Emotions, Activism, and Social Change

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DEBORAH J. CANTRELL
Professor of Law
University of Colorado Law School

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Introduction

> My government makes me angry. The police force makes me angry. Homophobia makes me angry. Luckily, anger is what motivates me. . . . Anger has served me well and we're achieving impact every day.
>
> ZHANAR SEKERBAYEVA, LGBTQ activist[1]

> There is a potential untapped power in acknowledging and harnessing women's rightful anger; we have every reason to be angry and it can be channeled very positively into advocacy for ourselves in the workplace, or political and social action, as the recent wave of Women's Marches and feminist campaigns worldwide has shown.
>
> LAURA BATES, feminist writer and activist[2]

Activists believe in anger. Activists believe that anger is motivating, mobilizing, righteous, and productive. Activists also are chided, criticized, and blamed for their anger. Activists use anger to express resistance; while at the same time, they experience anger being used against them as control. In social movement work, anger can feel dichotomous and binary. It either is good or bad. It either is productive or harmful. Our reflexive idea of anger is as a "hot" emotion. In its heat, it gets things done, or it burns people out. What could happen

1. Zhanar Sekerbayeva, *My Activism Isn't Motivated By Kindness, It's Motivated By Anger,* AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, available July 2, 2019, at https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/impact/2019/07/zhanar-sekerbayeva-from-feminita-on-why-anger-motivates-her-activism/.

2. Will Coldwell, *Anger Is An Energy: How to Turn Fury Into a Force for Good*, THE GUARDIAN, May 13, 2019, available at https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/may/13/anger-interviews.

if social movement activists interrupted our habits—both actions and thoughts—about anger? If we saw anger with more nuance, how might that impact social movement work? For example, could we make better strategic choices if we distinguished between the kind of anger that seeks revenge from the kind of anger that is intended to call out unjust behavior? Or would it help our social movement communities if we understood, and were attentive to, the ways in which the dominant society has structured rules about anger that reflect gender and racial discrimination? And what might happen if we pay attention to emotions related to social activism other than anger?

This book takes up those questions. It does so not from a place of remove and distance. I am a social activist. I feel and act on emotions in my social change work, including anger. At the same time, I am a legal academic who studies social movements, particularly the lawyers who participate in activist work. In my work, I try and identify ways in which social activists can create a more effective strategy of change, particularly if that strategy includes changing the law. I bring both those selves, with both sets of knowledge, to bear in this book. As such, in some ways, this book may read like a manifesto for social activists articulating a range of benefits that could come from rethinking how emotions get deployed in social movement work. This book also is my effort to put research and theory across several disciplines (sociology, psychology, and law) into closer conversation with each other in order to more fulsomely build out a framework about the role of emotions in social movement work, to consider the ways in which the law is embedded with rules about emotions, and to explore what conditions need to be in place for social activism to succeed at changing the law.

In this book, we will start where activists often start—investigating the ways in which the emotion of anger exists in social movement work and the beliefs about when and why it is critical to effective advocacy. First, we need to understand

more generally the construct called "anger." What does it look like? Does it take different forms under different circumstances? Has our understanding of anger changed over time? And how has our understanding of anger changed as that concept has been the subject of research by sociologists, psychologists, and others? Critically, we will consider the ways in which there are sets of rules about who is entitled to express anger and under what conditions. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild has called the work we do to discern those emotion rules and make decisions about whether or not to comply with the rules "emotional labor."[3] As we investigate emotional labor, we will see that the rules change depending on who we are and what communities we belong to. Unsurprisingly, those rules reflect that our society pays attention to who has power and control, and that, in turn, reflects status differences based on race, gender, and other important points of identity. Once we have some foundational knowledge about "anger," we can look more carefully and precisely at that emotion and see that it is not one constant experience across all contexts and across all people. That then lets us investigate the role of anger in social movement work with more precision. We will see that there are several kinds of "anger." There is anger that includes a wish for payback or revenge. There is anger that is intended as a public callout of injustice. There is anger that is intended as a signal to other activists of commitment and loyalty to a cause. There is anger that is an expression of frustration.

Importantly, all kinds of anger share a critical feature—anger is an emotion that exists because people are in relationships among one another. In other words, anger is relational. I am angry because of someone else or because of some group of people. Even when I am angry at myself, I usually feel that way because of something I did (or did not do) to another. For

3. *See generally* Arlie Russell Hochschild, *Emotion Work, Feeling Rules, and Social Structure*, 85 AM. J. SOC. 551 (1979) (articulating a theoretical framework for emotional labor through "feeling" and "framing" rules).

example, as an activist, I might get angry at myself because I did not speak up in a group where someone criticized my cause. My anger is relational because it stems from my actions in response to the conduct of others. Understanding that anger is relational is important because it helps us more carefully assess the purpose of anger and the consequences of anger. The question is not just whether I could or should be angry. The question always includes the web of relationships that trigger my anger and that will experience the consequences of my anger. Because social movement work, by definition, involves multiple webs of relationships, we need to be able to accurately assess and describe the many kinds of anger that might be at play. Then we can turn to judging anger.

Judging anger is a task that has been taken up by ancient philosophers, like Aristotle, to contemporary philosophers, like Martha Nussbaum and Amia Srinivasan. Across time, there has been no consensus about whether, when, or how anger is good or bad. Thinkers have put forward reasonable arguments in favor of and opposed to anger. We need to have a working knowledge of those arguments, but we do not need to resolve the disagreements. I will encourage us to see how the disagreements themselves present us with important revelations for social movement work. The first is that anger never exists in the abstract. Anger is always tied to a contextualized goal—I have chosen to express anger because I hope or want something to happen as a result and I think anger is the best way to generate that consequence. For example, as an activist, I might believe that expressing anger is the best way for me to demonstrate to those in power that I will not condone their unjust actions. Or, as an activist, I might believe that the best way for me to show my solidarity with others in my movement is to express my anger. My anger signals to others around me that I am just as committed as they are. The challenge with anger in social activism is that it can carry unhelpful consequences. The consequence of being angry at an injustice can

be that I want payback. I may believe that I am made whole only when the wrongdoer suffers for the harm they caused. Or, within my movement community, others may question how loyal and dedicated I am if I do not express my anger at a high enough level.

Social activists, like all people, have to navigate the fact that their expressions of anger can carry both positive and negative consequences. But social activists face a unique challenge because of the expectation that activism must be public. In other words, we expect that social movement work is a kind of resistance that only happens in public. It is ardent. It is intended to be seen and to be disruptive. That commitment to public resistance pushes all of us, activists or not, to expect activists to perform emotional labor that is hot, and reveals the fire in the belly. That commitment has consequences for how all of us perceive the webs of relationship surrounding social movement work. We see "us" and "them,"—no matter what side of the public protest we are on. Our relational lines are rigid and are hardened in the space of public resistance. As a result, I suggest that we forget to pay attention to the ways in which quietude and interior reflection can be important sites for cultivating transformative resistance.

In an effort to dislocate and unsettle our habituated patterns of thinking about social movement work as necessarily requiring a hot version of public resistance, we will consider the work of scholar Kevin Quashie. He has offered a probing cultural contemplation on how quiet and interior reflection can be liberatory and dignity enhancing, especially in light of the expectation that public resistance is *the way* to protest against subordination. Using Quashie's work as a bridge, I then ask us to make an unexpected move—to consider how many faith traditions also have embraced the generative potential of silence and quiet. I make this unexpected move for two reasons. First, the move helps us to become aware of the habit we have in social movement work of seeing webs of

relationship only in binary terms—us/them and good/bad. Second, I think that looking at the way faith traditions embrace revelatory knowledge and embrace a sense of connectedness between all living beings helps us to discern a critical dimension of relationality—there is a difference between the *fact* of relationality and the *valence* of relationality. In other words, there is a descriptive fact about relationality, and it is that webs of relationships are a constant descriptive truth in our world. But the valence of relationality—whether any particular web contains positive, negative, or neutral relationships—always is in flux. Not only do different webs of relationships have different valences, but even the same web of relationships can ebb and flow between positive, negative, and neutral. I argue that the possibility that relationships can change presents a critical opportunity for social movement activists. If I can disrupt my habit of only seeing friends or enemies, that opens me to the possibility of finding new and unexpected common ground with others. It also helps me see that I still may need to engage in deeper conversations about differences and disagreements with the people I believe already to be on my side. Importantly, I have to engage in relational work regardless of the current valence of any particular relationship. Having the ability to move into quiet, contemplative, and revelatory mind space improves my chances to foster positive relationships.

It would be sanguine and unhelpful if I did not also chart out concerns and challenges that come with my recommendation that activists rethink the importance that they place on hot anger and public resistance. For example, if it is true that people with power maintain their control in part by vilifying activists (particularly women and people of color) for expressing anger, how do we preserve a way for activists to insist upon their own dignity and power? What does resistance look like if it is not hotly angry? And can we be sure that resistance without hot anger is effective in bringing about social

change? The second half of the book turns to those important questions. I begin by considering the counterpart emotion to anger—love. It, too, is an emotion that shows up among activists. Activists speak of their commitments to their cause in love-related terms. We might hear an activist describe how she came to her movement because she loves, or is passionate about, the cause (i.e., "I love the wilderness and I'm passionate about protecting it from development."). Or we hear activists talk about the support and comradery they feel for their movement colleagues, and how important it is to show movement colleagues that they are loved and will be protected.

Just like we did with anger, before we consider whether and how the emotion of love can benefit activists in their work, we first have to more thoroughly understand the concept of "love" and the range of emotional labor rules that relate to it. I explore how the construct of love contains a key expectation about relationality, which is that when we describe a relationship as including love, we assume the relationship is positive. Further, when we focus on emotional labor rules about love and passion in social movement work, we see a similar pattern as with anger. The idea of "love" in social movement work is oppositional—either you are in the movement with me or you are outside of it and against me. To love my social movement colleagues requires me to show a kind of loyalty that is absolute and unyielding. I call that kind of emotional labor "hyper-loyalty." Like anger in social movement work, love also is understood mostly as unidimensional. Love, like anger, in social movement work gets described as the "fire in the belly." As a result, we face a similar conundrum as we did with anger. There are ways in which hyper-loyalty supports and protects activist communities. Hyper-loyalty gives activists comfort that they have a space in which to speak freely with each other without risking censure or opprobrium. At the same time, it overemphasizes differences and too readily embraces antagonism between groups.

But our earlier exploration of more dynamic and fluid experiences of webs of relationships offers us a way to think about how emotional labor could happen in social movement work in ways that are not zero-sum. When we remind ourselves that the fact of relationality is constant, but the valence of relationality regularly changes, that encourages us to expand our understanding of what "love" in social movement work can mean. Importantly, social movement histories themselves give us potent examples. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. repeatedly spoke of his belief in a "beloved community" that included all people, and that was created through practices he called "love in action."[4] Dr. King pressed the idea that "love in action" was vigorous and required the calling out of injustice as a means of ensuring that all people had their dignity recognized. As Dr. King conceived of love in social movement work, it was not sentimental and apologetic, but clear-eyed and strong-voiced. It embraced tension and resistance as ways of prompting people to "rise from the bondage of myths and half-truths"[5] that supported racial prejudice and discrimination. Clear-eyed love in action also insisted that the fact of interconnectedness of all people then was the seed from which a beloved community could be created.

More contemporary activist-scholars have offered complementary teachings. Moving from Dr. King's Christian-centered tradition to a Buddhist tradition, I introduce the work of Buddhist theologian, Reverend angel Kyodo williams. Like Dr. King who grounded his work in his faith tradition and Biblical teachings, Reverend williams grounds her work in foundational Buddhist concepts, including a central tenet that all life is interconnected. As a person of color, Reverend

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4. *See generally* Martin Luther King, Jr., A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. (James Melvin Washington ed., HarperOne 1986).

5. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Letter From Birmingham City Jail*, A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr. 291 (James Melvin Washington ed., 1986).

williams also grounds her work in her lived experiences of discrimination, particularly within Buddhist communities in which she has practiced. williams calls her approach "radical dharma"[6]—"dharma" being the Sanskrit word used to refer to the core truths and teachings of Buddhism. Like Dr. King's love in action, the goal of radical dharma is to bring forward the ever-present relationality between all people, and to do so in ways that enhance dignity for everyone and dismantle systems of subordination and oppression. For williams, the method for unearthing that dignity-enhancing relationality is the practice of fierce love. For example, if I am a white person with privilege, fierce love requires me to see how society awards me unearned benefits, to see how my silence and inaction actually support systemic injustice, and to understand that my Buddhist practices for my own liberation are errant if they do not also include my genuine commitment to actions that are just and liberatory for all. If I am a person of color, fierce love supports me in speaking plainly about unjust experiences and in calling forward the range of ways, explicit and tacit, that current members of my community, particularly white members, maintain systems of subordination. At the same time, I do so with the goal of fostering interconnectedness, not dismantling it.

While activism founded on faith traditions is not new—as Dr. King's example illustrates—it is an uncommon frame by which to explore emotional labor in social movement work. Using such a frame may make us pause for a moment, because it is unfamiliar. That is precisely my goal. I encourage us to harness the potential of the unexpected pause. Instead of meeting the unexpected frame with distrust and skepticism, I want us to let the frame create the possibility that we will learn something useful and novel from it. I posit that the clear-eyed and strong-voiced practices of love in action and

6. angel Kyodo williams & Rod Owens with Jasmine Syedullah, RADICAL DHARMA: TALKING RACE, LOVE AND LIBERATION (2016).

radical dharma give activists effective ways to call out injustice, but without the payback wish that anger often carries with it. Further, the frame helps us center emotional labor in social movement work around an emotion, love, which is grounded on seeing connections between people and taking actions to maintain and build those connections. Importantly, love in action and fierce love adjust the more common feeling and framing rules about love so that it becomes necessary for each person within a web of relationships to pay attention to the ways in which the web of relationships have unhelpfully adopted unjust and dignity-denying practices.

Once we have created a new foundation for a more positive kind of emotional labor for social movement work, we need to build one more connection before we take up our final inquiry about whether, when, and how anything related to emotional labor matters to activists when their goal is to change the law. That connection is to articulate why and how positive relationality matters to activists other than strengthening relationships within their own groups. Here I again will look to histories within social movement work itself—more particularly, to the history of mutual aid. Mutual aid is the idea that communities can (and should) come together to create services that ensure that community members have their fundamental needs met. For example, if a community has members who face food insecurity, the community can create a no-cost grocery store where folks can come select the foods they need. Or, if a community has members who need no-cost childcare, the community can create a no-cost, neighborhood home-based childcare service. As community members come together in mutual aid, they have opportunities to learn about each other and to learn about ways in which their collective efforts can expand and become more politically active. The Black Panther Party powerfully used mutual aid in the 1960s to catalyze community activism. The Party began providing free meals for school children in Oakland as a way to meet

a critical community need, and as a method for bringing community members together and introducing them to the activism of the Party. Legal scholar and activist Dean Spade has written powerfully about the way in which mutual aid catalyzes connection. And, as Spade points out, social change does not happen unless there are enough people supporting and pressing for the change.[7]

The examples of mutual aid help us to see a core fact about social change—we need sufficient numbers of people to make change happen. Thus, we need to be able to build connections between, among, and across movement groups. As activists, we need to be able to see commonality and the possibilities that come with working through difference, instead of focusing on disagreements and fostering distrust. At the same time, working together cannot happen in ways that replicate current systems of injustice or subordination. I think that fierce love provides a set of practices that help activists navigate the dynamism and challenges of interconnectedness.

In the book's final chapter, I take up the question of whether and how emotional labor in social movements is relevant if the change that activists desire is to change the law. As a starting crux move, I illustrate how we often misperceive "the law" as something that is above, or removed from, people. I argue that thinking about the law as disembodied from people creates two key misapprehensions. The first is that we think about "the law" as unmoored from the people who make it. As a result, we may neglect to consider how the law is made by, and for the support of, the people in society who hold power and who wish to maintain power. In other words, "the law" is never neutral. The people who make the law build a certain set of values into the law, and those values often do not seek to benefit all members of society equitably. If we do not remind

7. *See* Dean Spade, Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next) (2020).

ourselves that "the law" comes from human actions, we may see the law as more neutral than it is, and more removed from people than it is.

Instead, law is deeply relational. Its core responsibility is to organize actions between people who live in communities together. Think of mundane examples, like the law telling me that I have to stop at a red light, because you get to drive at a green light. Or the law telling you that, as an employer, you cannot fire me, your employee, just because I am getting older. We often experience the law in the binary—either the law is in your favor, or it is in your opponent's favor. I argue that the dominant perception of the law as about individual winners or losers subtly assists those with power to hold on to power. The law gets enforced by creating adversaries, not allies. If I want to get a benefit from the law, I have to sue you. I do not generally get to sue the people who made the law on the grounds that they made an unjust law.

We can change that dynamic by seeing law's relationality in its fullest, especially in those settings where the more obvious relationality is binary and adversarial. I use the law of personal injury (called tort law) as an example, where one person sues another for a harm caused by the other's bad conduct. More particularly, I look at how tort law has developed in a way that subtly privileges paying back the more powerful people in society for harms they suffer. Using the work of legal scholars Martha Chamallas and Scott Skinner-Thompson, we will see how men have benefitted from the way tort law calculates their lost wages compared to women, and how straight people have benefitted in harms related to invasions of privacy compared with LGBTQ people. When we unearth the more subtle ways that the law controls much larger webs of relationality, I argue that we also unearth the possibility of bringing more people together in an effort to create change. If changing the law requires bringing the greatest number of people into the effort, then finding common ground helps that endeavor.

The second key misapprehension that happens when we disembody the law is that we can mistakenly imbue "the law" with some special capacity to make change on its own. We mistakenly think that changing the law necessarily will lead to changing every person's view. In other words, we think the law has some special forcefulness to drive change. If we take a moment to think about the history of laws designed to end segregation, I think we readily see that the law *does not* have special power to change minds. By keeping the law tethered to the people who make it, we, as activists, have to confront the question of what other work we need to do to support people changing their minds. I look at the history of activism related to marriage equality to see how that dynamic can unfold. Author and journalist Sasha Issenberg has chronicled the roughly quarter-century of activism that ultimately led to both federal and state laws recognizing marriage as a legal union available to a couple regardless of sex or gender identity. As Issenberg documents, early activist efforts in the 1960s were led by lesbian feminists who were critical of marriage as an institution, and whose efforts focused on expanding the legal definition of family so that it would include LGBTQ couples—particularly gay or lesbian parents who wanted to maintain relationships with children they had from straight marriages.[8] But, the conservative response to those efforts was framed in a more focused way and centered on preserving marriage as available only between one man and one woman. That focus shifted the LGBTQ activist strategy because it appeared that the way to garner more people in support of a range of outcomes that enhanced the lives of LGBTQ people was not to accept the focus on marriage as an institution, but to push people to think about marriage equality as necessary for human dignity for all. That framing brought along most

8. *See* Sasha Issenberg, The Engagement: America's Quarter-Century Struggle Over Same-Sex Marriage (2022).

LGBTQ people and brought in straight allies. The coalition grew because members saw how their lives—with their joys and struggles—were similar to each other.

I think a key feature of all of my examples about the law is that in organizing relationships, the law also creates rules about expected emotional labor. For example, in tort law, the law creates a wrongdoer and a victim who is harmed. If I am the person who has been harmed, the law says that I am entitled to be angry and to seek payback from the wrongdoer. Similarly, historically, family law has said that certain legal rights attach only to certain relationships. It also has set up expectations about the emotional labor that is supposed to happen within those relationships—what kinds of actions constitute "love," who is supposed to show what feelings to whom, and the like.

Because the law is deeply relational, it prescribes and orchestrates emotional labor. Thus, all of the discoveries we have made earlier in the book about emotional labor in social movement work need to be brought to bear when we, as activists, think that we need to change the law. We need to be able to see the ways in which our current expectations about emotional labor in activism help us catalyze and grow webs of relationships, and when our emotional labor discourages relationality. In turn, we need to be able to cultivate some equanimity about the fact that anger in social movement work is complicated. It can be good and bad at the very same time. It can enhance dignity and degrade dignity at the very same time. It can be used to resist and to control at the very same time. Because anger in social movement work is complicated, it may be less effective at helping us achieve social change than we would hope. Let us explore those inquiries together more thoroughly in the coming chapters.