

# Civil Anger as Paying Attention

## Response to PES Presidential Address

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### INTRODUCTION

I am angry. All the time.

I am angry that people can buy weapons and kill children. In schools.

I am angry that the Department of Education is instructing universities to protect those accused of sexual assault – at the expense of the survivors of the assault.<sup>1</sup>

I am angry that it seems normal to disregard scientific consensus based on political beliefs.<sup>2</sup>

I am angry that people think that a person's gender identity is a quote unquote "issue" that can somehow be up for debate.<sup>3</sup>

I am angry that white supremacists are distributing their propaganda on campus at an all-time high rate.<sup>4</sup>

I could go on, but you get my point. And I'm sure many of you are angry about these things as well. Is such anger useful for anything? Can it help us teach and learn? In a thoughtful and beautifully written address, PES President Cris Mayo has argued for a kind of "motivating anger," an anger that is "useful," that means we are paying attention, and that would enable "transformative" education.<sup>5</sup> In my brief words today, I am going to agree with Cris's primary argument, and also try to help us think about how anger has several

different hues that may or may not render it useful.

One hundred and thirty years ago, W.E.B. Du Bois was at the beginning of his study of race in the United States. As he explained,

the Negro problem was in my mind a matter of systematic investigation and intelligent understanding. The world was thinking wrong about race, because it did not know. The ultimate evil was stupidity. The cure for it was knowledge based on scientific investigation.<sup>6</sup>

And then a horrific tragedy happened. A black agricultural worker was tortured and lynched in Georgia. This tragedy affected Du Bois deeply, disrupting his work and changing his approach; he noted, "one could not be a calm, cool, and detached scientist" while black people were "lynched, murdered and starved."<sup>7</sup> In other words, Du Bois was angry, and his anger spurred him to reconceptualize his scholarship and the very idea of the objective scientist.

It is a very appealing notion that anger might get us moving in a positive direction, like it did for Du Bois. In that way, President Mayo's argument for anger as a method of attentiveness, for motivating learning and positive action, makes a lot of sense. I so appreciate both the argument Mayo is making, and the way Mayo is making it. This provides needed thinking about how to live our educational ideals during the current sociopolitical moment, while centering people's experiences and knowledge in the quest for better learning experiences and recognition of people's identities.

Still, I am not sure that people always have the potential to turn anger into something motivating or productive. Isn't it sometimes just rage? Furthermore, I am not sure whether we, as educators, can always use anger to good effect for better teaching and learning, or – perhaps more importantly – for developing better democratic citizens or fostering social justice.

So I want to take the opportunity of this response to try to build on

Mayo's thinking about anger as a method for teaching and learning by exploring three different hues of anger and how each may or may not do the work that Mayo wants it to. I do so by posing three questions about these different kinds of anger: productive anger, poisonous anger, and what I call civil anger, and examining whether they can all function well as a method for attentiveness in teaching and learning. In so doing, I aim to extend Mayo's argument and use the idea of anger to complicate the idea of civility.

First let's consider productive anger, which I do think fits well with Mayo's ideas. How can anger be useful and productive in education spaces?

### PRODUCTIVE ANGER (OR RIGHTEOUS RAGE)<sup>8</sup>

According to Mayo, "Anger in its simplest form may simply contain these two steps: not wanting something to be the way it is and wanting to stop it from happening again."<sup>9</sup> Borrowing from Barbara Deming, Mayo calls such anger "generative," saying that "disruption" is its point; "generative anger says 'this must change.'"<sup>10</sup> Rather than pushing students to forgiveness or to letting bygones be bygones too quickly, educators should instead pay attention to the anger—and to the social conditions precipitating the anger—and, when appropriate, channel it to the work of making things right. One important point there is that educators need to be very skilled to be able to channel students' anger in productive directions. This is not easy.

If anger in "its best iteration organizes against wrong," as Mayo argues, then it does have potentially transformative positive implications. When anger at a problem is motivating rather than debilitating, we can see how it could aid learning and foster positive action. There are numerous examples of social movements where this has been the case, whereas being too quick to forgive could lead us to perpetuate the unjust status quo. The cult of forgiveness can be insidious and counterproductive to educative social justice aims.

That brings me to my second question: What happens when it is not possible to channel anger in a positive, educative direction?

## POISONOUS ANGER (OR DESTRUCTIVE RAGE)

We cannot ignore the anger in a classroom that can poison the atmosphere for teaching and learning. This is close to what Mayo calls vicious anger that may be “verging into vengeance.”<sup>11</sup> Mayo points out that conceptualizing anger primarily as vengeance leads scholars, like Martha Nussbaum for instance, to make conciliatory moves too quickly.

Yet, as Agnes Callard has written, “Long-term anger is unpleasant... and exhausting.”<sup>12</sup> I would go further to say that it can also be poisonous in such a way that it results in silencing difficult conversations or harming those already harmed by the object of their anger. But maybe this is not as worrisome as I am making it out to be? After all, given the seeming permanence of racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia – I could go on and on – some of us can rarely not be angry. As a Latina, for example, I feel angry about the microaggressions I experience or witness. It seems that even when there is some attempt to address this, it just ends up happening again. Even though such perpetual anger is justified, it can take its toll on people’s health and well-being, and have the effect of poisoning them personally, as well as poisoning the atmosphere for generative learning.

Calling anger an “emotion whose manifestations are not only often but characteristically destructive and cruel,” Callard made a relevant point: “If we are trying to solve normative problems – to make the world a better place – it looks as though we have better tools at our disposal than anger.”<sup>13</sup> That said, I would not want us to fall into the trap Mayo describes, where we are unjustly curbing someone’s anger (often someone from a group that is underrepresented in higher education), in the name of moving past the anger towards what we consider to be positive change and progress. Mayo quotes James Baldwin about the “criminal indifference... and ignorance of most white people” regarding racism, which creates a context where black people may justifiably be angry all the time. Baldwin pondered “how to control that rage so it won’t destroy you.”<sup>14</sup> I don’t think Mayo takes up in a meaningful enough way the problem of the destructiveness of anger for the person who is angry; Mayo mentions that anger could be damaging, but glosses over it, merely making the

point that such anger can serve a political function.

This leads me to my third question: How might we extract the potentially poisonous outcomes of anger and channel the more productive parts of anger, in thinking about a kind of anger that serves the democratic purposes of education? Could we reconceptualize or expand the notion of “civility” to account for anger and righteousness?

### CIVIL ANGER

Could anger sometimes be a (more) civil response? Could we attach meaning to our idea of civility so that being civil might include being angry when that anger is directed at injustice? When people call for people of color, for example, to act “civilly,” because they are uncomfortable with the anger that historically marginalized persons are showing in the face of unjust treatment or conditions, it feels like epistemic injustice. What I mean by this is that when their justified anger is minimized or contested, historically marginalized people are being treated as if their knowledge is illegitimate.<sup>15</sup> “Don’t be so angry,” someone might say, “things aren’t all that bad” ... “we’ve made so much progress... ”

So, who gets to be angry? Expectations around anger often are racialized and gendered. You catch more flies with honey, and so on. (Notwithstanding that no one actually wants more flies, but whatever). My point is that not even anger is equitable. I want to argue that there are situations in which an angry response is not only justified or appropriate, but actually more civil than not being angry, because, as Mayo notes, not being angry shows that someone is not paying attention. To take one example, students become angry for good reason when other students in their classes espouse views about people that are grounded neither in evidence nor in ethical treatment. They might be angry because a classmate refuses to use the correct pronouns, or because everyone turns to look at them – the only Chicana in the class – to answer the professor’s question about immigration, or because a classmate hides behind free speech when saying something hateful and ignorant. These are all real examples from classes I have taught. With white supremacy, homophobia, xe-

nophobia, antisemitism, and transphobia on the rise on college campuses, I argue that anger at coded or openly exclusionary claims in class is more civil than congenially not paying attention.

I think the idea of civil anger fits in well with Mayo's notion of anger as a method of attentiveness. Following Mayo, we should use the anger as a pedagogical tool to fuel learning and action.

## CONCLUSION

I want to conclude by thanking Cris for this insightful essay. It made me think. It made me angry too – about my own tendencies to brush over anger, to move to solutions too quickly, to smile, to excuse, to forgive. So often anger is treated as mere emotion – separate and distinct from the rational, but Mayo's arguments have made me see anger in a different light. It is emotion to be sure, but at the same time it can be entirely reasonable and rational.

Indeed, Mayo's argument for anger as a method sharpens the idea that anger can be a rational – and indeed civil – response to unjust sociopolitical conditions. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that it can be poisonous, or destructive anger, just as easily as it can be productive, or righteous, or in the service of a rich notion of civility. In addition, it remains a complex task to harness students' anger in classrooms and other educational spaces; as Mayo notes, "staying with the anger in the right way is hard. Responding to anger, too, is very difficult." With Mayo's address this evening, however, we have a giant head start.

We should all pay attention.

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[posed-ttle-ix-regulation.pdf](#); Erica L. Green, “As DeVos Eases Sexual Assault Rules, Her Old High School May Provide a Test Case,” *The New York Times*, April 1, 2019,

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2 Brad Plumer and Coral Davenport, “Science Under Attack: How Trump Is Sidelining Researchers and Their Work,” *The New York Times*, December 28, 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/28/climate/trump-administration-war-on-science.html>.

3 Alyson Escalante, “Transgender Lives Are Not Up for Debate,” *Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting*, November 15, 2018, <https://fair.org/home/transgender-lives-are-not-up-for-debate/>.

4 Marjorie Valbrun, “White Supremacist Activity on Campus Hits Record High,” *InsideHigherEd*, February 13, 2020, <https://www.insidehighered.com/quick-takes/2020/02/13/white-supremacist-activity-campus-hits-record-high>.

5 Cris Mayo, “Teaching Anger,” Presidential Address, Philosophy of Education Society Annual Meeting (2020).

6 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Oxford University Press, 1903), xvii.

7 Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, xvii.

8 Charles Duhigg, “The Real Roots of American Rage,” *The Atlantic*, January 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2019/01/charles-duhigg-american-anger/576424/>.

9 Mayo, “Teaching Anger,” 4.

10 Mayo, “Teaching Anger,” 7.

11 Mayo, “Teaching Anger,” 1.

12 Agnes Callard, “The Reason to Be Angry Forever,” in *The Moral Psychology*

*of Anger*, eds. Owen Flanagan and Myisha Cherry (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 123-137, 124.

13 Callard, "The Reason to Be Angry Forever," 125.

14 Mayo, "Teaching Anger," 9.

15 Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford University Press, 2007).