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MUSING

My Friend, Anger: Musings

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Abstract

In this essay, I argue that for women, rather than a flaw to be suppressed, embracing anger is a vital act of self-care and resilience. While philosophical traditions often dismiss women's anger as irrational, I argue that it is a legitimate response to injustice and a necessary tool for reclaiming agency. I begin by examining how traditions from the Stoics to Aristotle have framed anger as an impediment to reason. This framing is often used to position women's anger as evidence of a weak or shameful state. I then argue that these social constraints are not universal; specifically, Black women must navigate the angry Black woman stereotype, which treats their expressions of anger as threatening or excessive. Drawing on my own history and the cultural evolution of "the angry woman" in the media, I next highlight that women become experts at controlling anger because the alternative is being labeled emotional or facing physical danger. I conclude by arguing that caring for oneself does not mean overcoming anger but rather embracing it as a source of strength. Seen as such, anger, then, becomes a form of self-respect and a liberating act of reclaiming.

In the 2012 Marvel *Avengers* movie, Steve Rogers, aka Captain America, turns to Bruce Banner, aka The Hulk, as they prepare to head into battle. "Doctor Banner, now might be a good time for you to get angry" Rogers says. Banner replies, "That's my secret, Cap: I'm always angry" (Whedon 2012). I don't think this line was supposed to be funny, but I laughed out loud in the theater when I heard it. I wanted to yell at the screen "join the damn club." Because I am also always angry. But unlike Banner, I have no outlet for my anger, no accepted funnel for my rage, no team relying on the strength my anger gives me to help us defeat the enemy. Outside of the fact that I am not a superhero, I am a woman, and the only appropriate level of anger for a woman is none.[1]

It may seem paradoxical to talk about embracing anger as a form of self-care. Anger, particularly for women, is often treated as something to suppress, manage, or hide.

[1]I am using the term "woman" very loosely to refer to those living in bodies that society holds to feminine stereotypes. I am also happy extending it to those who once lived in such bodies and were similarly judged, or those who live in any type of body who is told they cannot and should not be angry. Join my anger circle, sisters.

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However, if caring for oneself includes acknowledging and embracing all facets of one's being, including the emotions society deems "unacceptable," then I argue anger is a vital part of this. This essay explores my relationship with anger, reflecting on its philosophical, cultural, and racial dimensions, and examines how engaging with it can be a form of self-respect, resilience, and care.

1. Philosophical views of anger

Anger has historically been framed as dangerous or irrational; something to be dealt with, managed, and eradicated. Anger stands in the way of moral progress. The Stoics tell us that anger causes us to behave irrationally and leads to destructive behavior. Seneca calls anger "foul and frenzied" and claims "anger has nothing useful about it" (Seneca 2010, 14, 22). Aristotle allows for anger when it is justified, such as virtuous anger which allows us to protect ourselves and our friends; "The man who is angry at the right things and with the right people, and, further, as he ought, when he ought, and as long as he ought, is to be praised" (Aristotle 1999, 1106b24–26).

But both Aristotle and Seneca are speaking of anger in *men*. The anger of women, much like women themselves, is considered irrational. Sokthan Yeng writes, "Male philosophers have repeatedly cast women as incapable or deficient in regard to reason. Anger, even in men, works as an impediment to understanding the situation clearly or seeing the truth. Women's anger, therefore, is a double dose of anti-reason" (Yeng 2020, 24). Somewhere, in my fifty years of existing in mainly male spaces, I think I came to see my anger as shameful, as evidence of some sort of weak emotional state inherent in women that I needed to overcome. As I type this, I hear how ridiculous it sounds. I have counseled scores of younger women to ignore such nonsense. But if I am honest with myself, I've been afraid of what might happen if I do embrace my anger. In *Feminist theory: From margin to center and talking back*, bell hooks explains that women are socialized to believe anger is unfeminine, destructive, or morally suspect (hooks 2014). In my experience, the flush of anger is usually accompanied by a feeling of being untethered and reckless.

2. The racial politics of anger

As I grapple with the role of anger in my own life, it is important to remember that the social constraints around anger are not the same for all women. Black women, in particular, face the "angry Black woman" stereotype, which frames expressions of anger as threatening, excessive, and socially unacceptable. This racialized and gendered lens infuses itself into all facets of life, including professional opportunities, public perception, and personal relationships.

In "The uses of anger: Women responding to racism," Audre Lorde argues that the fear of Black women's anger functions as a mechanism of silencing. Rather than treating anger as something to be suppressed, Lorde reframes it as a source of power, "My response to racism is anger. That anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone (Lorde 1981, 9).[2] For Black women, anger carries a distinct cultural meaning: it is both a response to oppression and a strategy for survival.

[2]I would be remiss if I didn't take this opportunity to note my favorite quote in this work; "I have suckled the wolf's lip of anger and I have used it for illumination, laughter, protection, fire in places where there was no light, no food, no sisters, no quarter." (Lorde 1981, 10).

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Lorde writes, "Anger is loaded with information and energy" (Lorde 1981, 8). In *Eloquent rage: A Black feminist discovers her superpower*, Brittney Cooper argues that Black women's anger is frequently delegitimized because society refuses to acknowledge the systemic racism and sexism that produce it. Anger is not merely an emotional response but a form of political and emotional labor; punished precisely because of its potential to challenge entrenched power structures (Cooper 2018). Reclaiming this anger is a radical act of self-care, self-preservation, and resistance. Lorde writes, "Anger expressed and translated into action in the service of our vision and our future is a liberating and strengthening act of clarification" (Lorde 1981, 8). Understanding anger in this way is crucial for grasping its political and social dimensions, especially for women navigating intersecting systems of racial and gendered oppression.

3. My origin story

I have been angry for as long as I can remember. It is the first emotion I am aware of having. Although there were undoubtedly prior experiences with anger, my first memory of being fully, completely angry stretches back to kindergarten and shines so brilliantly that it is also one of my most vivid memories. On the playground one day, a boy decided he wanted to kiss me. I did not want to be kissed, so I ran. He and a friend chased me until I finally crawled inside a play tunnel to hide, only to be blocked on each side by the boys. I sat there in semi-darkness begging them to leave me alone and let me come out. They would, they said, if I let the boy kiss me. I stayed where I was thinking that eventually a teacher would come by and help. When the bell rang to signal the end of recess, I waited for the boys to run off. They stayed where they were. Eventually a teacher came to see why they weren't returning to class and found me trapped inside. Sighing with frustration, she moved one of the boys aside and yelled at me to come out. Then she made me stand there so the boy could kiss my cheek and then sent us all off to class.[3]

Whatever my earlier experiences with anger might have been, the feeling that came over me at that moment was something I had never felt before. I was outraged, I was humiliated, I was betrayed, and it was all coalescing into absolute rage. I knew my only option was to quietly return to class, and halfway there I started crying. The boy looked at me with disgust and said something like, "why are you crying, I didn't do anything."[4] I was also a bit confused about why I was crying. Later, of course, I would discover that this is not an uncommon response in women. In "Sadness and anger: Boys, girls, and crying in adolescence", Mahal Santiago-Menendez and Anne Campbell write that "Women's accounts of crying episodes make frequent reference to being overwhelmed by the force of their anger" (2013, 401). At the time, however, I only knew that, whatever I was feeling, I was not sad. Back in class, the boys continued looking at me and laughing while I simmered. Finally, I had enough and threw a box of crayons at them. Needless to say, it was I who ended up in trouble for not "controlling my anger."

I think that one of the reasons this event has stayed so prominent in my mind is due to the fact that it, or its pattern at any rate, has been replicated so often throughout my life. The storyline is as follows: X happens, where X is an action that seems so obviously

[3]This was due to the whining of the boy and I have no doubt she thought it was the quickest way to get us all inside. I do not fault the teacher for this. This was in the mid-1980s and for an account of why I believe that to be an explanation please see all issues of *Hypatia* during the 1980s.

[4]After forty-three years I cannot confirm the accuracy of his exact words.

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wrong and unjust that I wait for everyone to be as angry about it as I am. Then Y happens, where Y is that not only is no one else as angry as I am, but apparently the fact that I am angry about it is much worse than X. This concludes with censure for my public display of anger, and I am forced to apologize for my actions. Which of course only results in more anger on my part. An interesting aspect of this is that it doesn't seem to matter *how* I react, if I am not pleasant and accommodating, I am the one who is wrong.

4. Anger, assemble!

"You're being too defensive." "That wasn't the right response." "You don't get angry the right way." "Your anger isn't in the right proportions." I have lost track of how many times I have been told this or versions of it. I have tried to take it to heart. I have tried to intentionally soften my voice, relax my face, be aware of my posture. It doesn't seem to matter. Soraya Chemaly writes in *Rage becomes her: The power of women's anger*, "Sometimes I joke that all I have to do to be considered aggressive is walk into a room" (Chemaly 2018, 19). I can relate.

The thing is those who say I don't get angry the right way aren't necessarily wrong. I don't know how to be angry. Part of this is obviously due to decades of suppression, but as I mentioned earlier, women are not supposed to get angry. We can get frustrated. We can get irritated. We can get annoyed. We cannot get angry. And if we are frustrated or irritated or annoyed, we need to be sure to put those feelings away and not let them influence our interactions with others.

Men, on the other hand, are allowed the luxury of anger.[5] What I mean by this is that boys are expected to get angry and when they do so they are not seen as engaging in deviant behavior. When boys get angry, they might throw their toys, push and even wrestle with each other. I do not mean to suggest that boys are never disciplined for these actions, nor do I mean to suggest that boys and men are not taught to control and channel anger, they are, but the key difference is that they are taught. They are taught how to engage in fair fights, they are told there is strength and virtue in standing up for others. They are encouraged to participate in contact sports which allow an outlet for anger.

Chemaly writes that when a woman shows anger, she "automatically violates gender norms" (Chemaly 2018, p. xvii). Girls are taught to hold our tongues, to mind our manners, and that if we can't say anything nice, we should not say anything at all. We are told to calm ourselves with walks, journaling, meditation. I give full respect to those who find peace in quiet walks, journaling, meditation, yoga. I wish I could enjoy these things. I have tried to. I enjoy walks. I always start with the idea that I am going to just exist with the surroundings. Then I come upon two people taking up the whole of the sidewalk so that I have to step into the street.[6] Or a cyclist rides by mistaking our little trail for the *tour de France* and yells at me to get out of the way. Journaling usually just ends in my writing "FUCK" over and over again. Meditation does sometimes help, but that is mainly because I fantasize about throwing rocks at the cyclists or standing my ground on

[5]It must be noted that I am using terms like "masculine" and "feminine" to refer to stereotypical gender expectations. I feel that personality traits are exactly that, traits of personalities, which everyone (I am told) has. My use of the terms, "boys" and "men" and the general description of their actions likewise refers to stereotypical expectations.

[6]I say "people" because very occasionally this happens with women, but it is generally men.

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the sidewalk and making the people either walk around me or walk into me. The less said about my experiences with yoga the better. Essentially, I think what I have realized is that, although I very much want to be with my peace, I can't do that until I am allowed my anger.

Jennifer Susan Walters, aka She-Hulk was introduced in "The Savage She-Hulk #1" in 1980. A cousin of Bruce Banner, Walters is infected with the Hulk condition through Banner's blood. She is considered to have a milder condition, which allows her to control her transformations, although she eventually transforms permanently (Lee 1980). In 2022, She-Hulk was brought to our screens via Disney in *She-Hulk attorney at law*. In this version, it is not that Walters's condition is milder than Banner's, it is that she is better able to control her anger. After her exposure, Banner takes his cousin off to teach her about her new condition. While he is mansplaining anger control, she tells him:

> Well, here's the thing, Bruce: I'm great at controlling my anger. I do it all the time. When I'm catcalled in the street, when incompetent men explain my own area of expertise to me. I do it pretty much every day, because if I don't, I'll get called "emotional" or "difficult," or might just literally get murdered. So I'm an expert at controlling my anger because I do it infinitely more than you!

In an interview with director Kat Coiro, she explains the decision to embrace Walters's anger:

> What does it mean to be a woman walking down a dark alley at night? What does it mean to be a woman getting hit on at a bar by someone you have no interest in, but feel like you have to be polite because you're scared for your safety? What does it mean that we have all this history of superheroes reaching rage level 10? What happens when our girl shows rage? How is that perceived by the world?" (West 2022)

Predictably, after the show was released two things happened: the manosphere exploded with outrage that a woman dared to say she was better at something than a man, and the show was not renewed. I am less concerned with these things than I am thrilled at any conversation that defies the forced invisibility of women's anger and brings it to the forefront.

5. Anger: evolution

After the US election in 2016, my anger and I began a new relationship. I decided that the constant strain of trying to ignore it had gone on long enough. A large portion of my countrypeople had shown that they preferred an aggressive bully to a competent woman, and that "taking the high road" and responding to bigotry, racism, and misogyny with quiet dignity might help our consciences, but it wasn't going to win elections. I remember walking out of my house the day after the election and thinking, "why do these people get to be awful, while I have to carefully gage my reactions to things?" In those days, my anger no longer seemed something I needed to be wary of. Instead, my ability to still become incensed seemed almost like a superpower. During the years of the Covid pandemic, I kept my anger close to me and started to get to know it. I began to notice the representations of female anger in media had changed. At first, it was hard to

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identify exactly what that change was. I was born in 1975, a time that had its fair share of politically militant women.[7] I grew up with female superheroes like Wonder Woman.[8] My teen years were spent with bands like Bikini Kill, using their distortion pedal to drive anger at the patriarchy deep into my soul. The difference now seemed to be that I didn't have to search out narratives of female anger. They were readily available, and in a wonderful variety. Now there were almost too many female superheroes to name. There were women avenging the death of their families, fighting back against abusive partners, standing up to bullies, and asserting their right to exist and move freely through their world without being harassed. And most of all, they weren't saying they were irritated, frustrated, annoyed. They were saying they were ANGRY.

6. Appreciating anger

Audre Lorde writes, "Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being. Focused with precision it can become a powerful source of energy serving progress and change" (Lorde 1981, 8). There is power in being able to name something. I spent so much time dancing around my anger, being afraid of it, being ashamed of it, denying it. In my early twenties I went to the doctor because I was exhausted all the time. The doctor asked if I was depressed. No, I said, I'm not depressed. I'm angry a lot though. The doctor told me that anger didn't cause exhaustion and that I was probably depressed. He gave me medication.[9] I've now been on mood stabilizers over half my life.[10] Today I know about the physical effects of repressed anger and emotional exhaustion, and I can better understand my periods of activity and lethargy.[11] This is an important step, but I am still in the process of trying to move beyond coping mechanisms. Part of this process is listening to what other women have to say. Myisha Cherry, Amia Srinivasan, and Rebecca Traister, among others, have helped me move beyond shame and fear of my anger and more thoroughly begin to explore its reasons. Srinivasan writes, "anger is sometimes and for some people the only way of recovering a lost sense of agency. And sometimes, and for some people, it can be the only way of registering the full injustice of the world" (Srinivasan 2016, 34).

I meet women all the time, from all across the social spectrum, who tell me they are angry. Some say it in hushed tones, others say it loudly, but none of them use euphemisms. They all own their anger, and it is beautiful to see. There is power in a community formed by sharing, listening, and accepting each other's anger. It can be difficult to hear another woman's anger, especially when that anger comes from injustices that you yourself may have benefitted from. Yet, as Audre Lorde writes, "It is not the anger of other women that will destroy us but our refusals to stand still, to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it, to move beyond the manner of presentation to the substance, to tap that anger as an important source of empowerment" (Lorde 1981, 9).

[7]Although it would not be until my mid-thirties that I actually learned about them all.

[8]I've been trying to think of another female superhero on television during my childhood for the past 15 minutes, so perhaps that is not the best example.

[9]This was once the most shameful secret I had.

[10]Menopause has not helped this.

[11]For an excellent discussion of the effects of anger on marginalized populations see Geronimus 2023.

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7. Conclusion

Over the last two decades, "rage rooms," places where people can pay for the privilege of smashing things in a private setting, have become increasingly popular. Anecdotal evidence from owners of such rooms says their clientele is overwhelmingly female. There are mixed opinions as to the overall health benefit of such places though. In an interview with *USA Today*, one woman reported being surprised by the catharsis she felt after her session (Huff 2018). The Cleveland Clinic, on the other hand, warns that this catharsis is short-lived and may actually encourage destructive behavior (Cleveland Clinic 2023). I have not yet been to a rage room, but I have to say, after spending nearly fifty years being told to calm down, the appeal of being able to use a sledgehammer to literally destroy the wall in my way is undeniable. And maybe women should be a bit more destructive.

I have come to realize I have disrespected my anger. I have taken it for granted. It was my anger that compelled me, a 16-year-old high school dropout, to go to college despite being told I wouldn't succeed. It was my anger that let me persevere in philosophy, a discipline known for its misogyny (among other bad behaviors). And it was my anger that kept nagging at me to look at it, to investigate it and to accept it that led to me writing this piece, even though it was uncomfortable, and I had to avoid being around people at times as I worked things out. I now believe that learning to care for myself does not mean overcoming my anger but rather learning to embrace it. This includes accepting the anger of others, and understanding the ways anger is racialized and socially constrained. My anger will always be a part of me. It is not good, it is not bad, it just is. And becoming friends with my anger seems to be a key part of finding peace in an increasingly infuriating world. Even if I am a woman.

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