

Who Gets to Be Angry?



By [Roxane Gay](#)

- June 10, 2016

-



Credit...Keith Negley

I AM an opinionated woman so I am often accused of being angry. This accusation is made because a woman, a black woman who is angry, is making trouble. She is daring to be dissatisfied with the status quo. She is daring to be heard.

When women are angry, we are wanting too much or complaining or wasting time or focusing on the wrong things or we are petty or shrill or strident or unbalanced or crazy or overly emotional. Race complicates anger. Black women are often characterized as angry simply for existing, as if anger is woven into our breath and our skin.

Black men, like black women, are judged harshly for their anger. The angry black man is seen as a danger, a threat, uncontrollable.

Feminists are regularly characterized as angry. At many events where I am speaking about feminism, young women ask how they can comport themselves so they aren't perceived as angry while they practice their feminism. They ask this question as if anger is an unreasonable emotion when considering the inequalities, challenges, violence and oppression women the world over face. I want to tell these young women to embrace their anger, sharpen themselves against it.

If you really want to see my anger, you would have to join me in my car, when I am driving. I am afflicted by road rage. I have deeply held opinions on the driving habits of others. When I am alone in my car, and sometimes when I have passengers, I yell at other drivers. I gesticulate wildly. I mutter terrible things about the mothers of these others. I am not proud of this but it is cathartic to release my anger. There is no fallout beyond a rise in my blood pressure.

And still, it's scary to recognize how much anger I have roiling beneath the surface of my skin and how few outlets I have for that anger, how I don't feel entitled to that anger. I keep most of my anger to myself, swallowing it as deep as I can, understanding that someday, I won't be able to swallow it anymore. I will erupt and then there will be fallout.

There are countless other moments when I get angry. Some are trivial — when the phone rings and I don't want to answer, when my first name is misspelled, when someone says they don't read. There is also the anger I harbor over far more serious things — a recent [law passed](#) in Indiana, where I live, further restricting abortion rights, and how reproductive freedom is being challenged across the country; the [light sentence](#) Brock Turner received this month in the Stanford rape case and the reality that he will receive more punishment than most people who commit similar crimes; the fractious political climate as we head into the general election.

Anger is a significant part of our cultural conversation. Sometimes, I see people log on to Twitter and ask, "What are we outraged about today?" In this, there is dismissiveness suggesting that the asker is bored with the injustices, small and great, that inspire anger within us.

In these circumstances, anger becomes an emotion that needs to be controlled, an inconvenience and an irritant. It gets confused for rage, which also has its uses.

There are consequences for both expressing and suppressing anger. In northeastern Brazil, women refer to suppressing their anger as "swallowing frogs," which contributes to "emotion-based ailments," according to L. A. Rebhun, an anthropologist who studied the connection between anger and illness in the region. The physical manifestations of anger, Professor Rebhun writes, "may also be seen as symptoms of the pain of bridging gaps between cultural expectation and personal experience in emotion, a process neither easy nor simple."

In Dallas, a place called the Anger Room is set up explicitly for customers' destructive pleasure. Clients can release their anger by taking a bat to the room. In Toronto, there is a [Rage Room](#). One of the options is a date night package, for two. The couple that rages together, perhaps, stays together.

Beyoncé's latest album chronicles heartbreak, betrayal and the anger that rises from those experiences. In the video for the song "Hold Up," Beyoncé strolls down a city street, a placid smile on her face, as she carries a baseball bat. And then, without warning, she slams that bat against car windows, a fire hydrant, a surveillance camera. With each blow, her face falls into a mask of concentrated rage and then she's on to the next target, with ever more bounce in her step.

In her keynote speech to the National Women's Studies Association in 1981, Audre Lorde said, "Every woman has a well-stocked arsenal of anger potentially useful against those oppressions, personal and institutional, which brought that anger into being."

Politics is one arena where anger is brought into being over oppression and other matters. President Obama is often accused of being angry. He is often accused of not being angry enough. Critics have written many pieces on why Mr. Obama cannot be or be perceived as an "angry black man" for fear he might alienate white voters who are, it would seem, so fragile as to be unable to handle human emotion. At the 2015 White House Correspondents Dinner, there was a comedic bit where Mr. Obama brought on Luther, an "[anger translator](#)" who expressed the anger that the president himself could not.

In the Democratic primary this year, people flocked to Bernie Sanders because they were angry about campaign finance and excessive debt and too few opportunities to flourish. The candidate reveled in his anger, often wagging his finger and raising his voice. Together he and his supporters were angry. Their anger was celebrated, framed as passion and engagement.

Conversely, Hillary Clinton is not allowed to be angry though certainly some of her supporters are. Mrs. Clinton, once again, has shown how the rules are different for women. She cannot raise her voice without reprisal. When she appears as anything but demure, when she is passionate and sharp, she is attacked not for her ideas, but for her demeanor.

Amid all this anger, history is being made. She is the first woman who will serve as a major party's nominee for the American presidency.

The presumptive Republican nominee for president, Donald J. Trump, is the angriest from a large field of angry contenders.

Many of his supporters seem angry about so many things — a black president, their lot in life, not getting their piece of the American dream or having to share that American dream with people of color, women, gay, lesbian and transgender people. This anger is discussed with no small amount of compassion or curiosity. It is allowed to flourish. At many of Mr. Trump's rallies, this anger spills into violence.

Mr. Trump himself revels in his anger or the performance of anger. He often shoots off angry tweets, insulting anyone who doesn't submit to his petty worldview. Or he pulls out of a [debate](#). On "[Meet the Press,](#)" in March, Mr. Trump said that his supporters were angry at the state of the world, and he was "just a messenger."

There is a medical name for excessive anger — [intermittent explosive disorder](#). A 2006 Harvard study suggested that up to 16 million people suffered from this disorder. When the study was published, there was a vigorous debate as to whether this disorder was real — discomfort in the idea that the inexcusable could be explained.

But anger is not an inherently bad thing. Most of the time, it is a normal and even healthy human emotion. Anger allows us to express dissatisfaction. It allows us to say something is wrong. The challenge is knowing the difference between useful anger, the kind that can stir revolutions, and the useless kind that can tear us down.

[Roxane Gay](#) is an associate professor at Purdue University, the author of "Bad Feminist" and the forthcoming "Hunger," and a contributing opinion writer.