

In Defense of Anger

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1.

On the 28th of August 1963, in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C., Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to a crowd of a quarter of a million people about a dream. That speech, which was televised across the country and heard around the world, has come more than anything else – more than images of men and women beaten by police, schoolchildren attacked by dogs, or swimming pools laced with acid – to stand for the American Civil Rights movement.

But the movement was about more than a utopian dream of racial harmony. It was also about an experience – of unceasing violence, rape, torture, exploitation, humiliation and degradation, perpetrated by white Americans against the black people they enslaved and never really emancipated. In the 1960s, few people spoke more powerfully about that experience than Malcolm X, the charismatic and fiery leader of the Black Nationalist movement. While Martin Luther King spoke of non-violence and loving the enemy, Malcolm X gave voice to the bitterness that black people felt towards their white oppressors. While King advocated for a politics of integration and love, Malcolm X stood for a politics of angry defiance.

In his autobiography, published shortly after his assassination in 1965, Malcolm X expressed his contempt for the March on Washington, where King gave his “I have a dream” speech. What began, he said, as a “militant, unorganized and leaderless” movement of angry black people, “sick and tired of the black man’s neck under the white man’s heel”, had been co-opted by white liberals and their black lackeys, Martin Luther King chief among them. What started as an “angry riptide” had become a “gentle flood”. It enraged Malcolm X to see black revolutionaries linking arms with what he saw as their white oppressors. It enraged him to hear King speak of dreams when black America was still living a nightmare.

Martin Luther King and Malcolm X met only once, on the steps of Capitol Hill. But they were often on each other’s minds, neither comrades nor enemies, but opposing

poles in a shared struggle for black emancipation. In his own memoirs, King lamented Malcolm X's angry rhetoric, his obsessive cataloguing of white crimes against black people, his insistence on the legitimacy of violent self-defence. King didn't believe the problems of Black America could be solved by a politics of anger. Anger couldn't generate the creative response to oppression that was required; only love could do that. Malcolm X's anger, King thought, was counterproductive, a "great disservice to his people" and to the cause of black liberation.

Yet King knew that Malcolm X had plenty of reason to be angry. He knew that a man whose pregnant mother had had her house burned down by the Klu Klux Klan while the police looked on, and whose father, himself a preacher, had had his skull crushed in: King understood that such a man would find it difficult to love his enemy. King didn't approve of Malcolm X's anger, but he never dismissed it.

There are photographs of that one meeting between King and Malcolm X, on the steps of Capitol Hill. The two men are clasping hands, looking into each other's eyes, smiling.

2.

More often than not anger *is* dismissed, especially when it comes from those who, like Malcolm X, have most reason to be angry. Today, the white descendants of American slave owners celebrate Martin Luther King as a moral hero – but write off Malcolm X as an angry black man. That image of the angry black man has dogged the political career of Barack Obama, despite the calm, measured tone of his speeches. In recent years, the spectre of the Angry Black Man has been eclipsed by that of the Angry Arab: hot-blooded, death-seeking and impervious to reason.

And older than both of them is the image of the Angry Woman. Proverbs 21:19 tells us that "it is better to dwell in the wilderness than with a contentious and angry woman", as if one had a better chance of surviving a bear attack than a marriage to an opinionated wife. A woman who loses her temper can expect to be called hysterical, or worse. She can expect men to speculate openly about where she is in her menstrual cycle. And if she's speaking in Parliament, she can expect the prime minister to tell her to "Calm down, dear." And what if you're, say, a woman *and* black? Google "Angry Black Woman Syndrome" and you'll get over a million hits.

These images – the angry black man, the angry woman, the angry Arab – are weapons of control. To dismiss someone as angry is to say that she is governed by emotion rather than reason – that she is uncivilised, not fully human – and so unworthy of serious engagement. To dismiss someone as angry is to say that she herself is the problem – not whatever it is that she is angry about. Of course the image of the angry man or woman has some basis in reality. Many black people are angry. Many women are angry. Many Arabs are angry. Their experience has given them much to be angry about. And this is precisely what these weaponised images obscure: that anger is often a reasonable response to an unreasonable world.

We should be suspicious when the powerful tell the powerless not to be so angry, to calm down dear, to just be reasonable. It is in the interest of the powerful to say such things. Anger can be a weapon in the hands of the powerless. It can broadcast injustice. It can draw crowds. It can motivate us to do what we would otherwise be too afraid, or too resigned, to do. Anger can frighten. We should ask ourselves whether White America would have been quite so eager to embrace Martin Luther King's loving dream if the alternative hadn't been Malcolm X's angry revolution.

And we should ask ourselves what might happen if *we* were angrier: about the privatisation of public goods and the erosion of the private sphere; about austerity in an age of massive inequality; about the demise of social security and the rise of corporate subsidy. About cuts to legal aid and the NHS, about 'go home' vans, about zero hours contracts, about Iraq and Gaza.

The writer James Baldwin said that Malcolm X, by giving expression to the suffering of black people, "corroborated their reality", made them feel as if they "really existed". He helped black people to think of themselves as black, and not as negroes. Anger can be the means to reveal what is really going on, the violence that silently structures how we live. Anger can show us that we aren't really bitches or sluts; fags or dykes or trannies; or any of the words I won't say here that are still used to insult people of colour. Anger can reveal that such words are designed to prevent people from being people. Anger can call us into a new existence.

Anger has its uses, but it also has its limits. Growing up, I was told, as little girls often are, not to get angry – that it was unbecoming, unladylike, and in any case wouldn't make things better. If I got angry, I was only hurting myself, getting het up for no reason. And they had a point. Eloquent anger can command attention. But anger in its most natural form, raw and inarticulate, risks getting you dismissed as irrational or shrill, even when you have excellent reason to be angry. If you want to be listened to, it's sometimes best to calm down.

This is one of the hard truths about living in a democracy: if you want something to change, you have to make others listen to you; and if you want others to listen to you, you can't be too angry about it. People don't like being shouted at, or being told that they've done something wrong, especially when they have. As a practical matter, it's usually better to appeal to people's sense of compassion and goodwill, to speak in a tone of neighbourly love rather than righteous anger.

This is why the exhortation to calm down isn't always an attempt at social control. Sometimes, it's a sincere attempt to help. Well-meaning allies will often remind the politically disenfranchised that getting angry is “counter-productive” to their cause. Helpful men have long told women that feminism would go down better if it were just a bit less “militant”. Straight allies have told queer activists the same thing. A few years ago, Barack Obama told the entire African continent that it should get over colonialism and start focusing on the future.

But even given in a spirit of care, the exhortation not to get angry can be morally pernicious. If you are a victim of racism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, misogyny, economic exploitation or some toxic combination of these, then you already have it bad enough. But your situation is made even worse by the fact that if you want anyone to pay attention to your suffering, you can't be shouty or shrill about it. Not only do you have to suffer injustice, you also have to police your natural emotional responses to that injustice. This itself is a form of oppression. Everyone else can behave as badly they like, but *you* have to be a saint.

When you tell an oppressed person that their anger is “counter-productive”, you are reminding them of, and re-enforcing, that oppression. It's true that getting angry might not alleviate the injustice – it might even make it worse. But that doesn't mean

that the oppressed don't have the right to get angry. And it doesn't mean that *you* have the right to tell them to calm down.

4.

Anger might not always be "useful". But anger isn't justified only when it can be put to some concrete use. Anger is justified when it responds to a moral failing in the world. We often hear about people being "blinded" by their anger. But anger, at its best, is a way of *seeing clearly*, a form of emotional insight into the moral world. "When we turn from anger," the black feminist Audre Lorde said, "we turn from insight, saying we will accept only the designs already known, deadly and safely familiar." When the powerful condemn the angry, we should be suspicious. What "designs already known" are they protecting? What is it that they don't want us to see?

And we should be suspicious of ourselves, too, when we are tempted to tell those suffering injustice not to get angry, *calm down, be reasonable*. For if anger is a form of moral seeing, then telling the powerless not to get angry is an exhortation to blindness. Sometimes it is easier to be blind. Sometimes it takes great strength to see things as they are.

5.

On the 27th of February, 1965, Malcolm X's funeral was held at Faith Temple Church of God in Christ, in Harlem. Many at the time thought his death should have been allowed to pass unobserved and unmemorialised. They thought it better that he be written out of the history of that turbulent period: that he was a rabble-rouser and a radical and an enemy of black emancipation. Nonetheless, 1500 people saw fit to come out and honour him. Those 1500 people saw that Malcolm X's great anger had also been a great gift.

Malcolm X was later buried upstate, in Hartsdale, New York. Friends took shovels from the gravediggers to fill the grave themselves.