

Fuck the Patriarchy: Towards an intersectional politics of irreverent rage

My impetus for writing this comes from noticing just how many times the word “fuck” comes up in contemporary feminist protests against injustice. In April 2019 [Huffpost](#) reports on Julia Louis-Dreyfus’ response to whether she will see a female president in her time: “I fucking better” (Jenna Amatulli, 2019). Adding the word fuck ratchets up the urgency, as it also grabs the headline in the context of a less censorious and more diffuse, networked press. Activists in 2015 challenging a “traditional marriage” rally in Sydney were arrested for the chant “When I say same sex, you say marriage. Same sex. Marriage. Same sex. Marriage. When I say bigots, you say fuck off. Bigots. Fuck off. Bigots. Fuck off” (see Elysa Methven, 2016). Now the slogan “Fuck the Patriarchy” has gained considerable currency on T shirts, mugs and other merchandising, but so too has the older black activist slogan “Fuck the police” which seems ever more relevant to the Black Lives Matter movement. Protest at the recent women’s marches included signs which read “Feminist as fuck” and “I still can’t believe I have to protest this fucking shit” --- and then there’s the beautiful trending hashtag “#FuckTrump”, to name just a few examples.

‘Fuck you’

But what’s in a word? Fuck is one of the most common and intense of all the swear words in the English language and has demonstrated incredible resilience and spawned numerous uses.¹ Linguists identify its dual meaning: both its literal use ‘to copulate’, as well as its figurative uses such as ‘to deceive’. The word gains its vernacular power precisely because it is taboo – it is both everywhere and yet also to be denied (Christopher M. Fairman, 2007). Its use is policed and often quite literally outlawed --- and yet its use is also exciting and

thrilling. But potentially “fuck” is most useful in political slogans because of its figurative use to deny the power of those to whom it is directed: “I don’t give a fuck”, “fuck you”.

“Fuck you” enables an ambiguous proposition because the double meaning of the word incorporates the sexual act. In Misha Kavka’s (2018) brilliant keynote at the Celebrity Studies conference she outlined a shift from “Fuck me to Fuck you celebrity” in the wake of the #MeToo movement, as a process of de-sacralising celebrity. This is a shift from a demure “fuck me” agreement to not mention sex to a “fuck you” that openly talks about the imbrication of sex with power that explicitly refuses to be shamed. When we say, “Fuck the patriarchy”, we don’t really mean fuck more men ... do we? But we might mean to take back some power in fucking, because embedded in those fucks are also our own desires (whether that’s actually fucking men or not). “Fuck you” suggests the power in upturning the historically heterosexist assumptions in the power of fucking, and tearing down the shackles of the Madonna/whore binary.

In this short piece, I want to speculate about what this seemingly energised prevalence of the word fuck in the feminist political sphere might signal about this current moment’s public expression of anger. A recent corpus study of everyday speech in the UK shows that women now use the F word more than men, and that since the 1990s women’s use of the word has risen by some 500 percent (Simon Holmes, 2018). I want to suggest that its increasing ubiquity might be a symptom of more hopeful shifts in the denial of regulatory power --- shifts that also offer forms of intersectional and affective connection against that regulatory power. To begin with one personal example, if you will indulge me. I remember starting out as a PhD student and being told that I might struggle because of my working-class “restricted code” (Basil Bernstein, 1971). “Fuck you”, I thought, though of course I did not verbalise it. In that “fuck” resides both the problem I am being called out for --- evidence of my “restricted code” which means a lack of ability to elaborate my language in middle-class

terms --- as well as my reactionary and ultimately resistive response. But this is possibly why that word can be such a useful vessel for articulating our collective reaction to all manner of injustices as they take their initial, visceral form. “Fuck you” is an embodied, transgressive response that is truncated and catchy in the current hyper-affective social media climate, and its use of taboo perhaps sets in motion the urges to resist the regulatory norms that are meant to keep us in our place.

Irreverent rage

In Angela McRobbie’s (2009) discussion of “illegible rage”, she outlines the way in which patriarchal consumerist culture produces an internalised rage in the postfeminist girl who is encouraged to “find the resources within herself to regain the self-esteem which is always inevitably lost” (p111). Her discussion of this internalisation draws upon Judith Butler’s ideas about “heterosexual melancholia” which describe how those who find the masquerade of heteronormativity too difficult can become confronted by a series of pathologies. For McRobbie, the popular culture of postfeminism asks young girls to get used to this gendered melancholia which has also denied them the promise of feminist sisterhood. This produces in the girl a rage turned in on herself through self-loathing, self-harm, and often alcohol and substance abuse --- it is an internalised illegible rage of self-beratement born from constantly wrestling with the heightened terms of self-regulation. Moving on from McRobbie’s work in this moment of renewed public feminisms, I wonder if we can expand the terms of this discussion. Woven into this fabric of illegible rage are a number of figures --- the anorexic girl, the girl who self-harms, and the out-of-control (and ultimately tragic) celebrity exemplified by the figure of Amy Winehouse. Whilst this is a spectrum, it also potentially collapses too much, especially given how race and class reconfigure postfeminist realities.

Working-class girls have a different relationship to regulatory forms of respectability than their middle-class counterparts (Beverley Skeggs, 1997). Depictions which have constructed the out-of-control “train-wreck girl” have done so because she also possesses a particularly classed and raced transgression of a middle-class regulatory norm --- that of composure --- which is offensive precisely because she is claiming a public space to which she is not understood as entitled. Whilst there may be seeds of this in the binge-drinking ladette, we might also see it in the hyper-sexed girl of reality TV, as she eschews the shame of the public and quite literally and consciously “spits herself out” (Helen Wood, 2017). Last September, when Serena Williams got angry with the umpire and smashed her racket after his suggestion of cheating and questioning her character, she was given a code violation, but Serena called out the sexism (and racism) of the uneven treatment of men’s and women’s emotions on the court --- and by and large the Twittersphere came out in admiration of her.ⁱⁱ Cat Pause and Sandra Grey (2018) argue that fat female activists are challenging the gendered norms of political life in the very space that they take up; Cat’s Twitter bio reads, “Tearing down white supremacy w/my fat fingers”. These examples, albeit in very different ways, celebrate the deliberate transgression of regulatory norms by already-marked bodies.

I therefore want to argue for a category of ‘irreverent rage’ that might be politically productive in the current climate. Instead of turning the rage of regulatory pressure inwards to make it illegible, this rage turns it outwards, precisely to publicly trouble regulatory power. This is irreverence which comes from older entanglements with “respectability politics” which speak to histories of subordination through which working-class, black and (we should add) queer bodies, are seen to be “in place” as long as they show the required deference to authority, and show willingness to achieve appropriate forms of respectability. Deference, in Weberian terms, explains how capital relations are a product of a Protestant ethic which morally encodes positions of superiority and inferiority. “Fuck you” fucks that off. In Britain,

class identification has gone through enormous shifts in last century, with the refusal of older class boundaries despite growing structural inequalities. Whilst this has been lamented as a political problem for solidarity and fuel for populism, one consequence has been a political and cultural shift away from deference (Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2018).

On giving no fucks

Brittney Cooper's (2019) book on *Eloquent Rage* also makes use of a number of fucks, and fucking, in which she describes the black girl's rage as located in "sass" when rage itself is too dangerous to display. Cooper's treatise is to try to focus that visceral experience toward a more productive and "eloquent" energy. Importantly, she discusses the harm done to black men and women through respectability politics, whether that's in relation to work, family and parenting, as well as in the more recent police shootings of unarmed black women and men for refusing to show enough deference at a traffic sign. For Cooper, "respectability projects at their core are a rage-management project" (151), and when Michelle Obama turned up to her last day at the White House for Trump's inauguration in a ponytail and casual dress, Cooper suggests respectability politics, at least on the public stage, died. Cooper's phrase to describe this significant moment is a "fuck-deficiency" --- to give no fucks as a way of registering the disdain towards Trump's inauguration.

The postfeminist project told us that a lack of respectability was related to low self-esteem --- that "out- of-control" girls needed therapy to work on themselves as individualised solutions to *their* problems. But for Cooper "rage and respectability cannot co-exist" and of course self-esteem for all women should not be moored to regulatory forms of respectability.

Michael Adams (2016) describes the way in which profanities can offer us emotional release as well as help to generate and sustain group solidarity. This gives us the possibility that

eschewing respectability could actively involve channelling esteem into more public, collective and political moments of “fuck you”. Whilst there is a proliferation across the mediascape of the word fuck, especially in celebrity feminist soundbites, I am wondering whether a seed of change can also be seen in our mainstream political landscape?

Consider two female political figures that are currently gaining prominence in Britain and the US with profiles that also engage consistently with social media and with the condensed form of Twitter. One is Jess Phillips (Labour MP for Yardley in Birmingham) and the other is Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (US Representative for New York’s 14th district The Bronx). Both figures represent ethnically diverse neighbourhoods and their social identity is central to their left feminist politics. In March 2019, both women have had politically charged “rants” (as they have been labelled) go viral. These rants draw upon their personal and impassioned speeches connected to the poor and diverse neighbourhoods that they represent. Jess Phillips gave her speech about austerity on Sky News, where she described the country as at “breaking point”, said:

They can't afford to cut the grass in our local parks. This isn't Maidenhead or Maidstone, this is a deprived area - 36% of the children live in poverty... Children who are out of school are ending up in gangs and killing each other where I live. It needs more money it is as simple as that. They can say the Labour Party love to spend money. Do you know what? I like spending money more than I like children in poverty.ⁱⁱⁱ

AOC’s so called viral “rant” came in response to the recent voting down of her Green New Deal; she responded to the claims that the environment is an ‘elitist’ issue, reminding them that a year ago she was a taco waitress who only recently could afford health-care:

This is not an elitist issue, this is a quality of life issue... tell that to the kids of the South Bronx who are suffering from the highest rates of child asthma. Tell that to the families in Flint whose kids -their blood is ascending in lead levels --- their brains are damaged for the rest of their lives...^{iv}

Whilst neither of these rants carry with them a round of fucks, it's hard not to think that they are not too far away. Perhaps I am too optimistic that the evolving diversity of the UK parliament and the House of Representatives will deliver vital change^v since representation needs to be followed by policy, but maybe at the least these are early signs.

These speeches certainly do not display the kind of “composure” so brilliantly displayed by Christine Blasey Ford, Anita Hill, or that which Uma Thurman is wrestling with as she tries to talk about Weinstein (as discussed elsewhere in this section). Composure, which --- for good reason --- public women have carefully crafted in order to be taken seriously by cis-gendered, white, straight, middle-class men does not always seem to work, because the rules of “affective injustice” seem to be constantly shifting (Kay and Banet-Weiser in this section). Perhaps licensed by their raced and classed identities, AOC and Jess Phillips seem to embody something different. Jess Phillips has become known for telling people to “fuck off” and, when asked about her difficult relationship with the Labour Party has famously said, “But it doesn't own me, it's nothing more than a logo. If it doesn't stand for something I care about, then it's just a fucking rose.” As AOC was signed in as the youngest ever US congresswoman, an anonymous Twitter account tried to humiliate her by posting a video of her dancing on a roof top in college with the tweet, “Here is America's favorite commie know-it-all acting like the clueless nitwit she is”. Her response was to release a video of her dancing as she enters her office on Capitol Hill, to Edwin Starr's Motown hit “War”, with the tweet “I hear the GOP thinks women dancing are scandalous. Wait till they find out

Congresswomen dance too! Have a great weekend everyone.”^{vi} AOC’s popularity rose - her lack of white middle-class respectability did not seem to matter.

Of course, *all* women have historically been subject to the regulation of behaviour and norms of propriety and *all* women are subject to “feeling rules” which are prescribed by their social location (Hochschild, 1979). These are “feeling rules” that young women are sometimes successfully navigating in multiple ways across the digital landscape (Akane Kanai, 2019). “Fuck the patriarchy” certainly has a longer history in feminist politics and such irreverence is ultimately performative, which is precisely the root of its intersectional power. But is it possible that in the current moment it can be adopted to greater effect by those bodies who are usually seen to fail at respectability politics --- and so they are beginning to play a different game? That a politics channelled via irreverent rage is “catching on” --- fuelled by an affectively viral media landscape?

Intellectual fucking rage

What I have described above might be small victories. Any rise in irreverence might also be related to a general rise in populism and anti-intellectualism which has spawned the triumph of Trump, and I am perhaps trying too hard to rescue something. I have clearly taken license with the form of this short essay and offered something that is mostly speculative. As women who are claiming political space this way, AOC and Jess Philipps are subject to reactive vitriolic trolling, and are targets of other kinds of regressive, misogynistic anger that are on the rise in contemporary culture. This might in the end all be part of a broader spectrum of anarchic “noise”. But I would suggest that the rants described above take on a different form to Trump’s empty anger that is born out of the condensed Twitter platform which generates affect for its own sake (Karin Wohl-Jorgensen, 2018). Whilst Cortez’s arms fly about with

rage in this speech, she also has a careful script that she is glancing down to, that names directly the areas and communities so affected by the horrors of climate change. This is rage that is focussed and directed --- eloquent, to borrow from Cooper.

I am reminded of the good luck card recently given to me by another eloquent feminist.^{vii} It read, “I DO NOT SPEW PROFANITIES. I ENUNCIATE THEM CLEARLY... LIKE A FUCKING LADY” which registers two things. Firstly, that swearing can be about clarity. It might be projected with the force of vomit, but the meaning can be clear --- in fact the *lack* of an elaborated code (which can also serve to obfuscate injustice) might even be its political super-power. And secondly, the way in which profanity can be targeted precisely to overturn repressive expectations of femininity --- ‘like a fucking lady’ --- one who fucks and does not give a fuck at the same time. Therefore, I want to suggest that irreverent anger is not just fuelled by the current tide of populism for its own sake, but rather that it is intellectually performative of the uneven and repressed histories of deference and respectability that cut across gender, race, class and sexuality. And if we consider that with climate change, widening inequality and rising factious populism we are truly fucked (as Jilly Kay the editor of this section keeps reminding me) then we need a different kind of intersectional feminist politics to cut through the crap, and sort this fucking shit out.

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ⁱ According to Jess Sheidler there are 272 in the dictionary ‘*The F-Word*’.

ⁱⁱ <https://eu.usatoday.com/story/sports/tennis/2018/09/08/serena-williams-umpire-dispute-outrage-admiration-us-open-final/1242832002/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/midlands-news/jess-phillipss-powerful-sky-news-15934018v>

^{iv} <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/politics/2019/03/27/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-green-new-deal-hearing-elitist-sot.cnn>

^v See : <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election-2017-40232272>
<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/07/us/politics/election-history-firsts-blackburn-pressley.html>

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^{vi} <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/jan/04/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-college-dance-video-discredit-backfires>

^{vii} Thank you Professor Heather Savigny