

Roxane Gay on the importance of storytelling



November 30, 2016 - Roxane Gay is the author of the best-selling essay collection, *Bad Feminist*, along with the multi-genre collection *Ayiti*, and the novel *An Untamed State* (which is being adapted for film). Her short story collection, *Difficult Women*, and the memoir, *Hunger*, are out in 2017. She's the author of the comic *World of Wakanda*, which is part of Marvel's Black Panther series. (Ta-Nehisi Coates, who oversaw the Black Panther relaunch suggested her to Marvel.) It's a comic written by a bisexual black feminist about two black, bisexual, feminist women. She's also a contributing opinion writer at *the New York Times* and an associate professor of English at Purdue University. She says she can't talk about her newest book yet, but notes that "it's going to be about television."

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As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1709 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Politics](#), [Inspiration](#).

You're a public intellectual, and someone who makes use of Twitter and social media, and writes a lot about your personal life and your day-to-day. I'm curious if you ever have a situation where you think, "This is where the limit is, this is something I don't need to make public." Or in your mind, is everything an open book, and it all contributes to an overall project?

I'm very deliberate about what I share from my life, and I have strict boundaries about what I don't share, so no, not everything goes. If I'm sharing something from my life, there's a reason.

When you're tweeting, or live-tweeting something, are these things you think will work with the way you want the world to see or think about your work?

Definitely. When I'm live-tweeting an awards show, it's because it's fun, and it's entertaining, and I'm sharing my worldview, about the Oscars, for example. It's a lot of fun, and also I do think that my commentary, during those moments on Twitter, is well in line with how I see the world, and the kinds of things that I want to write about.

I often think of Twitter, especially when I'm thinking through current events, like a sandbox. I'm kicking around ideas. There are definitely times when I do latch onto something and think, this deserves the kind of thought and depth that writing an essay could bring about.

One thing I noticed recently was someone sharing a video with you, and you commented, something along the lines of, "I don't need to comment on everything. People don't need to pass everything along to have me give my two cents." Because you use social media, do people assume you want to know everything about them as well?

I don't mind learning about people's lives, but what gets frustrating is that people are like, "Here is this outrageous thing that happened," or, "Here is this deeply traumatizing thing that happened; comment." Trauma is a strong word, but that becomes frustrating, that the only things put in front of you are the worst things that are happening in the world. A lot of times people treat me and other public intellectuals—even though I don't really think of myself that way—as vending machines, just there available to offer opinions. When we push back there's a lot of resentment, as in, "How dare you not exist to serve me?"

Twitter I do for fun. Twitter is social media, and I think we have to keep it in that proper context. It's not a courtroom, and my opinions shouldn't matter that much to you. What do you think about this thing that you're putting in front of me?

You say you don't think of yourself as a public intellectual. What do you think of yourself as?

I think of myself as a writer. I'm a writer and critic. I think they're of the same piece, but yeah, I think of myself as a writer and critic.

Have you ever thought, "I just want to not be online for a while, and not have to do this?" Or for you, is it a pleasurable thing to do?

It's a pleasurable thing to do, and when I don't want to do it, I don't. I take three or four day breaks at least once a month, and people don't notice, because I don't make a big announcement. I think too many people make huge announcements, "I'm leaving social media." When I hit my limit, which I do regularly, I just don't go on Twitter for four days. It's fine. I choose when I want to be part of social media.

After the election, I didn't really want to be online but I had to say something. You can't stay silent in the face of what is in many ways a tragedy for a great many people, so I definitely had something to say there.

You write fiction, too. For you, what's the difference between writing a story and writing an essay? How does your process shift?

In many ways, I see it as two sides of the same coin—stories are being told, with different kinds of urgency and different ideas about truth. When I am writing fiction, I have complete control of the worlds I write and when I write nonfiction, I am trying to face the world as it is.

I'm curious, what do you see happening, if anything, with fiction in our current political situation? Can you imagine writing fiction now, or are you focusing more on nonfiction?

I think there's a need for all kinds of art, and that includes fiction and poetry, plays. I think art, historically, has done a great job of responding to current events. In fact the election's made me decide to teach my fiction workshop next semester as a workshop teaching how to write a political novel. That's what my next workshop is going to be, in the Spring. I'm more motivated than ever to write fiction. I'll also continue writing nonfiction, because I do both, but I think now more than ever we need stories.

I think that, not right away, but in a couple years, we're going to start to see a lot more political fiction, and novels that take on the issues that matter most. I think we're going to see a lot of novels about women's rights. *The Handmaid's Tale* has already been written, but I think we're going to see a lot of work in that vein, and I think we're going to see a lot about persecution, and religious persecution, and immigration, and I think that's good.

So is that a positive aspect of what's happened?

There's nothing positive about this moment. There's so much at stake, and there are so many people who are now even more vulnerable than they were before November 8th. I do think that there is encouragement to be found, and there is hope to be found, of course. We're seeing people motivated and galvanized in a way I haven't seen, and I feel myself more galvanized in a way I haven't been. What I hope is that we take this energy, that we're not just going to be upset about the election, we're going to do something, and we're going to do our best to hold Trump and his cronies accountable over the next four years, and that we're going to make sure that in four years he does not get reelected. Yes, this is a hopeful moment, because we just have to do everything in our power as individuals, and collectively, to make sure the damage that Trump might do is contained as best as we can keep it contained.

How will you teach writing a political novel?

I have no idea how to teach the writing of a political novel, but I'm about to find out. As with all my writing workshops, there will be a lot of reading, writing, and discussion. We're going to start out the semester coming up with a working definition of the political novel and why political novels are necessary. Then we're going to break down key elements of these novels and create blueprints for each student to tackle such a novel on their own. Ultimately, I want students to consider how they take on some kind of injustice through fiction, without losing sight that they are, indeed, writing fiction.

Why do you think stories are important right now?

For hundreds of years now, most cultures have relied on storytelling for preserving their culture and history and communicating essential information. Stories offer reflections of who we are, how we could be, and also offer escape. We need these things, and we definitely should not diminish the importance of escape—at least in small doses—in times like these.

Roxanne Gay recommends:

I think my [Twitter](#) feed gives a good sense of who I am and the kinds of things that I'm interested in.

Otherwise, right now I'm really interested, oddly enough, in the [ACLU](#), and how they've been responding to the potential threats of the Trump administration. As a writer, free speech is, of course, very important to me, and so I'm intrigued by what's going on with the ACLU.

The movie [Moonlight](#), I'm loving. I've seen it twice already and I can't wait to see it again. I think that's the kind of art that I want to see more black people making. Because one of the things that I talk about a lot is that we don't always have to write, or create movies about, slavery. Which is not to say that we shouldn't, but that there are other things, and that there's a range of black experiences. One of the things I loved most about [Moonlight](#) was that we had this expression of a black experience that we haven't seen before, and that it was very much written from a very specific point of view. I want to see more stuff like that.

I loved [Brit Bennett's *The Mothers*](#). The first reason I loved it is because the writing is exceptional. It's just gorgeous. She has turns of phrase, and this wisdom throughout, that is uncanny for a debut novel. She was also just writing about the black middle class, we don't see that a lot, and the black church community. In literary fiction these are just things that we don't see a lot of. It's a very political thing for her to do, and I hope that we continue to see more of this, and that we see the literary world, and readers, embracing this idea. I'm so excited by the fact that she's 26, because I can only imagine, what's she going to be writing in a decade? I'm actually even more interested in that, just to see what she's doing two or three novels from now. Talent comes at any age, and some people find it really young, and some people... I have always written, but I really found people gravitating toward my writing in my mid-30s, and now my early 40s, and so you just never know.

Name

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Vocation

Author

Fact

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