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Safety valves for mediated female rage in the #Metoo era

Shani Orgad and Rosalind Gill

In political discourse, popular and media culture, female rage is “having a moment.” More and more women are getting publicly and unapologetically angry, particularly in relation to sexual violence, but also in reaction to other forms of sexism, racism and injustice. Yet, it is also clear that the release of female anger in public culture is uneven ---- in terms of class, race, age, sexuality, disability --- and that powerful mechanisms continue long legacies of pathologizing this anger, situating it as a problem with a woman’s body, her hormones or her mental state. Rage is thus simultaneously “an instrument of patriarchy as well as a potential feminist resource... operating both for and against feminism: visceral, transgressive, galvanizing, and socially constructed” (Signs 2018).

In the following short essay, we are interested in the ways in which female anger may become legible as feminist rage, and, conversely, in how the possibilities of rage are undone. We analyse ways in which female rage is allowed to enter the mediated public sphere and in which it is simultaneously contained and disavowed. We start by briefly locating the current expressions of female rage in media and culture within the history of female rage and its prohibition in public. We then present our empirical analysis of one of the early #MeToo ‘flashpoints’ (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018a) of female rage: the mediation of Hollywood actress Uma Thurman’s anger about sexual violence and coercion.

Female rage in public life

Historically, women who expressed their anger --- especially lower-class women whose speech was deemed “riotous” or “troublesome” --- were subjected to barbaric corporeal punishments (Megan Garber 2017; Andy Zeisler 2018). These have given way to various less

brutal, but arguably equally miasmatic and effective forms of regulating women's anger. Most notable is the systematic denigration of female rage as inappropriate or disruptive, pathologised as hysteria or dismissed as paranoia. For women of colour this is particularly potent, positioning them as "always already" angry, an anger that has not been explained as a reaction to living in racist societies, but as a further way of pathologising black women (Brittney Cooper 2018).

Commenting on the pathologisation of female rage, the blogger Katy Guest (2018) notes how when she tried searching "angry women in fiction" Google suggested she might want to look for "female anger disorders." Indeed, the contemporary Anglo-American mediated public sphere has been marked by the conspicuous invisibilising of angry women: from Hollywood films' overwhelmingly sanitised representations of well-behaved women (Lisa Purse 2016), through the pressure on women not to come across as angry in political life, to the rise of the idealized "cool girl," whose emotional vocabulary does not include "anger and its attendant inconveniences" (Garber 2017).

However, female rage is not completely absent in contemporary culture. Rather, as several feminist scholars underline, women's anger has been systematically contained and reconfigured, modulated and rechannelled into something else. In her discussion of the figure of the "angry black woman," Sara Ahmed (2010, p.68) observes that the woman's anger is a judgment that something is wrong, but that it is then read as unattributable and, thus, unreasonable (see also Ahmed 2013-2019). Angela McRobbie (2009) has underscored the containment and redirection of female rage in contemporary (post-feminist) culture, as a way of pre-empting the re-invention of feminist politics. The media's focus often becomes the anger women direct at themselves—a cultural script that fits, and in turn reinforces, the familiar and legible tropes of female self-beratement, low self-esteem and discontent.

For Lauren Berlant (1988, 2008), the disarming and containment of female rage occur crucially through their displacement to juxtapolitical intimate publics that is emotional spaces that seem to offer “*relief from the political*” (Berlant 2008:10, emphasis in original) . They may be located in aesthetic and cultural mass-mediated texts circulating squarely in the world of women’s popular culture (such as, e.g., romance, melodrama and self-help). Rather than the forces of anger and critique, the genre that flourishes here is what Berlant calls “the female complaint” (1988, 245) which operates “as ‘safety valves’ for surplus female rage and desire” (ibid). Thus, the female complaint constitutes a site of resistance to the messages and practices of patriarchal dominance while implicitly foreclosing any action to change the fundamental conditions of the complaint's production. The energy and force in anger, which could contribute to political change and growth (Audre Lorde 1981), are displaced to the realm of feeling and sentimentality, turned inwards and depoliticized.

While the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s saw some instances of feminist public rage from political manifestoes such as that of Valerie Solonas’s SCUM, to artistic projects including Martha Rosler’s Semiotics of the Kitchen, since the mid-1990s, female anger seems to be increasingly marginalised in mainstream media and culture. Indeed, several authors (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018b; Rosalind Gill and Shani Orgad 2017; Catherine Rottenberg 2018) have highlighted how, in the context of these wider economic, social, political and cultural processes towards post-feminism and neoliberalism, female anger, rage or complaint are systematically outlawed. There is a palpable favouring of positive affect and a proscription of “negative” feelings (Rosalind Gill 2016). Considered “political,” such feelings are frequently repudiated or refigured in terms of injunctions to work on the self.

Against the consistent containment, policing, muting and outlawing of the expression of women’s anger in media and culture, the current moment, specifically in the wake of the

#MeToo movement, seems to represent a radical break. But what characterises the articulation and representation of female public figures' anger in the current moment and, crucially, what do these mediated appearances obscure, contain or undo? Part of a wider project on the incitement and intelligibility of certain feelings, affects and dispositions in contemporary culture such as confidence, happiness, resilience, vulnerability and rage (Gill & Orgad 2015; 2017; 2018; Orgad & Gill, 2020), we now turn to an example to explore these themes. We use Berlant's (1988) metaphor of safety valves to examine one of the momentous expressions of female rage in the first weeks of the #MeToo campaign: Uma Thurman's.

Uma Thurman: "Roaring rampage of revenge"?

Safety valve 1: lauding women's self-policing of their rage

In October 2017, when stories of sexual abuse by Harvey Weinstein and other senior men in the entertainment industry started emerging, the television entertainment news show *Access Hollywood* asked Thurman for her thoughts on "women speaking out about inappropriate behaviour in the workplace." In the clip, which went viral the following month, Thurman, clenching her jaw, taking frequent deep breaths and carefully articulating a few words at a time, responded: "I don't have a tidy sound bite for you, because I've learned ---I am not a child --- and I have learned that when I've spoken in anger, I usually regret the way I express myself. So I've been waiting to feel less angry. And when I'm ready, I'll say what I have to say."

Thurman's response was an example of public restraint of female rage *par excellence*. Situated at the heart of the "American female culture industry" (Berlant 2008), Thurman visibly worked to repress her emotion. Positioning herself in contradistinction to the impulsive child who cannot control her anger and later regrets it, her words and tone fitted neatly the dominant cultural script denouncing female rage as emotional immaturity. Notably, Thurman's public declaration was overwhelmingly lauded by commentators in the press and social media. A New

York Times (NYT thereafter) article described it as “a triumphant vision of female anger,” exalting Thurman’s rage as “palpable yet contained” (Leslie Jamison 2018), while the UK daily Independent praised Thurman for “speaking slowly, carefully, and with clear self-restraint” (Clarisse Loughrey 2017). Lydia Polgreen (cited in Shannon Carlin 2017), editor in chief of The Huffington Post, tweeted “The controlled rage here is incredible,” and an article (Carlin 2017) in the post-feminist digital platform Refinery29.com, stated: “It’s hard not to be in awe of Thurman’s response, which is so poised and controlled.”

Safety valve 2: Announcing anger becomes the story

A few weeks later Thurman posted on her Twitter account a Thanksgiving message venting some of her anger at Harvey Weinstein with whom she worked on several films:

I am grateful today, to be alive, for all those I love, and for all those who have the courage to stand up for others.

I said I was angry recently, and I have a few reasons, #metoo, in case you couldn’t tell by the look on my face.

I feel it’s important to take your time, be fair, be exact, so... Happy Thanksgiving Everyone! (Except you Harvey, and all your wicked conspirators - I’m glad it’s going slowly - you don’t deserve a bullet) -stay tuned

The tweet allows the release of a measured amount of anger but purposefully refuses its “uncontrollable” discharge: “I’m glad it’s going slowly... stay tuned,” Thurman signed off cryptically. On the one hand, the text draws on and reinforces the holiday spirit of gratitude --an affect historically associated with femininity --- and demonstrates the restraint that for decades women have been demanded to exercise over their angry thoughts, feelings, and speech. On the other hand, the tweet cleverly uses the conventional affective register of heart-warming thankfulness to create irony, and deliver a message directed at Weinstein and all his

“wicked conspirators.” Thurman posted the text next to her image as the assassin, the Bride, in the film Kill Bill 2 which was produced by Weinstein’s company Miramax. Specifically, the image is from a scene where the vengeful Bride lays out her plan:

Bill’s last bullet put me in a coma. A coma I was to lie in for four years. When I woke up, I went on what the movie advertisements refer to as a “roaring rampage of revenge.”¹

The intertextual relationship between Thurman and the Bride charges the message with rage and the promise of revenge. Eschewing the image of the irrational and hysterical angry woman, the tweet displays an alternative, effective form of female anger: one that is premeditated, focused, and precise. At the same time, rather than making legible the injustice which was the source of Thurman’s rage, the anger itself became the story in the manner discussed by Sara Ahmed (Ahmed 2010). “Uma Thurman had a brutal Thanksgiving message,” the Washington Post declared; “Thurman breaks her angry silence,” read the title of the Metro newspaper (Sarah Deen 2017); and Fox News.com announced that “Uma Thurman rips Harvey Weinstein in Thanksgiving Day Instagram post.”²

Focusing on the expression of Thurman’s anger detracts from concern over the cause for her anger. This was vividly pronounced in the NYT (Maureen Dowd 2018) article entitled “This Is Why Uma Thurman Is Angry.” The article reports several sexual assaults that Thurman recounts having experienced from Weinstein as well as accusations that the Kill Bill director Quentin Tarantino, had put her life in danger by making her perform a dangerous stunt. On the one hand, the interview-based article finally detailed the causes of Thurman’s anger. It exposed the sexual abuse and violence to which Thurman had been subjected, joining many similar stories that continue to pour out into the public eye, which collectively amplify the

perniciousness of Hollywood's sexist culture. It challenged the "bad apples" narrative that frames people like Weinstein and Tarantino as deviant "monsters."

Yet at the same time, as suggested by its title, the NYT article centres rage as a key, even constitutive, element of Thurman's identity, constructing it as pathological. This is manifest already in the article's opening sentences:

Yes, Uma Thurman is mad.

She has been raped. She has been sexually assaulted. She has been mangled in hot steel.

She has been betrayed and gaslighted by those she trusted.

And we're not talking about her role as the blood-spattered bride in "Kill Bill." We're talking about a world that is just as cutthroat, amoral, vindictive and misogynistic as any Quentin Tarantino hellscape.

We're talking about Hollywood, where even an avenging angel has a hard time getting respect, much less bloody satisfaction.

Describing Thurman as "mad," of course, has multiple meanings here. It is part of a long history, rooted in the construction of women as hysterics, but it also is an Americanism for "angry." Furthermore it is subject to attempts to reclaim and resignify it (Traister 2018). The article can be understood as a powerful record of the suffering Thurman endured, but also as subtly undermining her, e.g. through highlighting the "surreal" character of this list of abuses. Above all it is striking how it continues to animate the intertextuality of Thurman's real and the Bride's fictional experience (in Kill Bill), almost as if the reality would not in itself justify her rage.

Safety valve 3: putting anger back in its place --- the individualized self-help narrative

The NYT article is peppered with references to Thurman's calm and composed personality. Dowd describes Thurman's consistent "Zen outlook" and emphasises her relationship to Buddhism: "Her hall features a large golden Buddha from her parents in Woodstock; her father, Robert Thurman, is a Buddhist professor of Indo-Tibetan studies at Columbia who thinks Uma is a reincarnated goddess." This emphasis drips with mockery, painting a picture that manages to reference wealth, privilege and 'fringe' beliefs about reincarnation, while completely individualising Thurman's calm and self-restraint. It also sits uncomfortably with other aspects of Dowd's depiction of Thurman, making available readings of hypocrisy and shallowness. For example, Thurman is described as "looking anguished in her elegant apartment River House on Manhattan's East Side, as she vaped tobacco, sipped white wine and fed empty pizza boxes into the fireplace". At the same time, it may imply that her suppression of anger is insincere, masked by the veneer of her "Zen outlook." "But beneath that reserve and golden aura, she has learned to be a street fighter," Dowd writes, a metaphor that further individualises Thurman's response and behaviour, but fails to question why she, and many other women subjected to injustice and the silencing of their anger, have (finally) had to learn to fight back.

The article ends with Thurman's reflection on the life-lesson she has learnt:

Personally, it has taken me 47 years to stop calling people who are mean to you "in love" with you. It took a long time because I think that as little girls we are conditioned to believe that cruelty and love somehow have a connection and that is like the sort of era that we need to evolve out of.

Concluding the article with this moral re-inscribes Thurman's rage squarely in the realm of the juxtapolitical (Berlant 2008) and in a narrative of self-realization. The proffered solution is to overcome women's "pathology" of confusing love and cruelty in intimate

relationships. Although Thurman's words recognise that this is a product of the way women have been "conditioned" to think and feel, they nevertheless locate the responsibility to change in women alone. There is no mention of taking action to change the fundamental conditions that produced these beliefs and consequent injustice and suffering. Importantly, the message is framed within the therapeutic self-help narrative: Thurman's journey of "evolving," to use her words, is offered as a model for women. Thus, after struggling to enunciate her rage in public --- waiting to feel less angry, releasing it in a slow and measured fashion --- Thurman's rage is re-rendered in individual terms. Rather than a protest against sexual injustice and violence, the focus becomes the anger she has directed at herself, for failing to recognize that meanness and cruelty are not expressions of love.

Conclusion

This has been a necessarily brief analysis of the mediation of one white, non-disabled, conventionally-beautiful, cisgendered female celebrity in Hollywood --- with all the limitations implied by such a distinct and singular focus. Indeed it is interesting to think about how Thurman's whiteness, her thinness and her striking good looks help to facilitate a reading of her as 'controlled' -- in stark distinction to Brittney Cooper's (2018) discussions about how her fat black body is read as always-already charged with aggression. Here we have examined how Thurman's anger "broke through" in mediated public space, yet, simultaneously, was remediated and contained. We would argue that the mediation of Thurman's rage --- from her first public expression of "waiting to feel less angry" to the much-circulated NYT article discussed above --- has operated as what Berlant would call a "safety valve" for female rage. It allowed a slow but powerful discharge of anger about Thurman's experiences of rape and coercion, while at the same time displacing this rage into the realm of the private and the personal. In this way it shifted discussion away from the legitimate causes of Thurman's anger and their structural roots, to a focus on how she

conducted herself (with restraint and calm) and how she made over her flawed psychic reality (mistaking cruelty for love). Thus, for all the celebration of “angry sisterhood...taking over the small screen” (Arielle Bernstein 2018) and women’s unleashing of decades of pent-up anger, our analysis acts as an important reminder that even when unleashed, this anger continues to be carefully regulated so as not to exceed the “safe” level allowed by a patriarchal system.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2017/11/uma-thurman-leaves-caa-instagram-deserve-bullet-revenge-harvey-weinstein>

² <http://www.foxnews.com/entertainment/2017/11/23/uma-thurman-rips-harvey-weinstein-in-thanksgiving-day-instagram-post.html>