad in *White Tears/Brown Scars* and a whole tradition of thinkers in understanding race as “an imposition, not a biological reality” (p.xvi). Words such as *white*, *brown*, *black*, and *person of colour*, are, thus in my work used as political words with material implications rather than sole descriptions of skin colour. Similarly, I understand gender not as a biological reality but as a political concept that is not confined to the man-woman binary. Additionally, when I talk about women, I mean all women and not just those assigned female at birth to which I refer as cis-women.

² Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), xii.

Introduction

Going on record

When I told a friend that I wanted to critique how we think of complaining because the experiences of minoritized people are often dismissed as complaints, he shared two stories with me. First, he told me about a person who called the national TV channel to complain about the inaccuracy of the weather forecast. We were laughing because it seemed so silly. Everyone knows that the weather forecast is not a perfect prediction but based on probability, right? Then he told me about a friend of his who once used the customer service of a chewing gum producer to complain about the weird shape of the gum in the package they had bought. The company reacted by providing this person with a yearly supply of perfectly shaped chewing gum. How picky, I remember thinking. The shape of the gum does not really matter when you are chewing on it. Thinking of complaints such as these in comparison to complaints about harmful behaviour led me to an important question: what happens when we throw all kinds of people who make complaints into one box with the label COMPLAINER? In other words, what are the effects of the dominant figure of the complainer?³

The societal and academic importance of further inquiry into the topic of complaining is multidimensional. While complaining has been identified as a common behaviour, it has rarely been the object of research.⁴ The little existing academic explorations of the topic often expose a thus far unnuanced understanding of complaining which warrants Kathryn J. Norlock's call: "We have some new mapping to do of the terrain of complaint."⁵ Additionally, feminist scholars have criticised complaining for being a mostly unsuccessful attempt to create change, which raises questions about the reasons for this ineffectiveness.⁶ In *Complaint!*, Sara Ahmed provides some

³ Throughout this thesis, I will refer to someone who is complaining, or seen as complaining, as a complainer. I will use *the complainer* in cursive as a synonym for the figure of the complainer.

⁴ Robin Kowalski, *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 26.

⁵ Kathryn J. Norlock, "Can't Complain," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2018): 134, <https://philarchive.org/versions/NORCC-2>.

⁶ Bonnie Washick, "Complaint and the World-Building Politics of Feminist Moderation," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 555, <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1086/706469>.

answers to this question by showing how the way we view complainers prevents the recognition of and fight against harm and injustice.⁷ Researching complaining can, thus, further our understanding of these effects and how they come about, while also serving a restorative purpose by supporting those seen and treated as complainers in making sense of their experiences.

Complaining has been addressed in various academic disciplines. I have brought the work of authors from different branches of philosophy and other academic disciplines into conversation with each other. This thesis will be mainly based on the work of Sara Ahmed who describes themselves as a feminist writer and scholar who works on feminist, queer and race studies through the approach of queer phenomenology.⁸ Further, I will use the work of the political scientist Bonnie Washick, the social psychologist Robin Kowalski, Aaron Schuster who specialised in philosophy and psychoanalysis, the philosopher of ethics Kathryn J. Norlock, Juli Thorson and Christine Baker's work in social epistemology, and moral philosopher and social epistemologist Miranda Fricker. While the psychological and psychoanalytical accounts of complaining provide considerations on personal and interpersonal psychological effects, the social, political and ethical accounts enable a politicisation of the topic of complaining and the effects of the figure of the complainer. As I will discuss further in the first chapter, I have found critical phenomenology to be the most suitable method for this thesis since it allows me to inquire about the relationship between our experiences and historical and social structures of power.⁹

Through this thesis, I will home in on my main argument that the figure of the complainer functions as a policing instrument which negatively affects predominantly those who experience oppression.¹⁰ I start with an exploration of different definitions of complaining and an argument

⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021).

⁸ Sara Ahmed, "BIO," accessed September 5, 2023, <https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv>.

⁹ Lisa Guenther, "Critical Phenomenology," In *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, ed. Gail Weiss et al. (United States of America, Northwestern University Press, 2020), 12.

¹⁰ Following Iris Marion Young's book *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990), I understand oppression as going beyond the traditional understanding of the tyranny of a specific group (p.40). Instead, oppression is understood as the "injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features of bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms" (p.41). Iris Marion Young

for a critical phenomenological approach in the first chapter. I approach the question of what the dominant figure of the complainer is in the second chapter, followed by two possible explanations for this particular figure in the third and fourth chapters. First, I argue that the figure of the complainer is produced by two hegemonic norms: the culture of positivity and the rational and self-sufficient subject. Afterwards, I argue that *the oppressed* are most likely to be seen as *complainers*. In the fifth chapter, I discuss four effects of the figure of the complainer, namely the concealment of benefits and reasons, isolation, epistemic injustice and the disguise of violence¹¹. I end this chapter with the argument that through these effects the figure of the complainer functions as a policing instrument. The conclusion includes some thoughts on how to think of and encounter *the complainer* otherwise.

Writing this thesis felt like going on record with what I have learnt, experienced and produced in the last months. Going on record means officially stating what has happened. Records and complaints are familiar with each other. As Sara Ahmed writes: “We need to remember that a complaint is a record of what happens to a person, as well as of what happens in institutions.”¹² Many complaints never make it on record. Many of us never go on record. And when we do, it also matters how records are ‘kept’. Therefore, I want to briefly comment on the form of this thesis, this record. Following Chiara Bottici, I have decided to mainly use they/them pronouns to

describes oppression as a structural concept that encompasses one or more of the following aspects: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence (p.40). For this thesis I use oppression as a broad concept that can take the form of either ‘traditional’ oppression or structural oppression, or both simultaneously. I will use the term *the oppressed* as a collective term for different groups experiencing oppression such as black and brown people, women, queer people, disabled people, Jews and Muslims, working class people and more. I do not claim to represent all these group’s experiences, nor do I intend to suggest that *the oppressed* is a homogenous group. Additionally, I would like to emphasise the importance of understanding structures of oppression as intersectional, which means to view them as interlocking systems that co-constitute each other and manifest differently depending on the localised case. As a concept coming from the black feminist tradition, intersectionality allows us to see and attend to the differences in experiences of oppression. For example, the fact that black women neither experience gendered oppression the same as white women, nor racial oppression the same as black men.

¹¹ Following many thinkers of the feminist, decolonial and black radical tradition, I understand violence as a continuum which encompasses various forms of violence such as physical violence against person and property, structural violence, representational and symbolic violence, and epistemic violence.

¹² Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 38.

refer to specific people throughout my work to fight the imposition of assumed gender identities.¹³ Additionally, I will refer to authors with their full names in the text and the footnotes to resist as much as possible the reproduction of the patriarchal norm of addressing a person (most importantly women) by their family name which is most often the name of a man (their father or husband).¹⁴ It also, and often most importantly, matters how records (or complaints) are received and heard. Soon you will notice that another recurring theme surrounding complaining is that of (not) being heard. I want to share with you a question that accompanied me through this work: “Who is heard and who has the power to refuse to listen?”¹⁵ I hope that you will find some joy and rage in reading this thesis, this record, this complaint.

¹³ Chiara Bottici, *Anarchafeminism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), xi-xii.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, xi-xii.

¹⁵ Nikita Dhawan and Maria do Mar Castro Varela, “What difference does difference make?,” *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 21, no.1 (March 2018): 60, <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGN2018.1.DHAW>.

1. The *as* of complaining

Engaging with the question *What is complaining?* beyond the expression of formal written complaints, has led me to the first argument I want to put forth in this thesis: that attempting to define complaining, demarcate it and distinguish it from other behaviours is difficult and perhaps unnecessary. Complaining is not what you do, but what you are perceived to be doing. You are seen or heard or read *as* complaining about something.

Attempts to conceptualize *complaining* share the reference to a form of negative experience. In the video series *L'abécédaire* with Claire Parnet, made between 1988 and 1989, Gilles Deleuze talks about complaining in the section *J comme Joie* (engl.: J for Joy). Gilles Deleuze argues that a complaint is a condition in which something is overwhelming either in a good or a bad way – though mostly in a bad way.¹⁶ Complaining might thus be an expression of this experience. In their book *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*, Robin Kowalski understands complaining as such an expression, however, in their words “an expression of dissatisfaction.”¹⁷ For Juli Thorson and Christine Baker complaining is an expression of agitation as they explain in their article *Venting as epistemic work*.¹⁸ Misfortune, dissatisfaction, and agitation are all words for a negative experience that bring with them varying connotations. We can also add to the list: for instance, pain, disappointment, grief, injustice, harm...

Sara Ahmed's work *Complaint!* can help us to navigate the multiplicity of proposals for what complaining is. Sara Ahmed uses the phenomenological concept of 'intentionality' to explain that complaints are always about something, an intentional object, which in this case is some form of negative experience.¹⁹ Sara Ahmed also teaches us that complaining is not clearly distinguishable from other forms of expression. Many actions can be evaluated as complaining. Complaining is not an exclusively verbal action. Non-verbal expressions can also be interpreted as complaints. “Objecting, calling out, contesting, naming, questioning, withdrawing, not

¹⁶ The interview series can be found on YouTube. Link to the section on joy:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xyXMmx2Ofgs>.

¹⁷ Robin Kowalski, *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*, 28.

¹⁸ Juli Thorson and Christine Baker, “Venting as epistemic work,” *Social Epistemology* 33, no. 2 (February 2019): 103, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1561762>.

¹⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 102.

smiling, not laughing, groaning” and other actions can be used to express a complaint or can be perceived as complaining.²⁰ It follows that complaining is not always done purposefully and expressions that are intended as complaints are not necessarily perceived as such by others. Complaining is irreducible to a distinguishable set of behaviours and dependent on the self-understanding of a person as complaining or the evaluation of others. Many of those who have tried to produce such demarcations and distinctions have acknowledged the instability of their arguments. Juli Thorson and Christine Baker attempt to distinguish venting from ranting and complaining but end up acknowledging that venting and ranting may after all be seen as kinds of complaints.²¹ In *Can't Complain*, Kathryn J. Norlock mentions that others have argued against distinguishing complaining from protesting as they do in their article.²²

Due to the instability of attempted distinctions and demarcations as well as the multiplicity of behaviours that may be interpreted as complaining, I argue that Sara Ahmed's phenomenological approach is most suitable to investigate complaining. Since they understand complaining as a bodily experience which expresses a negative experience and is interpreted as complaining their definition accounts for various (conflicting) applications of the concept. Like Sara Ahmed, I am not interested in constructing lists, scales and criteria for what complaining is (not) but rather in what calling certain actions complaining does. More precisely, I am interested in what the invocation of *the figure of the complainer* does. Hence, I have found critical phenomenology to be a good approach for this thesis. In contrast to classical phenomenologists, critical phenomenologists do not aim to overcome the supposed problem of the impossibility of complete suspension of one's presuppositions.²³ Instead, critical phenomenologists propose to work from this instability and understand the relationship between our experiences and social and historical structures to be constitutive and reflexive. According to Lisa Guenther, critical phenomenology is both a philosophical and a political project.²⁴ It is philosophical as it aims to

²⁰ Ibid., 102.

²¹ Juli Thorson and Christine Baker, “Venting as epistemic work,” 108.

²² Kathryn J. Norlock, “Can't Complain,” 126.

²³ Duane H. Davis, “The Phenomenological Method,” In *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, ed. Gail Weiss et al. (United States of America, Northwestern University Press, 2020), 6.

²⁴ Lisa Guenther, “Critical Phenomenology,” 15.

reflect “on the quasi-transcendental social structures that make our experience of the world possible and meaningful.”²⁵ It is political through the commitment to “struggle for liberation from the structures that privilege, naturalize, and normalize certain experiences of the world while marginalizing, pathologizing, and discrediting others.”²⁶ Thus, critical phenomenology enables an analysis of the figure of the complainer beyond a description of the experiences of those described as such and toward an inquiry into the sociohistorical structures that produce this figure as well as possibilities to encounter the complainer otherwise.

²⁵ Ibid., 15.

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

2. The dominant figure of the complainer

In this chapter, I will provide an outline of the figure of the complainer. This means addressing the question *Who is the complainer?* in a way in which the question is not interpreted as *Who are the people that complain?* The answer to that question would be simple: all of us in varying degrees. I believe I do not take a big risk when stating that all of us have at some point thought of ourselves as complaining and/or have been interpreted by someone else as complaining. What I am asking is *Who is **the complainer**?* in the sense of *What and who do we think of when we think of a complainer as a kind of person? What do we ascribe to a person whom we describe as a complainer?* What I aim to do is to unpack the baggage of the dominant figure of the complainer. I am not the first to engage in this unpacking. In *Complaint!*, Sara Ahmed does a lot of unpacking which teaches us about *the complainer*. In this chapter, I will use the subsequent quote from Sara Ahmed's book. I will go through their points one by one and expand on their work by showing how other authors (re)produce this figure of the complainer.

The complainer as figure is sticky, also picky, loaded with affect and value: the complainers as moaner, as minor, making something from nothing, much out of little; as a stranger or foreigner, not one of us, as endangering us.²⁷

Sticky. Once you are a complainer, the image sticks to you. The work for this thesis did not only involve reading and writing about complaining but also talking about it with others. One time around the beginning of my research, I went for a walk with a person I had recently gotten to know at a faculty event. I told them about my thesis topic and my motivation behind it. I noticed that from this moment onwards they kept referring to some of my contributions to our conversations as complaints (with a wink): “Aah, now this is you complaining again!” Laugh. Wink. I had invoked the figure of the complainer and it stuck to me. However, as Sara Ahmed explains, the figure of the complainer does not only stick to you, but it also brings with it a lot of baggage, it is *loaded*.²⁸ This association is, for instance, inherent to one of the German words for complaining, which are ‘beschweren’ and ‘beklagen.’ The former, ‘beschweren’ literally

²⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 171.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

translates into ‘making something heavy.’²⁹ To complain – ‘sich beschweren’ – thus means to make oneself heavy. As Sara Ahmed argues, the complainer is heavy because they are loaded, but they are also seen as making the situation heavy by unloading.

Moaner. Minor. Making something from nothing. Complainers are seen as making a fuzz about ‘small issues,’ blowing things out of proportion.³⁰ In a way, as Aaron Schuster has argued, complainers are often seen as hypochondriacs and as “architects of their own unhappiness.”³¹ They are ‘oversensitive.’ Not only are the objects of their complaints ‘minor,’ but also the complainers themselves are seen as a minority. A pushy and privileged minority, because having the capacity to complain is often seen as evidence that what you are complaining about does not harm you enough.³² The assumption here being: whoever is able to complain cannot be a victim of harm. Robin Kowalski, for instance, argues that complainers are usually concerned with “trivial” things and rarely complain about “major stressful events.”³³

Stranger. Foreigner. Taking issue with something that does not bother the ‘majority’ does not only predicate the declaration of a minority status, but it also makes *the complainer* an outsider. Divergent behaviour from what is seen as ‘normal’ and ‘appropriate’ in a situation makes one the “object of attention” and often leads to being positioned apart from the rest.³⁴ “Not smiling” or “not laughing” can just as well cause someone to be seen as a complainer as submitting a formal complaint.³⁵ On top of being seen as an outsider, the complainer is also held responsible for their situation. Through their behaviour, they are seen as actively removing themselves from and positioning themselves outside of and against the majority. Sara Ahmed observed that often the complainer’s demands for equality and safety are seen as acts of “separatism.”³⁶

²⁹ I would like to thank you, Elina, for our conversation about the connotations of the German words for complaining.

³⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 109.

³¹ Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016), 5.

³² Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 146.

³³ Robin Kowalski, *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*, 18.

³⁴ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 123.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

Danger. The complainer is not only a stranger but is also often seen as a danger. By having a ‘problem’ with how things are, *the complainer* is, in Sara Ahmed’s words, often associated with “stranger danger.”³⁷ Sara Ahmed argues that “[t]he figure of the complainer is treated as a symptom of a more generalized structure of violence, whether institutional, managerial, neoliberal, or carceral.”³⁸ Especially when submitting formal complaints, *the complainer* is seen as (re)producing institutional violence by resorting to official complaint procedures that are often experienced by those whose behaviour is the object of complaint as “disciplinary regimes.”³⁹ The complainer becomes the manager who is seen as performing oversight, enforcing the rules meticulously and imposing their moral norms on others while framing it as a matter of justice.⁴⁰ For example, as a reaction to the complaint about being sexually harassed by her mother’s boyfriend, a friend of mine received the response that she should stop being such a manhater, who sees a potential predator in every man. She was, thus, seen as performing oversight over the men in her surroundings and imposing her moral norms on them while framing it as harassment. This framing of *the complainer* often goes together with the invocation of a critique of neoliberalism. Sara Ahmed writes; “Neoliberalism can be mobilized to judge those who complain as motivated by self-interest.”⁴¹ When your complaint is seen as a consumer preference, you are seen as individualistic and putting yourself before others and the ‘common good.’⁴² Robin Kowalski’s definition of complaint as an “expression of dissatisfaction,” for instance, invokes such associations.⁴³ If complaining is about dissatisfaction, it can easily be framed as a personal preference. When this argument arises in its extreme, the complainer is seen as someone who gains satisfaction and pleasure from the act of complaining alone.⁴⁴ Additionally, Sara Ahmed argues that *the complainer* is also often seen as motivated by punitive

³⁷ Ibid., 134.

³⁸ Sara Ahmed, “The Complainer as Carceral Feminist,” published June 8, 2022, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2022/06/08/the-complainer-as-carceral-feminist/>.

³⁹ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 203.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 203.

⁴¹ Ibid., 203.

⁴² Sara Ahmed, “The Complainer as Carceral Feminist.”

⁴³ Robin Kowalski, *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*, 28.

⁴⁴ Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, 3.

urges and thereby (re)producing carceral violence and becoming “the police, or the prison guards.”⁴⁵ In short, *the complainer* is seen as a danger to the happiness of others by caring only about their pleasure and enforcing personal interests and punitive urges. This aspect of the figure of the complainer can also be found in the accounts of other authors. Thorson and Baker, for example, define complaining as an expression of agitation, thus associating it with violence.⁴⁶ Robin Kowalski warns against destructive types of complaining and categorises complaining as a mostly annoying behaviour which often burdens others; “It’s better to complain occasionally and carry your own burdens than cheerfully push them off on someone else.”⁴⁷ A similar argument has already been made by Friedrich Nietzsche in *Götzendämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt*:

The very act of complaining, the mere fact that one bewails one’s lot, may lend such a charm to life that on that account alone, one is ready to endure it. There is a small dose of revenge in every lamentation. One casts one’s afflictions, and, under certain circumstances, even one’s baseness, in the teeth of those who are different, as if their condition were an injustice, an *iniquitous* privilege. “Since I am a *blackguard* you ought to be one too.” It is upon such reasoning that revolutions are based. – To bewail one’s lot is always despicable: it is always the outcome of weakness.⁴⁸

Here Friedrich Nietzsche argues that complaining usually contains an element of revenge, is a way to burden others with one's problems and, thus, is brought about by weakness. This work was originally published in 1889. As I will further show in the next chapter, the figure of the complainer has a history and can not only be found in contemporary discourse.

⁴⁵ Sara Ahmed, “The Complainer as Carceral Feminist”.

⁴⁶ Juli Thorson and Christine Baker, “Venting as epistemic work,” 103.

⁴⁷ Robin Kowalski, *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*, 46-47.

⁴⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with the Hammer* (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911), Skirmishes in a War with the Age, §34, https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/52263/pg52263-images.html#THE_ANTICHRIST.

3. *The complainer, a defective subject*

Feminist complaint flags hegemonic, patriarchal norms even as it often falls short of seriously challenging them owing to those same norms that shape its reception. – Bonnie Washick⁴⁹

In the following, I will discuss some of the hegemonic norms that produce the figure of the complainer. These norms should be understood both as contextual and productive concerning the figure of the complainer, meaning factors that are part of the context in which people complain and are perceived as complainers and factors that are (re)producing the figure of the complainer. First, I will discuss how a *culture of positivity* posits the ideal of the happy and optimistic subject. Then, I will turn towards the theories on the virtuous subject of two canonical European thinkers; Aristotle and Immanuel Kant. I will also use Miranda Fricker's work on epistemic injustice to offer a possible explanation as to why these norms keep dominating over alternatives. I understand these norms as constituted by and simultaneously constitutive of our current capitalist, patriarchal, white-supremacist and ableist order. I argue that these norms are, consequently, hetero-sexist, racist, classist and ableist.⁵⁰

3.1 *The culture of positivity*

Simultaneous with my thesis process I have been part of a group organising a congress for climate activists. At some point, I together with another comrade, voiced my disagreement and dissatisfaction with the way a specific decision was made by by-passing a large part of the group.

⁴⁹ Bonnie Washick, "Complaint and the World-Building Politics of Feminist Moderation," 557.

⁵⁰ I would like to emphasise that my point here is a structural one rather than about individua. By describing the current order as capitalist, patriarchal, white-supremacist and ableist, I describe a structure rather than every individuum within it. However, as individua under the current order we are affected by it in our experiences and judgements in various ways. By describing the current order as white-supremacist I aim to convey that this order is racist and characterised by systematically treating white populations and their lives as superior to all others. Thereby I do not mean that everyone living under this system is *a white-supremacist* and neither that everyone is white-supremacist in the same ways. Additionally, I recognise that the literature and examples used in this section are mainly focused on illustrating the gendered nature of these norms. I attribute this to the constraints in time and scope of this thesis and my personal choices rather than seeing it as evidence against the claim that the figure of the complainer is racist, classist and ableist. I think this is still apparent and it would be important for future research to focus more on these aspects.

Our criticism led to a discussion in a group chat. At some point, one person said: “We all try our best to make this congress happen so please let’s be kind to each other while we all try to figure it out together.” I could use what I had already learned about the complainer to describe why this message made me feel uneasy. I recognised that this person saw us as complainers, as those who are not being kind and positive, those who are threatening the harmony of the group.

In the preface to their book *Critique of Pure Complaint*, Aaron Schuster uses Nancy Ries’ work on lamenting in the Soviet Union in the 1980s to argue that in some cultures people complain more than in others.⁵¹ Nancy Ries shows that complaining served an important social function by creating a “community of shared suffering” in that particular context.⁵² Aaron Schuster compares this to the dominant contemporary North American culture which they characterise as a culture of “compulsive positivity” that discourages complaining.⁵³ Byung-Chul Han has for instance made a similar argument in the European context in their essay *Palliativgesellschaft: Schmerz heute*.⁵⁴ According to them, society is undergoing a paradigm change and is becoming increasingly centred around the avoidance of pain and conflict.⁵⁵ This paradigm change affects, among many other spheres of life, psychology which has shifted from a “negative psychology” to a “positive psychology” focused on happiness and optimism.⁵⁶

Byung-Chul Han and Aaron Schuster are not the only ones who put forth arguments about what I refer to in this thesis as a *culture of positivity*. They have been preceded by feminist critiques of the concept and desirability of happiness as Sara Ahmed shows in their article *Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness*.⁵⁷ What is at stake in this discussion is the idea that happiness is necessarily a good thing, and thus, the ‘ideal life’ is a life full of positivity and

⁵¹ Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, 2.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *Palliativgesellschaft: Schmerz heute* (Berlin: MSB Matthes & Seitz, 2022). Many of Byung-Chul Han’s arguments and premises have been criticised for being unfounded and questionable. I generally agree with this critique. However, I find the specific argument concerning positivity convincing.

⁵⁵ Byung-Chul Han, *Palliativgesellschaft: Schmerz heute*, 7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁷ Sara Ahmed, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 572, <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1086/648513>.

happiness and the 'ideal subject' is a person who is happy and optimistic. Sara Ahmed argues that this culture of positivity posits an understanding of happiness as something that does not just happen to you but is rather created and, thereby, leads to the identification of things in terms of their potential to bring about happiness, which they call “happiness pointers.”⁵⁸ This is only possible since “objects are associated with affects before they are even encountered” based on general associations rather than their actual effects.⁵⁹ Sara Ahmed calls this “anticipatory causality.”⁶⁰ This way of encountering the world does not only apply to happiness pointers but also to things that should be feared because they are endangering our happiness; because they make us unhappy, we might call them *unhappiness pointers*.⁶¹ An unhappiness pointer may, thus, be anything that is seen as a threat to the happiness of one or a group or that may disrupt the ‘harmony’ of a situation.

This is where we can locate the connection between the culture of happiness and the figure of the complainer. By positing happiness, harmony and positivity as important goals, the culture of happiness leads to the identification of happiness pointers and unhappiness pointers. Complaints are often identified as unhappiness pointers that disrupt a situation that was beforehand experienced as positive and happy (by some) by drawing attention to something that is not positive. By becoming an unhappiness pointer, *the complainer* becomes a *moaner* and a *danger* to the happiness of those who are happy. As Sara Ahmed writes: “You cause unhappiness by revealing the cause of unhappiness. And you can become the cause of the unhappiness you reveal.”⁶² *Becoming the cause* means becoming an unhappiness pointer, becoming a danger.

To understand why *the complainer* also becomes a stranger we turn to another one of Sara Ahmed’s points in *Complaint!*: that the very same environment can be positive for some and hostile for others.⁶³ Addressing something negative is often not only seen as a danger to the happiness of those for whom the current circumstances are positive but also as different and

⁵⁸ Ibid., 576.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 576.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 576.

⁶¹ Ibid., 576-577.

⁶² Ibid., 591.

⁶³ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 154.

strange. The failure to acknowledge that the same context can be positive, totally ‘normal’ and uneventful for oneself, but harmful to another, thereby co-creates the figure of the complainer as a stranger. This situation can be attributed to a particular world consciousness in which the violence of the current order is not seen by most of those who personally experience it in relatively small ways. Byung-Chul Han argues that “[d]ie Forderung nach Optimierung der Seele, die in Wirklichkeit eine Anpassung an Herrschaftsverhältnisse erzwingt, verschleiert gesellschaftliche Missstände,” or my English translation: the demand for the optimization of the soul, which in reality forces an adjustment to power relations, conceals societal injustices.⁶⁴ Both Sara Ahmed and Byung-Chul Han, thus, address that the violence of the current order becomes concealed by what the former calls “happiness duty”.⁶⁵ When the violence of the current order is concealed, those who reveal it (the complainers) are likely to be seen as imposing violence in a ‘non-violent’ situation. Byung-Chul Han also argues that this happiness duty leads to depoliticisation and desolidarisation.⁶⁶ These effects influence the perception of and reaction to complaints. They may help us to understand why people often fail to recognise and respond in a supportive manner to the complaints of others. The culture of happiness, thus, causes complainers to be perceived as moaners, as dangers and strangers by positing positivity and happiness as great ideals, by concealing the violence of the current order, and by preventing solidarity with the complainer. For example, when a former student met with a counsellor at the time to complain about the repeated sexist ‘jokes’ of a lecturer at the Faculty of Philosophy and his reaction when she confronted him, she was told that the faculty cannot censor the humour of a lecturer and she was not offered any further support. Similarly, a student who confronted a professor of the Faculty of History, Communication and Culture received the reply that he (the professor) should not have to walk on eggshells and that humour in the end is a question of taste and, thus, very subjective. Earlier that professor had told a male student who was struggling to explain something that he should say it like to a “lekker wijf in de kroeg” (my translation: “hot broad in a bar”). In both examples, people failed to recognise the violence of a particular

⁶⁴ Byung-Chul Han, *Palliativgesellschaft: Schmerz heute*, 19.

⁶⁵ Byung-Chul Han, *Palliativgesellschaft: Schmerz heute*, 21; Sara Ahmed, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” 590.

⁶⁶ Byung-Chul Han, *Palliativgesellschaft: Schmerz heute*, 21.

behaviour that was by many experienced as humorous and positive and the students were treated as a threat to that positivity.

The culture of happiness is a discourse of the relatively powerful. Sara Ahmed shows “how the general viewing point [on happiness] is itself rather particular.”⁶⁷ They argue that under the “sign of happiness” the stories of the unhappy are covered up. Their stories are framed as complaints about their unhappiness rather than what they are unhappy about.⁶⁸ Feminists have, for instance, been criticising the sign of happiness for what it asks women to give up on.⁶⁹ A classic example is Betty Friedan’s argument that the figure of the “happy housewife” justifies the gendered division of labour.⁷⁰ Sara Ahmed also brings in some figures from their own work. The culture of happiness, according to them, also leads to the invocation of “the angry black woman” and “the feminist killjoy.”⁷¹ Thus, the interplay of the culture of happiness with racism, sexism, classism, ableism and other forms of oppression also explains why the ‘happy subject’ is largely unattainable and/or undesirable for those people affected by these systems of oppression. The culture of happiness may be the culture of those who *can* and *want* to be happy in the current order.

3.2 *The rational & self-sufficient subject*

Another way to explain the figure of the complainer is to show that it is antithetical to the white-supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist and ableist understanding of the ideal subject as rational and self-sufficient. I will show below that complaining is often viewed as oppositional to the characteristics of this ‘ideal’ subject and, therefore, the complainer becomes irrational, needy, a burden, or as Sara Ahmed put it “making something from nothing” and “endangering” others.⁷² I will use Miranda Fricker’s theory of *epistemic injustice* to explain why this understanding of the ideal subject may prevail.

⁶⁷ Sara Ahmed, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” 571.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 573.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 585.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 573.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 583.

⁷² Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 171.

In *Can't Complain*, Kathryn J. Norlock exposes the gendered rigorism that has shaped the figure of the complainer.⁷³ The author turns towards the theory of the 'ideal' subject of two canonical European thinkers; Aristotle and Immanuel Kant.⁷⁴ They argue that these authors have an androcentric understanding of the ideal subject as rational and self-sufficient which leads to the perception of behaviours that diverge from that ideal as irrational.⁷⁵ The complainer is sharing their grievances with others and, thus, they are not self-sufficient.⁷⁶ Since that is seen as a burden to others, the complainer is also not rational as they fail to think beyond their individual emotions.⁷⁷ The author writes: "For both Aristotle and Kant, it is the complainer's preference to yield to the sensuous temptations of self-pity that undermines the dignity of a manly nature."⁷⁸ For Aristotle, complaining is a sign of weakness while for Immanuel Kant it is a sign of failure to uphold one's morals.⁷⁹ Complaining, thus, becomes a vice as not complaining becomes a virtue.

Earlier, I used a quote from Friedrich Nietzsche, whose view on the complainer shares some similarities with Immanuel Kant's and Aristotle's views. For all three thinkers, complaining stems from personal failure and is a way of putting one's misery on others. As Friedrich Nietzsche remarks: "it is always the outcome of a weakness."⁸⁰ It is important to note that while Immanuel Kant and Aristotle were concerned with the prerequisites of a virtuous man, Friedrich Nietzsche's view was a different one. Based on his critique of traditional European morals, he did not allocate the failure of *the complainer* in not fulfilling these values but in blaming one's own grievances on other's failure to fulfil these values and, therefore, prescribing those values to

⁷³ Kathryn J. Norlock, "Can't Complain," 118.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 118.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

⁸⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophise with the Hammer*, Skirmishes in a War with the Age, §34.

them.⁸¹ Thus, Friedrich Nietzsche, Immanuel Kant and Aristotle all prescribe against complaining. While Aristotle and Immanuel Kant do so to urge men to fulfil the prerequisites of the ‘ideal’ subject, Friedrich Nietzsche takes issue with complaining because he views it as a prescription of the traditional morals he critiques.

Bonnie Washick also exposes the gendered rigorism that informs the figure of the complainer in *Complaint and the World-Building Politics of Feminist Moderation*.⁸² The author analyses complaining as a speech act that is situated within a public sphere that privileges “generically masculine speech acts” over “generically feminist speech acts”.⁸³ In contrast to generically masculine speech acts which are characterized as being “individuated, independent, autonomous” and about individual interests, generically feminist speech acts are defined as those that embrace strategies of (self-)containment and that are “typically advocated for by reference to a broader community or shared ideal rather than as a free expression of the self.”⁸⁴ Generically feminist speech acts are, therefore, a practice of a subject that “accounts for others when speaking for herself.”⁸⁵ Bonnie Washick names moderation and trigger warnings as examples from the subject of their article which is the social media platform Usenet.⁸⁶ While trigger warnings are often accused of treating the viewer as weak and defenceless, their proponents argue that, if applied thoughtfully, they are rather a form of political action that points towards and holds people responsible for structural inequalities.⁸⁷ The author also provides an alternative view on moderation and comments policies which is often perceived as a form of censorship.⁸⁸ Instead, we should view these practices as ways to “cultivate readers and writers as entangled

⁸¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophise with the Hammer*, Skirmishes in a War with the Age, §34; Anderson, R. Lanier, “Friedrich Nietzsche,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2022 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/nietzsche/>.

⁸² Bonnie Washick, “Complaint and the World-Building Politics of Feminist Moderation.”

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 555.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 555, 560.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 578.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 555.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 577.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 574.

with others and accountable for more than a discrete, sovereignly agentic self.”⁸⁹ The hierarchized distinction between masculine speech acts and feminist speech acts, according to Bonnie Washick, is one of the reasons why feminist complaints are often seen as invalid and inappropriate. Thereby this distinction (re)produces the figure of the complainer.

The analyses above can help us to partly explain the figure of the complainer. Being seen as not self-sufficient, weak, inappropriate, and a burden is another reason why the complainer is seen as a stranger and a danger both to themselves and to others. To themselves because they fail to fulfil the criteria for the ‘ideal’ subject. To others because they fail to deal with their grievances themselves. The additional failure of not being rational also lies behind the accusation towards the complainer of “making something from nothing,” implying that *the complainer* is identifying something that is not actually there.⁹⁰ Robin Kowalski, for instance, presents different criteria through which we may evaluate whether a complaint is annoying.⁹¹ One of their criteria is the verifiability of the content. The author writes: “a nonverifiable complaint reflects a personal opinion that cannot be substantiated.”⁹² While not explicitly calling such a ‘nonverifiable complaint’ irrational, the argument that a complaint needs to be verifiable to be appropriate or justified, implies the need for a shared method of verification which is often based on ‘objective evidence’ or ‘sound argumentation.’ These concepts are tightly related to the idea of rationality, thus lending themselves to framing *the complainer* as irrational. Additionally, Robin Kowalski argues that “mindlessness” is another reason for complaints to be annoying.⁹³ Mindlessness may also be understood as not thinking correctly or as not being rational.

In this vein, the complainer is found in the realm of persons that are antithetical to the androcentric idea of the virtuous and rational being propagated amongst others by canonical European thinkers such as Aristotle, Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche in the past which can still be located today in the work of authors such as Robin Kowalski. Thus, in a social imaginary in which the ideal of the rational and self-sufficient person still exists and is

⁸⁹ Ibid., 574.

⁹⁰ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 171.

⁹¹ Robin Kowalski, *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*, 42.

⁹² Ibid., 44.

⁹³ Ibid., 45.

(re)produced, the complainer is seen as imposing one's pain onto others and being dependent on others. *The complainer* becomes not ideal, not virtuous, not rational. *The complainer* becomes insufficient and a failure.

I will use Miranda Fricker's work *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing* to provide an explanation as to how the 'ideal' subject as outlined above prevails as a norm.⁹⁴ The author argues that *hermeneutical marginalization* constrains certain (groups of) people from participating in processes of building social meaning through which expressive styles become recognized as rational or appropriate.⁹⁵ This marginalization may be due to material power and/or identity power,⁹⁶ explained as follows:

There can be operations of power which are dependent upon agents having shared conceptions of social identity – conceptions alive in the collective social imagination that govern, for instance, what it is or means to be a woman or a man, or what it is or means to be gay or straight, young or old, and so on. Whenever there is an operation of power that depends in some significant degree upon such shared imaginative conceptions of social identity, then *identity power* is at work.⁹⁷

As I have shown above, the figure of the complainer has been partly produced by the norms discussed above which have been established through epistemic processes dominated by the perspectives of those relatively abundant with material and/or identity power. Meanwhile, those deprived of material and/or identity power have been hermeneutically marginalized, and prevented from effectively co-creating the social imaginary and, thus, the figure of the complainer. Additionally, prevalent forms of discrimination such as hetero-sexism, racism, classism and ableism cause negative *identity prejudice* which Miranda Fricker explains as prejudice “against people owing to some feature of their social identity.”⁹⁸ This prejudice largely determines the degree of identity power. Thus, the figure of the complainer has been

⁹⁴ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 160-161.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 153.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

(re)produced through the very norms which remain dominant due to the hermeneutical marginalization of those oppressed by these norms, or the hermeneutical domination of those in power.

In this chapter I have argued that there are at least two hegemonic norms that (re)produce the figure of the complainer; the culture of positivity, and the ideal of a rational and self-sufficient subject. I have shown how these norms create an image of the 'ideal' person that is in several ways incompatible with and opposed to complaining. I have also shown that these norms are discriminatory. *The complainer* is a story which has largely been written by the relatively powerful. It is the image of a person that the white, able-bodied, productive and propertied man is not. *He* is not unhappy, pessimistic and burdening others. *He* is not irrational or dependent on others. *He* is not a complainer.

4. *The complainer and their structural position*

I closed the previous chapter with the statement that *he* is not a complainer. So, the question arises who is? As in chapter 2, my objective is not to broadly inquire into who has the capacity to complain or be seen as a complainer. While such an analysis may be worthwhile (especially regarding structural obstacles that prevent complaints), I will instead focus on the question of who is likely to be seen as a complainer and why. I will thus interrogate whether fulfilling the parameters of the patriarchal, white-supremacist, capitalist and ableist understanding of the ideal subject may prevent someone from being seen as *a complainer*. I will arrive at the answer that the figure of the complainer may stick to certain people regardless of whether or not they pertain to this ideal subject or not.

Earlier we have seen that the figure of the complainer is in several ways antithetical to the patriarchal, white-supremacist, capitalist and ableist understanding of the ideal subject. This ideal subject is understood as optimistic, rational, self-sufficient and adhering to generically masculine ways of speech which are characterised as being “individuated, independent, autonomous”.⁹⁹ Following Bonnie Washick’s arguments, we would expect that someone is more likely to be seen as a complainer when their speech acts do not pertain to the generically masculine standards by which appropriate public speech is assessed. However, bringing this finding in conversation with Sara Ahmed’s observation of the neoliberal framing (see chapter 2) shows that *the complainer* is often characterised as individualistic and self-interested which is in line with Bonnie Washick’s definition of generically masculine speech acts. Thus, a person may adhere to the parameters of appropriate speech but still (or because of it) be seen as a complainer. This seems to happen independently of the content of the complaint since complaints that are made more in line with generically feminist speech acts are also dismissed as individualistic and/or imposing the view of a minority. Thus, there seems to be a paradox; Some people will be dismissed as self-interested and individualistic complainers regardless of the content of the complaint and regardless of their possible adherence to the hegemonic norms identified earlier.

This paradox manifests itself as a double standard. For example, in *Wages against Housework* Silvia Federici describes that in the struggle for the recognition of housework as work, “[w]e [the

⁹⁹ Bonnie Washick, “Complaint and the World-Building Politics of Feminist Moderation,” 555.

women] are seen as nagging bitches, not workers in struggle.”¹⁰⁰ While this difference is also largely due to the *work* in *housework* being concealed by the signs of love and nature, Silvia Federici also provides a great example of how women taking part in class struggle have been dismissed as *nagging bitches* (also known as complainers) in contrast to their male ‘comrades’ who were perceived as heroic and brave. However, the figure of the complainer is not only accompanied by gendered double standards but also, amongst others, racist and classist double standards. One and the same behaviour is, for example, often perceived as aggressive if displayed by black and brown people and assertive when displayed by white people. While it is considered legitimate for those employed in white-collar sectors to advocate for better salaries and working conditions, those employed in blue-collar sectors, especially people considered ‘unqualified’ immigrants are often expected to be grateful for even having paid employment.

Based on the work of Sara Ahmed and Miranda Fricker, I argue that the paradox identified above can be explained through the structural position of the subject that is seen as *the complainer*. Sara Ahmed argues that “[w]e learn how only some ideas are heard if they are deemed to come from the right people; right can be white.”¹⁰¹ This argument suggests that someone can be a ‘right’ or a ‘wrong’ person in the eyes or ears of another and that, therefore, the reception of someone’s behaviour or speech is partly independent of its content. Earlier I used Miranda Fricker’s work to show how *identity power* is at play in the (re)production of the figure of the complainer. In this chapter, I will build on this discussion and use the concepts of *identity power* and *negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes* to argue that some people are more likely to be seen as complainers than others. The main argument I will make is that identity power (or the lack thereof) plays an important role in whether someone is seen as a complainer or not. To recap: identity power is a kind of power based on “shared imaginative conceptions of social identity.”¹⁰² Miranda Fricker argues that people’s perceptions of others are often not based on doxastic mediation but rather on prejudicial stereotypes.¹⁰³ This may work in favour of people

¹⁰⁰ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012), 16.

¹⁰¹ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 4.

¹⁰² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*, 14.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 35.

who benefit from ‘positive’ prejudice but it also works against those who are associated with “negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes” which are dominant associations of a social group with some characteristics regardless of counter-evidence due to negative prejudice.¹⁰⁴ These kinds of stereotypes predominantly affect those who are already harmed by systems of discrimination and oppression.¹⁰⁵ More specifically, the author writes:

Many of the stereotypes of historically powerless groups such as women, black people, or working-class people variously involve an association with some attribute inversely related to competence or sincerity or both: over-emotionality, illogicality, inferior intelligence, evolutionary inferiority, incontinence, lack of ‘breeding’, lack of moral fibre, being on the make, etc.¹⁰⁶

These attributes sound quite familiar. Most of them are also ascribed to *the complainer*. Due to negative identity-prejudicial stereotypes, *the oppressed* are generally associated with some of the characteristics of *the complainer* and, thus, also more likely to be seen as such. The degree of identity power awarded to a subject through shared social imaginations, thus, also makes them more or less likely to be seen as a complainer. In the words of Ruby Hamad: “the closer to power a person is, the less their ‘identity’ is held against them.”¹⁰⁷ Or, in the terms of Sara Ahmed and Miranda Fricker: the more *identity power* someone holds, the less *sticky* they are for the figure of the complainer. In this vein, the oppressed are very sticky, as in the figure of the complainer sticks to them particularly easily.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 35.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 32.

¹⁰⁷ Ruby Hamad, *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Colour* (London: Trapeze, 2021), 179.

5. *The complainer as a policing instrument*

Until now I have discussed that to study complaining we should consider when the term is invoked and what it does (not) do. I have described how we view *the complainer* and I have provided possible explanations for this figure. In the previous chapter, I have argued that *the oppressed* are more likely to be seen as complainers. In this last chapter, I will home in on the question of what the effects of the dominant figure of the complainer are and I will argue that the figure of the complainer functions as a tool of violence against *the oppressed*, more specifically a policing instrument. To make this point I will discuss four effects of the figure of the complainer and how these are specifically harmful for those already suffering from systems of oppression. I do not think of those effects as independent from each other but rather co-constitutive.

5.1 *The concealment of benefits and reasons*

The figure of the complainer effectively conceals the potential benefits of complaining. Sara Ahmed observes that the complainer is generally perceived as “the location of a problem”¹⁰⁸ and “a site of negation”¹⁰⁹ rather than doing something constructive and beneficial. However, several authors have addressed the benefits of complaint disguised by the negatively connotated figure of the complainer. Robin Kowalski, who is otherwise critical of complaining acknowledges that complaining may also be beneficial for the individual:

Among the many functions that complaining serves, five are easily recognized: venting feelings (catharsis), lubricating social interactions, conveying a social image, comparing ourselves with others, and seeking explanations.¹¹⁰

Kathryn Norlock also identifies benefits for the complainer and argues that complaining may not only be cathartic but also lead to the commiseration of unchangeable grievances through the acknowledgement of pain and validation of one’s experiences.¹¹¹ This effect, they argue, may be especially important for people in vulnerable positions. These authors, however, focus on the benefits for the individual which may reinforce the perception of the complainer as solely self-

¹⁰⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 3.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹¹⁰ Robin Kowalski, *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*, 28.

¹¹¹ Kathryn J. Norlock, “Can’t Complain,” 119.

interested. Sara Ahmed's work shows us that the benefits of complaining go beyond an individual's attempt to deal with an experience of harm or potential benefits for social interactions. They argue that complaining is a form of "communicative labour" that conveys knowledge about individual instances of violence and structural systems of violence.¹¹² In this vein, complaining should be seen as "feminist pedagogy" because it teaches us about the current state of affairs and the experiences of others.¹¹³ Gilles Deleuze makes a similar point by understanding complaint as communicating that something is overwhelming and, thus, seeing it as an affirmation rather than a negation.¹¹⁴ By expanding on Gilles Deleuze's work, Aaron Schuster argues that complainers may be seen as sensitive to what others cannot perceive. For Sara Ahmed, however, the concealed benefits of complaining go beyond the identification of violence and transmission of knowledge. They also argue that complaining is a form of "non-reproductive labour" as it aims to make something stop.¹¹⁵ The figure of the complainer conceals these functions and effects of complaint. It disguises the benefits for individuals who experience harm, and it prevents the recognition of the productivity of complaining as a sort of pedagogy and as actions aimed at creating social change.

5.2 Isolation

By framing the complainer as a stranger and an outsider, the figure of the complainer also leads to isolation. Often, the objects of complaint already have an isolating effect on an individual.¹¹⁶ For example, an experience of sexually transgressive behaviour within a group of friends or at the workplace often leads to feelings of loneliness and unsafety. The figure of the complainer as a stranger and a danger that imposes their own situation on others often leads to further isolation either by discouraging the voicing of a complaint and, thus, suffering in silence or by perceiving the complainer as an outsider. In such a situation the longing for belonging may prevent a complaint, or a complaint may be made at the cost of belonging. Let me illustrate with a personal example: for example, during the welcoming session of a philosophy summer school, one of the

¹¹² Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 35.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹⁴ Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, 16.

¹¹⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 163.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 158.

organisers pointed out that I was the only non-Dutch speaker. This situation already made me feel singled out and while the program was in English, it was difficult for me to participate socially. I was scared to complain about this situation because I did not want to be seen as forcing others to speak to me and to speak in another language. As disrupting the ‘harmony’ of the summer school. In the end, I felt excluded and mainly interacted with the two people whom I already knew.

Next to the isolation of the complainer, the figure of the complainer also leads to the individualisation of structural problems.¹¹⁷ The focus on the individual as the site of the problem leads to the concealment of structural causes. Sara Ahmed shares an example of a woman of colour who had repeatedly made complaints about sexism and racism within her department at a University.¹¹⁸ One time she brought up the topic of gender equality during a meeting and was dismissed by a senior male professor for only bringing that up because it is her personal issue. In situations like this, the figure of the complainer causes structural problems to be treated as individual problems.

5.3 Epistemic injustice

I will now return to Miranda Fricker’s work on *epistemic injustice*, which is understood as “a wrong done to someone specifically in their capacity as a knower.”¹¹⁹ They present two kinds of epistemic injustice; *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. When a subject is perceived as less credible because of prejudice, the author speaks of testimonial injustice.¹²⁰ The figure of the complainer often leads to such injustice as it functions to discredit the complainer as well as dismiss their complaint through the attribution of irrationality, selfishness, negativity and danger. Thus, complainers are often not perceived as appropriate and capable epistemic subjects. Simultaneously, occurrences of testimonial injustice also increase the likelihood of being seen as a complainer since a person is already encountered as deficient in their epistemic capacities. Testimonial injustice and the figure of the complainer thus (re)produce and reinforce each other.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 64.

¹¹⁹ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*, 1.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 27.

The relationship with hermeneutical injustice is similar. Miranda Fricker describes the term as follows: “hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of and articulating their social experiences.”¹²¹ Such gaps may be about content but also form.¹²² For example, someone may be disadvantaged in making sense of their experiences of emotional blackmailing because they lack knowledge about the discourses and the vocabulary relating to the concept. However, someone may also express themselves in ways that are lacking in the social imaginary of appropriate expressive styles and thus encounter disadvantages in articulating their experiences as well. Both gaps in content and gaps in form are relevant in the discussion of the figure of the complainer. Firstly, by discouraging complaining, the figure of the complainer prevents certain experiences from being articulated or from being heard and taken seriously; thus, from entering the social imaginary. Additionally, it reproduces the association of certain styles of expression as inappropriate, carceral and irrational. Therefore, the figure of the complainer (re)produces certain hermeneutical gaps. However, it is also partly caused by the same hermeneutical gaps it (re)produces since the complainer’s way of expressing themselves is largely not recognized in the social imaginary as appropriate expression.

According to Miranda Fricker, the primary harm of testimonial injustice is not being heard as a knower and the primary harm of hermeneutical injustice is not being able to make certain experiences intelligible to others.¹²³ However, there is more to it. The author also acknowledges that forms of epistemic injustice often lead to the loss of epistemic confidence and difficulties in developing certain epistemic virtues such as courage and perseverance. These may also manifest themselves in practical consequences such as losing a job or not being believed when reporting an instance of harm.¹²⁴ Sara Ahmed observes precisely such consequences. The object of complaint and the figure of the complainer, according to them, lead to self-doubt, paranoia, fear of overreacting or being seen as a killjoy.¹²⁵ To identify an object of complaint and articulate a

¹²¹ Ibid., 1.

¹²² Ibid., 160.

¹²³ Ibid., 172.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 46.

¹²⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 104-105.

complaint one needs epistemic confidence which is precisely undermined by the object of complaint and the figure of the complainer which are tightly intertwined with the forms of epistemic injustice Miranda Fricker identifies. Sara Ahmed, thus, concludes that those with the most to complain about also find it the hardest to complain.¹²⁶ Similarly, Miranda Fricker argues: “No wonder too that in the contexts of oppression the powerful will be sure to undermine the powerless in just that capacity [that of a knower], for it provides a direct route to undermining them in their very humanity”.¹²⁷ In other words; *the oppressed* find it the hardest to complain while simultaneously having a lot to complain about.

5.4 *The disguise of violence*

The figure of the complainer is partly produced by a selective perception of violence (see subchapter 3.1). Simultaneously, the figure of the complainer reinforces the disguise of violence. Sara Ahmed argues that in institutions complaints are often perceived as uncollegial while the objects of complaint are not.¹²⁸ This observation relates to the conditionality of happiness that Sara Ahmed discusses in *Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness*. They argue that the happiness of those in power is generally treated as a shared object while the happiness of the oppressed is not.¹²⁹ A similar asymmetry also applies to the recognition of violence. Sara Ahmed states that “[w]hen the exposure of violence becomes the origin of violence, then the violence that is exposed is not revealed.”¹³⁰ Thus, while the complainer exposing violence is perceived as violent (a danger), the violence of the object of complaint is often not recognised. Complaining about violent experiences often does not lead to their recognition but rather paradoxically, reproduces the disguise of the violence that is being complained about. The figure of the complainer is, therefore, not only produced by the disguise of violence but it also reproduces that same disguise, and thereby the violence itself.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 97.

¹²⁷ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*, 44.

¹²⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 196.

¹²⁹ Sara Ahmed, “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” 584.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 584.

5.5 Depoliticisation and (self-)policing

If there is someone who you do not wish to recognize as a political being, you begin by not seeing them as the bearers of politicalness, by not understanding what they say, by not hearing that it is an utterance coming out of their mouths. – Jacques Rancière¹³¹

In this chapter, I have argued that the figure of the complainer disguises the benefits of complaining and reinforces the disguise of violence. It leads to isolation, the individualisation of structural problems, and epistemic injustice and through all these effects causes harm, especially for those who have a lot to complain about, *the oppressed*. All in all, the figure of the complainer functions to discourage complaining and often prevents those complaints that are still made from being heard and achieving their intended results. It thereby suppresses social change and consequently functions to reproduce the current order. I, therefore, have come to understand the figure of the complainer as a *policing tool*.

Following Jacques Rancière, I understand policing as an activity based on a specific logic rather than the understanding of policing as only what is undertaken by the police as a state apparatus. As Jacques Rancière describes in their work *Ten Theses on Politics*:

The essence of the police is to be a partition of the sensible characterized by the absence of a void or a supplement: society consists of groups dedicated to specific modes of action, in places where these occupations are exercised, in modes of being corresponding to these occupations and these places. In this fittingness of functions, places, and ways of being, there is no place for a void. It is this exclusion of what ‘there is not’ that is the police-principle at the heart of statist practices.¹³²

Policing is based on the logic that everything has been ascribed its proper place and a corresponding ontological mode. Policing entails all kinds of ways in which to confine people to ‘their’ places and ways of being and, thereby, preventing social change. This can be done, for example, through actions targeted at individuals but also the dominance of certain norms and behaviours. Jacques Rancière defines the police in contrast to politics, which is understood as

¹³¹ Jacques Rancière et al., “Ten Theses on Politics,” *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001), 10, <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/32639>.

¹³² Jacques Rancière et al., “Ten Theses on Politics,” 9.

“first and foremost an intervention upon the visible and the sayable.”¹³³ Politics happens when the police arrangement is impeded by the assertion of that which has not been (ac)counted (for):

It has consisted in making what was unseen visible; in getting what was only audible as noise to be heard as speech; in demonstrating to be a feeling of shared ‘good’ or ‘evil’ what had appeared merely as an expression of pleasure or pain.¹³⁴

Through Jacques Rancière’s understanding of politics, complaining becomes a political activity. The complainer draws attention to something that was previously not (supposed to be) seen. The complainer asserts themselves in a way that was not ascribed by the policing order. The effects of the figure of the complainer, as we have seen, function to prevent or dismiss and obscure the complainer. The figure of the complainer therefore functions as a policing tool and it depoliticises the complainer’s actions.

This policing tool broadly functions in two intertwined ways; extraneously and from the self. By extraneous policing, I mean the use and effect of the figure of the complainer to a person perceived as complaining from the outside. This may be explicit assertions like Aaron Schuster describes: “we are told that we should stop whining and start acting, or that the energy spent in futile and self-indulgent moaning should be redirected into positive, socially constructive protest.”¹³⁵ It may also be the overly complicated and exhausting complaint procedures of institutions to prove that your complaint is not that which the figure of the complainer suggests.¹³⁶ The dismissal of a complainer based on testimonial injustice, as explained above, is also a form of external policing. There is, however, also the internal mode of policing: self-policing. Through this kind of policing the current order is not enforced by others but by oneself.

¹³³ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹³⁵ Aaron Schuster, *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*, 12.

¹³⁶ In April 2022 Erasmus Magazine published a series of articles about the topic of sexual harassment among students at the Erasmus University Rotterdam. Amongst these articles was an anonymous account of a victim of sexual harassment who shared her experiences with the complaint procedure at the University. She described the procedure as “the most horrendous four months of my life.” The article can be found here:

https://www.erasmusmagazine.nl/en/2022/04/26/it-feels-like-i-am-the-one-being-punished-for-the-assault-and-not-the-perpetrator/?noredirect=en_US.

That can mean toning down one's complaint to make it more acceptable for others or, in the extreme, not voicing one's complaint or not being able to clearly identify it. Sara Ahmed explains how the figure of the complainer works as a warning.¹³⁷ The warning *this is what you will be perceived as if you complain*. Or the warning *this is what you will experience if you complain*: isolation, exclusion, loneliness, disbelief, annoyance... The loss of or difficulty in developing epistemic virtues can also lead to self-policing since the lack of confidence in one's own experiences and skills may prevent complaints from being identified and/or voiced. The figure of the complainer thereby discourages and often prevents complaints from being voiced and, thus, protects the current order. It keeps things as they are and where they are. The figure of the complainer functions as a policing tool.

¹³⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 70.

Conclusion

Unsettling the record

This thesis is a project to unsettle the record rather than 'set the record straight.' Setting it straight implies efforts to streamline, and put things back into their places thereby thinning and stretching out complaints and taking away their noise. Setting the record straight would have meant engaging in policing work. Rather, I aimed to unsettle and, thereby, cause worry and uneasiness for the dominant figure of the complainer by posing several questions. First, I addressed the question of how to define complaining and I argued for a critical phenomenological approach to the topic through which I understand this thesis as a philosophical, political and liberatory project. Afterwards, I engaged with the question of what is the dominant figure of the complainer and I used Sara Ahmed's work to show that complainers are generally thought of as heavy, sticky, egoistic, carceral, overly sensitive, and dangerous strangers. I then offered some explanations for this figure through the discussion of two hegemonic norms: the culture of positivity and the ideal of the rational and self-sufficient subject. I also argued that these norms, and consequently the dominant figure of the complainer, are sexist, racist, classist and ableist. Subsequently, I argued that the oppressed are more likely to be seen as complainers by addressing some of the double standards around the figure of the complainer. In the last chapter, I exposed some of the effects of the dominant figure of the complainer, namely the concealment of benefits and reasons of complaints, isolation, epistemic injustice, and the disguise of violence. I argued that through these effects, the figure of the complainer undermines complainers in their capacity as a knower, leads to depoliticization and desolidarisation, the individualisation of structural problems and (self-)policing. I, thereby, arrived at my main thesis, that the figure of the complainer functions as a policing instrument which negatively affects predominantly those who experience oppression.

One may argue that these effects are desirable in some situations. That there are complainers to whom the figure of the complainer applies. One may also argue that there are complaints that are harmful for the oppressed and that in such situations the figure of the complainer is not only accurate but also helpful. What about, for instance, those who complain about feminists? My aim for this thesis was not to argue that none of the characteristics of the figure of the complainer are

ever true. Instead, I argued against the universal application of this figure by showing the negative effects it has on the oppressed.

Engaging in the project of unsettling the dominant figure of the complainer does not only mean critiquing and analysing it but also what Lisa Guenther identifies as one of the aims of critical phenomenology: “creating or amplifying different, less oppressive, and more liberatory ways of Being-in-the-world.”¹³⁸ Of being complainers or encountering complainers. Many of these ways of being already exist, as many already resist. There are practical strategies to overcome some of the effects of the dominant figure of the complainer. For example, making group complaints can mitigate the isolating and individualising effects. A friend of mine was recently involved in a group complaint about a former professor of the Erasmus School of Social and Behavioural Sciences who physically and verbally harassed students on a school trip. She explained that the complaint was facilitated by another teacher who managed to bring together 17 students and support them throughout the whole process. The process was long and difficult, but she told me that it would have been so much harder to do it alone. However, we don't need to be personally affected to complain about something or to support a complaint. The words *none of us are free until all of us are free* echo through our liberation movements and teach us again and again that we need to be in solidarity with those who experience violence and oppression.

Simultaneously with employing strategies to make immanent complaints heard, we need to change how we encounter complainers in the first place by fighting the structural causes of this encounter and reshaping it. It is our task, in Margarete Stokowski's words which I translated to English, “not just to blame existing disparities on individual weaknesses and bad luck, but to recognise structural problems: problems that are repeated because some people have more power and privileges than others.”¹³⁹ We need to consider the structural position of the complainer and the structural causes of their complaints. We need to improve our understanding of violence and learn to see the violence that is concealed by the current order. We need to actively turn our attention to the content and unlearn the predominant focus on evaluating the personality of the

¹³⁸ Lisa Guenther, “Critical Phenomenology,” 16.

¹³⁹ Margarete Stokowski, *Die Letzten Tage des Patriarchats*, 9th ed. (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2022), 12.

complainer (as weak, carceral, egoistic...) and the format of a complaint (as unconstructive, inappropriate...). We need to recognise the strong, constructive, productive and political nature of a complainer and a complaint.

Learning and writing about *the complainer* often felt like going in circles. Thinking in circles. Where do all these things begin and where do they end? Sara Ahmed illustrates this circularity throughout their work. For example, during a lecture at the UC Davis Forum in 2018 they said: “You encounter what you complain about when you complain about what you encounter.”¹⁴⁰ Complaints of the oppressed often are caused by the very systems of oppression that also shape their reception by (re)producing the figure of the complainer. For example, a person who complains about an instance of racism is often met with the very racism through being perceived and treated as a complainer. We need to take up the task of getting out of these vicious circles that seem to accompany complainers. In doing this work we are often confronted with other circles. We might feel like and be perceived as *broken records* who say the same things again, and again, and again. Writers such as Sara Ahmed teach us to think of ourselves as such and to turn towards the history of broken records. The broken records of history are those who keep addressing injustices and oppression again, and again, and again. “We keep saying it because they keep doing it.”¹⁴¹ For the record, we will keep complaining and we will keep our own records to unsettle those that function to police us.

¹⁴⁰ The lecture can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jf4sgw5NeQ>

¹⁴¹ Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (London: Allen Lane, 2023), 40.

Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. "BIO." Accessed September 5, 2023. <https://www.saranahmed.com/bio-cv>.
- Ahmed, Sara. *Complaint!*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2021.
- Ahmed, Sara. "Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 35, no. 3 (Spring 2010): 571-594. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1086/648513>.
- Ahmed, Sara. "The Complainer as Carceral Feminist." Published June 8, 2022. <https://feministkilljoys.com/2022/06/08/the-complainer-as-carceral-feminist/>.
- Ahmed, Sara. *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook*. London: Allen Lane, 2023.
- Bottici, Chiara. *Anarchafeminism*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.
- Davis, Duane H. "The Phenomenological Method." In *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, edited by Weiss, Gail, Murphy, Ann V., and Salamon, Gayle, 3-9. United States of America, Northwestern University Press, 2020.
- Dhawan, Nikita, and do Mar Castro Varela, Maria. "What difference does difference make?." *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies* 21, no.1 (March 2018): 45-67. <https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGN2018.1.DHAW>.
- Federici, Silvia. *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Oakland: PM Press, 2012.
- Fricke, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Guenther, Lisa. "Critical Phenomenology." In *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology*, edited by Weiss, Gail, Murphy, Ann V., and Salamon, Gayle, 11-16. United States of America, Northwestern University Press, 2020.
- Hamad, Ruby. *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Colour*. London: Trapeze, 2021.
- Han, Byung-Chul. *Palliativgesellschaft: Schmerz heute*. Berlin: MSB Matthes & Seitz, 2022.

- Kowalski, Robin. *Complaining, Teasing, and Other Annoying Behaviors*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Lanier, Anderson, R. "Friedrich Nietzsche." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Summer 2022 Edition, Edward N. Zalta (ed.).
<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/nietzsche/>.
- Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. London: James Currey, 1986.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Twilight of the Idols or How to Philosophize with the Hammer*. Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1911. https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/52263/pg52263-images.html#THE_ANTICHRIST.
- Norlock, Kathryn J. "Can't Complain." *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2018): 117-135.
<https://philarchive.org/versions/NORCC-2>.
- Rancière, Jacques, Panagia, Davide, and Bowlby, Rachel. "Ten Theses on Politics." *Theory & Event* 5, no. 3 (2001). <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/1/article/32639>.
- Schuster, Aaron. *The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016.
- Stokowski, Margarete. *Die Letzten Tage des Patriarchats*. 9th edition. Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2022.
- Thorson, Juli, and Christine Baker. "Venting as epistemic work." *Social Epistemology* 33, no. 2 (February 2019): 101-110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2018.1561762>.
- Washick, Bonnie. "Complaint and the World-Building Politics of Feminist Moderation." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 555-580. <https://doi-org.eur.idm.oclc.org/10.1086/706469>.
- Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1990.