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Reading rage: Theorising the epistemic value of feminist anger

Sigrid Wallaert

PhD Researcher, CEVI – Center for Ethics & Value Inquiry, Ghent University

Sigrid.wallaert@ugent.be

Abstract

The #MeToo movement, Women's Marches and less prominent grassroots initiatives have clearly demonstrated that women are angry. This anger is often criticised as 'disruptive' or 'uncommunicative', praising 'calm rationality' as a superior alternative. This article applies Fricker's (2007) Epistemic Injustice framework to examine the communicative disadvantages and merits of what I call feminist anger. I explain how it can be subject to both testimonial and hermeneutical injustices, but that this does not preclude its communicative merits. Importantly, feminist anger can challenge the patriarchal status quo and may provide an epistemic bridge towards hermeneutical justice. Listening to feminist anger, both our own and others', is therefore a crucial step towards epistemic equality.

Keywords

Feminist anger, Epistemic injustice, #MeToo, Feminism, Activism, Misogyny

Introduction

The 2020 American presidential election was remarkable in many ways, particularly from a feminist perspective. Not only could the American public prevent a second term for a notably misogynist president, it also opened up the political sphere for a formerly marginalized emotion. Throughout her campaign, Democratic presidential candidate Elizabeth Warren, championed a remarkable and philosophically interesting cause: feminist anger. In a short recorded speech circulated on Facebook, Warren explained that anger is fundamentally an issue of power; of who has it, who wants it, and who wants to keep it. From the stage, Warren declared: ‘Today, I am angry, and I own it.’ (Warren, 2020).

Her commitment to anger might not seem that subversive. After all, Warren lacks power nor privilege, and expressing anger is certainly easier for her. But in the public eye, regardless of their ‘power’ relative to the average woman citizen, women remain subject to forcible patriarchal expectations. This has been amply demonstrated by extensive research into women’s public rhetoric (e.g. Balachandra et al., 2021; Campbell, 1989, 1998; Dow & Tonn, 1993; Winderman, 2019). Campbell (1989), in particular, outlined a distinctive ‘feminine style’ of rhetoric, shaped by these demands. Indeed, “women speakers were expected to reaffirm their womanliness discursively at the same time that they demonstrated the ordinary rhetorical competencies [...] that were gender-coded as masculine” (Campbell, 1998, p. 4). Addressing angry gendered rhetoric specifically, Winderman (2019) attends to the rhetoric aspects of volume to show how legitimate anger is distributed along gendered (among other) lines. Hence, Kay (2020) argues, women and other minorities are uniquely susceptible to ‘communicative injustice’: “they are pulled in opposite directions by the contradictions of a culture that impels them to speak out, but which also punishes them for doing so” (Kay, 2020, p. 8). Accordingly, the gendered norms feminine rhetoric is subject to, co-constitute this communicative injustice. Women are expected to be nice, caring, kind and motherly. Anger is precluded from this ideal, and therefore delegitimized as a communicative form. Angry women are deemed irrational, unstable, unfit to lead (Chemaly, 2018; Cooper, 2018; Traister, 2018). So by asserting her anger so strongly, Warren did subvert commonplace expectations, and took political risks.

Feminist anger is certainly not a new topic. Not only have feminists long acknowledged the role of anger for their intellectual commitment, but feminist scholarship has also outspokenly argued for using and valuing anger (Bailey, 2018; Bell, 2009; Kay, 2019; Kay & Banet-Weiser, 2019; Srinivasan, 2018). Through the different waves of feminism, anger has been a consistent under- or overtone, with authors ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft to Virginia Woolf to Audre Lorde using and/or addressing it in their writing. But recent years have also witnessed an uptick in popular nonfiction books about women’s anger (Agarwal, 2022; Chemaly, 2018; Cooper, 2018; Dancyger, 2019; Fahs, 2020; Traister, 2018) – demonstrating mainstream attention for the subject. In this article, I specifically focus on the epistemic value hereof, adding to our present understanding of how feminist anger can be a crucial rhetorical tool.

Arguably, the first recognition of anger’s epistemic value starts with Audre Lorde. In *The Uses of Anger* (Lorde, 2017), she writes that ‘anger is loaded with information and energy’ (p. 111) and that ‘when we turn from anger, we turn from insight’ (p. 115). Anger can teach us about ourselves, Lorde argued, but also about others. What we learn through anger, moreover, might not otherwise have been understood. Feminist anger is often ignored, Lorde knew, and especially Black feminist anger is prone to being silenced. Inasmuch as anger has epistemic value then, Lorde understood its precarity too; anger might always simply be overlooked. Baker Miller and Surrey (1990) recognize this ephemerality, and describe anger as ‘an emotion which arises when something is wrong or something hurts and needs changing.’ (1990, p. 2). In this way, anger serves to signal, conveying a message by simply existing. Building on these observations, Kulbaga and Spencer (2022) studied three years’ worth of feminist scholarship in communication studies, and demonstrate how feminist outrage has increasingly become a legitimate, valuable way of contributing to

academic conversations. Writing angrily has epistemic value, they argue, and readers should make an effort to take it seriously, even if it transgresses traditional academic standards of ‘rationality’ and ‘impartiality’ (Kulbaga & Spencer, 2022).

Nevertheless, (feminist) anger continues to be routinely suppressed. Orgad and Gill (2019), for instance, explicitly address the silencing of feminist anger, focusing on the context of #MeToo. They identify three safety valves keeping feminist anger in check: praising women for self-silencing, focusing on anger itself rather than its reasons, and enforcing an individualistic rather than systemic focus (Orgad & Gill, 2019). Through these three mechanisms, they argue, feminist anger is routinely defused and silenced, thereby losing its epistemic and revolutionary value. This echoes Alison Bailey’s article *On Anger, Silence, and Epistemic Injustice* (Bailey, 2018), which similarly addresses the muting of anger by linking it to Miranda Fricker’s (2007) ideas about ‘epistemic injustice’. In doing so, Bailey aims to ‘make visible the overlooked and undertheorized resistant anger saturating the silences that epistemic injustice repeatedly manufactures’ (Bailey, 2018, p. 94). She distinguishes between two types of silencing: *tone policing* occurs when audiences regulate angry speakers’ tone, while angry speakers’ pre-emptively controlling of their own tone signals *tone vigilance*. But anger cannot always be suppressed by the self or by others, opening up radical potentials. Bailey argues that anger that resists these silencing practices is ‘not a raw unfocused energy’. It is a ‘*knowing resistant anger*’ (Bailey, 2018, p. 103), able to become a productive force .

While investigating interlinkages between feminist anger and epistemic injustice has been addressed before, much ground is left to cover. In this article, I elaborate a theoretical analysis of epistemic injustice’s relation to feminist anger, gesturing at a framework for future empirical inquiry. Hence, my primary concern is the communicative value of anger, and of feminist anger in particular. Can angry communication ever be effective, or is its emotionality an insurmountable hurdle? Using the theoretical framework of Miranda Fricker’s epistemic injustice (2007), I demonstrate that feminist anger carries particular epistemic risks, but can be a useful tool, and holds significant epistemic value. To do so, I first explicate how feminist anger is habitually subject to both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice – the two key dimensions of Fricker’s (2007) conception. But subsequently, I illustrate how feminist anger in and of itself can be a productive tool to combat both types of injustice. In conclusion, I argue that while feminist anger comes with some epistemic risks, ultimately it is a useful epistemic tool, both for the angry person and for her target audience.

What is feminist anger?

What exactly is feminist anger? Whose anger is it, and how is it different from other kinds of anger? For the purposes of this article, I understand feminist anger as a type of collective, activist, largely forward-looking anger aligned with feminist goals and purposes. It is not always apt or productive, but it does carry such potential (Srinivasan, 2018)¹. It is collective, not individual, and is felt and expressed in the context of a wider movement with shared goals (Winderman, 2019). It is activist, and articulates socially motivated action (Traister, 2018). And while Martha Nussbaum famously disagrees (2016), most argue that feminist anger is concerned with improving the future, not with enacting revenge for past wrongs. Its feminist aspirations make it antithetical to misogyny (Manne, 2018), essentially forming an affective response. But feminist anger is not just women’s anger: it is often felt and expressed by women², but not only, and not exclusively. Nevertheless, popular imaginaries of feminist anger articulate it to women. The #MeToo movement is a clear example here, which cannot be reduced to women’s anger alone – even though popular constructions certainly suggest as

¹ Srinivasan’s (2018) work on affective injustice is also very relevant in this context; I go into much more depth on this topic in a forthcoming article (Wallaert, forthcoming)

² A disclaimer: for the purposes of this article, any person who identifies as a woman, is a woman; any person who does not, is not.

much. Feminist anger aims for inclusivity of people of any gender, as long as they share the same goals; in the case of #MeToo, this shared goal was combatting insidious sexual harassment.

Alongside its gendered assumptions, there are particular racialized aspects to feminist anger. The #MeToo movement has often been justifiably criticized for being too white (e.g. Rottenberg, 2017). History demonstrates that anger has been pivotal to attend to such inequities. Feminist anger has strong roots in black feminist traditions and practices. In this context, Leslie Jamison argues that ‘the real entitlement has never been anger, it has always been its absence’ (Jamison, 2019, p. 20). White women complain about having to repress their anger, but as Jamison notes, this is in fact a luxury. In reality, many black women have no choice but to express their anger for survival. These expressions permeate the history of feminism, notably with Audre Lorde’s essay *Uses of Anger* (1981/2018) and bell hooks’ *Killing Rage* (1995), who both pioneered a positive scholarly and popular valuation of black women’s anger. More recently, the work of Brittney Cooper (2018) and Myisha Cherry’s book *The Case for Rage* (2021) continues to expand this trajectory onwards, with Cherry developing the concept of ‘Lordean rage’ (2021), a type of anti-racist anger inspired by the work of Audre Lorde. Hence, discussing feminist anger and its implications necessarily mobilizes this specifically racialized history. Although feminist anger is not necessarily racialised, its analysis must therefore take care to not fail to account for its salience. Indeed, in pursuing feminist goals and targets, anti-racism is a crucial attitude to take on in order to be inclusive of women of colour and their struggles. As Audre Lorde wrote, “I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own. And I am not free as long as one person of Color remains chained. Nor is anyone of you.” (Lorde, 2017, p. 117).

Epistemic injustice as a framework

The gendered and at times racialized constructions that shape whether (feminist) anger is warranted, articulate notions of epistemic injustice. The concept was coined by Miranda Fricker, whose 2007 book has inspired a productive branch of scholarship on the subject. Departing from the general observation that the question of whether someone’s claims to expressing ‘true’ or ‘legitimate’ knowledge are fundamentally dependent on broader power relations, Fricker outlines two kinds of epistemic injustice: *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice*. “Testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage, when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences.” (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Hence, both concepts explicitly articulate communicative dimensions, and concern the degree to which individuals’ discourses are taken seriously by others. In the first category, what someone expresses is deemed untrustworthy due to their personal characteristics; in the latter category, the socio-cultural discretion of certain shared experiences precludes a full understanding of individuals’ accounts. Anger can interact with both of these concepts in complex ways. It can be subject to the kinds of prejudice that cause testimonial injustice, but it can just as easily be a reaction to testimonial injustice. And anger can share causes with hermeneutical injustice, but it can also be a powerful way to combat it. All communication, including angry communication, happens on what Bailey (2018) calls an ‘uneven knowing field’. Some people are ‘more powerful knowers’ than others, determining the degree to which their testimony is believed and respected. Both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are subject to the tilt of the knowing field, with those at the bottom more likely to suffer injustice than those at the top.

Hence, power tilts the knowing field. Power puts some at the top, while pushing others down to the bottom. Fricker outlines two related forms: *social power* and *identity power* – but both kinds revolve around the issue of control (2007). Where social power allows an actor to control others’ actions in a socially situated manner, identity power is specifically

derived of one's social identity (Fricker, 2007, pp. 13–14) – with gender as a prominent dimension. But insofar as gender is a key factor in determining what counts as 'women's anger', it does not operate in a vacuum. Gender continually interacts with other facets of social identity, whether that be race, class, disability, sexual orientation, etc. These collectively configure individual power, which in turn determines one's credibility. Those in power will generally enjoy unquestioned credibility too, while the less powerful have trouble being believed. Hence, we must recognize the existence of credibility excesses and deficits (Fricker, 2007): speakers may receive more or less credibility than they should. Simply put, then, the 'unfair distribution' of credibility is what constitutes epistemic injustice. But reality is of course less clear cut than a mere unfair distribution, and the practical existence of epistemic injustice is often predicated on the complex situatedness of the interpersonal level. As Fricker stresses, epistemic injustice is "a kind of injustice in which someone is wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower." (Fricker, 2007, p. 20). When someone's credibility is unfairly evaluated, this does not just signal a distributive injustice, but an interpersonal injustice. Experiencing a credibility deficit then amounts to not being respected as a full person, as a full knower.

Understanding the relation of epistemic injustice to expressions of feminist anger thus also calls into question how credibility judgments are made. For Fricker, this happens using stereotypes. She uses the term 'stereotype' neutrally, to simply denote "widely held associations between a given social group and one or more attributes" (Fricker, 2007, p. 30). Basing credibility judgments on stereotypical reasoning is by no means epistemically ideal, but nevertheless almost unavoidable – and not necessarily problematic. Issues arise when prejudice informs the stereotypes judgments are based on. In the absence of detailed knowledge about the sender of a certain message, we base our judgements on the limited and often biased information available, and use it to draw a number of inferences about that person's credibility (Fricker, 2007, p. 32). In other words, we link certain social characteristics of a person - like race, class, gender - with the attribute of credibility. The stereotypes we use to judge credibility are largely based on culturally driven social and historical concepts. Therefore, societal dominance and historical marginalisation are reproduced in the epistemic landscape; both in the form of 'active' testimonial injustice and 'passive' hermeneutic injustice. The same social groups who are marginalised in terms of societal power suffer a credibility deficit, and those who are societally dominant enjoy a credibility excess.

Clearly then, epistemic injustice is not gender-neutral, and neither are the stereotypes it is often based on. In our society, someone's individual sense of subjectivity will undoubtedly call upon 'shared imaginative conceptions of social identity' (Fricker, 2007, p. 14). In turn, these shape the stereotypes associated with the person concerned, from which testimonial credibility is derived. While gender is obviously not the only social identity factor to be considered, being male has historically contributed to a credibility excess, while being non-male has and continues to produce a credibility deficit. As Kate Manne puts it: 'When it comes to a 'he said'/'she said,' 'her word against his' scenario, there are obvious reasons to give him testimonial priority, from the point of view of upholding patriarchal order.' (Manne, 2018, p. 52). The fact that a perceived male gender identity is given testimonial priority is then indicative of the patriarchal epistemic order. The 'unlevel knowing field' tilts like gender does more generally: male at the top, non-male at the bottom. The mechanisms of epistemic injustice are one of many systems justifying and naturalizing this imbalance.

American politics again serve as a real-world example to demonstrate the salience of epistemic injustice when (feminist) anger is involved. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, democrat and the U.S. representative for New York's 14th congressional district is another politically active woman popularly understood as 'angry' – either when speaking up in defence of Warren's anger (Ocasio-Cortez, 2020), or more generally as a key trait of her public persona. On one occasion, the Republican Ted Cruz responded to a tweet by Ocasio-Cortez by stating that "there's a lot of partisan anger and rage on the Democratic side. It's, it's

not healthy for our country, it's certainly not conducive of healing or unity” (Cioffi, 2021). Mirroring mainstream news coverage, with especially right-wing publications dismissively portraying Ocasio-Cortez as angry (e.g. Brown, 2023; Hays, 2023; Jankowicz, 2020; Mann, 2022), It is no accident that Ocasio-Cortez, a woman of colour, is targeted by strategies that aim to lower her credibility. On the one hand, stereotypes about women, and about women of colour especially, lead people to perpetuate testimonial injustice against Ocasio-Cortez. These stereotypes serve to resignify her anger, and by extension her speech, as irrational and therefore less credible. Clearly then, this mechanism of testimonial injustice is actively mobilised to influence the public’s credibility judgements. By emphasizing Ocasio-Cortez’ anger and its associations of irrationality and low credibility, this rhetorical strategy aims to ensure that her arguments will not be heard properly – in turn reifying the conditions that sustain hermeneutic injustice. It aims to silence her powerful message in the short term, and to ensure its broader popular unintelligibility in the long term.

Why feminist anger isn’t understood

Ocasio-Cortez experiences something many women are familiar with. Their rightful anger is dismissed as hysterical, overly emotional, and irrational (Chemaly, 2018; Cooper, 2018). And when their anger itself is dismissed, the reasons for this anger are easily glossed over too (Srinivasan, 2018). But what are the underlying mechanisms of this brush-off? And is it comprehensive enough to strategically discourage women from angrily airing their grievances? Below, I first apply Fricker’s (2007) notions of testimonial and hermeneutical injustice to women’s anger – demonstrating how they are key mechanisms to understand the ubiquity of dismissing both the affect and its instigator.

Testimonial Injustice Threatens Anger’s Epistemic Value

Building on Fricker’s work, Kristie Dotson shows that testimonial injustice has two distinct operationalizations: ‘testimonial quieting’ and ‘testimonial smothering’ respectively (Dotson, 2011). But ultimately, both effectuate the same: a speaker’s capacity to know is not taken seriously and, crucially, her message is not heard. She endures a credibility deficit – in the sense that the legitimacy of her claim is *a priori* dismissed. As discussed earlier in this paper, such instances of testimonial injustice are predicated on stereotypes – which continue to characterize mainstream constructions of feminism. Admittedly, stereotypes are not necessarily negative, but they certainly are when feminist anger is concerned. Angry women have been ridiculed (Harris, 2001) and categorized as hysterical (Kalkman, 2020) for centuries, to delegitimize their rightful societal plights – and these representational strategies continue to circulate. Although women in the West are no longer practically reduced to their uterus, their historical marginalization remains present in the ways in which feminist testimony is not taken seriously. Feminist criticism *always* amounts to anger, the idea goes, and anger is *never* constructive nor rational. This echoes what Lyman calls the ‘psychological critique of anger’, whereby it is ‘constructed as a psychological problem rather than as a form of political speech.’ (Lyman, 2004, p. 134). Because of these historical and contemporary delegitimizing discourses – ridiculing, pathologizing, psychologising – women’s anger automatically invokes deeply rooted stereotypes. As a result, audiences are less inclined to afford credibility to the speaker. Credibility deficits are therefore a structural risk for angry women, meaning not only that the anger in and of itself is easily brushed off, but its underlying reasons too. This is why the media framing of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez – and others like her – as simply ‘angry’, discussed earlier, is so problematic and dangerous. Feminist anger is not empty emotion; it has a signal function and can convey that something is going wrong, that someone is hurting (Baker Miller & Surrey, 1990; Hochschild, 1983). But due to the socio-cultural mechanisms historically used to forego on the legitimacy of women’s plights and their stereotypical reduction to mere ‘anger’, the communicative value of feminist anger continues to be denied.

The stereotypes angry women face are meaningful only in a broader misogynist framework. Kate Manne calls misogyny the structural instrument by which patriarchy upholds itself (Manne, 2018). With the example of feminist writer Lindy West, Manne (2018) points to the peculiar role anger plays in misogynist assumptions. West was badly harassed by a so-called internet ‘troll’, but dismissed the advice that women in similar situations often receive; ‘stay quiet and let it pass’. Instead, she tracked him down and conducted an interview (Glass, 2015). Interestingly, the issue of anger did come up, but on the side of the harasser. West’s feminist discourse, he confessed, ‘kind of stoked that anger that [he] had’; reading her words made the man uncomfortable. And this, he furthermore admitted, was largely due to West’s gender: ‘Who is this bitch who thinks she knows everything?’ (Glass, 2015). As Manne notes, this assertive yet angry way of expressing oneself is clearly a masculine-coded privilege (Manne, 2018, p. 130). When women use it instead, men feel hurt and threatened, as demonstrated by the harasser’s confession (Glass, 2015). Hence, when women express themselves angrily, they face two obstacles in search of justified credibility and uptake: their own legitimate anger articulates long-held stereotypes about female irrationality and hysteria – undermining the relevance of her expression and the seriousness of its roots. At the same time, they legitimate male reactionary anger – which in turn feeds into an array of sanctioned and unsanctioned disciplinary mechanisms. Hence, anger in this context creates a twofold pathway to testimonial injustice.

This risk is particularly salient for racialized women. When women of colour especially express themselves angrily, they are hindered by commonplace prejudices about their anger, gender, and racialized subjectivity combined. Audre Lorde gives a striking example of this in her essay *Uses of Anger*:³

‘I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, ‘Tell me how you feel but don’t say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.’ But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?’ (Lorde, 1981/2018, p. 23)

Neither the speaker’s nor her audience’s racialized identities are irrelevant here. The woman presenting herself as the audience is white, dissuading Lorde, a black woman, from being angry. This obviously articulates tropes on the ‘angry black woman’. As Sara Ahmed writes, ‘The anger of feminists of color is [...] read as unattributed.’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 68). When women of colour are angry, their rage is ascribed to their (flawed) character, not to justified external reasons. Lorde’s case demonstrates this too: she is told to tone down her anger, as if it is isolated and unrelated to her underlying message. As if the message does not rightfully elicit anger. But anger is a vital dimension of her message and an apt response to her lived experiences – meriting recognition. Crucially, the fact that Lorde later highlighted this exchange indicates her awareness not just of the subtle racism at play in the audience member’s words. More so perhaps, she demonstrates white feminists’ failure to appraise her assumptions, and their wilful ignorance of Lorde’s epistemic capabilities.

Hermeneutical Injustice Threatens Anger’s Epistemic Value

This heightened vulnerability women of colour face for testimonial injustice is therefore inextricably linked to hermeneutical inequities too. With the notion of ‘wilful hermeneutical ignorance,’ Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (Pohlhaus Jr., 2012) describes how members of dominant social groups refuse to recognise the hermeneutical tools of marginalised group members. Much like Lorde’s audience rejected the possibility that the anger in her discourse was crucial to convey realities and experiences inexpressible through conventional means, wilful hermeneutical ignorance renders knowledge transfer between both groups impossible (Pohlhaus Jr., 2012).

³ The use of which in this context I owe to Bailey (2018).

Hence, expressing angrily invites hermeneutical injustice too, occurring ‘when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences.’ (Fricker, 2007, p. 1). Again, social power is a central concept here. Shared understandings and our epistemic tools derive from the social groups we belong to, and social power inequalities easily translate into hermeneutical power inequalities as well (Fricker, 2007). The powerful can have common epistemic tools at their disposal when making sense of their reality, but the powerless are often left wanting. Marginalised experiences are not or badly reflected by extant epistemic tools and hermeneutical resources (Fricker, 2007, p. 148) which Fricker exemplifies by referring to sexual harassment. Notwithstanding how common the experience is for women, the term itself is fairly recent. The vocabulary emerged only when a group of victims shared what had happened to them and created linguistic tools to express what they had been through. To give their pain a voice and to denounce the violence they incurred, they had to develop the very terminology that would allow them to do so.

Importantly, then, the effects of hermeneutical injustice are not equally distributed – as the example of sexual harassment shows. Had men been the primary victims here, patriarchal logics would have long provided a meaningful vocabulary. The effects coalesce in ‘hermeneutical hotspots’; ‘locations in social life where the powerful have no interest in achieving a proper interpretation, perhaps indeed where they have a positive interest in sustaining the extant misinterpretation’ (Fricker, 2007, p. 152). Hence, they emerge almost accidentally, through careless gaps in the interests of the powerful, obfuscating the plights of the powerless. But they might also be created intentionally, to reify existing power asymmetries. Perpetrators of sexual harassment, for instance, often reciprocally aim to deflect the gravity and consequences of their acts precisely by seizing on the term ‘harassment’ to distinguish it from ‘actual’ violence. Consequently, power relations determine both who is affected by hermeneutical injustice and the context in which the injustices takes place.

Clear parallels can be drawn to the case of female rage. Angry women are routinely denied the expression of their anger. Stereotyping and diminishing feminist anger reproduces an underlying patriarchal rule: anger is the domain of men (Chemaly, 2018; Cooper, 2018). This is predicated on a pattern of giving and taking: women are expected to give and men can take freely (Manne, 2018). Men are free to use anger as a tool (*taking* anger for their own use), while women are expected to react to men’s anger with compassion and empathy (*giving* understanding of men’s anger). When women get angry, then, their personal credibility is not just rejected. What is equally detrimental is that neither they nor their audience are able to readily and effectively appreciate the grounds of their anger. They suffer injustice in the hermeneutical sense. In patriarchal society, collective hermeneutical resources are skewed towards a male perspective, while experiences specific to women’s lives often remain overlooked. Misogyny in its many forms is a clear catalyst for women’s anger – and feminist anger in particular. But given that misogyny is a specifically female experience, the epistemic resources available to address it remain marginal in patriarchal society. Not only do men lack the urgency of thoroughly grasping its experience, patriarchy in general and some men in specific simply benefit from keeping misogyny out of the epistemic spotlight. Misogyny is therefore a hermeneutical hotspot of sorts; firstly because men are simply not interested in a systematic understanding of misogyny (‘There’s no need for feminism anymore, right?’), secondly because they are actively invested in upholding patriarchal power structures.

How feminist anger communicates

Clearly, being angry entails risks for women. Women’s anger is subject to stereotypes that hamper the unprejudiced reception of its message, and is casually bereft of the epistemic tools to redress the situation. But what does this imply for feminist action? Should women accept the ubiquitous advice to calm down and keep quiet, in the hopes that one day they will

be heard? Or are there strong reasons why feminist anger can be important and valuable, even considering the challenges it might bring? Below, I demonstrate that anger in the face of misogyny is not just apt, but productive too. I start by exploring anger not *met with*, but *caused by* testimonial injustice – hinting at its radical potential. Subsequently, I argue that feminist anger can actually be a tool in combatting hermeneutical injustice – producing the conceptual instruments needed to combat misogyny.

Anger in the face of misogynist testimonial injustice

Testimonial injustice does not just make it more difficult for people to find uptake for their anger. It makes them angry too. The silence of a person unheard is ‘saturated with anger because injustice is painful’ (Bailey, 2018, p. 96). This creates a ‘vicious cycle of testimonial injustice’ (McKinnon, 2016, p. 440): not being heard incites anger, which makes women less likely to be heard, adding to their anger – particularly when it continues to be misattributed. Sara Ahmed writes: ‘Your anger is a judgement that something is wrong. But in being heard as angry, your speech is read as motivated by anger. Your anger is read as unattributed, as if you are against x because you are angry, rather than being angry because you are against x.’ (Ahmed, 2010, p. 68). Anger always transmits a particular message. But if that anger is misattributed, the message fails to receive uptake.

Anger is a logical response to injustice (Bailey, 2018). Consequently, its validity is never reducible to its productivity (Srinivasan, 2018): if there are good, personal reasons for it, anger can be apt even when it is unproductive. The question is what is considered ‘productive’ too, of course. When women use anger to voice their frustration about the face of patriarchally inspired testimonial injustice, dismissing it as ‘unproductive’ would merely naturalize the very conditions from which the injustice emerges. When powerful men ignore women’s grievances, whether in the grassroots form of #MeToo protests or formal political activism, anger is an all too natural response. And such anger is far from ‘inert’ or ‘unproductive’ – although it is always at the risk of being dismissed as such. In this instance, being angry ‘is to put oneself in the position of the judge, which for a woman in a patriarchal society means to be insubordinate’ (Harris, 2001, p. 275). Expressing anger lays claim to power which you are otherwise deprived of, and doing so allows women to transcend the gendered norms that have historically kept them from being in control (Fricker, (2007) ; regardless of whether they suffer testimonial injustice for it or not. It produces ‘identity power’: an outspoken explication of the fact that experiences of marginalization are real and unjustified, and merit rage regardless of the legibility or appropriateness of that rage. Insofar rage is the prerogative of men in a patriarchal society⁴, female expressions of anger are by definition subversive.

When society deems particular emotions unacceptable for certain people to experience and/or express, they become what Alison Jaggar (1989) calls ‘outlaw emotions’. Given that anger is fundamentally determined by its situ-relational character (Holmes, (2004), meaning that the reception and meaning of anger is always shaped by its context, it is not hard to see how it can act as an outlaw emotion. A woman angrily bursting out in a professional context, especially with men nearby, illustrates the point well, for instance. Such outlaw emotions are subversive by default, and ‘unseemly’ anger is disruptive regardless of its reception (Manne, 2018). When women claim traditionally withheld emotions, they tilt the slope of the epistemic playing field to shift power in their favour – however temporarily. Aside from an emotional reaction, then, anger can also be a feminist tool; ‘emotions become feminist when they incorporate feminist perceptions and values’ (Jaggar, 1989, p. 166).

⁴ Although it has to be noted that, as Michael Kimmel points out, ‘patriarchy is not simply men's power over women; it's also some men's power over other men’ (Kimmel & Wade, 2018). In his analysis, women experience a symmetry in their power(lessness) while men experience an asymmetry: women are both individually and socially powerless, while men are socially powerful but can still feel individually powerless.

Women can of course be angry for a full spectrum of reasons, not unlike men. But where the anger expressed in the wake of #MeToo is concerned, its emotional payload is clearly couched in a feminist rejection of the status quo coupled with a feminist project to reconfigure it. Women angrily decry misogyny and powerful men getting away with sexual assault; they angrily demand to be respected and treated as equals. Through anger, they are feminist.

This anger is not necessarily understood in all its communicative dimensions, but is not devoid of potential. Patriarchal society endows men with a privileged relational position vis-à-vis women (Kimmel, 2017), and they are generally situated at the upper end of the ‘unlevel knowing field’ (Bailey, 2018). But women’s anger can draw this often unrecognized pattern of patriarchal misogyny out in the open. When women *take* anger instead of *giving* understanding, they claim a position of power, they claim a ‘masculine-coded privilege’ for themselves (Manne, 2018). For men, this feels uncomfortable, not only because their usual position of relative power is being threatened, but because it becomes visible too. Through anger, women claim their part of the pie – demonstrating that there is a pie in the first place. As Fricker argues, social power ‘may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally.’ (Fricker, 2007, p. 13). By expressing anger, women turn female agential power, exercised by individual women, to female structural power, shifting the societal balance of power. The #MeToo movement exemplifies such a shift. Over the course of a decade, what started from the anger of individual women, became organised and unified into a powerful social movement by prominent activists like Tarana Burke and countless Twitter-based feminists. Individual women expressing anger at an abusive boss would typically be powerless in the face of existing power structures, and their outlaw emotion would be quickly dismissed. But when anger coalesces into a worldwide movement, power balances can shift. Men featured on the ‘Shitty Media Men’ list (Donegan, 2018) started to face consequences; Harvey Weinstein was convicted and sentenced (Beckett, 2023). Regardless of whether the anger expressed elicits instances of testimonial injustice then, it also succeeded in transcending those barriers. Here, the whole was more than the sum of its parts: innumerable women expressing their anger became a kind of structural power that was more than their individual agential powers could have added up to.

Anger can compensate for hermeneutical injustice

Apart from feminist anger’s potential to disregard and neutralize the regulatory mechanisms of testimonial injustice, it can be a strong force against hermeneutical injustice too. Anger has a didactic quality, teaching us not only about others but also about ourselves (Lorde, 2017). A ‘knowing resistant anger’ can be cultivated in response to silencing: knowing for its epistemic value, and resistant for its ability to withstand silencing practices (Bailey, 2018, p. 103). This type of anger is not an ‘automatic response’ to silencing: it must be consciously worked on. Understanding the origins of one’s anger is crucial here, and they must be brought into focus. This extends its epistemic value from its target audience back to the angry individual. Engaging someone’s anger allows learning more about them and the injustices they face. But equally, addressing our own anger can voice our lived experiences, which in turn can lead us to share grievances – building a vocabulary to collectively denounce injustices we face. These two orientations of epistemic value are therefore intimately synergized: inward or self-reflective epistemic value clarifies anger first to the self, allowing its meaning and message to be conveyed to others more convincingly. Both directions of epistemic value are useful and merit recognition.

Especially due to the particular potential they hold for underprivileged and hermeneutically marginalized people. Anger is a corporeal affect, experienced regardless of whether its feeler has a conceptual framework to categorize those experiences by readily available. Marginalized communities are routinely deprived of the knowledge, resources or education required to build a conceptual narrative that clearly and effectively frames their lived experiences. Hence, abstract notions like ‘feminism’ or ‘sexual harassment’ or

'misogyny' might not resonate with the particularity of their lived experiences. Feeling anger can provide a stepping stone towards building a shared conceptual framework, or function as a framework in itself. Unnamed experiences of anger invite a recognition of that anger, synergizing with other experiences of anger, ultimately informing a comprehensible conceptual framework, facilitating collective consciousness built on shared emotions. In allowing for a categorisation of certain experiences by way of lived and felt experience rather than (immediately) by way of a shared conceptual framework, it can incubate the development of an appropriate bottom-up conceptual framework, and replace those that inadequately reflect a particular reality.

Consequently, feminist anger may bridge unlabelled experiences of injustice with an epistemic framework, allowing women to categorise and connect different experiences of and grounds for anger, and to voice them in a more legible and rhetorically convincing way. Feminist anger, to an extent, offers an epistemic bridge. Once again, Fricker's (2007) discussion of how the introduction of sexual harassment to public awareness reveals the mechanisms of epistemic injustice helps to substantiate this claim. Women had been sexually harassed since the dawn of times, but a term to collectively label these experiences long remained absent. Women knew, of course, that what they experienced was unpleasant, degrading, and harmful – which rightfully angered them. But being deprived from a shared conceptual framework and terminology hindered powerful, effective communication about the grounds for their rage. Only when a group of women came together to talk about their individual experiences, their anger appeared linked not just to individual incidents, but to systemic injustice. The development and circulation of the term 'sexual harassment' was the result of this 'collectivization' of anger, a discursive response to an epistemic need. Initially, these women were brought together by acute feelings of anger, a sense of injustice, of something being amiss. But this led to the introduction of a new vocabulary to address the grounds of their rage. Their anger thus functioned as an epistemic bridge between individual, isolated experiences, and a shared conceptual framework to make sense of these experiences.

Hence, we should be mindful of the outward epistemic value of anger, and this applies specifically to how the privileged respond to the anger of the marginalized. Doing so, the reflections here demonstrate, is a *sine qua non* for true hermeneutical justice. If hermeneutical justice is an alertness to the fact that someone might not be very clear because they lack the necessary hermeneutical resources, not because their message does not make sense (Fricker, 2007, p. 169), attentiveness to anger is required. Instead of being put off by someone's anger and demanding 'calm expression', audiences should try to accept the speaker's angry mode of expression, and read it as a message in itself. When epistemic resources fail and speakers cannot communicate their message effectively, their anger is still there, still intelligible and still recognisable to the audience. Making an effort to listen both to an angrily expressed message and to the anger the message is packaged in signals a step towards a friendlier, more inclusive epistemic climate. Angry activists are often dismissed on the basis of their anger but, as I argued elsewhere (Wallaert, 2020), it is worth making the effort to listen to them regardless of the discomfort their anger may bring. As Fricker writes, 'In so far as the exercise of the virtue at least sometimes involves the creation of a more inclusive hermeneutical micro-climate shared by hearer and speaker, its general exercise is obviously conducive to the generation of new meanings to fill in the offending hermeneutical gaps, and it is thereby conducive to reducing the effects of hermeneutical marginalization.' (Fricker, 2007, p. 174). In the case of feminist anger especially, many single hearers taking an epistemically open and friendly stance towards it can, combined, make a large systemic difference.

Conclusion

This article has mobilized the framework of epistemic injustice to examine the epistemic value of feminist anger. However concise, the literature review of contemporary philosophical research on feminist anger identified a research gap yet to be filled: although

anger and its worth for feminism has been addressed before, its particular *epistemic* value has long escaped attention. As the article shows, there are two distinct ways in which feminist anger might be misunderstood. Feminist anger is routinely subject to testimonial injustice; angry women have historically been and continue to be negatively stereotyped, and face a credibility deficit vis-à-vis their private or public audiences. But feminist anger is just as easily subject to hermeneutical injustice: sustained gaps in our collective hermeneutical resources ensure that neither women nor their audiences can readily and effectively voice the grounds of their anger and the measures needed to address them. But despite these challenges, feminist anger should not and cannot be given up on: it continues to hold communicative properties that have proven to be instrumental to change in the past and will continue to do so in the future. The confrontation with epistemic injustice in both of its forms can and will enrage women, and while this anger might be uncomfortable (especially to those in power), it can challenge existing power structures and hint at alternatives. Indeed, feminist anger offers an epistemic bridge of sorts to overcome the issue of hermeneutical injustice, allowing women to find a common conceptual narrative to voice their own anger and the anger of other women. Feminist anger has epistemic value both to the angry person herself, and to her anger's target audience. By making a point of listening to feminist anger, we learn not just about the issues angry women face, but about the ways in which they are not being believed and the degree to which their experiences go unnoticed and unnamed too. Such anger produces a starting point for epistemic bridges that address these injustices. Rather than arguing for women to express their anger regardless of patriarchal expectations, this should encourage anyone on the receiving end of anger to take it seriously, to listen to it, and to meet it with understanding and care. The burden of change should not be on the victim, so while it is valid to encourage women to express their apt anger rather than stifling it, we must avoid telling victims of misogyny to nurse their anger in order to be heard better. The burden of change should be carried largely by allies. By making a point of listening to justified feminist anger, whether expressed by powerful politicians or grassroots activists, people of all genders can learn to work together to reduce inequality and combat the common denominator of feminist anger: misogyny.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest

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