

## Philosophy

Argentine philosopher Maria Lugones recognised the benefits of rage, redefining anger as sometimes right and good.

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# Lessons in anger

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In a recent interview, author Anne Lamott quoted her friend who said: “If you’re an American girl over the age of 12 and you’re not angry, you’ve completely missed the boat.” The sentiment now seems almost universally applicable: not being angry may be a sign that we are failing to notice the injustices all around us, not just to women but to minorities, immigrants, the economically disadvantaged, children, and so on. What makes me angry on a daily basis includes big things like the sexist expectations put on mothers in the midst of COVID-19 accompanied by loads of self-help drivel that ignores the disparity of our material conditions. It also includes the failure of police to keep black people safe in my country. I get angry about small things too, like having to go to the

store, trying and failing for the fifth time to make mayonnaise, and when my kids forget to put the cap back on the toothpaste. Big and small, these all feel like personal attacks, and they make me want to break dishes. If I did, though, I’d have to clean it up, and besides, it would add one more thing to what so many people get wrong. Most, if not all societies, still believe that a raging woman is off her nut.

In the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10), the category “irritability and anger” lives alongside unhappiness, nervousness, restlessness, hostility, and violent behaviour, and it’s billable. This means that anger is seen worldwide as a mental health problem - I’d wager especially when a woman is performing it. And rage? Forget it.



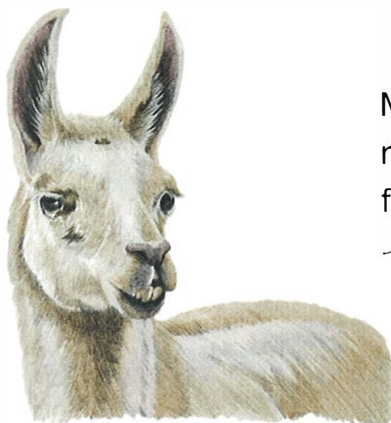
It's not only seen as unbecoming on a woman, but it's historically considered a human vice, largely because of Aristotle. At least he allowed that anger itself - just short of breaking dishes - can be a virtue. Anger's OK, rage isn't. This was the philosophy that the recently-departed Argentine philosopher Maria Lugones internalised for a significant portion of her life. She wrote about it in 1996, in an essay titled *Hard-to-Handle Anger*. Lugones recognised the benefits of rage before #MeToo, before Trump, and before Black Lives Matter. But it took her about 30 years to do so, after fleeing Argentina and "relocating away from battering, systematic rape, extreme psychological and physical torture, by those closest to me".

In an act of literary vulnerability, Lugones writes: "On the one hand, I find myself angrier and angrier; on the other, I have always disliked being overwhelmed by emotion... I have distrusted anger uncontained as a source of knowledge, as the impetus for political action, as the tone for my interaction with other people. But most of all I have disliked myself in deep overwhelming anger." Lugones had been taught to associate anger with power and fear, as Bob Woodward does in his critique of President Trump in his new book *Rage*. This stock depiction of top-down rage as one-dimensional resists

nuance. Lugones also admitted to thinking her anger was manipulative - she had internalised another stock interpretation. When anger comes from the bottom, it often gets misunderstood, maligned, and stitched into a minority's character. Black women rage, Lugones was taught; it's just part of their personality.

Part of Lugones's reevaluation of rage and anger in general came from reading women like Audrey Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa, whose uses of anger she considered right and good. Another part came from noticing that women in the midst of hard to handle anger were "outrageously clear-headed". Their words, she noticed, were "clean, true, undiluted by regard for others' feelings or possible reactions". I myself am never so clear-headed as when I am irate, and if I waited to calm down before having an argument with my spouse (like the marriage books advise), I will have forgotten my point. Worse, without the heat I slip back into being the girl who was taught that a woman's first virtue is putting herself last. As a Latina I was raised on humility and self-sacrifice, and it's only in moments of clear-headed rage that I stop worrying about other people's reactions.

Lugones began to question the familiar idea that the angry self is out of control. Maybe the raging woman



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rages because she is finally in control. She began to notice that anger comes in several flavours, and her research led her to name eight of them, some of which count as rage and some as resistant, some “first order” and some “second order”. Lugones described first order anger as “resistant, measured, communicative, and backward looking”; it responds directly to injustice. Second order anger is also resistant, but in a “raging, uncommunicative, and forward looking” way. In other words, not all anger comes from a place of trying to get someone to understand or respect you. We can use rage to separate ourselves from others if our psychic lives are under threat, like Anzaldúa did. Lugones’s list of angers includes fear anger, explosive anger, controlled anger, peer anger, isolationist anger, anger

that demands respect, anger that challenges respectability, and finally, generous anger, which “expresses love and an unwillingness to accept anything but love in return”. It’s this generous anger, which she also calls loving anger, that women and minorities can express with each other but might not want to risk using (and can never be forced to use) with an oppressor. I suspect this is the hardest anger to handle.

Lugones’s investigation into the varied uses of anger led her to conclude that “anger needs to be trained but not necessarily toned down”. Aristotle advised training, too, but from him we would likely get a list that includes self-helpy options like breathing, counting to ten, walking away, and my new personal favourite: playing the piano really loudly. Having been heavily influenced by Aristotle, my

ears interpret all talk of training as controlling, calming down, moderating. But for Lugones, who insists that we need not tone ourselves down, training means using anger to our benefit. She suggests that we get to know the different uses of anger and make an effort to understand ourselves and others in anger. For example, if we need to distance ourselves from others for our safety or wellbeing, second-order rage might be a good choice. We’ll know we’re getting the hang of it when we begin choosing our angers like we choose our friends.

Women don’t need to “calm down,” we need to clear our heads, speak out against oppression, resist fatigue, and sometimes rage. We need to train our anger to work for us, to give us what we need, not to make other people feel comfortable. Our goal is to be, not to behave.

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