Radical Feminism

edited by Anne Koedt • Ellen Levine • Anita Rapone

An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Getting Angry

by Susi Kaplow

In 1970 Susi Kaplow was part of the nucleus of the now expanded women's liberation group in Paris. When she returned to New York in the fall of 1970 she joined New York Radical Feminists. She organized four consciousness-raising groups and was on the organizing committee for the Speak-out on Rape held in New York City, January, 1971.

Two scenarios. An angry man: someone has infringed on his rights, gone against his interests, or harmed a loved one. Or perhaps his anger is social—against racism or militarism. He holds his anger in check (on the screen we can see the muscles of his face tighten, his fists clench) and then, at the strategic moment, he lets it go. We see him yelling, shouting his angry phrases with sureness and confidence—or pushing a fist into his opponent's stomach with equal conviction. In either event, the anger is resolved; our hero has vented it and is content with success or accepts what he knows to be unmerited defeat.

Dissolve to scene two. An angry woman: angry at her man for cheating on her or (more likely) at the other woman. If we're in the good old days, she stomps up to her man and begins to scream wildly, he holds her down with his pinky, her anger melts in his embrace. After the fade-out, we find a puzzled heroine wondering how she could have been angry at such a good man. Or she marches over to the local saloon, hurls a few choice epithets at her rival, and then the hair-pulling begins. This ludicrous scene is always broken up by the amused and slightly scandalized gentlemen on the side-

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lines. In modern dress the same episode would be played differently. Discovering her husband’s or lover’s infidelity, the woman would smolder inwardly until the anger had burned down to a bitter resentment or become such a pressurized force that it could only come out in a rage so uncontrollable that the man (and the audience) can dismiss it as irrational. “I can’t talk to you when you’re like this.” Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.

For a woman in our society is denied the forthright expression of her healthy anger. Her attempts at physical confrontation seem ridiculous; “ladies” do a slow burn, letting out their anger indirectly in catty little phrases, often directed against a third party, especially children. A woman has learned to hold back her anger: It’s unseemly, aesthetically displeasing, and against the sweet, pliant feminine image to be angry. And the woman fears her own anger: She, the great conciliator, the steadier of rock ed boats, moves, out of her fear, to quiet not only others’ anger but also her own. Small wonder that when the vacuum-sealed lid bursts off, the angry woman seems either like a freaked-out nut or a bitch on wheels. Her frenzy is intensified by the shakiness of her commitment to her own anger. What if she’s really wrong? What if the other person is right? —Or worse (and this is the greatest fear) hits back with “You’re crazy, I don’t know what you’re so mad about.”

Why can’t women allow themselves the outlet of their contained anger? Why do those around them find an angry woman so frightening that they must demoralize and deflate her into a degraded, inauthentic calm? Healthy anger says “I’m a person. I have certain human rights which you can’t deny. I have a right to be treated with fairness and compassion, I have a right to live my life as I see fit, I have a right to get what I can for myself without hurting you. And if you deprive me of my rights, I’m not going to thank you, I’m going to say ‘fuck off’ and fight you if I have to.” A person’s anger puts him or her on center stage. It claims attention for itself and demands to be taken seriously, or else. (Or else I won’t talk to you, I won’t work with you or be friendly toward you, or else, ultimately, our association is over.)

Expressing anger means risking. Risking that the other person will be angry in return, risking that he or she will misunderstand the anger or refuse to deal with it, risking that the anger itself is misplaced or misinformed. So you need strength to say you’re angry
—both the courage of your convictions and the ability to accept
that your anger may be unwarranted without feeling crushed into
nothingness. You must not have your total worth as a person riding
on the worth of each individual case of anger.

Thus anger is self-confident, willing to fight for itself even at the
jeopardy of the status quo, capable of taking a risk and, if neces-
sary, of accepting defeat without total demise. Above all, anger is
assertive. The traditional woman is the polar opposite of this de-
scription. Lacking confidence in herself and in her own perceptions,
she backs away from a fight or, following the rules of chivalry, lets
someone else do battle for her. Strong emotions disturb her for the
disruption they bring to things-as-they-are. So shaky is her self-
image that every criticism is seen as an indictment of her person.
She is a living, walking apology for her own existence—what could
be more foreign to self-assertion?

Although the reality has changed somewhat, most women will
recognize themselves somewhere in this description. And society
clings to this model as its ideal and calls an angry woman unfemi-
nine. Because anger takes the woman out of her earth mother role
as bastion of peace and calm, out of her familial role as peace-
maker, out of her political role as preserver of the status quo, out of
her economic role as cheap labor, out of her social role as second-
class citizen. It takes her out of roles altogether and makes her a
person.

It is no accident, then, that the emotion which accompanies the
first steps toward liberation is, for most women, anger. Whatever
sense of self-worth you have been able to emerge with after twenty
or thirty years of having your mind messed with, gives you the
vague feeling that your situation is not what it should be and sends
you looking tentatively at the world around you for explanations.
Realizations are, at first, halting, and then begin to hit you like a
relentless sledge hammer, driving the anger deeper and deeper into
your consciousness with every blow.

Your fury focuses on the select group of individuals who have
done you the most damage. You are furious at your parents for
having wanted a boy instead; at your mother (and this fury is mixed
with compassion) for having let herself be stifled and having failed
to show you another model of female behavior; at your father for
having gotten a cheap bolster to his ego at your and your mother’s
expense.
You are furious at those who groom you to play your shabby role. At the teachers who demanded less of you because you were a girl. At the doctors who told you birth control was the woman’s responsibility, gave you a Hobson’s choice of dangerous and ineffectual devices, then refused you an abortion when these failed to work. At the psychiatrist who called you frigid because you didn’t have vaginal orgasms and who told you you were neurotic for wanting more than the unpaid, unappreciated role of maid, wet nurse, and occasional lay. At employers who paid you less and kept you in lousy jobs. At the message from the media which you never understood before: “You’ve come a long way, baby”—down the dead-end, pre-fab street we designed for you.

Furious, above all, at men. For the grocer who has always called you “honey” you now have a stiff, curt “don’t call me honey.” For the men on the street who visit their daily indignities on your body, you have a “fuck off,” or, if you’re brave, a knee in the right place. For your male friends (and these get fewer and fewer) who are “all for women’s lib” you reserve a cynical eye and a ready put-down. And for your man (if he’s still around), a lot of hostile, angry questions. Is he different from other men? How? And when he fails to prove himself, your rage explodes readily from just beneath the surface.

This is an uncomfortable period to live through. You are raw with an anger that seems to have a mind and will of its own. Your friends, most of whom disagree with you, find you strident and difficult. And you become all the more so because of your fear that they are right, that you’re crazy after all. You yourself get tired of this anger—it’s exhausting to be furious all the time—which won’t even let you watch a movie or have a conversation in peace.

But from your fury, you are gaining strength. The exercise of your anger gives you a sense of self and of self-worth. And the more this sense increases, the angrier you become. The two elements run in a dialectic whirlwind, smashing idols and myths all around them. You see, too, that you can get angry and it doesn’t kill people, they don’t kill you, the world doesn’t fall apart.

Then this anger, burning white hot against the outside world, suddenly veers around and turns its flame toward you. Sure, they fucked you up and over, sure, they oppressed you, sure they continue to degrade and use you. But—why did you let it happen? Why do you continue to let it happen? All of a sudden you are up
against the part you played in your own oppression. You were the indispensable accomplice to the crime. You internalized your own inferiority, the pressing necessity to be beautiful and seductive, the belief that men are more important than women, the conviction that marriage is the ultimate goal. Seeing this, you are violent against yourself for every time you were afraid to try something for fear of failing, for all the hours lost on make-up and shopping, for every woman you missed because there was a man in the room, for getting yourself stuck as a housewife or in a job you hate because “marriage is your career.”

This phase of anger turned inward is terrifying. You are alone with your own failed responsibilities toward yourself, however much you can still blame others. It is this phase that some women find unbearable and flee from, returning to the first phase of anger or dropping out altogether. Because this inturned anger demands action—change—and won’t let go until its demands begin to be satisfied. You can fall back on your inability to control others and their behavior toward you. But you can’t comfortably claim powerlessness over your own conduct. Nor can you, at least for long, go on being furious at others (the forty-five year old who still blames mommy, flounders) if you don’t even try to get yourself together.

This inturned anger is a constructive or rather reconstructive catalyst. For what you can do under its impetus is to restructure yourself, putting new images, patterns, and expectations in place of the old, no longer viable ones. As you use your anger, you also tame it. Anger becomes a tool which you can control, not only to help you make personal changes but to deal with the world outside as well. You can mobilize your anger to warn those around you that you’re not having any more bullshit, to underscore your seriousness, to dare to drive your point home.

Through the exercise of your anger, as you see its efficacy and thus your own, you gain strength. And the growing feeling that you control your anger and not vice versa adds to this strength. As you gain this control, become surer of yourself, less afraid of being told you’re crazy, your anger is less enraged and, in a sense, calmer. So it becomes discriminating. You reserve it for those individuals and groups who are messing with your mind—be they men or other women.

This progression of anger finds its ultimate meaning as an experi-
ence shared with other women. All striving to understand their collective situation, women in a group can help each other through the first, painful phase of outward-directed anger. Through consciousness-raising each woman can (at least ideally) find sufficient confirmation of her perceptions to be reassured of her own sanity—and can find growing strength to do without such confirmation when necessary.

In the second phase of inturned anger, women can support one another in their attempts at self-definition and change, change which others will try to forestall. And, at the same time, they can start to move together to create new social forms and structures in which individual changes can come to fruition. Controlled, directed, but nonetheless passionate, anger moves from the personal to the political and becomes a force for shaping our new destiny.