

BETRAYED EXPECTATIONS

MISDIRECTED ANGER AND THE PRESERVATION OF IDEOLOGY

Barrett Emerick and Audrey Yap

AFTER the 2016 presidential election in the United States it was common to encounter think pieces and hot takes from folks excusing rural, poor, white Americans for having voted for Donald Trump.¹ Although his campaign was grounded in and employed racism and xenophobia, both overtly and covertly, apologists for those voters argued that their anger was legitimate and exculpatory; they had been economically exploited and politically marginalized. The anger of poor rural whites alienated from the concerns of urban elites was seen as an obvious reason why they would find someone like Trump appealing (though that does not answer the question of why the obvious bigotry of the Trump campaign was not a deal breaker for them). Our view in this paper is that this was an instance of a general phenomenon where a group's justified anger is redirected toward an inappropriate source. This will provide us with a way of understanding the causes of many cases of misplaced anger without excusing the harmful actions to which that anger often leads. Though our examples are primarily drawn from a North American cultural context, in which the US political landscape dominates, we believe that the phenomenon we describe is ubiquitous.

The particular kind of anger we unpack in this paper is anger that is partially justified but misdirected.² Fully justified anger is both grounded in an appropriate source and directed toward the appropriate system or agent of that system. Anger can be *partially* justified by being grounded in an appropriate source and directed toward an inappropriate target, or by being directed to an appropriate target and grounded in an inappropriate source. Our paper focuses on the former, in that we are considering anger that is grounded in or

1 Two examples: Kurtzleben, "Rural Voters Played a Big Part in Helping Trump Defeat Clinton"; and Leonard, "Why Rural America Voted for Trump."

2 For more on different senses of the appropriateness of emotion, see D'Arms and Jacobson, "The Moralistic Fallacy." For the aptness of emotion as a "fitting response to the world," see Srinivasan, "The Aptness of Anger."

is the result of unjust and oppressive systems. But it is misdirected, in that the target of the anger is not those oppressive systems or their agents. As such, we will call it justified-but-misdirected anger. The misdirection we will explore is born from the ideologies that sustain those oppressive systems. Following Sally Haslanger, we understand an ideology to be “the background cognitive and affective frame that gives actions and reactions meaning within a social system and contributes to its survival.”³ Ideologies are the social stories we are trained in and in which we train others, often without conscious awareness and in ways that are constrained (as they always are) by whatever conceptual resources are available in the relevant social imaginaries. They provide social scripts for how to act and what outcomes to expect from our actions.⁴ Sometimes those ideological scripts are accurate and just. Often they are neither and they distort our understanding of the world and misdirect what would otherwise be appropriate anger in ways that preserve the ideology itself. Exploring that phenomenon is the primary aim of this paper. In short, we agree that many poor, rural white Americans were right to be angry, but argue that their anger was misdirected away from the economic systems that exploit and marginalize them, and toward immigrants and people of color who are also just trying to survive under capitalism. Our analysis will consider how social location bears on what emotions someone is encouraged to feel and how they are able to interpret those emotions. Specifically, we will consider the ways that gender, race, and class affect those moral-emotional and epistemic phenomena.

In many cases, anger (both appropriately and inappropriately targeted) is born from a sense of *expectation and betrayal* that someone feels when, despite having done “everything right,” things did not turn out the way they had been told or trained to believe they would. Poor, rural whites were trained in the American Dream, which says that if you work hard you can get ahead. Furthermore, US culture tends to be broadly individualistic, with an emphasis on individual rights and freedoms, even when the pursuit of such freedoms is in tension with the greater good.⁵ We contend that when that meritocratic dream

3 Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 447.

4 Because scripts are prescriptive, playing the role you have been assigned is incentivized or rewarded, and deviating from the script is disincentivized or penalized. Over time, one might become conditioned to thoroughly be the person that one has been trained to be. For more on this, see Lindemann, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair and Holding and Letting Go*; Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*; and Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?*

5 As one example, Americans’ strong resistance to mask wearing and distancing restrictions in response to COVID-19 is often attributed to a mixture of individualism and national exceptionalism; see Andrew, “America’s Response to the Coronavirus Is the Most American Thing Ever.”

crashes against the shores of a capitalist reality, someone who has worked hard throughout their life and still lives in relative poverty is justified in feeling both betrayed and angry that their expectations are not met, even if the actions they take as a result of their anger are morally wrong.

Examples of anger born from betrayal and unmet expectations are legion. Consider three more examples:

1. Members of Generation Y who were told that if they went to college and earned a degree, they would be able to find good jobs and pay off the massive student loans they had taken out to pay for it.
2. The disillusion Black and brown folks might experience upon learning (often at a very young age) that police are a violent extension of a white supremacist state.
3. Men who are trained in masculinity and expect sex if they act like “gentlemen.”

Each of these cases is grounded in the experience of being trained to believe that the world is a certain way and that if you act appropriately good outcomes will follow, only to discover that that is often not true. Such training, whether implicit or explicit, contributes to the ways in which our expectations are built up in the first place. Our use of “expectation” is normative rather than descriptive. A descriptive expectation is simply a kind of probability judgement of what we think is likely to happen. The expectations we consider are normative, in that they also include the belief that what is likely to happen *ought* to happen. Several other important caveats need to be made before moving on.

First, because people occupy different social locations and so are trained to believe different things, they will experience different types of betrayal from different sets of failed expectations. Indeed, the betrayed expectations of poor rural whites are different from those in example 1, who are saddled with serious student loan debt, though they might all be angry about being economically oppressed.

Second, not everyone who occupies the same social location will experience the same moral-emotional response to betrayed expectations; that certain emotional responses generally accompany experiences that tend to track particular social locations does not mean that *everyone* who occupies that social location will feel the same way, nor does it mean that everyone occupying that social location must have the same expectations.

Third, those who occupy some social locations will be trained *not* to feel angry even when their expectations are betrayed. Others will not experience betrayal because they will not ever have had any expectations that things would be otherwise.

Finally, we want to be very clear that the fact that feelings of betrayal and anger might be justified does not yet tell us anything about what the morally appropriate ways to express or act on that anger involve. It is completely consistent with our analysis that a justified emotional response can lead to an action that is deeply morally wrong.

We will proceed as follows. In section 1, we briefly unpack the way that we understand anger and its relationship to expectations and betrayal in general. In section 2, we analyze in depth the particular forms of expectations and betrayal that are bound up with the social promise that if you act one way or another certain outcomes will follow. We will explore some of the ways that one's anger can be misdirected by oppressive ideologies in a way that maintains and perpetuates those ideologies.

1. EXPECTATION AND BETRAYAL

Much has been written analyzing anger. Our aim is not to reinvent the wheel but to build off the good work that has already been done and then apply it in a new way that helps to better make sense of the world and the ideologies and social structures that are appropriate targets of anger. Specifically, we follow P. F. Strawson, who understands moral anger (or resentment) as a reactive attitude that is appropriate or warranted in response to a moral wrong.⁶ Strawson argues that there is an important difference between becoming angry that an event has occurred and becoming angry with another person who I believe has wronged me. So, if a lightning bolt burns down my house I might become angry that my home has been destroyed. If an arsonist burns down my house I might become angry with them for having destroyed my home. We will only focus on *moral anger with* (rather than *nonmoral anger that*) for the remainder of this paper.⁷

The key difference is that in the arsonist case my anger expresses the dual judgment that *the arsonist is a person*—a moral agent—who is the appropriate target of praise or blame, and that *I am a person* who can be wronged by others. Both judgements are forms of respect. In recognizing the arsonist as an agent who could have done otherwise, I regard them as a person rather than as a thing or naturally occurring event like a lightning strike.⁸ In recognizing myself as deserving certain kinds of treatment (or not deserving others) I recognize my own self-worth and value. In this we follow many feminist theorists who have

6 Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment."

7 Assuming, of course, that I do not subscribe to a belief system that attributes agency to natural events.

8 Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," 6.

argued for similar claims.⁹ For instance, Elizabeth Spelman argues that “[t]o be angry at [someone who has wronged me] is to make myself, at least on this occasion, his judge—to have, and to express, a standard against which I assess his conduct. If he is in other ways regarded as my superior, when I get angry at him I at least on that occasion am regarding him as no more and no less than my equal.”¹⁰ As such, Spelman also recognizes that anger can be an act of insubordination in these latter cases. When I get angry with someone, I act as though I have the right to judge their behavior. I also signal that I will not tolerate future wrongful treatment and either *expect or demand* that the person who wronged me change their ways.¹¹ Note that understanding anger to convey that expectation does not necessarily entail a threat or wish that some harm befall one’s wrongdoer. Martha Nussbaum argues that anger essentially involves a desire for retribution.¹² Though it sometimes might, we see no reason to think that such a desire is universal to all experiences of anger.¹³

When we attend to anger and resentment as personal reactive attitudes, we recognize their role in, as Margaret Urban Walker notes:

The ongoing definition and enforcement of the standards by which we live, our unequal authority to define and enforce them, and the collective task of keeping vital our senses and practices of responsibility. Unexpected, or, in the observer’s view, improper displays of resentment highlight our disputes and misunderstandings about our standards and about the nature and membership of communities.¹⁴

That last point is crucial and bears repeating: my anger conveys either an expectation or a demand that the one who wronged me act differently in the future and is fundamental to existing in the world as a profoundly social being. Walker argues that “we navigate the human world around us by forming and acting on normative expectations of others and of ourselves. . . . A normative expectation anticipates compliance more or less (and sometimes scarcely at all), but always

9 Lorde, “The Uses of Anger”; Frye, *The Politics of Reality*; Spelman, “Anger and Insubordination”; MacLachlan, “Unreasonable Resentments”; and Murphy, “Forgiveness and Resentment.”

10 Spelman, “Anger and Insubordination,” 266.

11 Spelman, “Anger and Insubordination,” 267. A similar point is made in Cherry, “The Errors and Limitations of Our ‘Anger-Evaluating’ Ways.”

12 Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*.

13 For a helpful critique of Nussbaum’s view, see Srinivasan, “Would Politics Be Better Off Without Anger?”

14 Walker, *Moral Repair*, 136–37.

embodies a *demand* for that form of behavior we think we've a right to."¹⁵ Our account is similar to Walker's but with an important difference in terminology. In our view, the difference between an expectation and a demand is that an expectation includes (but does not solely consist in) a probability judgment about how things are likely to unfold whereas a demand does not. Recall that, as we use the term, expectations are normative: an expectation is a demand that I believe will likely be met and ought to be met. When I say that I expect you to make good on your promise I convey that I am holding you to it—you ought to keep your promise—and that is the future that I believe will and ought to unfold. When I merely demand that you keep your promise, I convey nothing about what future I anticipate will follow.

We will return to this distinction later in explaining several types of reactions one might have in the face of wrongdoing, which are often related both to one's relative privilege and to the particular relationships and contexts in which one is operating. Since humans are social beings, our expectations are grounded in and born from social norms and practices.

Consider this case. One roommate says to another, "I'll do the cooking if you wash the dishes." When the second roommate eats the cooking but fails to wash up (without good reason) the first is likely to become angry. That anger response demonstrates several things about the first roommate:

1. They recognize that the second roommate is an agent who made (bad) choices about how to spend their time and energy.
2. They recognize themselves as someone who is affected negatively and undeservedly by their roommate's failure.
3. They operate on a script about how roommates behave toward one another, derived from a larger social imaginary. Such scripts give rise to the moral-emotional responses described above: the tendency to expect or demand certain kinds of treatment (or not), to become angry (or not), and toward whom or what that anger is directed. In this case, the roommate has an expectation that their arrangement will be honored and becomes justifiably angry (or at least frustrated) when it is not.¹⁶
4. Even if they do not "stay on script" the material circumstances they encounter might cause a certain moral-emotional response.

15 Walker, *Moral Repair*, 24.

16 Here we follow Hilde Lindemann in thinking that narratives help craft our understanding of ourselves and each other within social relationships (*Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair and Holding and Letting Go*). Much more could be said about the role of those narratives or scripts, but would take us beyond the scope of this paper.

If the first roommate has a long history with the second roommate failing to honor such agreements, they might express a demand but hold no expectation that their roommate will make good on their word. They might also fail to either expect or demand if they have been trained to do so, lack proper self-regard, or both. That list of factors is not exhaustive, but those are at least some of the relevant options for making sense of their moral-emotional response. The important takeaway here is that, as profoundly social beings, we not only learn how to act and become who we are in relation to others, but we also learn what to expect or demand from others in light of the social location we occupy. “There is a sense in which any individual’s guilt or anger, joy or triumph, presupposes the existence of a social group capable of feeling guilt, anger, joy, or triumph. This is not to say that group emotions historically precede or are logically prior to the emotions of individuals; it is to say that individual experience is simultaneously social experience.”¹⁷ All of that can be more or less morally appropriate, and more or less in line with what justice requires.

One important implication of that point is that our emotional responses often have epistemic value.¹⁸ Many feminist and anti-racist scholars have worked to reject a view of emotion that regards it as anathema to reason. Far from being a hindrance to thinking and perceiving clearly, our feelings can often help us to more accurately make sense of and understand features of our situation.¹⁹ This is true both for those who experience conventional emotional responses and those who experience what Alison Jaggar calls “outlaw emotions” (those emotions that are unconventional or run counter to dominant ideologies or social imaginaries).²⁰

Jaggar argues that outlaw emotions are most obviously epistemically valuable insofar as they motivate new investigations into the nature and causes of various phenomena. Which problems should be solved? Which issues deserve further analysis or study? Outlaw emotions provide political motivation and help both to select which problems to pursue and the methods by which they are investigated.²¹

Furthermore, outlaw emotions can themselves be useful in perceiving that the world and the story we tell about it in the social imaginary do not match up. Jaggar writes, “Only when we reflect on our initially puzzling irritability,

17 Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge,” 382.

18 For a helpful discussion of the epistemic value of contempt and other moral emotion, see Bell, “A Woman’s Scorn,” 85–88.

19 Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge,” 387.

20 Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge,” 387.

21 Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge,” 387.

revulsion, anger, or fear may we bring to consciousness our 'gut-level' awareness that we are in a situation of coercion, cruelty, injustice, or danger."²²

In short: our emotional responses, both conventional and outlaw, can tell us something about the world. The first roommate's anger might only point to the fact that the second roommate did not keep their promise. But a lack of anger on their part might be more informative—perhaps something about the state of their relationship and their history together, about their self-regard, or both. Millennials with huge student loan debt who are angry about being told to give up soy lattes or avocado toast might correctly link that anger to the oppressiveness of capitalism and the fact that the social promises they had been made have not been kept. It might indicate that they feel as though they have been duped and exploited to the benefit of the extremely wealthy. In both cases, what one feels or does not feel, and whether those feelings are conventional or outlaw, identify or reveal features of the social context in which the agent is operating.

These responses need not be revelatory. Sometimes we know exactly why we are angry, and there is nothing further that needs to be learned about our situation. Furthermore, emotional responses do not *always* reveal something accurate about the world; like our other means of understanding the world they can go awry. As Jaggar says, "Although our emotions are epistemologically indispensable, they are not epistemologically indisputable."²³ At least some of the time when people are angry, the social context in which they are operating encourages them to direct their anger to an inappropriate target.²⁴ We will consider several cases below in which this misdirection is part of the self-preservation mechanism of particular ideologies.

2. BETRAYAL IN ACTION

As Jaggar points out, the presence of anger implies a background of social norms in which that anger is situated. One could not be betrayed, after all, by

22 Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge," 387.

23 Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge," 389.

24 There are other reasons why anger or other emotional responses might be misdirected. Psychotherapists in a broadly Freudian tradition identify a phenomenon called displacement as a kind of defense mechanism in which strong emotional responses are directed away from their genuine targets toward more vulnerable substitutes. For example, a child being bullied at school might take out their anger and frustration on a younger sibling. See, for instance Clark, *Defense Mechanisms in the Counseling Process*. While it is certainly possible that displacement is responsible for some of the misdirection we identify in this paper, we still think it is relevant to talk about the social mechanisms that encourage and support these misdirections. Thanks to Lisa Tessman for this point.

unfaithfulness if there were no social norms about fidelity in the first place.²⁵ This section will connect anger to the particular social norms that shape the ways in which it is (or is not!) felt and the targets to which it is (or is not!) directed.

We can be and feel betrayed in a wide variety of ways, and such betrayals are connected to the trust we have in the various individuals, offices, and institutions to whom and to which we are vulnerable. Your trust could be betrayed by a friend who breaks a promise, by a doctor who violates rights to confidentiality with no good reason, by an academic institution that denies tenure despite having met the stated requirements, or by other drivers who fail to observe the same traffic laws.

Feeling betrayed is different from actually being betrayed. I might feel betrayed if I trust in a kind of cosmic justice that things work out for the best (or that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice). I might feel betrayed by a celebrity who turns out to be a creep despite cultivating a nice guy image, but since I do not know the celebrity personally, to say that they have betrayed me would be inappropriate. That is not to suggest there is not real pain associated with such revelations, nor is it to discount the significance of feeling betrayed. It is instead to highlight that actually being betrayed relies fundamentally on a breakdown in a relationship or set of relationships that are at least minimally bidirectional or reciprocal. In the celebrity case and the cosmic justice case, the relationships in question are unidirectional or one sided.²⁶

Trust in our friends is generally built up through different means than trust in people in virtue of the social roles they play, or in institutions to which we belong, but that trust, once in place, implies that we hold those people or institutions responsible for living up to certain obligations. While interpersonal trust is certainly relevant to the misdirected senses of betrayal we consider here,

25 Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge," 382.

26 Relationships can be more or less bidirectional. Some public figures with a track record of taking strong political stands could arguably be said to have a responsibility to their fans or followers, which would make their feelings of betrayal appropriate. For instance, it might be the case that J. K. Rowling's very public transphobia does constitute a betrayal of her fans (Wallis, "J. K. Rowling Doubles Down on Transphobic Comments, Reveals She's an Abuse Survivor"). Since some of the positive press around her books has suggested that reading them decreases prejudice and increases empathy toward marginalized groups, that might give her a responsibility to her fans to refrain from attacking marginalized groups herself (McDade-Montez and Dore, "Supporting Diversity & Inclusion"). It might also be the case that in the age of social media, where public figures respond interactively with fans, their relationship is sufficiently bidirectional so as to again make feelings of betrayal appropriate. We will not make either argument here, but just note that, by our definitions, betrayal can only occur in relationships in which there is some minimal reciprocity.

we will spend more time discussing trust in institutions and in particular social roles. This is because our sense of the responsibilities that institutions (and those playing specific roles in those institutions) have to us are largely shaped by our background social beliefs about the way the world is, and the things within it to which we are entitled.

To complicate things further, we do not all share the same background beliefs about the way the world is, the things we can reliably expect from people who occupy certain positions, or the things that others in our social world owe us. We will argue that many instances of misdirected anger and betrayal are the result of distorted expectations stemming from ideologies that encourage us to think of the world in ways that reproduce injustice. This does not mean that all cases of anger and betrayal can be explained in this way, but at least some can, and these are important cases. And this illustrates an important way in which certain ideologies maintain themselves—namely, by directing people's anger or resentment away from the ideology, often toward a more vulnerable target.

One important factor that shapes people's expectations is their social location. Women who have been raised with a normalized sense of their own inequality, or of the entitlement of others to their body, may simply expect sexual harassment as an inevitable annoyance. So although they might not like or welcome the comments and treatment they receive, they might not see that behavior as violating an established social norm or see the harassers as having failed to live up to appropriate standards of behavior. As a result, they might not have a sense that they could hold the harasser responsible for their actions (a point to which we will return). Conversely, many men under patriarchy have also been raised with a certain expectation of what women owe them and how it is appropriate to behave toward women. What follows is that women who fail to live up to those expectations will then frequently become the targets of such men's anger for having failed to satisfy social norms that were imposed on them by a sexist ideology.²⁷

Since our interest here is in describing the ways in which betrayal and its associated feelings of anger might be misdirected, we will distinguish between four different kinds of anger. First, there are cases of unjustified anger.²⁸ In such cases, people might simply be mistaken about the facts of a situation; I might be

27 Manne, *Down Girl*.

28 Our terminology here differs from some who write about anger. Srinivasan, talks about it in terms of aptness and fittingness ("The Aptness of Anger"). We use the language of justification in order to make some finer-grained distinctions that the concept of aptness does not quite capture. More specifically, we aim to distinguish between the appropriateness of anger as a moral response, and the appropriateness of the way in which that anger is targeted. Apt anger is appropriate in both of those ways, but the anger we consider is only appropriate in one of them.

angry with my roommate, thinking they had borrowed one of my things without permission, when in fact I had merely mislaid the item in question. Alternately, I might become angry about an unforeseen rainstorm during a camping trip that resulted in a cold and wet night. I might direct that anger toward my camping buddy, getting mad at them when they had done nothing wrong. (In this case, my anger is inappropriate partly because I treat what should have been an instance of *anger that* as an instance of *anger with*.) In these two examples, the anger is unjustified because no one acted wrongly: my roommate has not taken liberties with my possessions, the world does not owe me a sunny day, and my camping buddy could not have made good on that obligation even if it did. Both of these cases involve wholly unjustified instances of anger—no one did anything wrong even though I experience some misfortune in both cases. We will not consider further cases of wholly unjustified anger in this paper.²⁹

The second category consists of anger that is both justified and appropriately targeted. These are cases in which we are right to be angry about a wrong that has been done, and are also angry at those who are primarily responsible for that wrong. For instance, if my roommate had in fact taken my things without permission or good reason, I would be justified in being angry with them for failing to respect my personal boundaries. Anger does not need to be directed at individual people and can instead be directed at institutions or groups more generally. The Black Lives Matter rallies after the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in mid-2020 were expressions of a great deal of justified and appropriately targeted anger about police brutality and racism. While people were certainly angry at the individual police officers who committed the murders, the very institution of policing in North America was the target of anger amid calls to defund or abolish the police. Greta Thunberg's address to the United Nations in September 2019 was also an expression of justified anger at world leaders' collective inaction on matters of climate change. In all of these cases, people are angry in the face of a genuine betrayal, and they are angry at those who are responsible for that betrayal. Note that both cases illustrate that one can be betrayed without having ever expected otherwise. People aware of the realities of police brutality do not generally have an *expectation* that police officers will behave ethically or respectfully toward Black people, but can still *demand* that they do so. Thus we can be angry with people for failing to live up to a social norm even when that failure is utterly predictable. Yet while this category of anger is relevant to our considerations here, it is also well-covered territory in the literature. Instead, we will turn next to categories of anger that have received somewhat less attention.

29 Note that if I accuse my roommate of stealing my item but my friend stole it instead, my anger would be justified but misplaced; there is a culprit but I have named the wrong person.

The third and fourth categories of anger we consider are cases in which anger would be justified—when there has been a genuine betrayal or failure on someone's behalf to live up to a social norm. However, we do not always get angry with those who have in fact betrayed us or violated our trust. The third category consists of cases in which we would be justified in feeling angry but do not. Sometimes these are cases in which our sense of what we are owed has been sufficiently eroded by oppressive social norms, such that we do not recognize them as moral violations. For instance, women living in a patriarchal society might lose a sense of entitlement to their own bodies or sense of safety (or might never have such a sense in the first place). In these situations, such women might not get angry about sexual harassment or misconduct that they experience, because it does not occur to them to hold the perpetrators to a different moral standard. One of the authors remembers being in graduate school with a faculty member who often made her (and other women students) feel uncomfortable. Yet in the climate at the time, she and several other women students simply took it for granted that they would just have to take it upon themselves to avoid that person. According to our framework, the author was not angry (though she would have been justified in being angry), because she was not placing the appropriate demands on the faculty member. Her anger, or lack thereof, was not a matter of what she expected him to do, but what kind of conduct she felt she could demand from him. This allows us to see that certain kinds of social contexts can distort the standards to which we hold other people, so that we fail to hold them responsible for their wrongdoing or, as we will soon see, hold the wrong people responsible for wrongdoing.

The fourth and final category will consider cases in which someone's anger is a response to a genuine wrong or injustice, but the targets of their anger are not the ones who have wronged them. These are the cases of misdirected anger that are the main focus of our paper. Before Elliot Rodger killed seven people (including himself) and injured several others, he released a video about his so-called day of retribution. In it, he expressed a great deal of anger over his solitude, rejection, and lack of romantic and sexual success. The stated targets of his anger, as he addressed those he was planning to punish, were the "spoiled, stuck-up, blonde" sorority girls living nearby. While it may be disputable whether Rodger had the right to be angry in the first place over the solitude he was experiencing, (Amia Srinivasan has an interesting discussion of these kinds of questions), one potential diagnosis of misogynist anger is as a reaction against norms of masculinity from someone who clearly did not live up to such norms.³⁰

30 Srinivasan, "Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?"

Part of the insidious work of patriarchy, then, is to misdirect anger away from the oppressive system that holds people to particular and frequently unattainable gendered standards of appearance and behavior, and toward those who are subordinated within that system. Had Rodger been angry at a system that tells boys from a young age that they are supposed to be a certain kind of man, and that at least some of their success as such a man is measured by their ability to attract women who also look and act in gender-appropriate ways, his anger would have been both justified and appropriately directed. But instead, that same system encourages the belief that women owe men an assortment of feminine-coded goods, like care and physical affection, in virtue of their position within a social hierarchy.³¹ As a result, Rodger, and others who have followed in his footsteps, internalized a system of beliefs under which women as a group can be held collectively responsible for their lack of romantic success. Much as people who believe that law enforcement is there for their protection might be angry at the police's failure to prevent crimes, within patriarchal ideologies, men are encouraged to believe that women are there to provide them with care and can become angry with women when such care is lacking. This category of justified but misdirected anger is intended to chart a middle course between "himpathy," Kate Manne's term for our tendency to provide excessive sympathy to (relatively privileged) men who commit acts of violence, and a carceral logic in which the circumstances of a person's wrongdoing are irrelevant. We think it is possible and necessary to both hold people responsible for their wrongful actions and to understand why such actions might have seemed the correct course of action at the time.³²

Another case in which anger is justified but misdirected are the situations of "poor rural whites" with whom we began, who are angry about certain aspects of their economic situation. They might be facing economic anxiety and the prospect of both job and status loss in the face of industries relying less and less on manual labor. Jared Yates Sexton's autobiographical book describes the misdirected anger of men like those in his family at the economy's shift away from manufacturing and manual labor-intensive jobs like the ones on which they and their fathers before them had come to rely:

While [these economic shifts] were signs of progress, men reacted as if they themselves were threatened instead of the patriarchal order that imprisoned them. They doubled down on misogyny, discriminated

31 Manne, *Down Girl*.

32 Spelman is very helpful for thinking about whose suffering secures recognition and uptake—and ways that suffering can be co-opted by those in positions of power (*Fruits of Sorrow*).

against women in the workplace, blocked the upward mobility of anyone but themselves, opposed civil rights as corrective measures that would have improved the economy, and supported politicians who promised to oppose progress and swore to bring back the former economic order they had languished in their entire lives.³³

The situation that Sexton describes is exactly one of justified but misdirected anger. As we said at the outset, for anger to be *wholly* justified it would have to both be *grounded* appropriately (it would have arisen in response to some actual wrong or injustice) and also be *directed* appropriately (focused on the responsible person or system). In distinguishing the grounds of anger from the extent to which it is appropriately directed, we hope to expose ways in which systems such as white supremacy and patriarchy preserve themselves. We argue that it is part of the self-preservation mechanisms of such ideological structures that they misdirect the anger of those harmed by them toward others (often already oppressed groups). For example, in the case of white American manufacturing workers whose employment has become increasingly insecure, a belief that they are entitled to a job of that kind in that industry can easily lead them to blame others, particularly out-group members such as immigrants of color, for taking jobs away from them. Such workers have good reasons to be angry: the exploitative nature of capitalism, the inflexibility of the economy, the lack of retraining opportunities, or environmental devastation, to name a few. However, the ideology of a North American industrialist capitalism leads them to blame immigrants (often presumed to be here illegally), or other countries generally, for taking the jobs that should rightfully be theirs. In other words, their anger is justified but misdirected away from its appropriate causes.

We argue that such toxic ideologies contribute to this disconnect by producing a sense of entitlement in people in which they wrongfully hold others responsible for producing desirable outcomes. This is perhaps more obvious in the case of many incels, who might be justifiably angry about our society's beauty standards (for people of all genders) that are frequently heteronormative, racist, sizeist, and ableist. As an implicit endorsement of those standards, many incels simply accept that they are naturally less desirable than other, more conventionally attractive men. But instead of questioning the sources and oppressiveness of such body ideals, many incels instead criticize women for failing to see the merits of "nice guys" or, as Rodger called himself, a "Supreme Gentleman." That incels focus on women in general as the source of their problems, or at least view them as appropriate scapegoats for punishment, is not coincidental, but is rather a feature of patriarchal ideology. Manne, for example, argues that

33 Sexton, *The Man They Wanted Me to Be*, 20.

misogyny, and much misogynist violence, is a means for the preservation of a sexist social order, calling misogyny the “law enforcement branch” of patriarchy.³⁴ Much of that is premised on the idea that women owe men their care and affection. Without that sense of entitlement to such “feminine-coded goods,” it would not make sense to frame misogynist violence as punishment or retribution. This means that patriarchy not only tries to hold people to rigid gender norms that can ultimately cause them various kinds of existential harm, but it also encourages men who fail to live up to those masculine standards to blame women if they do not get the romantic or sexual attention they desire.

These kinds of scapegoating strategies have also been crucial to the campaigns of many recent North American conservative politicians, providing the public with racialized bogeymen in order to prompt support for their ultimately destructive policies. As Ian Haney López argues:

Conservative dog whistling made minorities, not concentrated wealth, the pressing enemy of the white middle class. It didn’t seem to matter that the actual monetary transfers to nonwhites were trivial. . . . What mattered was the sense that blacks [sic] were getting more than they deserved, at the expense of white taxpayers. The middle class no longer saw itself in opposition to concentrated wealth, but instead it saw itself beset by grasping minorities.³⁵

The impact of racial scapegoating, such as the gendered and racialized images of welfare queens, predatory immigrant men, and the concept of anchor babies, served to channel middle- and working-class white anger away from capitalist policies that ultimately hurt them economically. What this has meant, practically speaking, is that even extremely wealthy politicians like Donald Trump who have arguably no lived experience of the everyday economic struggles of their voter base can portray themselves as friends of ordinary working white people. They can do so by simultaneously telling such people that they are entitled to their fair share of the “American Dream” in the form of a secure job paying a good wage with the promise of further upward mobility, and that their progress toward this dream has been stymied by an array of villains who all happen to have non-white faces.

This misdirected anger is in the service of what Haney López calls *strategic racism*, which cultivates and leverages animus against racialized groups.³⁶ Pledges to “Make America Great Again” often invoke a nostalgic image of

34 Manne, *Down Girl*, 78.

35 López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 58.

36 López, *Dog Whistle Politics*, 80.

America, in which playing by the rules and working hard would ensure financial stability through to a secure retirement. Rarely do such politicians champion government policies that would do things like guarantee health care for all, or ensure a living wage that would provide actual security for those facing economic precarity, much less make good on such social promises. Instead, the homogeneity of the invoked middle-class utopia in the cultural imagination makes it obvious who can easily be blamed for its absence: the non-white people who are conspicuously absent from this idealized society. In other words, it is, and has long been, in the interest of the wealthy to direct attention away from their own accumulation of wealth; non-white folks, portrayed in a variety of ways (dangerous, lazy, conniving, etc.) are an easy target.

The ongoing success of strategic racism is in the way in which its architects profit from the justified but misdirected anger that it helps to cultivate. As those in positions of power continue to support economic policies that concentrate wealth in the hands of a tiny minority of people, they cultivate and encourage a worldview that allows a white voter base to lay the blame for their hardship elsewhere. In other words, many white people are trained to form an expectation of what they are due, and to lay the blame for their failure to receive their due at the feet of non-white folks, who are much more similarly positioned to them than they might think. Many such people are right, however, to be angry, because, having “done everything right”—having worked hard to take responsibility for their own lives—they failed to receive the rewards that they were assured would be forthcoming if they did so.³⁷

We should not, however, overstate our case. The racial animus that is tapped by strategic racism to misdirect appropriately grounded anger can also result in anger that is entirely unjustified. In our initial discussion of unjustified anger, the cases we considered were accidental—no conspiracy or ideology led me to think that my roommate had taken liberties with my things. Contrast these cases of unjustified and accidental anger with the anger that many felt with quarterback Colin Kaepernick, who protested police violence against people of color by “taking a knee” during the American national anthem at the start of football games. Many fans were angry with Kaepernick, ostensibly for a variety of things (making a football game “political,” failing to just do his job, being disrespectful or unpatriotic to the United States). Donald Trump himself called a person who would take a knee during the national anthem a “son of a bitch.” Alternatively, consider someone who is angry with activists who protested the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. Stuck at

37 An episode of *The Daily* from *The New York Times* provides helpful first-person testimony to the experience of feeling betrayed despite having done everything right. Barbaro, “The Epidemic of Unemployment.”

an intersection while the crowd marches by, the driver stewes with resentment about being made late to an appointment. In contrast to the misplaced item or the rained-out camping trip, a fan's anger with Kaepernick or the driver's anger with protesters is unjustified but non-accidental. There is something moral on the scene—Kaepernick and the protesters are both committing an act of protest against profound racial injustice. Perhaps there is some kind of genuine inconvenience to the fan and the driver—the fan's enjoyment of the game is sullied by a political statement or by a reminder that racial injustice exists, while the driver's trip across town takes longer and perhaps they miss an important appointment as a result. But neither Kaepernick nor the protesters acted wrongly, despite the costs borne by the fan or the driver. In short, while these are not cases of justified anger, they do share many of the same racist sources as the cases of justified but misdirected anger we considered earlier.

In this paper, we have argued that when someone's trust is wrongfully violated it can give rise to justified anger, and that such anger can often be misdirected by oppressive ideologies in a way that works to preserve the ideology itself or social institutions they enable. In short, we have been working to recognize the ways that someone might be right to be angry but might be wrong about toward whom or against what their anger should be directed. Note that this is still a case of being *angry with* instead of *angry that*. An unexpected rainstorm is under nobody's control. Social institutions like capitalism or patriarchy are not under the control of any individual person but are certainly perpetuated and supported by individuals. In short: while it is inappropriate to be angry with a rainstorm, it is quite appropriate to be angry with capitalism or patriarchy. Though in some cases one's anger might not be directed against any particular agent of oppression, oppression itself is a social phenomenon and so an appropriate target of moral anger. It is our hope that identifying the appropriate source of that anger is useful in working to tell new and liberatory social stories in a world shot through with injustice.³⁸

St. Mary's College of Maryland
bmemerick@smcm.edu

University of Victoria
ayap@uvic.ca

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