

Learning from Anger as an Outlaw Emotion: Moving Beyond the Limits of What One Can Hear¹

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We don't know what you want from us anyway. All we can hear is that you're angry, and that doesn't help anyone.²

Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.³

INTRODUCTION

Anger scares me. Seldom will I express anger. I even once considered the disposition to be slow to anger and quick to forgive a moral virtue. Being the target of another's anger, moreover, is something I dreadfully avoided. Fearing anger, however, hinders my ability to use anger when appropriate and also to learn from the appropriate anger of others.⁴

Feminist theorists offer tremendous insights about the epistemological and political significance of anger revealing the intricate ways that anger is related to power. Alison Jaggar⁵ argues that outlaw emotions, emotions that are not congruent with dominant expectations, have the potential to expose and challenge norms that cause errors in our methods of seeking knowledge. Outlaw emotions are often discounted and made unintelligible by discourses of power; in particular, women's anger does not get uptake.⁶ According to Elizabeth Spelman, anger presumes the ability to judge wrongness and tends to have an object.⁷ If the ability to make judgments supposes an agent who can judge, then dismissing women's anger functions to deny women status as subjects.

As a feminist who was learning about the gendered politics of anger, I was simultaneously learning how women of color were often angry with white men and, especially, white feminist women *like me*. In her interrogation of the "angry black woman" stereotype that silences black women, Audre Lorde demystifies the codes of white femininity that prohibit black women from expressing their anger in ways very different from how such codes silence me.⁸ More recently, Sara Ahmed⁹ explains how the discourse of happiness constrains the ability of women of color to point out racism and heterosexism in feminism and how "angry black women" are accused of being the cause of the unhappiness when their anger only exposes injustice that already exists in mystified forms.

Philosophers of education have recently started to recognize the significance of anger in social justice pedagogy. Michalinos Zembylas¹⁰ and Megan Boler,¹¹ for example, argue that in the social justice classroom students of color often express moral anger that is a response to violations of justice, humanity, and dignity. Moral anger is a political emotion and a form of communication having the potential to motivate social change. However, white students often dismiss such anger and are unable to hear black rage. White students end up responding to the *expression of anger* rather than hearing the *message such anger carries*.

In this essay, I am specifically concerned with the obstacles that prevent white students from learning about anger from the anger of the racially marginalized. One of those obstacles, I submit, is the presumption of white innocence. While scholarly attention has justifiably been given to the epistemic and political value of anger in the social justice classroom, there is less analysis of the conceptual tools that can help the systemically privileged hear and learn from such anger. Yet, as bell hooks queries, how can black and white folk “be subjects together if white people remain unable to hear black rage”?¹² How can white students learn to hear the message behind the anger rather than focus on its mode of expression?

The first section of this essay explores the characteristics of anger as an outlaw emotion that differentiate it from moral anger and that underscore the point that “the rage of the oppressed is never the same as the rage of the privileged.”¹³ The second section offers examples that illustrate how presumptions of innocence obstruct the ability of white people to hear what people of color are telling them. Finally, I present some preliminary ideas based on Judith Butler’s work that may help white people counter presumptions of innocence — decentering the subject, opacity of self, and new conceptions of responsibility. I claim that learning from anger as an outlaw emotion is crucial for white students because it keeps them vigilant about their complicity in social injustice and may also contribute to developing coalitions that can work together to challenge injustice.

ANGER AS AN OUTLAW EMOTION

In her critique of the primacy given to reason in traditional epistemology, Alison Jaggar argues that outlaw emotions play a role in knowledge construction. Such emotions are “outlaw” because they go counter to dominant normative expectations and are predominantly expressed by members of subordinated groups who “pay a disproportionately high price for maintaining the status quo.”¹⁴ Jaggar contends that outlaw emotions are subversive because they can contribute to exposing unjust normative and interpretative structures that are often invisible to the systemically privileged. While Jaggar maintains that outlaw emotions are not beyond critique, she underscores that “discordant emotions should be attended to seriously and respectfully rather than condemned, ignored, discounted, or suppressed.”¹⁵

Elizabeth Spelman further explores why outlaw emotions are subversive. According to Spelman, anger as an outlaw emotion is not merely about emotions that are incompatible with dominant normative expectations — for example, a women’s expression of anger is “unfeminine” — but rather anger as an outlaw emotion is threatening to those in power. Spelman explains that there is a connection between expressions of anger and self-worth. When someone expresses anger about the wrongness of subordination and a refusal to accept it, the person is acting as if she or he has the capacity and the right to judge that another has acted unjustly. By expressing anger, the angry person implies that one is in fact a person who has rights. Anger as an outlaw emotion, therefore, constitutes a claim of equality that those in power must dismiss in order to preserve dominance or risk a challenge to the norms that support systemic privilege.

There are at least three effects of such emotional dismissals that I want to mention. First, affirmations of self-worth are constrained by such dismissals and subordination is perpetuated. Second, such emotional dismissals are accomplished by shifting the focus of responsibility from the one who caused the anger to the one who is expressing anger. Shifts of responsibility are manifest in dismissive utterances such as: “*You* are overly sensitive.” “*You* are mad.” “If *you* weren’t so aggressive, people would be able to listen to you.” Finally, such dismissals can generate a “double anger” that works to keep oppression in place. According to Sara Ahmed when a woman of color is read as being against *x* because she is angry rather than being angry because she is against *x*, the result is often that the woman becomes entangled in her anger and angry at not being heard (hence a double anger).¹⁶ Ironically, this can be used by the systemically privileged to validate the dismissal by confirming that only anger grounds the truth behind the woman’s speech.

There are advantages to referring to the anger of the subordinated, about their oppression, as an outlaw emotion rather than merely moral anger. First, as just noted, anger as an outlaw emotion is characterized by its potential to challenge social norms. Moral anger does not necessarily function to challenge oppressive norms and may in fact reproduce them.¹⁷ Second, anger as an outlaw emotion, in contrast to moral anger, unequivocally highlights that the anger of the marginalized is different than the anger of the privileged. Third, anger as an outlaw emotion opposes injustice yet the typical response to such anger is itself *a manifestation* of injustice. Dismissals of outlaw emotions can further mask subordination and protect injustice from contestation.

Understanding anger as an outlaw emotion emphasizes that not taking such anger seriously is not just an individualistic response but also a pervasive discursive pattern that is a form of complicity in systemic injustice. Not only are dismissals of anger a form of disrespect, but they also serve to *safeguard the innocence of the dominant group*. This is most palpable in the ways in which responsibility is shifted away from the one who stands to learn from anger to the one expressing anger. By focusing on the expression of anger and blaming the person who expresses anger, dominant group members can avoid considering how they might have contributed to what caused the anger. This defensiveness relationally positions the one who dismisses anger outside the framework of systemic injustice and consequently protects his or her innocence. Shifting the blame to the other, thus, constitutes one as an innocent subject.

This might explain why white students often perceive anger as an outlaw emotion as an attack. They might feel their moral innocence is being challenged. In the next section, I explore some examples where whites’ desire to safeguard their white innocence gets in the way of them considering how they might be complicit in racism.

PRESUMING INNOCENCE

It is the innocence which constitutes the crime.¹⁸

In 2012, as part of the Un-Fair Campaign¹⁹ in Duluth, Minnesota, a number of billboards were plastered along major roads with messages like “It’s hard to see racism when you’re white.”²⁰ The goal of the campaign was to create dialogue but

many of the city's white residents complained that the campaign was offensive because it blamed whites for racism. Many of the white residents of Duluth insisted that they are innocent of racism because they don't focus on the color of a person's skin but rather treat everyone as human beings. A Facebook entry initiated by some white residents of Duluth, however, proclaimed "Anti-racist is a code word for anti-white."²¹ The presumption of innocence was blocking the campaign's message from getting through.

The conflicts among feminists around competing marginalities teach us a lot about the dangers of presumed innocence. Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack refer to the "race to innocence" which they define as "a deeply felt belief that each of us, as women, is not implicated in the subordination of other women."²² When white feminists make claims about the exclusivity of their own perceived marginality, they protect white innocence because the focus is on how they are victims and so cannot be implicated in the oppression of others. Fellows and Razack suggest that feminists begin the process of feeling less innocent if they want to contribute to social change.

Critical analysis of systemic oppression can be thwarted by presumptions of innocence. Sarita Srivastava recounts how women of color raised concerns about racism at a Toronto shelter for battered women.²³ June Callwood, a prominent white Canadian philanthropist and chair of the board, reproached the women of color for complaining about racism when they had received so much aid from the shelter. Since benevolence is considered "good," the innocence of the one who bestows benevolence is secured and any implication one might have in perpetuating social injustice can be ignored. The reminder of the good white women who help women of color brought any discussion about the racism existing at the hostel to an end. Audrey Thompson similarly argues that a preoccupation with being "good" can block challenges to systemic oppression.²⁴

Remaining focused on the self and preoccupied with one's moral innocence makes broader analyses of racism difficult. Srivastava concludes "that some of the deadlocks of anti-racist efforts are linked to these preoccupations with morality and self."²⁵ The struggle to maintain innocence can become an obstacle to learning from anger as an outlaw emotion. Whites' ability to name such emotional investments might require theoretical tools that de-center the focus on innocence and reframe how they hear such anger.

DECENTERED SUBJECTS, OPACITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

We are foreign both to ourselves and to others.²⁶

In what follows I borrow from the work of Judith Butler in order to sketch out some preliminary suggestions about conceptual tools that can counter the move to protect innocence. I begin with a brief discussion of the *subject as an effect of discourse* and then demonstrate how Butler's notion of opacity of self and her new conception of responsibility offer possibilities to transform defensiveness into vigilance.

Butler's work has consistently focused on exposing the dangers of assuming the self as sovereign or as the sole source of one's own desires, intentions, and agency. Following Michel Foucault, Butler begins with the notion that the subject is authored.

The subject is not an essential being with a knowable core but rather a discursive effect of productive power. This is relevant to our discussion because presumptions of innocence are supported by the notion of a sovereign, autonomous subject who can stand outside of systems of power in order to be innocent. The understanding of the subject as sovereign conceals the subtle and not so subtle ways that the subject is complicit in the performative iterations of norms. According to Butler, the subject is not only inaugurated by norms but the subject must also continually perform or reiterate these norms (often unconsciously) in order to conserve its status as a recognizable subject within a particular regime of truth. Thus, the subject is complicit in maintaining dominant norms through performative repetition.

Butler insists, however, that to critique the sovereign self is not to eliminate the subject. Rather it is to expose what certain conceptions of the subject prevent us from considering, that is, that power works through the subject and how the subject performs exclusionary norms that perpetuate injustice. Although the subject is a product of discourse, the subject is not determined. In fact, according to Butler “agency begins where sovereignty wanes.”²⁷ Norms are not fully realizable²⁸ and require constant repetition by subjects. Yet it is within the repetition of norms that subversion becomes possible because subjects can repeat discourse differently. The theory of performativity not only makes room for agency but also establishes a relationship between the system of norms, subject formation, and subversion.

This conception of subject formation and its emphasis on performativity can facilitate white students’ understanding that they may be discursively reproducing racial injustice without knowing it. While they are not the originators of the discourse they reiterate, by repeating discursive practices they are complicit, often unwittingly, in upholding dominant norms. Butler can provide conceptual tools for doing whiteness differently.

Opacity of self follows from the idea of the subject as an effect of discourse and has become the cornerstone for Butler’s new conception of responsibility. By opacity, Butler is not referring to some psychological not-knowing of oneself. Rather her understanding of opacity follows from her understanding of subject as constituted through norms that represent the limits of what one can know. Responsibility, according to Butler, begins with the humbling realization that there are always normative limits that mediate who we are and the intelligibility of the other we encounter. The very meaning of responsibility, she insists, must be reconsidered “on the basis of this (self) limitation, it cannot be tied to the conceit of a self fully transparent to itself.”²⁹

Self-knowledge will always remain incomplete. We can never give a full account of ourselves because at the very moment the “I” speaks the “I” is already dispossessed by normative frames that one must conform to and that are exclusionary. In order to be intelligible, our narratives have to “fit” with the normative frameworks that are available to us, but the “I” is always in excess of these norms that “are not of our making.”³⁰ Acknowledging that I cannot fully know myself is to acknowledge one’s epistemic limits and this *can counter the certainty of one’s moral innocence*.

Moreover, Butler maintains that subjectivity emerges by being addressed by the other, a relationship that is also always mediated by available normative frames of intelligibility. If normative frameworks constrain the encounter between the subject and others, then we can inquire about the norms through which the relationship is mediated. For instance, through what norms does one interpret anger? Acknowledging opacity, Butler contends, is also important for recognizing the other as the other is. Not only is self-knowledge incomplete, one can also never fully know the other. Both the subject and the other emerge within the context of limited frames of intelligibility. Instead of expecting to know the other fully, we should let the question of the other remain an open one and we must “become critical of the norms under which we are asked to act.”³¹

Butler develops a notion of responsibility based on the acknowledgment of this unknowability and on the critical interrogation of the limits of knowing. As Butler puts it, “my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others.”³² Acknowledging opacity opens a *space for transformation* in the encounter with the other, a space that encourages vulnerability and openness rather than invulnerability and closure.³³

In addition, understanding how normative frameworks limit our encounter with others allows for a conception of responsibility that is not about who is to blame. An exclusive focus on individual blame assumes the sovereign self is the sole cause of harm and leaves the system of dominant norms intact. White students require a notion of responsibility that acknowledges they are not the originators of injustice and yet they can still be complicit in discursively sustaining it. This notion of responsibility does not relieve discomfort but generates discomfort in productive and subversive ways by underscoring the role of critique.

Critique, for Butler, is a practice in which we pose the question of the limits of our most sure ways of knowing³⁴ and involves “living in the anxiety of that questioning without closing it down too quickly.”³⁵ Such critique not only fosters more inclusive categories of what is possible but, as Sara Rushing explains, it is to trouble normative boundaries themselves “by showing solidarity with the as-of-yet-unintelligible.”³⁶ This can be the basis of coalition building. The risks and anguish that such critique incurs will be discomforting, for certain. But staying with this discomfort is worthwhile because “our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.”³⁷ To learn from anger as an outlaw emotion is discomforting, but to stay with that discomfort promises to offer insights about what has been foreclosed and what might be. *Staying with* the tension that critique of norms engenders is not only crucial for the type of responsibility that Butler promotes but also offers insights about ourselves and the social world we live in.

CONCLUSION

Encouraging students to make a shift away from perceiving themselves as sites of complete self-possession and toward subjects as effects of discourse can disrupt presumptions of innocence. In his discussion of the embodied white racist, George Yancy explains that “one is not *the* ego-logical sovereign that governs its own meaning,

definition, and constitution” and emphasizes that white being is always relationally constituted.³⁸ Social justice pedagogy should encourage white students to critically question the norms that mediate their encounters with others. And this is especially important, as Yancy notes, when white people hold conceptions of themselves as post-race. Acknowledging opacity, for Yancy, is essential for taking responsibility for white discursive practices.

Yancy also emphasizes the dangers of assuming there is an exit, an outside of racist structures, for whites. Whiteness is “deferred by the sheer complexity of the fact that one is never self-transparent, that one is ensconced within structural and material power racial hierarchies.”³⁹ For Yancy, to assume one is outside of power and privilege is “precisely the problematic white self of power and privilege.”⁴⁰ This supports Audrey Thompson’s contention “There is no such thing as racial innocence; there is only racial responsibility or irresponsibility.”⁴¹ The aporetic nature of white responsibility consists in that whites are responsible but are not solely responsible for racism and that whites cannot escape this racist system. That is why vigilance is crucial. Vigilance, according to Yancy, involves the “*continuous* effort on the part of whites to forge new ways of seeing, knowing, and being.”⁴² Butler’s emphasis on opacity can help encourage such vigilance.

Instead of reading anger as an attack, white students may be encouraged to ask “In what ways do our interpretations and responses to anger interpellate us as innocent and shield us from considering our complicity in what caused the anger?” Acknowledging that one can never give a complete account of oneself can promote a vigilant openness to how one is complicit in injustice and a willingness to stay in places of discomfort because the unease of such spaces provides new opportunities to learn.

When white students are encouraged to re-interpret anger as both, about me and not only about me, they may be less likely to respond with discursive dismissals. Even when they are accused of being racist, they may shift from hearing anger as an attack to hearing anger as a communication. They may be more willing to remain in the discomfort because they understand that discomfort can open up worlds. Acknowledging opacity and new conceptions of responsibility can provide conceptual tools that help white students let go of the binary trap of guilt versus innocence.

Moreover, coalitions with the marginalized become possible when white students give up being defensive and exploitative. The call for white students to learn from the anger of the marginalized is about making it possible to work together to disrupt and transform unjust systems. Introducing white students to the opacity of self and a decentered responsibility may facilitate their ability to learn from anger and build coalitions that can fight injustice. These conceptual tools may help white students to not specifically move beyond but more specifically to work toward transforming the limits of what they can hear.

1. I borrow this title from Judith Butler, “Explanation and Exoneration, or What We Can Hear,” in *Pre-carious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso Books, 2004), 1–18.

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25. Srivastava, "'You're Calling Me a Racist?,'" 31.
26. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 84.
27. Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 15–16.
28. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 126.
29. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 83.
30. *Ibid.*, 21.
31. *Ibid.*, 24.
32. *Ibid.*, 84.
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