

## 4

Use and the University

On February 9, 1825, the Scottish poet Thomas Campbell published a letter in *The Times* addressed to Sir Henry Brougham, a liberal member of the House of Commons, a Benthamite, and one of the founding members of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK). This letter was followed up by another piece published in the April edition of the *Monthly Review*. Both pieces of writing (Campbell 1825) called for the formation of a new English university, to be based in London, which was to offer a secular alternative to Oxford and Cambridge. That university, originally called University of London, now called University College London (UCL), was founded a year after the publication of Campbell's letter, almost to the day, on February 11, 1826, the same year that the SDUK was established. Campbell's letters could be considered the first attempt to give written expression to the utilitarian principles upon which the modern university was to be based, though his role in establishing the new university has been largely forgotten.

A painting by Henry Tonks, *The Four Founders of UCL* (1923), does place Campbell at the founding moment ([figure 4.1](#)). The UCL Art Museum describes the painting thus: "Kneeling at the right is the architect William Wilkins who presents his plans of the building to Jeremy Bentham, standing in the centre of the composition, and the poet Thomas Campbell who first conceived the idea of a London University. At the left stand Lord Brougham, lawyer, politician and Benthamite, and

behind him the diarist, former *Times* correspondent and retired barrister Henry Crabb Robinson who was instrumental in establishing the Flaxman Gallery."<sup>1</sup> The painting places Bentham himself as the recipient of the plan. Bentham did not play any such role in the setting up of this university (he was over eighty at the time), although he is often called UCL's "spiritual father," including by UCL.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps Bentham is placed by the artist at the scene *because he is expected to be there*. Of course, at another level, Bentham's body is there, even if he was not the recipient of the architect's plan. The auto-icon of Bentham's dead body referred to in the conclusion of [chapter 3](#) remains on display at UCL in accordance with Bentham's own will ([figure 4.2](#)).

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4.1. Henry Tonks, *The Four Founders of ucl*, painting, 1923. ucl. Art

Museum, University College London.

Bentham had instructed that “the whole figure may be seated in a chair usually occupied by me when living, in the attitude in which I am sitting engaged in thought” (cited in Starck 2006, 43), although Bentham’s head is now located in ucl’s Institute of Archaeology, and a wax head is in its place. We could consider Bentham’s body as a phantom limb in a similar way to the blacksmith’s arm. The investment in the distinction between mental and manual labor as a social distinction is evidenced by these contrasting figures—arm and head, body and mind, laborer and gentleman.

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4.2. Auto-icon of Bentham.

The story of the founding of [ucl](#) teaches us how the emergence of the modern university cannot be understood without reference to utilitarianism, how at least in England the very idea of a modern university was a utilitarian idea. Indeed, Robert J. C. Young (1992) has called London University “the Chrestomathic University.” Recognizing this long history helps challenge any notion that utility arrives late to the university, as if utility is a foreign policy imposed on universities by governments. I have opened this chapter with the story of the founding of [ucl](#) for a reason. I wanted to show how an account of use and the university could be offered as an extension of the history of monitorial schools addressed in the previous chapter. Thomas Campbell himself makes direct reference to Andrew Bell and Joseph Lancaster in making a case for a new university organized around useful knowledge. An account of use and the university could also be offered as an extension of my discussion of using things from [chapter 1](#): universities depend on paths and postboxes; they have routes and routines. The university could even be considered an object in use or a container technology. As Zoë Sofia has shown, a container is “not just about what holds or houses us, but what we put our stuff into” (2000, 185). An account of use and the university could also extend the discussion of ideas of use from [chapter 2](#); the university could be understood as holding or housing ideas, which could be understood as “the stuff” of the university. I will indeed consider the housing of eugenics by London University in due course.

Houses are built over time and ideas can be shaped by where and how they are housed. When I visited the archives of London University held by [ucl](#), which include the minute books, I was able to witness the history of decisions about how the university was to be built. The minutes from May 20, 1827, report, “It was resolved that each member of council should use his personal influence to induce such proprietors as he may select.” A network of influence is how a university is funded, how a university is assembled as a body. On May 6, 1827, stones were brought to the Building Committee, Portland and Edinburgh Stones, in order to help make a decision about which stones to use. I think of stones there, on the table—part of the proceedings. These are different kinds of stones



than Darwin's stones that I referred to in [chapter 2](#); these stones have been cut, made to fit. The stones, however fitting, still have a story to tell. If bricks become walls, stones become steps. Jay Timothy Dolmage notes how steep steps are material but how they also create an idea of the university, reminding us "that access to the university is a movement upwards—only the truly 'fit' survive this climb" (2017, 44). Eugenics then might be understood not only as housed by the university but as shaping how it is built, stone by stone, step by step. A building can be built around an assumption of who it is for; those who fit become the "truly fit."

Accounting for use and the university is thus a way of bringing the arguments of each of my three preceding chapters together. While I will conclude with a discussion of how utility operates as policy within the university, it is important to my argument that I do not start there; to start there would not allow us to witness how use shapes what is already here, who is already here. In this chapter, I am drawing on data I have collected for two research projects—the first on diversity work in universities (2003–9) and the second on complaint within universities (2016–19)<sup>3</sup>—as well as material I have collected from being a diversity worker based at universities for over twenty years, in addition to my own involvement in a series of inquiries into sexual harassment and misconduct promoted by a collective complaint lodged by students. I bring the projects together in part because working on complaint returned me to diversity work. We become diversity workers when we try to challenge or dismantle the structures that are not built to accommodate us. Diversity work and complaint provide a lens with which to explain how institutions take shape. Once assembled, it can seem that institutions are as they are. You come to know how "being as they are" is work when your work is to change how things are.

## Uses of Diversity

A history of the emergence of the modern secular university has much to

teach us about how accessibility was a crucial value for the university even if that was not the term being used. In 1835, Thomas Spring Rice wrote as Chancellor of the Exchequer to obtain a Royal Charter for the University: "It should always be kept in mind that what is sought in the present occasion is an equality in all respects to the ancient universities, freed from those exclusions and religious distinctions which abridge the usefulness of Oxford and Cambridge" (cited in Meisel 2008, 127). If the word *equality* appears here as an aspiration for equal status to Oxbridge, that aspiration is directly tied to a concept of inclusion (freedom from exclusion), as well as being predicated on an extension of usefulness. Today, UCL references this history as its founding principles: "UCL was established in 1826 in order to open up education in England for the first time to students of any race, class or religion. By 1878, it had become the first English university to welcome female students on equal terms with men." The mission statement of UCL makes use of the term *diversity* as one term among others for describing itself: "a diverse intellectual community, engaged with the wider world and committed to changing it for the better; recognised for our radical and critical thinking and its widespread influence; with an outstanding ability to integrate our education, research, innovation and enterprise for the long-term benefit of humanity." A modified version of this core mission forms the first sentence of UCL's equality and diversity strategy.

The use of *diversity* as a description and strategy is not specific to UCL. Diversity is frequently used by universities as a way of describing their core educational and social missions. The word *diversity* may be used in mission statements such as the one I cited here, or in speeches made by vice chancellors, heads of departments, and managers, as well as in brochures and publicity materials produced by communications and marketing departments. We might call these uses of diversity "official diversity." I have in previous work offered an analysis of such official uses of diversity, though I have not foregrounded the significance of *use* to my analysis of what diversity is doing.

Diversity is in use within universities in both senses of being in use discussed in [chapter 1](#): it is in circulation and has become a form of



currency. Diversity is often used to signal a kind of commitment to something, including a commitment to change: change as diversification. So, for example, in the case of ucl's strategy, diversity and equality are used firstly as what it does and what it is good at: "ucl is regarded as a sector leader in the field of equalities and diversity." This claim is followed by a qualification: "and yet our staff and student data, and some lived experiences, tell a different story." Sometimes a qualification to an argument is how an argument can be made. The qualification makes clear that being regarded by a sector as a diversity leader does not mean that is how you are regarded by staff and students.

We can note here that despite the implication that diversity requires commitment and work, even for those who are leading the sector, diversity is widely understood as having lost its meaning. Perhaps diversity is used too easily or too much. One recent article asks: "How does a word become so muddled that it loses much of its meaning? How does it go from communicating something idealistic to something cynical and suspect? If that word is 'diversity,' the answer is: through a combination of overuse, imprecision, inertia and self-serving intentions."<sup>4</sup> In [chapter 1](#), I discussed how words can become overused—worn out and worn down. Diversity might be one such word: used so much that it seems not to do very much at all.

One way of reflecting on what diversity is doing is to ask those appointed as diversity practitioners about how and why they use the term. In the UK, those who are employed as diversity workers are usually administrators. The hierarchy between academic/administrator is powerful. The split between heads and hands described in [chapter 2](#) becomes a division of labor within the university: many academics think of themselves as head workers and perceive administrators as hands and handy. Diversity and equality are also dismissed as being simply an administrative function: as about audit and accountability, as mechanisms that restrict academic freedom. This dismissal of diversity and equality often means in practice a dismissal of diversity workers. A practitioner explained: "It is another area of equality—an academic/non-academic divide. It's absolutely horrified me. I've never experienced

anything like it. It is really surprising that it's just, well you know if you aren't an academic you don't get listened to." You do not get listened to; to be an administrator is to be looked over, assumed as beneath and below.

Diversity workers make do with what is available to them. The tools they use are tools that are already supplied by the institutions they are trying to transform. One of my first questions to diversity workers was about the word *diversity*, but it was also, I now realize, a question about use. I asked practitioners about whether they use that word or why they think that word is useful. Practitioners often made decisions about what words to use by considering whom they are addressing: different words work for different people; diversity works for some constituencies more than others. You might use the word *diversity* because of who you are speaking to; consciousness of use is also consciousness of audience, use as *to*. I think of the process as rather like trying on different clothes: you have to work out which words work for different audiences. We learn from trying words that do not fit. Not fitting is an experience of not getting through.

Most of the practitioners I spoke to use the language of diversity even when they are critical of how organizations use the word. Some practitioners suggested that they use the term *diversity* because diversity is the term that is in use. The appeal of the term *diversity* might point to a circularity or loop: we use *diversity* because it is being used; it is being used because we use it. It is important to note that this circularity is not specific to diversity but describes the slippery phenomenon of what we might call simply linguistic fashion: words come in and out of use by being used or not being used. Institutional knowledge can be defined as knowledge of fashion: knowing which words are most in use is about how one can be affectively aligned with others. One practitioner observed: "I would say that the term *diversity* is just used now because it's more popular. You know it's in the press so why would we have equal opportunities when we can just say it's diversity." We can "just say its diversity" if diversity is "just used now." Use becomes a reason for use, the circularity of a logic transformed into a tool.



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The word *diversity* might be “just used now,” because of its affective qualities as a happy or positive term. One practitioner stated: “Diversity obscures the issues.... diversity is like a big shiny red apple, it all looks wonderful but if you actually cut into that apple there’s a rotten core in there and you know that it’s actually all rotting away and it’s not actually being addressed. It all looks wonderful but the inequalities aren’t being addressed.” Diversity might be a useful word because of what it does not address. If diversity creates the impression of addressing something without addressing anything, diversity is used as a way of managing impressions. Intended functionality can be used to refer not only to the intended function of an object (which can be used queerly in a way that disagrees with an intention as I noted in [chapter 1](#)) but also what is *stated* as the intended function of an action. There is a gap between what is given expression as intention and what is being done. Diversity workers often work in this gap, and might have to make use of it. By this I mean that they can use that organizations do not do what they say to challenge what they do.

While some practitioners do not use the word *diversity* because it is too positive, for other practitioners the positivity of diversity makes it useful. The term *diversity* is used because it is less threatening; diversity offers a route through people’s defenses. Another practitioner noted: “I think it’s really difficult: to use a term that’s not acceptable is not to be able to do anything. In a way, you need to use a term that’s not going to make people feel threatened if you’re going to try and work with them.” To use a term that is unacceptable to many is not to get very far. Another practitioner explained that she uses *diversity* because “it is not a scary word.” You use a word because it is not charged; it does not threaten those to whom you are speaking. Diversity allows us to reconsider what it means for something to be *user friendly*. Diversity is a friendly word because of what it does not bring up. Of course there is a problem in a solution: diversity might be used more because it does not bring up what brings you to use it in the first place.

*Diversity* could be described as a buzz word: what we can hear might be the sound of it being used, or buzz as busy. I noted in [chapter 3](#) how

concepts become organizing of a field by the work that is done around them. Working with diversity, I have come to understand how the story of how words are used more cannot be told without reference to the fate of other words. Part of the story of diversity’s usage is also a story of recession: how other terms have lost their appeal, becoming old, tired, and dated. One practitioner explained:

I think it [equity] became a tired term because it was thrown around a lot and I think ... well, I don’t know ... because our title is equity and social justice, somebody the other day was saying to me, “Oh, there’s equity fatigue, people are sick of the word *equity*.” ... Oh well, OK, we’ve gone through equal opportunity, affirmative action—they are sick of equity—now what do we call ourselves?! They are sick of it because we have to keep saying it because they are not doing it.

The tiredness or even sickness of the old terms is here a symptom of a certain institutional reluctance: you have to repeat the terms because they are not doing it; they are not doing it because you are repeating the terms. The implication of the arguments about equity fatigue is that in using less tired words, practitioners might themselves be energized or perceived as more energetic: “Those terms had got tired and I think that there’s a bit of ‘if one thing gets tired, looks like you’ve got tired as well.’” If you can become tired by your association with tired words, then the word *diversity* offers a way of appearing or even being less tired. As this practitioner went on to say, “You’re put in a position where you have to say these things because nobody else will say them. People don’t listen to you because you’re the one who’s saying it.” You keep saying it because they are not saying it. The tiredness is part of the loop of repetition: you use the terms more because they are not working, and because you use them more they are not working. The implication of this argument is that certain words get heavy or acquire baggage from their use; they get weighed down by their associations. The more words circulate, the less they seem to do. We could say diversity does less because it is used more.

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It remains possible that diversity will also become tired through repetition. As one practitioner described it, “They’re not tired of it yet; I think it’s a term that they think, ‘Oh yeah, diversity.’ Diversity they can cope with.” Coping with diversity might be conditional; they are not tired of it yet. This still implies that tiredness might happen somewhere down the line. Diversity does less because it is used more. Or diversity is used more because it does less. Perhaps both of these statements are true. If you use diversity because it does less, doing less becomes as much as you can do.



4.3. Go that way!

Diversity is used not only as a word but also as an image. Images are instantly recognizable as images of diversity, those happy smiling colorful faces, because that is how they have been used. In her important book *Space Invaders*, Nirmal Puwar notes how “in policy terms, diversity has overwhelmingly come to mean the inclusion of different bodies”

(2004,1). In practice, “different bodies” often means those who look different from white, or not looking white, or looking not white. In an interview I had with staff from a human resources department of an elite university, we discussed the findings of a research project that had been commissioned about how their university was perceived by external communities. The research found that the university was perceived as white as well as male dominated. The findings should not have been surprising: like many elite universities in the UK, the university was in fact white and male dominated, especially at senior levels. But the response was to treat the perception as wrong; the staff I interviewed described their project as being to modify the perception by *changing the image*. They intended to create a new brochure by using more colorful faces.

*New* here might have its uses: the investment in new can imply old patterns can simply be changed by a change of image. You can change the image but not change the organization. You can change the image in order not to change the organization. When we are talking about the uses of diversity as an image, we are talking about more than an image. Simply put: those who are *less* represented are used *more* to represent the organization. The further away you are from the norm, the more you have to appear. *Being used more* needs to be understood as political as well as emotional labor. I still remember when we began our research project on diversity, how the organization that funded us kept wanting to photograph us (for further discussion, see Ahmed 2012). We were the only research team that included people of color. By representing us, they could represent themselves as being more diverse than they were. Being a happy symbol of diversity can be hard work, especially if your experiences are not happy. The smile masks more than organizational failure; it masks your own experience of that failure. Heidi Mirza describes how her university kept using her smiling face: “Visual images of ‘colourful’ happy faces are used to show the university has embraced difference. My ‘happy’ face appeared on the front of the university website—even though every week I asked for it to be taken down, it still kept popping up” (2017, 44). Diversity work can also be the work you



have to do *not* to appear smiling or even *not* to appear.

## Institutional Mechanics

We can now make sense of how diversity often operates as a use instruction: a path or even an arrow, which tells you which way to go (figure 4.3). The ease with which diversity travels demonstrates the difficulty of getting through. One practitioner described her job as follows: “It is a banging your head against a brick wall job.” I have drawn from her insight in describing diversity work as *wall work* (Ahmed 2012, 2017). You sense how repetition becomes a sore point: if you throw yourself against a wall, it is you that gets sore. And what happens to the wall? All you seem to have done is scratched the surface. And this is what diversity work can feel like: scratching the surface; scratching at the surface (figure 4.4).<sup>5</sup>

Scratching seems to convey the limits of what we have accomplished. But even if you just scratch the surface, you can still end up liable for damages. When we consider how diversity can be framed as damage, we need to remember that many diversity practitioners are appointed by universities to diversify them. And yet practitioners experience the institution as what is blocking their efforts. Let me share with you one example of a practitioner who developed a new policy on appointments.

When I was first here there was a policy that you had to have three people on every panel who had been diversity trained. But then there was a decision early on when I was here, that it should be everybody, all panel members, at least internal people. They took that decision at the equality and diversity committee which several members of SMT were present at. But then the director of human resources found out about it and decided we didn't have the resources to support it; and it went to council with that taken out, and council were told that they were happy to have just three members, only a

person on council who was an external member of the diversity committee went ballistic—and I am not kidding went ballistic—and said the minutes didn't reflect what had happened in the meeting because the minutes said the decision was different to what actually happened (and I didn't take the minutes, by the way). And so they had to take it through and reverse it. And the council decision was that all people should be trained. And despite that, I have then sat in meetings where they have just continued saying that it has to be just three people on the panel. And I said, “But no, council changed their view and I can give you the minutes,” and they just look at me as if I am saying something really stupid; this went on for ages, even though the council minutes definitely said all panel members should be trained. And to be honest sometimes you just give up.



4.4. Scratching the surface.

A decision made in the present about the future is overridden by the momentum of the past. The past becomes like that well-trodden path:



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what usually happens still happens, despite a change of policy, even through a change of policy. An old policy is another well-trodden path (figure 4.5).



4.5. An old policy.

Or perhaps we could say that the new policy is so light that it does not even scratch the surface: they keep saying it has to be just three people; they keep doing what they are saying. Each time they do what they did, the furrow left by following the same route becomes deeper. A policy that has been brought into existence by following the right procedures, by doing the right things in the right way, does not stop what usually happens from happening. The head of personnel did not need to take the decision out of the minutes for the decision not to bring something into effect. I have named this dynamic “nonperformativity”: when naming something does not bring something into effect, or when something is

named in order not to bring something into effect.

The wall refers to that which keeps standing. The wall is how things are stopped, which means that *what stops movement moves*. When the mechanisms for stopping something are mobile, to witness the movement can mean to miss the mechanism. I think this is very important as organizations are good at moving things around; movement can be used as a distraction from what is not being done. In our example, what stopped something from happening *could have been* the removal of the policy from the minutes; it *could have been* the failure to notice this removal, but it was not. It was the way in which those within the institution acted after the policy had been agreed. Agreeing to something can be another way of stopping something from happening.

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4.6. The postbox that is not in use might have another function.

A diversity policy can come into existence without coming into use. I noted in [chapter 1](#) how a sign is often used to make a transition from something being in use to being out of use, like the sign on the postbox. From the point of view of the would-be poster of a letter, you need to know the postbox is not in use in order to know not to post a letter through a hole; otherwise your letter would just sit there: *not much use*. Maybe the diversity worker puts the policy in the postbox because she assumes the box is in use. An assumption can be what you receive from others. She is, after all, following the usual procedure; she is using the tools she is supposed to use in the way she is supposed to use them. The postbox that is not in use without any sign indicating that it is not in use might have another function: to stop something from going through the whole system ([figure 4.6](#)).



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4.7. Sometimes you just give up.

Diversity work is often mechanical: you have to work out how you are stopped from getting a new policy through a system. The mechanical is also experiential; the wall is an *experience* of being stopped or gives expression to that experience. We can return here to my discussions of wear and tear in [chapter 1](#). Marx argued that “wear and tear” can be a result of use or disuse; a machine might wear out after it has been used for such-and-such amount of time, or a sword might become rusty by being left in a scabbard. In this instance, the policy becomes rather like that rusty sword: from rusty to dusty. The policy becomes unusable by not being used.

Consider too how much energy the diversity worker expended bringing a policy into existence that does not come into use. Maybe she ends up being used up, rather like that tube of toothpaste: limp, spent, wasted. As she said, “Sometimes you just give up” ([figure 4.7](#)).

The story of how the wall keeps standing is thus the same story as the story of how the diversity worker is shattered. That the story is the same story needs to be understood as significant. To be used up or depleted is a feeling but also a structure; we could understand being used up as a *feeling of structure*. You are depleted by an encounter with a wall that is not even perceptible to others. We need to remember that many diversity workers are employed by institutions to diversify them, to bring, as it were, more diversity about. If you are employed by the institution to transform the institution, you might assume that the institution is willing to be transformed; in other words, you might assume an agreement between your ends and the institution’s ends. To be stopped from achieving those ends by those who employed you is to become a means to ends that are not your own. Diversity workers too can be used to create the appearance of doing something or used to create an impression that diversity is being done. Diversity workers can end up being depleted not simply because of how much effort is required to do what they do but because of how much effort is expended in not bringing something about. Being used up is a measure of how diversity workers are used by institutions: used up as being used.

Thinking through how diversity policies are stopped even after they

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have been agreed has helped me think about what happens to complaints, to follow them around, to ask where they go and do not go. I have been learning about how complaints travel by talking to administrators, students, and academics about the process of making complaints within universities. Making a complaint also requires becoming an institutional mechanic: you have to work out how to get a complaint through the system. It is because of the difficulty of getting through that a complaint often ends up being about a system. This point might seem counterintuitive given that most organizations have complaint procedures. Surely to make a complaint is to follow a procedure for making a complaint? Listening to those who have made or tried to make formal complaints has taught me that the gap between what is supposed to happen and what does happen is densely populated.

Many universities in the UK include as part of their complaint policies a discussion of how they will record and monitor complaints. One university writes that complaints will “assist in identifying problems and trends across the University.” They then write that complaints will “form the basis of positive publicity, in demonstrating that identified issues have been resolved.” When complaints record a problem, they can be quickly folded into a solution: a record of how universities have resolved something—resolution, dissolution. Complaints can thus be used in a similar way to diversity: *a way of appearing to address a problem*.

A complaint procedure is often represented as flowchart: flow, flow, away we go, with paths and arrows, which give the would-be complainant a route through. I spoke to one administrator about her work in supporting students through the complaints process. She explained:

So your first stage would require the complainant to try and resolve it informally, which is really difficult in some situations and which is where it might get stuck in a department.... And so it takes a really tenacious complaining student to say, no, I am being blocked.... If something bad has happened, and you are not feeling that way inclined, you can understand why a student would not have the tenacity to

make sure that happens, and to advocate for themselves. They might go to the student union, and the student union is really bogged down ... or they might go to the central complaints office and they get a very bureaucratic response back and get put off. So you can imagine that something on paper that looks very linear is actually very circular a lot of the time and I think that's the problem, students get discouraged and get demoralized and feel hard done by, and nothing's getting resolved and then they are in a murky place and they can't get out.

If a procedure exists in order to clear a path, that path can be blocked at any point. Blockages can occur through conversations; if those you speak to are bogged down, you can get bogged down. A conversation can be another wall; a complaint can feel like “talking to a wall.” A complaint is not simply an outcome of a *no*; a complaint requires you to keep saying *no* along the way. This practitioner acknowledged that what is required to proceed with a complaint (confidence and tenacity) might be what is eroded by the very experiences that lead to complaint (“something bad has happened,” “not feeling that way inclined”).

Unsurprisingly, then, stopping is part of the life course or biography of a complaint. One problem identified in some of my interviews is the relative inaccessibility of policies and procedures. One student described: “It took us forever to try and find the complaints procedure PDF on the database. We knew it existed but it was like a mythical golden egg; we just couldn't find it. And when we did it was so big that even two PhD students spent weeks trying to get through the small print, to find out what the complaint process was.” If you cannot find the policy, you cannot follow the path laid out as procedure. Remember: the less a path is used, the less a path is used, until you can hardly see the sign for the leaves. Or if you do find the policy, but it is hard to use, we might call the policy user unfriendly—you might be discouraged; you might try to find an easier route, not complaining as easing a passage through an organization ([figure 4.8](#)).



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4.8. If you can't find the policy, you can't follow the path.

A would-be complainer is one who has taken some steps in the direction of a formal complaint, perhaps by making an informal disclosure to a line manager, supervisor, or peer. Many complaints are stopped at this point through the use of warnings. In [chapter 1](#), I referred to the overuse of exclamation points: when the signs used for emphasis are used too much, they no longer function to emphasize something (although by not functioning as emphasis, they might be doing something else). With small modifications, an exclamation point can offer a more precise instruction. When a singular exclamation point is black, and contained by a red triangle, it becomes a warning ([figure 4.9](#)).

A warning is an ominous sign, a sign of the danger-to-come. Warnings surround complaints as if to say to proceed is to endanger your own person. Warnings are typically stronger than advice about how to proceed; they are often issued in an emergency. When an emergency is implied, an instruction is given about how to treat a situation. Sometimes to be warned is to be told there is no time to think about a course of action. This is not to say that the tone of a warning is always stern; intonation depends on use. Sometimes warnings are given calmly, spoken in the language of care, because, after all, to be given such an instruction is also to be told how a potential danger can be avoided. One student explained: "I ended up going back to the chair, and saying, look, this is harassment and I am going to file a complaint. And his response was essentially, 'Well we are just thinking about your career, how this will affect you in the future.'" The implication is that to proceed with a formal complaint is not to think about your career; being advised not to complain is offered as career advice. Your career is evoked as a companion who needs to be looked after. Maybe your career is a plant that needs watering so that it does not wither away; if your career would wither as a consequence of complaining, then a complaint is figured in advance as carelessness, as negligence, as not looking after yourself.

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4.9. Stop! Danger ahead!

Warnings are useful because they articulate a *no* predicated not on some abstract rule but on the complainer's own health and safety. Another student noted: "I was repeatedly told that 'rocking the boat' or 'making waves' would affect my career in the future and that I would ruin the department for everyone else. I was told if I did put in a complaint, I would never be able to work in the university and that it was likely I wouldn't get a job elsewhere." Complaining is framed as self-damage as well as damage to others—ruining a department, no less. This student described how the pressure not to complain was exerted: "In just one day I was subjected to eight hours of grueling meetings and questioning, almost designed to break me and stop me from taking the complaint any further." You can stop people from doing something by making it harder for them to do something. Remember, deviation is hard. Deviation is made hard. Warnings can operate not simply as predictive utterances but also as threats. This student commented on how the head of her department made reference to her source of funding during one of these meetings. To be reminded of how she is dependent on the department for resources is to be told how they can make her topple over.

If warnings are used to discourage a certain course of action, they also function as positive directives: you might be encouraged not to make a complaint. Indeed, one academic described this approach as a default setting: "The default academia thing, the university thing: it will be fine; if we do wait, don't make a fuss." Not making a complaint becomes a form of civic virtue and even good citizenship; patience is tied to a positive outlook as if the best way to approach a wrong is to assume it will right itself. The flip side of a warning is a promise, an institutional version of what I called *the promise of happiness*, a promise that if you don't complain you will get further.

Complaints can also be stopped by the appearance of being heard. I spoke to one academic about how she came to a decision about whether to complain about the conduct of senior members of the university, including heads of departments and a pro vice chancellor around a table. She was the only woman at that table. She described how they were "talking about women's bodies, what they look like, what they do to them



as men, what they would do to them. Very sexual. Very sexist jokes. Very sexually overt conversations and I was sitting there as if I was not there.” It was a deeply distressing experience in part as she had assumed the organization to be as progressive as it said it was. She took the matter up by speaking to another pro vice chancellor and the director of human resources: “I had a hearing ... but I think it was just to placate me.” Being placated is another way a complaint is stopped; you might receive a nod, a yes, yes. Nods seem to surround complaints. One student described what happened when she talked to the head of her department: “He seemed to take it on board; he was listening, he was nodding. Ten days later I still had not heard anything. A space of limbo opened up.” Thus far I have primarily used the category of “nonperformative” to refer to speech acts. A body too can appear to act. A nod can operate in the realm of the nonperformative; a nod can be made in order not to bring something about.

When these senior managers did not do anything—and not doing is an action, not simply inaction—she decided not to take the complaint any further. And she came to that decision in part because of what had happened at her previous institution; she had supported a number of students who had filed a complaint against a male lecturer for sexual misconduct and sexual harassment. She explained: “I think I just suddenly thought this is too much. And I had just come from an institution where I had spearheaded a group of students, making a complaint against a lecturer, we took it all the way to the top and the lecturer got off.” He got off despite the evidence (in this case ten students provided firsthand testimony). It was this experience of not getting anywhere that led her to decide not to make a complaint about the conduct of these senior managers. We carry complaints with us, whether or not we make them; when a complaint is stopped, that stoppage can lead to yet more stoppages down the line.

Another academic described what followed when students lodged a complaint about the behavior of professors at research events. A meeting was set up: “They said they would have an open meeting but it was just about calming [the students] down.” Venting is used as a technique of

preventing something more explosive from happening: you let a complaint be expressed in order that it can be contained. Once the students have vented their frustrations, once they have gotten complaint out of their system, the complaint is out of the system. The mechanism is rather like a pressure relief valve, which lets off enough pressure so that it does not build up and cause an explosion.

Another method of stopping a complaint is to declare a complaint “not a complaint” because it does not fulfill the technical requirements for being a complaint. For example, a member of staff made a complaint about bullying from the head of her department. The experience of bullying had been devastating, and she suffered from depression as a result. It took her a long time to get to the point where she could write a complaint. She described what happened once she was able to file a complaint: “I basically did it when I was able to, because I was just really unwell for a significant period of time. And I put in the complaint and the response that I got was from the deputy vc. He said that he couldn’t process my complaint because I had taken too long to lodge it.” Some experiences are so devastating that it takes time to process them. And the length of time taken can be used to disqualify a complaint. The tightening of the complaint as genre—a complaint as the requirement to fill in a form in a certain way at a certain time—is how many struggles are not recorded.

If organizations can disqualify complaints because they take too long to make, they can also take too long to respond to complaints. One student described how the university took seven months to respond to her complaint, and then another seven months to respond to her response to their response to her complaint: “It is my theory they been putting in the long finger and pulling this out, dragging this out over unacceptable periods of time, to try and tire me out so that I will just give up.” Sometimes it can seem exhaustion is not just the effect but the point of a complaint process. Exhaustion can be a management technique: you tire people out so they are too tired to address what makes them too tired.

In [chapter 1](#), I discussed efficiency as the ratio of useful work relative

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to the output of energy. We can now consider how inefficiency can sometimes be useful as a technique for expending energy. I use the term *strategic inefficiency*, to point to how organizations have an interest in slowing or stopping complaints. We might think of inefficiency as annoying but indiscriminate, affecting everyone and everything. Listening to those who have complained has taught me that inefficiency can be discriminatory. An international student was waiting for her complaint to be processed while her visa was running out: "Ten days before my visa was about to run out I applied for a new visa. And they were like how can we give her a visa she is on probation. You have to have good standing to get a visa and they were like this complaint thing is open." For students and staff who are more precarious because of their residential, employment, or financial status, the longer a complaint is kept open the more you could lose. Those who have less need to complain are those who could most handle the consequences of complaint. We can establish a connection between the discriminatory effects of inefficiency and the efficiency with which organizations reproduce themselves as being for certain kinds of people: those whose papers are in the right place, those who are in the right place; those who are upright, able; well resourced, well connected.

You can lodge a complaint, it can even go through the whole system, and still nothing happens. Perhaps complaints end up in a filing cabinet: filing as filing away ([figure 4.10](#)). One student said of her complaint, "It just gets shoved in the box." Another student explained, "I feel like my complaint has gone into the complaint graveyard." When a complaint is filed away or binned or buried, those who complain can end up feeling filed away or binned or buried. We need to remember that a complaint is a record of what happens to a person. Complaints are personal. Complaints are also records of what happens in an institution. Complaints are institutional. The personal is institutional. One academic researcher shared her complaint file with me: "One of the things I talked about in those documents, I am very open, I was under such stress and trauma that my periods stopped.... That's the intimacy of some of the things that go into it, bodily functions like this." A body can stop

functioning. A body can announce a complaint. That body is in a document. And that document is in a file. And that file is in a cabinet. To file a complaint can mean to become alienated from your own history, a history that is often difficult, painful, and traumatic.





4.10. Filing as filing away.

## The Institutional as Usual

We know about the institutional (as usual) from those who are trying to transform institutions. Diversity work generates data on institutions, snapshots of institutional life taken from the point of view of those trying not to reproduce that life.

Here is a snapshot. I am having an informal meeting with a diversity practitioner. She is talking to me about how she felt about her job, how she felt about the university that employed her. She speaks of how most of her time was spent preparing for committees, which usually meant writing documents: writing the agenda for the next committee, minutes of the last, new policies for consideration, often prompted by changes in legislation. There is a lot of paperwork—a lot of stuff—in diversity work. Diversity work is stuffy. I will turn to how diversity workers become stuff in due course. How institutions do committees varies. Once you have been somewhere for a certain length of time, as long as it takes not to be surprised by your surroundings, you have become *used to it*: business as usual. You know what usually happens; the usual is a field of expectation that derives its contours from past experience. The usual is the structural in temporal form. Some of this routine is about formal process: the motions you go through, how often committees feel like going through the motions; reviewing the minutes from that past meeting; chairs and secretaries with their specific tasks; any other business, always last. In committees, we know what usually happens: the institutional as usual.

Committees are also spaces: there are ways of talking, ways of being seated, ways of organizing the table and the chairs, ways of doing the work. When a room has been properly assembled, a meeting can progress. In our conversation, the diversity practitioner spoke of one time when she turned up for the equality and diversity committee for which she was the secretary. This committee is chaired by a senior member of the university, a white male professor. At the time all members of the senior management were white male professors: he is

how the professor usually appears. In the previous section I noted how a new appointment policy does not stop what usually happens from happening. The usual can refer to whom as well as what: who usually happens (and who does not). You do not appear as a professor if you are not how a professor usually appears.

However he appears, the professor is there because he is the chair. When the diversity worker turned up, she found the room was already occupied. The chair was already there, as was another member of the committee, also a white male professor. They were lounging around, confident, taking up the time. They were talking about the breakfasts they used to have when they were students at Cambridge University; they were laughing; a shared memory of consuming. A memory can be consuming. A memory can occupy space. A casual conversation about a past experience of an elite institution can fill the space—the space becomes elite, for a select few, how a few are selected; a sense of ownership spills out and over, our space, our diversity, our university, ours. She said they did not stop talking to each other when she, the person who had sent them the papers that were on the table, entered the room; they just kept talking to each other as if she were not there. Perhaps for them she was not there. This practitioner said to me about her experience of turning up at a diversity committee, only to find it was already occupied, and her words have stayed with me because they got through to me: “I realized how far away they were from my world.” We learn: a committee set up to transform a world can be how a world is reassembled. We also learn: those of us who arrive in institutions that were not intended for us bring with us worlds that would not otherwise be here.

A background can be what is shared. What is behind you can be what enables you to enter the room, to occupy a space. We could think of this history as a history of wearing. We can return to my metaphor of the institution as a well-worn garment introduced in [chapter 1](#): an institution acquires the shape of those who have shaped it. An institution is easier to wear if you have the same shape as the shape of those who came before. A history of use can be inherited as ease. As I noted in *Queer*

*Phenomenology*, the word *inheritance* can mean to receive as well as to possess (2006, 125). An inheritance not only can be *what* you receive but can be a matter of *how* you are received. An inheritance can be an easing of being, an enabling—how spaces are shaped by those who came before.

We can think back to the sign *occupied*. We can think of all the different ways in which the university is occupied ([figure 4.11](#)). This occupation leaves traces on walls; portraits of past leaders can surround you; and a background can be what you have to confront. You do not need to know the histories to encounter what they have left behind; use leaves traces in places. Perhaps you can feel alienated because you are surrounded by what does not accommodate you. Alienation can be revelation. My first post was in women’s studies. I had an impression of this organization as a friendly and feminist space. But then I became head of the department. Well, if women’s studies was a feminist bubble, becoming head of the department meant that bubble burst. I began to attend faculty meetings. I remember going to one meeting at the top room. I remember going into that room and seeing all the paintings of white men. They were modern in style but traditional in content. I remember women coming around in uniforms serving tea and cakes. But the thing I really remember: the secretary and the chair of the board engaging in sexual innuendo throughout the meeting. I remember people laughing. I remember feeling shocked in part by how it seemed to be business as usual. Sexual jokes, sexual banter, portraits of white men, former leaders, reminding you of who led the university to be where it is, and then there were the women serving coffee: yes, my feminist bubble had burst. All these different elements combine—thick, becoming wall.



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4.11. The university is occupied.

Portraits, names, the walls can be busy. Busy can be business. The University College London received funds from Francis Galton to found a program in national eugenics. The university has mostly removed the word *eugenics* from his legacy, that word too associated with what is damaged, but it has kept his name. You can take out the word but keep the thing. That Galton's name remains in use does matter: a donation preserved as a sign in a landscape. There is a Galton professorship, a Galton lecture theater; UCL houses the Galton collection. The history of eugenics can be given a home; use leaves traces in places. To be at UCL is to confront this history. In 2016 a panel took place at UCL titled "Why Isn't My Professor Black?," with Black British scholars William Ackah, Nathaniel Adam Tobias Coleman, Deborah Gabriel, Lisa Amanda Palmer, Nathan Richards, and Shirley Anne Tate.<sup>6</sup> Why isn't my professor black? What a good question—what a necessary and important question! At the end of the panel, a member of the audience asked another necessary and urgent question about UCL's continued use of Francis Galton's name. The president and provost of UCL answered, "My only defense is I inherited him." Use inheritance becomes use as inheritance.



4.12. The more he is cited, the more he is cited.

In my defense, I inherited him: we can think too of the use of a name as how a history is kept alive. Citation too is another way a history is kept alive—citation as a reference system. You are asked to follow the well-trodden paths of citation, to cite properly as to cite those deemed to have already the most influence. The more a path is used, the more a path is used. The more he is cited, the more he is cited (figure 4.12).

A path is kept clear through work; occupation depends on erasure. Such-and-such white man might become an originator of a concept, an idea as becoming seminal, by removing traces of those who were here before. When use leaves traces in places, occupation can involve the removal of traces. You can inherit a removal. Sometimes occupation is achieved by how work is discarded. Eve Tuck describes settler reading practices: “The reading is like panning for gold,” which works by “sorting it by what is useful and what can be discarded” (2018, 15). Settler

readers, she suggests, “read like settlers,” reading for “particular content which can be removed for future use” (15). Other times occupation is achieved by not even having to regard work by those who are deemed “the others” at all. To be trained within a discipline is to learn to follow a citational path: certain work does not have to be regarded because it does not come into view if you follow a path, which means work can be discarded without deliberation.

Good habits in citation are about extending a line: you have to show how much you know of a field by citing those deemed to have shaped that field. To extend a line is to reproduce an inheritance. Diversity work is also about generating understanding of how reproduction works, how the reproduction of the same old bodies, doing the same old things, is a result of *work* rather than being something that “just happens.” The university is shaped by a history of appointments. When I visited the UCL archives, I did not find what I hoped to find: some interesting uses of use in the letter books and minutes from the period during which London University came into existence. But I found something else: a repetition of a form that I was used to, so used to that I often do not notice it.<sup>7</sup> The secretary wrote letters in response to those who expressed interest in teaching at the new university. Once you had read one of these letters, it seemed you had read them all: they were standardized; each letter might as well as have been a copy of another letter. A standard is what you create when you use the same form. I began to skim over these letters, as if I had read each one before. But then one letter jumped out: it was quite different; it was exceptional. It was a letter sent in response to Professor Johann Friedrich Meckel in 1827. Meckel was a German scientist who adopted Lamarck’s evolutionary beliefs. He was a star professor at the time, though his work is not well known today. Meckel’s name survives, as far as I can tell, because of the use of his name to name things: his name was given to a condition (Meckel’s diverticulum), a syndrome (the Meckel syndrome), bone structure (Meckel’s cartilage), as well as a protein (mecklin). One thinks here of naming as another way some are preserved in the archive, how some are committed to memory.

What struck me about the letter sent to Meckel is how the standards



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are suspended for the star professor; the letter is long and gushing, personal and keen. The suspension of the usual procedure: I began to see how suspension is crucial to the reproduction of the same thing—a suspension of the usual is usual. I know of many cases where the usual procedures are bypassed to enable the recruitment of such-and-such star professor, even though this bypassing is a bypassing of equal opportunity procedures that are supposed to be compulsory. I remember one time when a head of my department reported happily how we were joining with another department to enable such-and-such star professor to teach at the college. As usual the star professor was a white man. He is how a professor usually appears. I remember intervening grumpily, with another question that was really an exclamation: What about the equal opportunity procedures? What about equal opportunity procedures! He looked at me blankly, and went on, as if I had not said anything, as if I was interrupting the proceedings. Other feminists in the room shared my grimace, but we knew that nothing we could say or do would stop the process, because it was perceived to be of general benefit for the university to hire the star professor. To put an end to the process would be understood as depriving the organization of what is assumed (who is assumed) to benefit the most.

We can return to the example of the diversity policy that did not come into use. That policy was a new policy about how academic appointments are made. We can begin to appreciate another difficulty here: diversity workers often try to develop new procedures to stop the reproduction of the same thing, but procedures are what are suspended to enable that very reproduction.<sup>8</sup> One early career academic who described to me in acute detail the intense and everyday misogyny and racism in her department also speculated on how her department came to be that way. And she referred to how the human resources guidelines were often bypassed to enable such-and-such white man to be hired or promoted.

We have the HR guidelines; I have been on the promotion committee for about 5 years and I saw it in action. Even though we had an HR representative right there and we had

these guidelines and people would be saying, “Oh yeah, but he’s a great guy, you know, I like to have a beer with him, he really should, he really does deserve reader, let’s go for it.” ... The same thing with the short-listing and interview panels that I was involved in. So someone would say that women’s presentation was outstanding but really he’s the guy you’d want to have a pint with, so let’s make the figures fit. So they’ll wiggle the numbers around so even if he just gets one point more, he gets the higher score.

This criterion for appointability—hiring someone you would want to have a pint with—cannot be made official; it would contradict equal opportunity commitments. The procedures are not so much suspended (the right form is still being filled in) but adapted or corrupted: if he does not get the highest score, you wiggle the numbers, making the figures fit. The figures are made to fit when a person is deemed to fit. Think back to the snapshot of what happens in a diversity committee: how casual modes of conversing can be how spaces become occupied. So fitting becomes a matter of *fitting in*; you are more likely to be appointed if you fit in with those who are already assembled: *being like as being with*.

We can return here to my discussion of the laws of use and disuse in [chapter 2](#). An institution is an environment. Environments are dynamic; it is because environments change that uses change. An institution, however, also functions as a container technology, a way of holding things or holding onto things. You reproduce something by *stabilizing the requirements for what you need to survive or thrive in an environment*. These requirements do not have to be made explicit; once a requirement has been stabilized, it does not need to be made explicit. Indeed, once these requirements are stabilized, they are reproduced unless a conscious willed effort is made to stop them from being reproduced. Institutions work hard not to enable a diversification that might otherwise happen because of the dynamic nature of life. In stabilizing the requirements for what you need to survive or thrive, institutions could be described as *antilife*.

We could return here to Darwin's use of the architect metaphor, in which natural selection is compared to the building of a house from uncut stones: the stones that are used are those that happen to fit. An institution too is built. It might appear as if the moment of use is hap: that this person or that person just happens to fit the requirements the way the stone just happens to be the same size as the hole in a wall. But once a building has been built, once it has taken form, more or less, some more than others, will fit the requirements. Fitting is still dependent on work: social reproduction works by tending to disappear as work. We are describing how a body seems somehow already attuned to a bourgeois set of requirements. An expectation is also about cutting, creating a shape that needs to be filled. Hap can then be used ideologically: *as if they are here because they just happened to fit, rather than they fit because of how the structure was built*. The institutional as usual refers not only to who is usual, who usually turns up or who usually appears, as well as to what is usual, the kinds of posts to be filled, but to a combining of a who and a what; many elements combine to enable a vacancy, a hole in a wall, to be shaped in order that some fit and for some to be shaped in order that they fit what needs to be filled.

A structure could thus be defined as the removal of hap from use in the determination of the requirements. In Lamarck's model, use becomes inheritance; when use becomes habitual, use shapes form, lessening the effort required to do something within an environment. When you fit, and fitting here is formal, a question of form, *you inherit the lessening of effort*. A path in the sense of a career path, a route through an organization as well as a life, is not simply made more usable by being used. Some have more paths laid out more clearly in front of them because they already fit the requirements. It is not just the constancy of use that eases a passage. Use is eased for those who inherit the right form, whereby rightness means the degree of a fit with an expectation. *For as before* acquires another resonance here: when a world is built *for* some, they come *before* others.

## Misfit Genres

People do come to inhabit organizations that are not intended for them; you can make the cut without fitting. If you arrive with dubious origins, you are not expected to be here, so in getting here you have already disagreed with an expectation of who you are and what you can do; then an institution can feel like the wrong shape. When that well-worn garment does not fit, you do not fit. You become, to use again Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's (2011) important term, a *misfit*. Fitting becomes work for those who do not fit—you have to push, push, push; and sometimes no amount of pushing will get you in.

A complaint might be what is necessary because you do not fit, giving expression to how you are *not* attuned to the requirements of an organization: *a complaint as a misfit genre*. Sometimes you have to complain in order to be able to enter the room. An academic described how she has to keep pointing out that rooms are inaccessible because they keep booking rooms that are inaccessible: "I worry about drawing attention to myself. But this is what happens when you hire a person in a wheelchair. There have been major access issues at the university." She spoke of "the drain, the exhaustion, the sense of why should I have to be the one who speaks out." You have to speak out because others do not; and because you speak out, others can justify their own silence. They hear you, so it becomes about you; "major access issues" become your issues. I noted earlier how a diversity worker has to keep saying it because others are not doing it. Sometimes you have to keep saying it because they keep doing it. Some have to complain about the structures that enable and ease the progression of others.

What gives some a route through can be what slows or stops others. Routes become routines. And you can be a misfit given what has become routine. An organization that organizes long meetings without any breaks assumes a body that can be seated without breaks. If you arrive and cannot maintain this position, you do not meet the requirements. If you lay down during the meeting, you would throw the meeting into



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crisis. A social justice project might require throwing meetings into crisis.

Perhaps because organizations are trying to avoid such crises, misfits often end up on the same committees (otherwise known as the diversity committee). We might end up on the diversity committee because of whom we are not: not white, not cis, not able-bodied, not man, not straight. The more nots you are, the more committees you end up on! We can be misfits on these committees. A woman of color academic explained: “I was on the equality and diversity group in the university. And as soon as I started mentioning things to do with race they changed the portfolio of who could be on the committee and I was dropped.” I noted earlier that diversity might be used more because it does less. The word *race* might be used less because it does more. Any use of the word *race* is thus an overuse. She added: “Whenever you raise something, the response is that you are not one of them” Not one of them: using words like *race* seems to *amplify* what makes you not fit, *picking up* what you are not. Perhaps a *not* is heard as shouting, as insistence, a stress point, a sore point, an exclamation point. Perhaps when a not is heard this way, you are being given a warning (figure 4.13).

Earlier I introduced the figure of a would-be complainer as the one who has indicated to herself or to others that she is considering filing a complaint. We are learning: you can become a complainer without giving any such indication. It is hard to do certain kinds of institutional work without being heard as a complainer. A figure too can be a file; the complainer is a rather stuffed file. If you then make a complaint, you are picking up an already stuffed file. As Leila Whitley and Tiffany Page have observed: “When a woman files an objection to sexual harassment she becomes in the language of the institution *a woman who complains*, and by extension a *complainer*” (2015, 43). Another academic described how becoming a complainer can take you away from your work: “If you have a situation and you make a complaint, then you are the woman who complains, the lesbian who complains, and it gets in the way of being in the role: being a good colleague, a good mentor, a great teacher, a supervisor. And you can feel the change in your voice and the dynamic in

meetings. And you don't like to hear yourself talking like that but you end up being in that situation, again. And you think, ‘It's me,’ and you think, ‘No it's not; it's systematic,’ and you think, ‘It's me.’ ” That conversation you have with yourself—it's me, it's the system, it's me, it's the system—takes time. And it can feel like everything is just spinning around. Spinning, spilling: maybe you reach a point, a breaking point, when it spills out.

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4.13. A complaint: when a not becomes an exclamation point!

You might fly off the handle (figure 4.14). To fly off the handle can mean to snap or to lose your temper. If the handle breaks, you become the one who cannot handle things. She further noted: “And then of course you get witch-hunted, you get scapegoated, you become the troublesome uppity woman; you become the woman who does not fit; you become everything the bully accuses you off, because nobody is listening to you. And you hear yourself starting to take that, not petulant tone [bangs table], come on. You can hear them saying, ‘Oh, there you go.’” A diversity practitioner had said something very similar to me: that she only had to open her mouth in meetings to witness eyes rolling as if to say, “Oh, here she goes.” Both times we laughed: it can be relief to have an experience put into words. It was from experiences like this that I developed an equation: rolling eyes = feminist pedagogy. Complaints too are surrounded by rolling eyes. The word *complaint* derives from old French, *complandre*, to lament, a lament, an expression of sorrow and grief; *lament*, from Latin, *lamentum*, “wailing, moaning; weeping.” Complaint catches how those who challenge power become sites of negation: you become a container of negative affect, one that is leaky: speaking out as spilling over.



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4.14. You might fly off the handle.

If a structure can be exhausting, it can be exhausting to point it out. An academic told me how she set up a writing group in her department and the meetings became dominated by senior men: “What I found in each of the meetings were senior men who were bullying everyone in the room.” The bullying took that form of constant belittling of the work of more junior academics as well as postgraduate students: “The first session someone was being just really abusive about someone’s PhD, saying it was rubbish.” Racist comments were made: “I’m from London and London is just ripe for ethnic cleansing.” She described how people laughed, how the laughter filled the room. She commented on these comments: “These were the sorts of things being aired.” These were the sorts of things: sentences as sentencing; violence thrown out as how some are thrown out. Even the air can be occupied.

She decided to make a complaint because she “wanted it recorded,” and because “the culture was being reproduced for new PhD students.” A complaint becomes a recording device; you have to record what you do not want to reproduce. She gathered statements from approximately twenty people in her department. A complaint can be a feminist collective. A meeting was set up in response to her complaint. At that meeting she was described by the head of human resources as “having a chip on her shoulder”; a grievance was heard as a grudge. Perhaps it is not surprising that if you keep chipping away at the old block, they quickly find that chip on your shoulder. She added: “They treated the submission as an act of arrogance on my part.” It was as if she put a complaint forward as a way of putting herself forward; a complaint was treated as self-promotional. Her complaint went nowhere. When those who try to stop a culture from being reproduced are stopped, a culture is being reproduced.

A complaint becomes necessary because of what has already been reproduced. A complaint is not a starting point; to make a complaint, informally or formally, is to complain *about* something that *precedes* the complaint. Complaints have what we might call a backward temporality: they take us back. And what precedes a complaint can be what stops you from getting through. One student gave an account of turning up at a

postgraduate retreat. She had been away from the department for some time, and she sensed something had shifted.

It was the cultural shift I recognized as I came through the doors. There was a lot of touching going on: shoulder rubs and knee pats. It was the dialogue. They were making jokes, jokes that were horrific; they were doing it in a very small space in front of staff, and nobody was saying anything. And it felt like my reaction to it was out of kilter with everyone else. It felt really disconnected, the way I felt about the way they were behaving and the way everybody else was laughing. They were talking about “milking bitches.” I still can’t quite get to the bottom of where the jokes were coming from. Nobody was saying anything about it: people were just laughing along.

You can open the door and be hit by it: a change in atmosphere, intrusions into personal space, words out and about. The sexist expression “milking bitches” seemed to have a history. Each time the expression is used, that *history is thrown out like a line*, a line you have to follow if you are to get anywhere. When laughter fills the room, like water in a cup, laughter as a holding something, it can feel like there is no room left. To experience such jokes as offensive is to become alienated not only from the jokes but from the laughter that surrounds them, propping them up, giving them somewhere to go. As she further described the situation:

You start to stand out in that way; you are just not playing along. He was doing things I think to try and provoke me to react to him. I think he was doing it under the guise of humor. But he specifically went for me, verbally, at a table where everyone was eating lunch. It was a large table with numerous amounts of people around it, including staff.... I was having quite a personal conversation with someone ...

and he literally leaned across the table or physically came forward—he was slightly ajar to me, he was really close—and he said, “Oh my god, I can see you ovulating.”

A refusal not to go along with something can be how you appear. Just by not laughing, not going along with something, she came to “stand out.” I think this is very important: a complaint can be registered before anything is even said, expressed by how a body is not attuned to an environment. And because she did not find the jokes funny, because she was not condoning the behavior, because she was not happy with what was going on, he came after her. Her personal space invaded, words flung out, flung at, she was reduced to a body, pulled back, woman as ovaries; she was not allowed to do her own thing, to converse with others, to be occupied as a student.

Spaces can be occupied by how bodies can take up spaces *as if those spaces belong to them*. A sign can tell us that the room is occupied, as we learned from that toilet door. Spaces can be occupied without the use of signs. Universities too can be occupied, but sometimes the signs used by universities do not tell us that they are, or even how they are. In fact, the sign might be telling us the university is vacant or has a vacancy, not in use as ready for you to enter ([figure 4.15](#)).

A policy too can be a sign, a use instruction, a signaling of a direction. And a policy might be telling us that the university is open—that harassment will not be tolerated. A policy can be about what ought not to exist. The idea that something should not exist, or even that something does not exist because it should not exist, might be how something stays in use. I have observed that a policy can come into existence without coming into use. *Policies that are not in use can still be used as evidence of what does not exist*. Norms too can operate all the more forcefully by not appearing to exist. This student described what followed her experience.



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4.15. Vacant, a vacancy, open.

I think the staff member knew I was deeply upset by it. I

pretty much left the table. And he (the staff member) followed me out and started a conversation, and this is when probably in hindsight it started to get difficult, in that staff member started to lean on me; immediately he said to me, “Oh, you know what he’s like, he’s got a really strange sense of humor, he didn’t mean anything by it,” and the implication was I was being a bit oversensitive and that I couldn’t take a joke, and that I need to sort of forget about it and move on.

She ended up leaving the table. Note that there was an effort to stop the student from complaining about the situation within the situation. She was told not to say anything, not to be oversensitive, not to do anything, not to cause trouble. This is how banter is used: to justify use as if words can be stripped from a history. A use is sustained by a fantasy that a use can be suspended. If norms operate all the more powerfully by not appearing to exist, you end up under obligation not to notice their existence, that is, not to experience norms *as* norms, not to experience some forms of expression as demeaning, not to experience harassment as harassment. Shirley Anne Tate has described how racial harassment is treated as “just” a style of communication that “you should just get used to” (2017, 55). So it is not simply that banter is used as if words can be stripped of their histories. *Those to whom harassment is directed are asked or required to strip words of their histories.* And so, those who experience harassment as harassment are understood as bringing the problem into existence.

Even to describe something as harassment requires persistence. If you do persist with it, you are harassed all the more: in this example the staff member, by trying to persuade the student not to complain, leaned on her. He positioned himself *with* the harasser, treating the verbal onslaught as joke, something she should take and keep taking. This response to harassment is harassment; this is the institutional response. The harasser physically came forward; the staff member leaned on her. Harassment can be the effort to stop you identifying harassment as

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harrassment, which means that the one who identifies harassment as harassment is harassed all the more.

This powerful testimony teaches us how a complaint is right in the middle of something, in the thick of it. And I have only shared a fragment of her story. She did go on to make a formal complaint. And she did not just leave the table; she left the academy. She left in part because of what she learned *about* the institution from how it responded to her complaint. The university came down on her by treating the complaint as a problem: a wall can be what comes up, what comes down. She described this process: “I lost my rose-tinted glasses, the way I saw those spaces being a place of excellence. I thought they were welcoming of difference. I had worked really hard to get to that space. When you come from the kind of background I have—no one had been to university to do a degree.” I have noted how diversity can be a way of not addressing something. Diversity can also be used as an address: “welcoming of difference.” Diversity might be represented as an open door. Students from diverse backgrounds are welcome, come in, come in: diversity as a tagline, tag along, tagged on.

Come in, come in: I think back to our postbox. There could be another sign on that postbox: “birds welcome” (figure 4.16). The sign “birds welcome” would be a nonperformative if the postbox was still in use because the birds would be dislodged by the letters, the nest destroyed before it could be created. I suggested in [chapter 1](#) that use is a restriction of possibility that is material. You can do some things with paper because of the material qualities of paper. We are now learning *how restrictions can become material through use*. The letters in the box, the words that are thrown out: they become materials, they pile up; they stop others from making use of something. What is material to some—leaving you with no room, no room to breathe, to nest, to be—can be what does not matter to others because it does not get in the way of their occupation of space; it might even enable that occupation. And so, you can stop others from using a space by how a space is being used, by what a space is being used for: *for as door*.



4.16. A sign as a nonperformative.



## Behind Closed Doors

Doors: they keep coming up. If walls came up a lot in my research into diversity (Ahmed 2012, 2017), doors have come up a lot in my research into complaint. As I noted in [chapter 1](#), doors are not just physical things that swing on hinges; they are also mechanisms that enable an opening and a closing. One woman of color academic described her department as *a revolving door* ([figure 4.17](#)): women and minorities arrive only to head right back out again—whoosh, whoosh. You can be kept out by what you find out when you get in.

A door can be what stops you from getting out.



4.17. You might have to get out.

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I am speaking to an academic about the first complaint she made when she was a postgraduate student. One of her lecturers on her course had been making her feel uncomfortable: “And then one afternoon, I went into his office to talk to him about something—it was an office a bit like this but without any glass, with a door that opened inwards and opened on a latch—and he pushed me up against the back of a door and tried to kiss me and I pushed him away, it was an instinctive pushed him away, and tried to get out of the room and it was a horrible moment because I realized I couldn’t actually; it was very difficult to operate the latch.”

We are back to the door, the back of the door: a door without glass, solid, that cannot be seen through; a door as what you are pushed against; the latch that will not open, getting stuck, trying to get out; the work you have to do to get out. She did get out of his room, but it was hard. Behind closed doors: harassment happens there, out of view, in secret. You can be locked in, or locked out. That door is a teacher: it teaches us the significance of a complaint about harassment being lodged in the same institution where the harassment happened.



4.18. The same door.



A door was shut on her. The same door is shut on a complaint—the same door (figure 4.18). She submitted an informal complaint, a letter, detailing the assault. Where does her complaint go? Her letter ends up with the dean. And what did he do? She explained, “The dean basically told me I should sit down and have a cup of tea with this guy to sort it out.” So often a response to a complaint about harassment is *to minimize harassment*, as if what occurred is just a minor squabble between two parties, something that can be sorted out by a cup of tea, that English signifier of reconciliation. A complaint would become a failure, your failure, to resolve a situation amicably.

She did not proceed to a formal complaint. *Her complaint was stopped; he was not.* Now I say her complaint was stopped rather than she was stopped because she did go on to have a career; she is now a professor. But this experience of being assaulted and harassed when she was a student stayed with her. She explained: “I thought I got a first because of academic merit, but then after this happened I remember thinking, ‘But hang on, maybe not, maybe this was some sort of ruse to try and keep me in the institution so he could keep the contact going.’ ... It starts undermining your own sense of your academic merit, the quality of your work and all that kind of stuff.” Being harassed by a lecturer damages your sense of self-worth, intellectual worth, leading you to question yourself, doubt yourself. Her complaint was stopped, she was not, but she carries that history with her. Her complaint was stopped; he was not. What happened to him? She told us: “He was a known harasser; there were lots of stories told about him. I had a friend who was very vulnerable; he took advantage of that. She ended up taking her own life.” She ended up taking her own life: so much more pain, so much more damage at the edges of one woman’s story of damage. He went on; he was allowed to go on, when her complaint—and for all we know there were others too; we do not know how many said no—did not stop him. He has since retired, much respected by his peers, no blemish on his record.

No blemish on his record, no blemish on the institutional record: the damage carried by those who did complain or would complain if they

could complain, carried around like baggage, slow, heavy, down. To hear a complaint is to hear from those weighed down by a history that has not left a trace in the official records. Damage to a person is deflected by being treated as potential damage to the institution (reputational damage) and damage to a person if a person is identified by a complaint. That damage is often evoked through or as concern, as *concern for consequence*, for how much he or they have to lose: careers, status, standing, and so on. Organizations become aligned with those who abuse power because they *share an interest in stopping what is recorded by a complaint from getting out*. One student said, “It is like you are complaining to your abuser.” The institution in protecting abusers takes their place. We can use the term *institutional abuse* to describe this taking place. And I would add here when that protection fails, when an abuse of power is exposed (usually after much activism and work usually undertaken by students), the figure of the abuser is transformed into that of the stranger or foreigner, as being inexpressive rather than expressive of the values of an organization.

The figure of the abuser as a stranger is useful to organizations. The location of danger in an outsider is how an organization can appear as safe and protective even when abuses of power have taken place. The figure of the abuser is also useful to those who abuse power: abuses can slide by undetected if those who abuse power do not appear as abusers usually appear. An abuse becomes an aberration rather than an expression of a system. But an abuse can usually happen because of ties that already exist, because of intimacies and connections, which means that those who abuse the power given to them by organizations might not appear as abusive because an abuser is assumed as a stranger. To challenge the exteriority of the figure of the abuser requires giving up any moral confidence that we can clearly differentiate an abuse from use. It is worth recalling here that *abuse* is a use word. It has two distinct but related meanings whether used as a noun or a verb. Abuse can refer to the improper use of something or abuse can refer to violent, cruel, or ill treatment. The first sense makes clear that abuse derives from use. The second shows how use can be at stake in the determination of situations



of violence and cruelty. A person or a thing when misused is being abused, whether the intent or the effect is cruel and violent.

In my opening of this book, I referred to how instrumentality and affection can be part of the same story (a useful pot, a useless foot). Indeed, instrumentality often works through affection. Many who abuse the power they receive by virtue of position can do so because of how they are then received: with affection. To recognize an abuse is made hard because of that affection. Those who abuse the power given to them by organizations often create a portrait of themselves as being in need: they might create the impression of being a victim of a hostile organization, as in need of protection, or present themselves as suffering, and in need of love and affection.

Perhaps we can then consider how sympathy as such becomes distributed, or, to use the terms introduced in [chapter 3](#), how sympathy becomes machinery. Many of those I have spoken to about complaint described meetings with heads of department or deans where there is a sustained attempt to stop them from making a complaint. I have given examples of such meetings. We could interpret these meetings as evidence of top-down bullying from management but that would capture only some of what is going on. Heads of department are often operating not only as managers but also as colleagues and sometimes even as close personal friends of those whose conduct is under question.

When a student made a complaint after being sexually assaulted by a lecturer—he had forced himself on her in his office after locking the door—she was called to a meeting with three professors and a dean. She described the meeting for us: “One of the professors said laughing, for instance, ‘Ah, X, he is always like this, isn’t he? Always very seductive and funny.... He has been always like this since we were studying together.... He also touches me when talking, so what?’ ... while the other was saying, ‘Ah, I know him for so many years, it must be some misunderstanding, for sure,’ while the other was just smiling and nodding, before even having heard what I had to say.”

A history can be casually evoked (studying together; I have known him for years) and a complaint about assault dismissed as

misunderstanding, smiling, nodding: it is right, he is right, you are wrong; he is being wronged. If sympathy is part of the machinery, then a machine can lean; it can be built out of past leanings; friendly like. A complaint can be stopped because of what is shared, who is shared: friendships, loyalties, personal, professional; affection becoming cement in a wall, a bond, a bind, be kind, he is one of a kind, one of our kind. Closing the door is also about closing ranks; when you are shown the back of a door, their backs have become doors. As another student described it, “They have each other’s backs.”

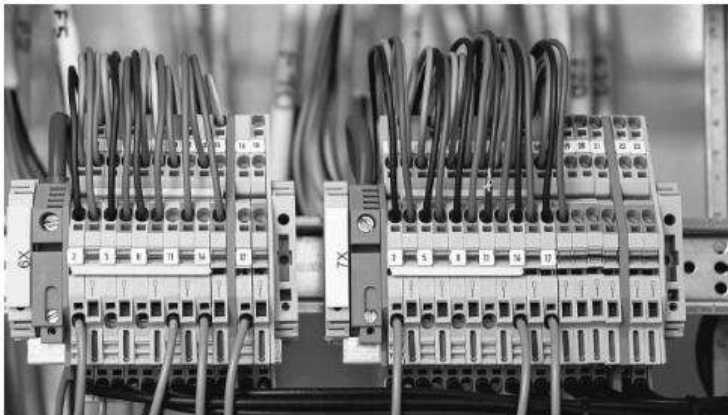
Complaints thus teach us about the *continuity* of abuses of power with the use patterns of an institution. And by use pattern I am precisely *not* referring to official policies. I am referring instead to how universities are occupied, how a network can come alive to stop complaints from getting through rather like how electricity travels through wire: hiring as wiring ([figure 4.19](#)).

How data is transmitted through organizations—the speed with which some information travels—has something to do how they are built to meet some people’s requirements. Paths into the organization become paths through an organization, a history kept alive as a communication network. When a circuit is broken, its conductive elements no longer form a complete path. A complaint becomes a crisis for an organization when it threatens to break a circuit; a complaint is treated as an error message, a beep, beep, that could stop what travels (who travels) along a path. A complaint can then function like a switch, an alarm, or an alert that triggers a reaction; when a network comes alive, it is in order to protect those who are the most networked, which is to say, a network is how a complaint is stopped: you can hear the buzz of electricity or the phone lines becoming busy. When I say a network comes alive, I am not suggesting this activity is coordinated by one person or a group of people who are meeting in secret, although secret meetings probably do happen. Meetings do not need to happen; what does not get out is built in.

The more a path is used, the more a path is used. *The more they are connected the more they are connected*. The more they are connected, the more others are invested in that connection. In the previous section, I



described how spaces can be occupied through conduct: action as bonding, as binding. We can now think of conduct in terms of the transmission not only of values but of information, energy, and resources. The body of a professor becomes a *conductor*; information, energy, and resources travel through that body; you have to go through the professor to get anywhere. We could understand this process as *institutional funneling*; how paths become narrower and narrower at the exit points. Uses of use, a restriction of possibility that has become material, uses of use, a narrowing of the routes; the more a path is used, the less paths there are to use; more going through less.



4.19. Hiring as wiring.

More going through less: a complaint is then treatable as a loose connection, as what could potentially stop not just a professor but could stop more, more and more, from receiving something through him. One student described how her complaint was framed by her peers: “We were accused of having caused the disruption in their studies. They valued their desire to have him as a professor over those who were suffering psychologically because of his harassment. We needed to be in ‘solidarity’

with those whose education was now being disrupted, not the other way around.” A complaint is framed as a failure to share a connection, a lack of solidarity with others, who are cut off from a source of information and energy. We could also rethink the feminist killjoy as a loose connection, a faulty wire: she deprives others of what follows a shared connection, causing damage by virtue of not being properly attached.

To complain about harassment is to be judged as cutting yourself off from a collective. And then you are cut off from a collective. The implication is that if you do not get used to it, you end up out of it. If the choice is get used to it or get out of it, some cannot afford to get out of it. You might fear that the more you do not get used to it—the more you comment, question, challenge, or resist—the more damage you will suffer. Getting used to it can become a method of survival: to stay put, you end up having to work on yourself rather than on the situation.

There is so much work, painful work, surrounding complaints. And so much of that work is the work of clearing. It is not just that some have paths cleared for them. The clearing of a path does involve, has involved, the clearing of complaints: clearing as clearing up. When an MA student made a complaint about the conduct of the most senior member of the department, she was told by the convener of the program: “Be careful; he is an important man.” He is an important man: a warning can take the form of a statement about whom or what is important. Importance is thus not only a judgment; it is a direction. You are warned against complaining about him *because of what he is deemed to be worth*. Despite the warning, the student went ahead with a complaint. In her terms, she “sacrificed the references.” In reference to the prospect of doing a PhD, she said, “That door is closed.”

That door is closed: references too can function as doors, mechanisms that enable an opening or closing (figure 4.20). References are how it is made possible for some to progress, others not. Reference systems also create paper trails, letters sent out; they are how some are enabled by their connections, how some gather speed and velocity, more and more, faster and faster: “he is an important man.” References can be withheld or they can offer faint praise: when praise is faint, a no is being

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expressed; a no can be how someone has nowhere to go. Many do not make complaints because they feel they cannot afford to lose the references, to lose the connections.

Note also that punishment for complaint can entail the withdrawal of support; to withdraw support is enough to stop someone from going somewhere. Power manifests as the withdrawal of support for those who show how power manifests. In *Willful Subjects* (2014) I explored how force goes with and not just against the will: you can make it costly for others not to be willing what you will them to will. The costs of complaint can be raised without the need to use threats or reprimands. The power to enable the progression of others, which is also the power to stop or to slow a progression, is how power *over* others is acquired. The more power is distributed the more power is concentrated. Power becomes handy. A complaint teaches us how power can be achieved without force through what might seem a light touch. The mere lifting of a supportive hand can function as the heaviest of weights. To lift a hand can be enough to close a door.



4.20. References can function as doors.



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We can return to how diversity is often figured as an open door. For those who embody diversity, whose entry is understood as dependent on a door being opened, whose entry is understood as debt, the door can be shut at any point. Doors can be shut because of how you have to enter. Doors can be shut after you enter. A black woman academic describes how she was racially harassed and bullied by a white woman colleague:

I think what she wanted to do was to maintain her position as the director, and I was supposed to be some pleb; you know what I mean, she had to be the boss, and I had to be the servant type of thing, that was how her particular version of white supremacy worked, so not just belittling my academic credentials and academic capabilities but also belittling me in front of the students; belittling me in front of administrators.

How do you know it's about race? That's a question we often get asked. Racism is how we know it's about race; that wall, whiteness, or let's call it what it is, as she has, white supremacy, we come to know intimately as it is what keeps coming up. She adds: "I had put down that I would like to work towards becoming a professor and she just laughed in my face." That laughter can be the sound of another door slammed. To have got there, a black woman in a white institution, a lecturer, a senior lecturer, on her way to becoming a professor—she is now a professor—is to be understood as getting above her station, above herself; ahead of herself. To belittle someone, to make them little, functions as a command: be little! And that command is being sent not only to her, but to those who are deemed to share the status of being subordinate, students and administrators. Racial harassment can be the effort to restore a hierarchy: how someone is being told you are not where you should be or you are above where you should be, or you are where I should be or even you have taken my place. Some of us in becoming professors become trespassers; you are being told you need permission to enter by being told you do not have permission.

Backs can be doors. Doors can be walls. How support is given to some colleagues is how others are stopped from being colleagues. When another white colleague became head of department, that colleague says: "I want you to reconcile with her because after all she is my friend and colleague and all she ever did was write you some long emails." Reconciliation: we are back to that cup of tea. The damage caused by racial harassment is minimized. And that damage is then transferred from the person harassed to the harasser. Racism becomes damage to a friend, damage to a white friend; racism as damage to whiteness. An expression of desire for reconciliation might appear to be a friendly gesture. There is nothing friendly about this gesture. If she does not return the desire for reconciliation, if she is not willing to smooth things over, moving on, getting along, getting on, she becomes mean; the one who has not only broken a connection but refused to repair it. The situation becomes too hard to handle and eventually she leaves: "there are very few people left who work on race." She goes and the work goes with her.

Whiteness is reproduced as sympathy. And yes, that sympathy is part of the machinery. We learn from how affection is built into the university; how horizontal relation between colleagues can be a means by which vertical lines are reestablished; how some are deemed to come first, to have priority over others, to be higher, more important, more; how others are deemed to come after, lower, less important, less. In [chapter 3](#) I noted with reference to the role of utilitarianism in empire, how the colonized other is treated as *stuffing*. When we are considering how universities remain occupied, we are pointing not only to how restrictions become material through use but to how histories are material. Diversity can be how some of us end up as stuffing. A woman of colour described how her research expertise was used to secure funding for a project on diversity. When the project was funded, she is shut out. She describes: "If you are a mascot you are silent, everything you amount to is nothing, you are stuffing, if that, a skeleton with stuffing. I was kept out of the frame of the management structure; I had no control over how the money was spent, who was being employed, who was being invited to

the advisory board. I was effectively silenced.” You are stuffing; a skeleton with stuffing. You are supposed to be silent; you are supposed to symbolize diversity, or perhaps you provide the raw materials that white academia converts into theory. What happens when the stuffing speaks? What happens when those who embody diversity theorize for ourselves? She told me what happens. She documented seventy-two instances of racial and sexual harassment directed toward her because she refused to be silent. Harassment can be the effort to silence those who refuse to comply, to try to stop somebody from speaking; to shut her up as to shut her out. To refuse to be silent is to make a complaint.

Sometimes in order to survive institutions we need to transform them. But we still have to survive the institutions we are trying to transform. I am listening to an indigenous woman academic. She told me how she could hardly manage to get to campus after a sustained campaign of bullying and harassment from white faculty, including a concerted effort by a senior white man to sabotage her tenure case as well as the tenure cases of other indigenous academics. She made a formal grievance that did not get anywhere: “I had to send an email to her with the subject line in all capital letters with an exclamation point, my final email to her after seven months. THIS IS A GRIEVANCE! THIS IS A GRIEVANCE! And her obligation under the university rules and the process is that she has to put it forward. She did not. She did not put it forward.” We are back to the clunk, clunk of institutional machinery; we learn how institutions work from how complaints are stopped. When you are harassed and bullied, when doors are closed, nay slammed in your face, making it hard to get anywhere, it can be history you are up against; thrown up against. When complaints take us back, they can take us back even further, further still, to histories that are still: “There is a genealogy of experience, a genealogy of consciousness in my body that is now at this stage traumatized beyond the capacity to go to the university.... So there’s a legacy, a genealogy and I haven’t really opened that door too widely as I have been so focused on my experience in the last seven years.”

To be traumatized is to hold a history in a body. You can be easily shattered. There is only so much you can take on because there is only so

much you can take in. We can inherit closed doors, a trauma can be inherited by being made inaccessible, all that happened that was too hard, too painful to reveal. Decolonial feminist work, black feminist work; feminist of colour work is often about opening those doors; the door to what came before; colonial legacies, genealogies; harassment as the hardening of *that* history, a colonial as well as patriarchal history, of who is deemed entitled to what, of who is deemed entitled to whom.

A complaint can be necessary: what you have to do to go on. But you still have to work out what you can take on. She went on by taking them on:

I took everything off my door, my posters, my activism; my pamphlets. I smudged everything all around the building. I knew I was going to war; I did a war ritual in our tradition. I pulled down the curtain. I pulled on a mask, my people we have a mask ... and I never opened my door for a year. I just let it be a crack. And only my students could come in. I would not let a single person come in to my office who I had not already invited there for a whole year.

Closing a door can sometimes be a survival strategy; she closes the door to the institution by withdrawing herself, her commitments, from it. She still does her work; she still teaches her students. She makes use of the institution’s door by using it to shut out what she can, who she can. And she takes herself off the door; she depersonalizes it. And she pulls down the blinds and she pulls on a mask, the mask of her people, connecting her fight to the battles that came before, because, quite frankly, for her, this is a war.

Our battles are not the same battles. But there are many battles happening behind closed doors. I have shared some of them; sharing with you stories that have been shared with me. Behind closed doors: that is where complaints are often found, so that is where you might find us too, and what we bring with us, who we bring with us, the worlds that would not be here if some of us were not here; the data we hold, our



bodies, our memories; perhaps the more we have to spill, the tighter their hold. I will return to spillages as queer use in my conclusion.

## Utility and Policy

A history of a university is a history of what and who has been selected as well as what and who has not been. I have tried to show how selection goes all the way down, brick by brick, paper by paper, person by person. Once selections are made, they recede, becoming part of the background. We need to confront what is behind us. Institutions are built from small acts of use, from uses of use, from how building blocks put together, over time, become walls, walls that enable some bodies to enter, stay put, progress, others not. You come up against how use thickens like cement to form a wall when you try to transform organizations so they are more accommodating or when you enter organizations that are not built for you or when you make a complaint about an abuse of power.

I consider in this concluding section the question of how utility becomes a policy, a policy that builds upon what is already built. In debates about the role of universities, and in particular about the value of the humanities, the word *utility* often comes up. That word, however, is given a rather restricted genealogy, as if the requirement to be useful is a relatively recent requirement that has been imposed on universities by governments.<sup>9</sup> So, for example, Steven C. Ward describes the Dearing Report published by the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE) in 1997 as a “transitional document” that contained “neoliberal notions of the economic and utilitarian purposes of higher education” (2012, 26). Wendy Brown describes neoliberalism “not simply as economic policy, but as a governing rationality that disseminates market values and metrics to every sphere of life” (2015, 176). One of the four key ways that neoliberalism as a governing rationality impacts on higher education is the revaluing of “knowledge, thought and training” in terms of their “capital enhancement” (177).

We do need strong critiques of neoliberalism as a governing

rationality.<sup>10</sup> Writing about the history of use, however, has led me to consider how much of what is named as neoliberal could be understood with reference to a longer history of utilitarianism, not only as a body of thought but as a set of practices or techniques for selection. In other words, the requirement on universities to be useful, to select what would be most beneficial (mostly defined in financial terms, though not always and not only<sup>11</sup>), builds upon longer histories of selection that have already shaped the body of the university, a body that combines stones, paper, and flesh, in the project of elevating or cultivating a mind.

We can think about selection as central to the emergence of a public; what is selected is often defined in terms of the public good. Jeremy Bentham in writing about the importance of publicity (an idea picked up by Jürgen Habermas in his account of the emergence of the public sphere) used the metaphor of a gymnasium: “The whole kingdom, the great globe itself, will become a gymnasium, in which every man exercises himself before the eyes of every other man. Each gesture, every turn of limb or feature, in those whose motions have a visible impact on the general happiness, will be noticed and marked down” (1834, 101). When happiness is the end, use becomes the means: to exercise one’s limbs defined here as gesture and motion is to have a “visible impact” on the happiness of others. The point of exercising one’s limbs would be to impact upon general happiness; to make use of is also to notice and to mark down.

Bentham is describing an ideal. It is rather terrifying. Perhaps Bentham’s ideal has become our real. Simply put, the modern university has become rather like Bentham’s fantasy of a world gymnasium. Many techniques of governance take the form of recording use. In the UK, the framework introduced for measuring the quality of research, the Research Excellence Framework (REF), requires recording use.<sup>12</sup> Citation indexes, for example, are used as evidence that your work is used. It is worth noting that these assessment exercises work through peer review. And peer review could be understood through the lens of “monitor as method” (discussed in [chapter 3](#)), in which colleagues are judged by other colleagues, to become a reviewer is an esteem indicator, and to be



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recent exercise in 2014 introduced “impact” as a key criteria for assessing research excellence. Impact was described as “effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.” We can hear echoes of Bentham’s model of a public that can monitor its motions. The idea that knowledge should be useful or even of general benefit was how the modern university was brought into existence; this is not a new idea. How do you give evidence of impact? In one workshop I attended, we were advised to solicit letters from external bodies that could be used as evidence of the impact of our own work. To show how you contribute to general happiness requires that you create evidence of that contribution: creating trails so you can tell tales.

Use becomes usable as evidence. And when citation becomes an index, other things follow: the more he is cited, the more evidence of impact; the more value to an organization, the more time he is given to do his work; the more he writes, the more he is cited; and so on, and so it goes on. When we are talking about being given time for the motions that can “have an impact on general happiness,” we are talking about others doing other kinds of work; she does more of the housework, the administrative work, the pastoral work, work that is less valued, diversity work. I am using a gendered pronoun here for a reason, to point to how different forms of labor tend to fall on different bodies. There is more at stake in this tending. Sexism and racism in the academy are about whose path is cleared, the path that leads up, up, and up, higher still; they are about whose load is lightened, who becomes usable as a means to lighten that load, a lightening, that is assumed to be of general benefit: a higher score, we all get more.

If you cannot show how you contribute to general happiness, you become a drain, taking energy and resources away from something else. In order to avoid becoming a drain, selection becomes a necessary, even moral, activity. In [chapter 2](#), I discussed how Darwin adopted the language of selection from animal breeding: methodical selection becomes natural selection. We can think of all selection as methodical, how from a diverse range of possibilities some possibilities are selected,

that is, given the support necessary to be actualized, or how from a diverse population some bodies are selected, that is, given the support necessary to proceed. Selection can be self-selection, when you select what you do “do” from what could do, depending on what can be used as evidence of your contribution. Or selection can be made by others who might want you to do what would contribute most to your own progression. You can end up willingly not doing what cannot be used as evidence of your contribution.

We learn then that in order to secure a future, you might have to give up on certain possibilities in the present. To be selected might require not going in a certain direction. I have heard again and again from students, and from colleagues, how they were directed away from certain kinds of work, away from certain stances, away from words even: do not do a feminist project, that will not get you very far; do not do race, race is too narrow; race and gender are often framed as too narrow; the universal is given width, breadth, as well as speed, faster, lighter. We can, and we do, refuse those instructions. But we do need to listen to them, to learn from what they are asking. It is not just that you are directed away from what compromises your own happiness (your own career, your own trajectory) but from what would compromise general happiness.

To open up other directions, we might need to question selections, to question how those who are selected are selected. Universities already have in place a system for justifying selections when they are required to do so. A justification of a selection is necessary when diversity workers turn selection into a crisis, when universities are questioned about their procedures. Meritocracy is a term that is much used by universities because it helps justify their own selections—past, present, and future. Meritocracy is the fantasy that those who are selected are the best. A fantasy can be a system. When diversity workers question who is here, or who is promoted, they are questioning the system. Meritocracy is useful as an answer to a question about the system because it allows the system to recede from view. An answer can be a recovery: how you recover or cover over what has come into view by coming into a question. A system is about the assistance given to individuals, as I have already noted; to fit



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the requirements is to have a path cleared. When a system disappears from view, the assistance given by that system also disappears. The selected can then reappear as unassisted by the system. This is how diversity often comes up: diversity as how some receive an assistance that they would not have to receive if they were the best; how the best would not be selected; diversity as the lowering of standards, as if diversity and merit are two different tracks, two different ways of entering the organization.<sup>33</sup> The use of meritocracy teaches us how those who are selected define the best around themselves.

Selection is used by organizations as a way of controlling or directing human traffic. It is not simply that what is selected is the most beneficial but that selection is beneficial. Central to the use of selection by organizations is the maintenance of precarity: to be selected or not can determine whether you have a future with an organization. Sometimes the basis upon which decisions are being made is unclear; unclear decisions are a way of managing crisis such that to be employed is to be in a state of alert. You do not know when you could be managed out of existence. Being on a state of alert is not about being on an equal footing: some more than others will be dependent on being selected; selection becomes *more* important the *less* you are resourced, the closer you are to an edge, the higher the stakes; something that would be small to others (not getting funding for this or for that) would be enough to topple you over the edge.

Not to be selected is not to benefit from selection. It is made harder to proceed. We are back to one of my starting points: the less a path is used, the harder it is to follow. Not to be selected can mean not to be supported; it can mean a project ceases to be possible. Something ceases to be if it ceases to be possible. What is not selected is sometimes discarded: the paper that ends up in the waste bin, the paper that did not get anywhere. What is discarded is usually assigned useless. This assignment could also be considered *institutional death*. Something can be someone: you can reach a dead end; you can become institutionally dead. You do not have a route or career pathway in front of you because of what is behind you. This cessation is not the end of the story;

institutional death is not the end of a story. An institutional death can be the start of another biography of use; leaving can be the beginning of another life. I will return to this point in my conclusion.

In order to have an institutional life, you might have to work to avoid institutional death. I want to suggest that “join or die” becomes an imperative, or even a choice, a fantasy choice. Join or die is another version of get used to it or get out of it. *Join* is a nice word. It sounds good, not scary: to join as to join in; to join as being part of something, as having a share in the happiness of others; to join as to be joined up with others. Being seen as choosing not to die, choosing not to have your projects cease to be (the double negative), and choosing your projects (turned into a positive) can mean you sign up to so much when you join up, including the presentation of the institutionally dead as a shared enemy, those to whom you must refuse proximity or allegiance.

The imperative to join up in order to survive within an institution can be experienced as a crisis for feminists and diversity workers. We are, after all, trying to transform the institutions that employ us. Even the projects that have transformation as their end need to be supported. A project too can be a path. We might use the more used path because, frankly, a project needs to be resourced. We might translate the work we do into the terms that are more likely to be picked up. We can be carried forward by what we pick up. We use the more used terms. The more we use the more used terms, the more we are aligned; we are going the same way others are going. If you tried to deviate, to change direction, you would get in the way of other people’s motions. If we proceed on a path in order to disrupt it, we can end up not disrupting it in order to proceed.

I think of this problem as a paradox as well as a pain. It is a problem that we need to keep at the front of our work not because we can resolve it but because we cannot. It is a problem I learned about from talking to diversity workers; one practitioner spoke to me about not using terms that were, in her words, “more confrontational,” to enable her to have more conversations with more staff across the university. She senses she could travel further by what she was not willing to confront. As I noted earlier, if *diversity* is used more because it does less, “doing less”

becomes as much as we can do. We might use the word *diversity* because it is light; we might not use the word *racism* to avoid a fight; we might try not to rock the boat because we do not have a secure footing, although of course sometimes rocking is a motion that seems to have nothing to do with what it is we are doing.

There are risks in doing what is required to proceed. I think we know this. If our feminist projects are resourced by an institution, it might become harder to confront certain problems as institutional problems, to speak out about the role of the institution in enabling racial or sexual harassment, for example. Sometimes, perhaps especially when we are trying to address the role of the institution in enabling abuse and violence, we have to refuse to do what is necessary to proceed. If you refuse to do what is necessary to proceed, it can feel as if you have committed yourself to a path that leads eventually, in one way or another, to your own cessation. You can end up feeling that you have made yourself history.

How do we counter what has become as hard as concrete? We need activism here. We need dismantling projects here. These are the projects I turn to in my conclusion to this book. Even when we do what is necessary to proceed, we can still fight to change what is necessary. To build an alternative university requires crafting different routes from what is behind us: the fainter trails, the less used paths. I think crafting is a good word for this work: it takes willed work not to reproduce an inheritance, not to create the same old shape. We need to do this work collectively if we are to widen the routes; otherwise, deviation might simply mean cessation, institutional death, reaching the end of a line, not having enough support to keep going. If we are to do this work, feminism is necessary as a support system: we have to find ways of not getting used to it without getting out of it, even if sometimes, for our own survival, our feminist survival, we need to get out of it. Not getting used to it: this is probably one of the best descriptions I can offer of what it means to be a diversity worker today.

## Conclusion

### Queer Use

What better way to bring out the queerness of use than by attending to uses of queer? Queer: a word with a history. Queer: a word that has been flung like a stone, picked up and hurled at us; a word we can claim for us. Queer: odd, strange, unseemly, disturbed, disturbing. Queer: a feeling, a sick feeling; feeling queer as feeling nauseous.

In older uses of queer—queer to describe anything that is noticeable because it is odd—queer and fragility were often companions. In one of George Eliot's essays, "Three Months in Weimar," the narrator describes the sound of an old piano thus: "its tones, now so queer and feeble, like those of an invalided old woman whose voice could once make a heart beat with fond passion" (1884, 91–92). Feeble, frail, invalid, incapacitate, falter, weak, tearful, worn; tear; wear; queer too, queer is there, too. These proximities tell a story. A queer life might be how we get in touch with things at the very point at which they, or we, are worn or worn down—those moments when we break or break down, when we shatter under the weight of history. The sounds of an old piano evoking the sound of an invalided old woman: could this evocation vibrate with affection? Could a