

## The Ambivalence of Black Rage

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**Abstract:** Activists associated with the Black Lives Matter movement embrace anger. Owning their rage sets these activists in opposition to an older generation of black leaders, invested in respectability, who narrate anger as an emotion to be overcome. Younger activists worry about complicity with the status quo – with white supremacy – of these older activists, yet embracing anger is no surefire way of avoiding complicity with the status quo. This essay investigates the ambivalence of black anger, drawing on philosophy and feminist theory while also locating the current eruption of black anger in an ambivalent history of black political affect. In laboratory conditions, anger tracks moral wrongs, but we do not live in a laboratory. We live in a world filled with systems of domination, including white supremacy, and in such circumstances, the wrongs to which anger points are often obscured. Feminist theorists including Audre Lorde and María Lugones offer strategies for clarifying and embracing rightly-directed anger in such circumstances, and for allowing such anger to be politically productive. These strategies help in attending to the anger described in recent memoirs written by young, Black Lives Matter-associated activists. Yet deep ambivalence remains: anger as an affect, anger as a rhetorical strategy, and anger as a trope slip into each other in these texts. Embracing anger may promise a way of escaping complicity, but subtle worries about complicity are unavoidable.

## Vincent LLOYD

### The Ambivalence of Black Rage

The phrase "black lives matter" is the most visible element of a much broader new vocabulary young people in black American communities are using to talk about race today. This has happened before: the language of black advocacy shifted swiftly and dramatically from the Christian idiom of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and early 1960s to the secular idiom of the black power movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, a language that would gradually fade and be incorporated into the multicultural status quo over the rest of the twentieth century and into the start of the twenty-first century. Since the murder of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin in 2012 and 18-year-old Michael Brown in 2014, multiculturalism no longer reigns; a realignment is taking place. It is originating in black American spaces, particularly those frequented by millennials, in person and in social media. The hashtag BlackLivesMatter emerged from these spaces and was embraced by mainstream, multiracial liberals, an anomaly in vocabularies still dominated by multiculturalism. But "black lives matter" is just one element of a broad new language that counts among its pillars "anti-blackness," "black love," "black joy," "black girl magic," "misogynoir," and "dignity."

Another pillar of this new black political discourse is "rage." It circulates in social media spaces and finds expression at meetings and rallies. The embrace of rage is part of a reevaluation of values central to the new black activism. Within this discourse, earlier generations are perceived to have a commitment to respectability that needs to be discarded. It is replaced with rage. Like much of the new black political vocabulary, rage is conceptualized by drawing on a distinctive set of theoretical resources, most prominently the writings of James Baldwin, Audre Lorde, and bell hooks. These intellectuals' work was always part of black studies within the academy and in black feminist spaces, but it has now been given the leading role in defining the terms of black political engagement. And each of these intellectuals speaks of black rage.

When considering a certain discourse, and particularly a newly emerging discourse, it is often difficult to determine how far down it goes. This problem is exacerbated by the tendency of social media to rapidly disseminate words and phrases without providing the space or time for reflection. Minimally, a new discourse would simply be providing new words to express old ideas and to describe old patterns of action. But words shape thought, and a new political vocabulary allows for new approaches to problems and makes new responses thinkable. A new discourse thus also shapes perceptions and actions. With a set of new words and new ways of thinking, young black activists notice new problems and experiment with new forms of response. Moreover, a new discourse has the potential, if fully embraced, to shape the emotions. In other words, it might be that rage is just a word that is employed much more often than it used to be by young black activists, or it might be the case that these activists feel rage, and the combination of this language and feeling (along with others) is a crucial component of our current political moment.<sup>1</sup>

This equivocation between language of emotion and felt emotion is one that I want to hold on to as I explore black rage. But I do want to take black rage as it is felt seriously, because those young black activists catalyzing the swirl of new discourse take it seriously. The aim of those activists is to revalue rage for the purposes of dissent. Their claim is that rage was once suppressed, or its expression was unfocused. Today, with the new discourse of black self-assertion, black Americans can own their rage, and so they can direct it properly against the forces of white supremacy. This is a bold claim and one that, on its surface, sounds like a product of our therapeutic age: If only we can be in touch with our emotions, we can solve our problems. Might it be the case that black rage pulls away from engagement with normativity – both of the world as it is and the world as it could be, leaving both intact as we focus on our own self-actualization? Is black rage actually complicit with the powers that be rather than a challenge to the powers that be? In what follows I will engage with, though ultimately not resolve, the ambivalence of black rage.

### Feeling Angry

Hatred is quite different from anger. As William Galston puts it, "Anger is directed to agency, hatred to identity. We feel angry because of what someone has done, hatred because of who someone is" (97). Anger is felt when we are wronged. When we are children, we may be angry that we do not get what we desire right away (the lollipop, the extra playtime, the blue ribbon). Once we mature, we feel

<sup>1</sup> Pace Debra Thompson, who forecloses this line of questioning when she writes, "Emotions are etched onto cardboard signs at BLM rallies across the country" (458).

frustrated, not angry, when we encounter obstacles to our desires. We have been taken into the normative order, doing what is done, desiring what is to be desired. Anger now may come when things and people do not do what they are supposed to do: when the vending machine does not give us a soda, when we fill out the right paperwork but the bureaucracy loses our application, or when our partner makes a commitment and then reneges. We are wronged: what ought to have happened did not happen. Anger also results when we are dishonored or, to put it another way, when our dignity is violated. This is a special class of the wrongs involved in failures of the normative order. One aspect of that order is treating each person in the proper way, that is, according to his or her specific status (honor) or according to his or her status as human (dignity). When my honor or dignity are violated, I am wronged, and anger follows. Observing anger means knowing that some wrong has been committed, so anger alerts that a question of morality may be at issue.

Anger, however, has a tendency to miss the mark. Sometimes this is simply a matter of misperception. We think that a norm is being violated, but on closer inspection of the situation we realize we misunderstood the norm or the facts of the case. We thought the meeting was at 2, we were angry that our colleague was late, then we realized that our appointment was for 2:30. Or we realize we are visiting a place where there is a cultural norm that meetings generally begin a half hour late. Or we realize that there is some other norm that trumped the norm of timeliness: our colleague's sister was hospitalized, for example. Similar forms of misperception happen in cases of honor and dignity. The general is angered when he thinks he was being dishonored by the soldier who failed to salute him, then he realizes that he is in a restaurant in civilian clothes. In cultural contexts where family is valued as an essential part of what makes one human, a stranger might mistakenly fail to inquire about the health of a new acquaintance's parents, slighting her dignity and prompting anger – until the cultural difference comes to light.

Deeper problems also hamper our ability to take anger as evidence of wrongness. For reasons that may be individual or social, psychological or cultural, individuals may struggle to express anger. Anger constipation, as it were, can result in a host of problems. Anger can turn inward, focused on the self, and so become self-hatred, perhaps resulting in depression. Anger can be withheld at moments it is warranted and instead shoot out at inappropriate occasions and in inappropriate quantities, resulting in seemingly unprovoked blind rage. For those not properly socialized, not brought into the normative order, what ought to be frustration can be expressed as anger, with this anger prompted by the inability to obtain a desired object rather than by failure to follow norms or to act according to honor or dignity.

There may be ideological forces that mute anger. This claim is often found in feminist literature where scholars observe that patriarchy prevents women from being able to express their anger, even to themselves.<sup>2</sup> Relatedly, when women do express anger, patriarchy makes it such that this anger is often dismissed as unwarranted or exaggerated, in other words as not fitting with a moral wrong. Another problem: ideological forces make it so that some minority groups' expressions of emotions other than anger, or even just speech that expresses contested opinions, are taken to be anger. In other words, anger is over-ascribed to some minority groups (e.g., black Americans) with the result that the credibility of all expressions of anger made by members of that minority group is reduced. At the end of the day, members of such a minority group are effectively deprived of the ability to signal wrongness by means of anger. And the problem compounds: being unable to have one's anger heard is itself a moral wrong, prompting more anger, anger that itself cannot be heard, and on *ad infinitum*. Pursuing this set of concerns leads us toward black rage.

Here we see one of the difficulties of anger. The distortion of anger by ideological forces can be difficult to distinguish from the distortion of anger by psychological or cultural forces. And this is used to the advantage of those in positions of domination. To invoke the classic example, a man claims that the angry woman is suffering from a psychological impairment, such as hysteria, or white Americans claim that black American culture predisposes black Americans to anger. But in this difficulty also lies promise. If we can develop the resources to rightly discern the anger of dominated communities, we can expose the workings of ideology, for the anger of dominated communities in part tracks the wrongness of domination. Yet if dominated communities are constantly being pulled into a loop of ever-amplifying anger, with visible anger motivated by the suppression of anger rather than the underlying wrong, it would seem nearly impossible to unravel these layers of anger so as to realize the promise of dominated communities' anger illuminating the shape of domination.

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<sup>2</sup> Marilyn Frye claims that first wave feminists succeeded in making it possible to hear women's anger when they took the role of mother, for example on child welfare issues and prohibition, but left women's anger muted when it pertained to themselves (84-94).

Let us approach another way, clarifying how it is that anger might assist in struggles for justice. So far, we have been considering anger of an abstract other, but let us now consider one's own anger. The story philosophers tell about reasoning about justice, usually portrayed as a rather heartless enterprise, might be enhanced by reflecting on one's feelings of anger in addition to one's ability to reason. Noticing that a certain situation evokes anger provides a *prima facie* reason to think there is injustice (See Lapoutre). You can then focus your reasoning powers, and emotional attention, at that situation and others like it so as to enhance your sensitivity to questions of justice. Filmmakers and orators who succeed in evoking anger in their audiences share more than we might think with moral philosophers, in this view. When Frederick Douglass or Malcolm X make their audience angry about slavery or segregation, they prompt the audience member to notice aspects of her world that she may have otherwise overlooked, and to look in those places for injustice. Note how, on this account, there is no one-to-one connection between anger and moral infraction; rather, anger prompts investigation for moral infraction, and so the concerns about anger's distortions are mitigated.

Another version of this use of anger for moral discernment involves tracking anger associated with feelings of indignation (e.g., Bromell). When you feel indignant or you observe others expressing feelings of indignation you are able to tell that a specific sort of wrong is being done, namely, an offense against dignity (or honor). Indignation would seem to suffer less from distortions afflicting other types of anger. Even when other angers are muted or over-ascribed, such as in the woman fully indoctrinated by patriarchy or black Americans viewed through white supremacist glasses, feelings of indignation remain perceptible. Sometimes they result from disrespect, treating an individual as though she has less standing than she really has. Yet the problem with indignation is that while it may be an effective marker of wrongs committed against those in the most marginalized communities, who have so little standing that indignation necessarily tracks offense to the most basic form of human dignity, those with relatively greater standing feel indignation when their social status is threatened, not only when the basics of their human dignity is threatened.

So far we have been thinking with Aristotle's observation in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that "apparent injustice" brings about anger (1135b29). Reacting too strongly or too weakly to perceived injustice is vicious; Aristotle, as always, recommends the mean. But Aristotle offers another definition of anger, this one in his *Rhetoric*: "A desire accompanied by pain for an imagined retribution on account of an imagined slighting inflicted by people who have no legitimate reason to slight oneself or one's own" (qtd. in Nussbaum 17). The focus here is forward-looking, toward retribution, rather than backward-looking, toward a wrong committed. Martha Nussbaum has recently urged that Aristotle's observation about the forward-looking nature of anger is correct – and this is a reason to reject anger altogether. Would it not be better for us to avoid cycles of vengeance and instead aim at reconciliation through hope for forgiveness?

That anger motivates action against those who inflict wrongs is an attractive feature of anger to some theorists of anger from marginalized communities. But if marginalization runs deep, effecting how a community sees the world and itself, forgiveness and reconciliation do not seem like viable goals. In such cases, the dominating and the dominated communities effectively live in different worlds. Forgiveness and reconciliation entail merging worlds, and given the posited power differential, such a merger is really a hostile takeover. The incommensurability between worlds strains the ability of the two individuals to even agree on the wrong that was committed, let alone how it might be righted. The problem is exacerbated when we consider how an individual in the dominating group stands in for a system of domination. That individual may be doing what she ought to do, following the norms of the dominating community. A member of the dominated community may then be wronged proximately by that one individual but really by the system of domination (patriarchy, white supremacy, etc.) as a whole.

Initially, the anger expressed by a member of the dominated community may seek retribution from one particular member of the dominating community. But very quickly it becomes clear that this is ineffective and confused. The system of domination seeks to capture the anger of the dominated, muting it or channeling it or commodifying it (e.g., Malcolm X t-shirts). A crucial project of emancipatory politics, then, is to provide a framework for "reading" anger rightly. The more robust the framework, the more it can resist attempts to mute, channel, or commodify anger. Sara Ahmed defines this as an essential project of feminism, to move "from anger into an interpretation of that which one is against, whereby associations or connections are made between the object of anger and broader patterns or structures" (176). When feminism succeeds in providing such a framework, it demonstrates that anger is "reasonable," and Ahmed urges feminists to insist on this in their activism even when they know most of the time those with power will ignore or dismiss feminist anger. One day, Ahmed seems to be claiming,

when the political moment is right, feminists may win, and the framework of their anger will be recognized as reasonable by all.<sup>3</sup>

Audre Lorde talks about black women's ability to make anger into a "'symphony' rather than 'cacophony' because we have had to learn to orchestrate those furies so that they do not tear us apart" (129). Given the incommensurability between the world of black American women and the dominant world, there is no straightforward method to identifying and pursuing wrongs or even systems of wrongs inflicted by white supremacy through the actions of white individuals (and institutions). It takes a subtle skill for black women to attune themselves to their anger, Lorde suggests, "to listen to its rhythms, to learn within it"; anger at its best can be used "for strength and force and insight within our daily lives" (130). There is a necessarily mysterious element to this process, but it is ultimately liberating. Anger will "help define and fashion a world where all our sisters can grow, where our children can love, and where the power of touching and meeting another woman's difference and wonder will eventually transcend the need for destruction" (133). Lorde's claim is that the desire for retribution looks quite different when we take a view from the margins. Rather than propelling a cycle of vengeance, the anger of the dominated, when symphonic, can motivate engagement in ordinary life, including persistence in the face of travails, and it can conjure a new, better world. When anger among the marginalized is symphonic, those who are marginalized know that the travails they face do not represent the way the world is supposed to be, that they are unjust; the world could be otherwise.

The difficulty with Lorde's view is that the more opaque the world of the dominated is from the perspective of the dominant, the less that can be said about what happens in the world of the dominated from outside that world. The vision of a new world that Lorde suggests symphonic anger can generate, motivating the marginalized to imagine radically otherwise, is made possible by incommensurability, but this same incommensurability renders the content of their imaginings inaccessible. María Lugones responds to this problem by embracing incommensurability and thinning out the content of anger's vision of the future. Lugones distinguishes first-order anger, anger that tracks wrongs within a normative world, and second-order anger, anger that is essentially opaque and interrupts the normative world, reminding its inhabitants that their world could be radically otherwise. From the perspective of an inhabitant of one normative world, expressing first-order anger in one's own normative world demonstrates respectability, that one is a competent participant in the world, worthy of respect. Expressing first-order anger in one normative world has no significance in another and generates no world-crossing sense of respect, but second-order anger does cross worlds. It takes practice to learn to ignore first-order anger in other normative worlds, for the dominated to desensitize themselves to the anger of those who dominate. Such anger would seem to track wrongs that call for response, but to try to track such anger and respond to those wrongs is to subject oneself to abuse, for it is impossible to stretch across the divide between normative worlds.

Second-order anger, in Lugones's view, is often dismissed as irrational. This is because such anger does not seem motivated by reason: while there is no particular wrong that was committed, there is still anger. "Yet, when I have observed women in hard-to-handle [second-order] anger, they have been outrageously clearheaded; their words clean, true, undiluted by regard for others' feelings or possible reactions" (107). While such anger may ostensibly be about this or that, its effect transcends any particular content. Observing such anger provincializes your own normative world, your confidence that reason and feeling follow the patterns with which you are familiar, even though no content is communicated about that other world. When we see such anger anywhere we intuit that the one angered demands respect (or, better, dignity), that she must be a competent member of some normative world, even if that world is outside of our horizon. Lugones argues that such second-order anger, which she describes as rage or "separatist anger," constitutes a community of sorts that transcends the divides between incommensurable worlds, and "its harshness attests to the hardness of the walls against which and over which it echoes" (112).

Lugones's account of rage seems to approximate what recent black American activists intend when they use the language of black rage, but this leads back to a problem. It is hard to say to what extent black rage is *felt* today; what is clear is that it is *narrated*. It is narrated as part of one's own story, at the center of recent memoirs by young activists, and it is narrated as part of the history of black American struggle. But essential to Lugones's account of rage is rage's resistance to communication (while still being "outrageously clearheaded").

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<sup>3</sup> Ahmed moves immediately from a section on anger to a section on hope. There are interesting parallels with Cornel West's assertion that a commitment to love undergirds expressions of black rage at their best, with an eye toward the case of Malcolm X (96).

### Situating Black Rage

While there is a self-consciousness in the writings of young black activists about the novelty of their discourse, about just how different it is from that of their elders and those in generations before, there is also a desire to root their discourse in a tradition of black (often beyond black-American) struggle. Some of those who came before attempted to express black rage, the activists say, but they did it imperfectly, not attending to certain issues (particularly around gender and sexuality) that today's discourse has more fully considered. Certain theorists aid in making connections between the current movement and the history of black struggle, with bell hooks as a leading bridge figure. Her 1995 book *Killing Rage* offers a characteristically clear analysis and historicization of the topic, and indeed she centers rage in part because "Sharing rage connects those of us who are older and more experienced with younger black and non-black folks who are seeking ways to be self-actualized, self-determined, who are eager to participate in anti-racist struggle" (19-20). According to hooks, in the segregated South "Black people could die from feeling rage and expressing it to the wrong white folks. We learned to choke down our rage" (13). Segregation eased this repression because the separate racial worlds made it possible for black Southerners to live their lives in minimal contact with whites, so with few proximate objects of rage. Yet because the system of racial domination was there, rage was still there, just infrequently activated (and, when activated, almost always muted).

After segregation ended, black Americans, and particularly those with some degree of worldly success, increasingly came into contact with whites – providing more occasions for rage to be activated and requiring all the more effort to suppress that rage. Now rage-suppression is motivated not only by fear of violence and death at the hands of whites but also by the desire for advancement, by the thought that more success can be had in a white world if black rage is nowhere to be found. Integration also provided more blacks with opportunities to exist in spaces where white terror was not felt so acutely, and so where black rage could be countenanced. Like Lugones's description of second-order anger, hooks describes rage that pulls singular individuals apart from their worlds, thrusting them into an unknown future. "A black person unashamed of her rage, using it as a catalyst to develop critical consciousness, to come to full decolonized self-actualization, had no real place in the existing social structure" (16). Writing of her own experiences leaning into rage, hooks writes, "I felt like an exile." She observes that rage "had the potential not only to destroy but also to construct," and it "can act as a catalyst inspiring courageous action" (16).

In 1995, hooks's anger made her feel like an exile, but twenty years later it would have put her in plenty of good company. Anger came back. Mychal Denzel Smith penned a pair of essays in *The Nation* accounting for anger's return in black America, "The Function of Black Rage" in 2014 and "The Rebirth of Black Rage" in 2015. By the time Smith entered the conversation, and by the time the new racial justice activism took off, mainstream commentators had declared black anger over, for example in psychologist Ellis Cose's 2011 book *The End of Anger: A New Generation's Take on Race and Rage*. Smith argues that anger animated the civil rights movement and the black power movement, motivating black Americans to organize for racial justice. Like hooks, he sees integration bringing about decline in a certain way. When black political energies turn toward electoral politics, anger becomes a liability rather than an asset. For a while anger can be found in politically-conscious rap music, in groups like N.W.A. and Tupac, but that, too, fades into the apolitical embrace of multiculturalism that was 1990s and 2000s America. Al Sharpton was an anomaly, and "his expressions of rage were diluted by his celebrity-activist status and the larger-than-life persona that made him a prime target for caricature" (Smith, "The Rebirth of Black Rage"). In other words, the anger of figures like Sharpton was not taken seriously.

Barack Obama represents the nadir of black anger, in Smith's account, with Obama's race speech during his 2008 campaign in which he renounced his association with his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, exemplary. Wright embodied black rage, and when Wright's fiery words, including "God damn America!," began circulating widely and threatening Obama's candidacy, Obama was pressed to respond. In a speech widely praised by the liberal media, Obama situates Wright's anger within the experiences of a generation for whom "the memories of humiliation and doubt and fear have not gone away" (Obama). In black spaces, Obama explains, survivors of segregation continue to express their anger, even if it is foreign to racially mixed and white spaces. Obama insists that Wright's anger is "real"— that is, properly responsive to a moral wrong — but he adds that "similar anger exists within segments of the white community" who have worked hard yet experience economic precarity, and white anger is also real. Both white and black anger call for acknowledgment, at which point we will be able to start "working together" in order to "move beyond some of our old racial wounds" and "continue on the path of a more

perfect union." Obama presented himself as embodying this possibility of moving forward together, of setting aside anger over wounds of the past.<sup>4</sup>

Obama's public performance was nearly anger-free. But observers suspected that anger lurked underneath, deeply repressed, an intuition that found expression in the comedian Keegan-Michael Key's performance as Luther, Obama's fictional "anger translator." Key was part of a wider, more serious set of public expressions of black anger that slowly emerged in the lead up to the deaths of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown. Smith identifies Kanye West going off-script in a Katrina fundraiser to declare, "George Bush doesn't care about black people" as a crucial moment in this emergence ("The Rebirth of Black Rage"). In the years that followed, black millennials would identify Obama with their parents, with desires for respectability, and perhaps with complicity in the evils of the status quo, in contrast with their own experiences of continuing racism in need of response. This sentiment went mainstream with the success of Ta-Nehisi Coates's *Between the World and Me*, a book Smith reads not so much as an expression of pessimism but as an expression of warranted anger, representing the sentiments of a generation.

Smith's narrative draws our attention to an important question of interpretation with respect to anger. Rarely do people who feel anger use the words, "I am angry." Given the over-ascription of anger to black Americans, discerning where there is really the feeling of anger is far from trivial. Key represents a widely shared sentiment that Obama was secretly angry. Smith interprets Coates as angry. Figures such as Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X are often held up as paradigms of black anger, but in reality they just straightforwardly describe the world as they see it, a world different than that seen through the cloudy glasses of white supremacy, making whites (and some blacks) hear anger. The figure of Martin Luther King, Jr. stands in this ambivalence. Officially, he distances himself from the anger that he ascribes to the emerging black nationalists organizing under the slogan of "black power" (King ch. 2). Yet commentators often see King himself as angry: "You cannot read or hear him without feeling that palpable sense of frustration, fury, and anger," with an "impatience born of rage" motivating the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (Smith "The Rebirth").

The same ambivalence is found in James Baldwin, whose words are often cited to represent the centrality of rage in black American life:

To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious, is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you. Part of the rage is this: it isn't only what is happening to you, but it's what's happening all around you all of the time, in the face of the most extraordinary and criminal indifference, the indifference and ignorance of most white people in this country. ("The Negro's Role" 81)

Baldwin speaks these words while he is responding to a question the journalist Nat Hentoff poses about balancing artistic and social responsibilities. While Baldwin starts by naming this rage, he goes on to assert that writers actually must distance themselves from rage because it leads to excessive simplicity and ultimately provinciality. "You have to decide that you can't spend the rest of your life cursing out everybody that gets in your way" ("The Negro's" 81). The task of the writer is not as straightforward as turning individual anger into a symphony, as Lorde asserts, or giving it a theoretical framework, as Ahmed asserts. Rather, Baldwin says that "the suffering of any people is really universal," and the task of the writer is to tell stories that allow readers to feel what others feel, and so deepen their appreciation of the human condition and its essentially tragic nature ("The Negro's" 81). In short, black rage motivates storytelling, which is hard, disciplined work; storytelling allows for a broader appreciation of our shared humanity. Baldwin, far from being an exponent of black rage and so a forefather of the rage of millennial black activists today, is at best ambivalent. Perhaps we can take inspiration from his turn to narrative, reading the ostensibly historical accounts of hooks, Smith, and others not as direct participation in a tradition of blacks feeling angry but rather as storytelling, as rage motivating a story about rage that expands our sensitivity to suffering as such and rattling our complicity with the status quo.

### **Narrating Rage**

James Baldwin also wrote about rage in his autobiographical essay, "Notes of a Native Son." The essay is a coming of age story structured around the death of Baldwin's father and Baldwin's own ascent into manhood in a racist nation. The centerpiece of the essay is an account of rage. Baldwin goes to a diner, the waitress tells him blacks are not served there, and Baldwin feels "colder and more murderous than

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<sup>4</sup> Smith further argues that Obama's message of hope, in particular, functioned to mute black rage ("The Rebirth").

ever."<sup>5</sup> He reports that he desired to strangle the waitress, but she was standing too far away. Baldwin throws a glass of water at her but misses, breaking a mirror behind her. The young Baldwin realizes that rage of that sort can only lead to his death – he attributes his father's death to rage that was impossible to express, turned into mental illness – and he decides to live differently. His father wanted him to be a preacher, but the young Baldwin decides to be a writer. He separates himself from his father and his father's anger, and he becomes an adult. The affect that once ran uncontrolled through him is now channeled into the norms of prose.

Put another way, Baldwin's anger in the diner was the anger of a child desiring an object (supper), not getting it, and raging. Through learning to write, and through narrating an account of his own earlier anger, Baldwin enters a normative world. It is not a distinctively black normative world, incommensurable with the dominant one; rather, it is the multiracial world of America, complete with forms of domination but also with music and love and joy. Baldwin's father, like the figure of the father more generally in our psychic life, represents a bridge from childhood, where the father establishes a normative world that is absolute and comforting, to adulthood, where the norms of the real world are opaque. In the real world, we will make mistakes discerning what it is we ought to do, and even when we try our best we will still receive the world's reprimand. This is the tragic nature of the world. Indeed, Baldwin suggests that he encounters this early, for he is aware that his father, as a black father, is never an absolute authority, that the white world puts his father's authority under erasure. Because of this dynamic, black Americans have particular insight into the human condition: they perceive the tragic nature of the normative world in a fuller sense than white Americans, who are motivated by a desire for stability that leads to delusion.

Baldwin's narrative positions black rage in childhood, in contrast to the disciplined performances of adulthood that might be fueled, at some level, by passion, but that are always at a distance from raw anger. We find similar narratives, also centered around childhood anger and coming to terms with fathers, in the autobiographies of Barack Obama and Ta-Nehisi Coates (and, at the cultural and political level, in Obama's race speech). What is so striking about recent autobiographical writings by black activists is that they decisively reject this narrative structure. They pivot away from the ambivalence and potential complicity that anger (of fathers, of an earlier generation) overcome or sublimated implies. Often, there is no coming to terms with the father. Fathers are absent; when they are present, they are abusive. The anger at desire thwarted is not sublimated into the symbolic, into a shared normative world. It is present at the surface. It is directed against systems of domination, particularly patriarchy and white supremacy. Those systems are faulted for taking away fathers, for making it impossible to enter a shared normative order.

A few years after the height of Black Lives Matter activism, leading figures associated with the movement have moved from protest to memoir. Smith published his in 2016, with a memoir by Black Lives Matter co-founder Patrisse Cullors published in 2017 and memoirs by activists Darnell Moore, Austin Channing Brown, and Brittney Cooper following in 2018. These authors, in their late 20s or 30s, present an entirely different sort of narrative than black memoirists even a half-generation older. The acclaimed books of Roxanne Gay, Tracy K. Smith, and Elizabeth Alexander, black writers in their 40s and 50s who circulate in elite media and cultural spaces, fit comfortably with "program era" prose, products of and contributors to the world of MFA programs (McGurl). They embrace multiculturalism, sharing the uniqueness of their black stories as part of the uniqueness of the American story, leaving the complicity implied by this position unchallenged. All anger is polished away, even memories of childhood anger. Whatever anger they experienced as children is retroactively read as frustration to be overcome, a learning experience on the path to bourgeois selfhood. The new memoirs, in contrast, emerge not from the rarified experience of MFA programs but from the free-form world of blogging and tweeting. Though certainly the New York publishing world has a heavy hand in shaping their form, something raw remains; they are not polished all the way down.

All five of these recent Black Lives Matter-associated memoirists grew up in poor or lower-middle class conditions, and all but Smith grew up without a father at home. They are not heirs to an earlier generation of blacks who have overcome. Like the larger activist culture from which they emerge, each memoirist is deeply suspicious of aspirations to respectability. Male and female alike, they wholeheartedly embrace feminism and present it as an essential part of their self-understanding and their coming to terms with themselves and with American racism. They embrace "intersectional" analysis, even if the term is not always present (perhaps because it was sullied by its association with Hillary

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<sup>5</sup> Baldwin actually describes his feeling here not as "anger" but as "hatred" (*Notes of a Native Son*, 96). We might read this as suggesting misdirected anger, hardened onto an individual or group rather than responsive to specific wrongs or a set of wrongs.

Clinton's 2016 campaign, in the eyes of young activists). They worry about homophobia, and they describe the complexity of intimate relations in ways that do not presume a teleology toward marriage.<sup>6</sup> And they all see activism and anti-racist analysis as integral to their lives. This is performed in the texts themselves, each of which integrates memoir and social analysis.

Of the five memoirists, Brown positions herself the most closely to the establishment. She is a diversity professional, working for non-profit organizations to educate others, especially white Americans, about race. She is also a Christian, having embraced black Christianity on a visit to her father's house, attended Catholic schools, and followed a career path leading through loosely evangelical organizations. Despite this association with bourgeois respectability, Brown fully embraces the vocabulary of millennial black activism, including anger. Indeed, she devotes a chapter to "creative anger," ostensibly aimed at making black rage legible to a mixed audience while resisting sublimation. Her book as a whole recounts numerous instances of racism, overt and subtle, that Brown has faced, and in the chapter she describes these and more incidents as "indignities" that motivate her anger (120). While some of these indignities are faced by Brown herself, she also describes her anger flowing from a sense of connection with the black community as a whole when any member of that community is wronged. Hearing whites mock the body of Serena Williams, call Michelle Obama a monkey, or appropriate black culture makes Brown mad.

Yet Brown cannot express her anger since black "anger is considered dangerous, explosive, and unwarranted" (123). When she is angry, she is considered irrational, and her interlocutors feel like they can just wait until her anger cools and she returns to the realm of rationality. At first she would avoid revealing her anger to audiences, instead communicating "pain, disappointment, sadness," with her anger lurking in a "boil, below the surface" (124). Then, she discovered the writings of James Baldwin and Audre Lorde. She realized that embracing her anger could fuel her creative engagement with the world and could allow her to forge deep connections with others. Brown came to recognize her anger in the anger of her God, and she came to see anger leading toward freedom.

Smith also narrates a childhood and youth out of touch with his anger – even though he reports that he read Malcolm X's autobiography in the second grade. He didn't fully understand it then, he admits, but he did when he read it in high school, and in college he fashioned himself a radical, surrounding himself with books marking his radicalism. He tells a story of his boiling rage coming to the surface after his first year in college that closely parallels Baldwin's account of his experience at the diner. Smith was working in a Walmart over the summer when he was approached by Marine recruiters. He couldn't contain himself and goes on a tirade against them. "I had reached my breaking point," he reflects. He ascribes his explosion not only to his own situation, struggling to find his identity at college, working at Walmart, but also to "the options for young black men in America," namely, "cog or killer" (*Invisible Man* 43). Indeed, Smith was not directly wronged by these Marines; his rage was displaced onto them from other wrongs. But Smith did not yet sense how to channel this rage. "I felt an anger that was wholly new to me. The irony is that I went back to work more productive than before, burning off the energy produced by my rage" (*Invisible Man* 43).

Like hooks, Smith was feeling anger at the wrong time. It made him lonely, disconnected. But the times changed. Black anger, particularly the anger of black youth at the imprisonment of black children in Jena, Louisiana, in 2006, became increasingly visible. That one of the boys arrested in Jena was, coincidentally, named Mychal confirmed Smith's connection with the national outrage that was beginning to be expressed, albeit under the radar of mainstream media. At first he just had a raw, emotional reaction to learning about Jena, "grunts and screams and fucks" (*Invisible Man* 102). Then, he attempted to take action, using his perch as college newspaper editor to generate interest in and outrage at the Jena case. He realized that he need not aspire to respectability, like his father and an earlier generation. He could dwell in his rage. Just like Baldwin's father, Smith portrays his father as a mysterious, absolute authority. But where Baldwin narrates a history of coming to terms with a (deceased) father, Smith does not succeed in such reconciliation. In fact, the anger produced by the wrongs of white supremacy, ranging from the shooting of his impoverished cousin to the internalized racism of black college administrators, festers, eventually bringing Smith to mental breakdown. The response is not a triumphant overcoming but rather – and here Smith follows the activist discourse closely – an embrace

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<sup>6</sup> Brown is an outlier here, with her Christianity motivating more sympathy for "Christian" morality, albeit inflected by Brown's critique of white supremacy and patriarchy. Cooper admits to fantasies of conventional romance, though she describes her own, actual personal life in far-from-heteronormative terms (*Eloquent Rage*).

of self-care and loving community to help manage his mental health so that his anger can continue to rage.<sup>7</sup>

Darnell Moore and Patrisse Khan-Cullors both played roles in shaping the organizational infrastructure accompanying Black Lives Matter, and they jointly led a national convergence on Ferguson, Missouri, bringing activists from around the country to the epicenter of protest. Both tell stories of particularly rough childhoods lived in poverty, Khan-Cullors in southern California and Moore in Camden, New Jersey. Neither speaks as much about their own anger as the other memoirists, perhaps because it is so naturally the result of their upbringing. Moore, for example, recounts an incident from his youth when a neighborhood child pours gasoline on him and tries to light him on fire. (Happily the wind keeps blowing out the match.) Surely this made Moore angry, though this goes unspoken; instead, Moore writes of the anger of OB, his bully. "What made him so angry he would want to kill me? I knew little about his family and personal life, but I knew enough. I knew the immense poverty he and his siblings endured, and I knew that the violence that had become mundane in our neighborhood had begun to shape him in the same ways it had started to shape me" (82-3). Instead of telling stories about childhood anger worked through, Moore narrates his childhood as one where he inhabited a world of anger – which he still inhabits in the present. The anger prompted by the wrongs he suffered himself is less important than the anger that circulated among the black community in Camden, all of it motivated by the wrongs of white supremacy. When Moore watches videos from Ferguson in the aftermath of Michael Brown's death, he recognizes that same swirl of anger, he finds it in his friends, and they work together to respond in a way that builds community among young blacks and directs anger toward white supremacy.

Moore's father was abusive to his mother and to Moore himself. After a long absence, Moore happens to meet his father late at night, on his way home from a night in the Philadelphia gay scene. Moore realizes that the same anger he wields against white supremacy is directed against his father, and he describes that anger as "a form of protection" against the abandonment and hurt he felt from his father. Unexpectedly reunited at a Camden bus stop, Moore "was tempted to forgive him, but doing so would have stripped me of the only weapon I had mastered" (182). He does not forgive; he seeks to live a life that is both angry and loving. He builds a community of friends and lovers who care for each other, and he learns to allow his love to dampen his anger when it concerns those in his community. He learns to direct that anger only outward, at the forces of white supremacy, seemingly part of another normative world.

Brittney Cooper participates in, and has been acclaimed in, activist spaces, academic spaces, and social media spaces. She is one of the founders of the Crunk Feminist Collective, a group of black Southern women academics who curate online discussions at the intersection of race and gender. In quick succession Cooper published a scholarly book, *Beyond Respectability*, and a book aimed for a wider, trade audience, *Eloquent Rage*. While aimed at different audiences and employing quite different styles, the two books do, in a certain sense, form a pair. The tradition of black women intellectuals has, Cooper asserts, been understood as developing and disseminating ideas about black respectability. Cooper argues that black women intellectuals did more than just this, and close attention to their work and lives will reveal that they even challenged certain conventional notions of respectability at the same time they ostensibly advocated for respectability. Cooper argues that it is essential to disambiguate respectability and dignity, the former associated with status or honor and the latter associated with inherent human worth. Cooper claims that the common denominator of the various projects in the black female intellectual tradition is dignity (*Beyond* 5).

Black women intellectuals assert black dignity because they experience indignity, because they are indignant. In other words, anger underlies their intellectual work, anger that was repressed (because of the times) and then redirected into accounts of dignity. Cooper herself, a twenty-first century black woman intellectual, no longer has to repress and channel her indignity. She can express it directly, in her *Eloquent Rage*. Respectability was a provisional strategy that rose "to the level of ideology"; now it is time for "Black women's rage" to be expressed as "a kind of orchestrated fury" (Cooper, *Eloquent* 152-3). The Williams sisters endured the tennis world's racism and turned it into orchestrated fury on the court; Cooper announces that she will do the same in the realm of memoir and cultural criticism. For Cooper, such rage starts not with her father but with her mother. The exemplary moment of rage, in Cooper's narrative, is when her mother interrupts a black preacher condescending to a group of working class women, telling them how they ought to raise their children. "My mama didn't turn over any tables in the temple like her Jesus might have done, but she did cause just enough of a disruption to make clear that an injustice was being done" (*Eloquent* 161). The mother's anger responds to a

<sup>7</sup> Like Baldwin, Smith eventually finds writing as a vocation, but it is writing that (in his portrayal) centers rather than sublimates anger.

wrong, calls attention to that wrong. Such individual acts of rage, Cooper cautions, are not enough. They must be organized, "orchestrated," in order to combat systemic injustice, and in order for anger to pivot away from complicity.

But Cooper's rage, and her mother's, is ultimately narrated. It promises purity, an alliance formed beyond the normative world of the father, against that world. It promises unadulterated "righteousness" that interrupts and invites us to imagine a new world, a loving world (*Eloquent* 166). Perhaps such projects call for a different genre, not the realism of the memoir, governed unavoidably by the literary law of the father, but science fiction – or, perhaps, mysticism.

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