

Review:

Roxane Gay. *Bad Feminist* (HarperCollins, 2014)

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I first heard about *Bad Feminist* in *Entertainment Weekly* magazine and was very excited to read it. *Bad Feminist* was to me mostly refreshing. Author Roxane Gay embodies a complexity of perspective that is still, in my eyes, missing from much of the popular feminist discourse. Is Beyonce a bad feminist because she is sexy and provocative? Or is she a good feminist because she uses her celebrity platform to address gender issues? While many scholars discuss the importance of intersectionality, too often the mainstream conversations about feminism are binary... you are either feminine or feminist, advocate or antagonist. This “essentialist feminist,” as Gay refers to it, is little more than a caricature that limits all those who seek gender equality but disavow the simplistic description of what that should look like or be like.

To me, a feminist peacemaker and criminologist, the strongest parts of Gay’s collections of essays, are those in which she directly addresses the ways that popular culture presents rape and

abuse. Her critique of *50 Shades of Gray* and *Twilight* are spot on. It should not be desirable or titillating to have someone dominate us, even if we are “into” domination sexually, which she clearly identifies as a mutual activity, not one in which one partner has disproportionate power over the other. Now that the film version of *50 Shades* has been released, so too has the mass marketing of all eroticism to women. A series this popular could potentially be sexually liberating for women, and surely it is being marketed as such. It would definitely be nice if as a country we were able to move past the narrow thinking that only men enjoy sex or that women who do are sluts. Yet, as Gay explains, these books do nothing of the sort.

Gay notes that these books also fuel the Disneyized myth that Prince Charming will save us if we simply comply with whatever we have been told, a very dangerous sort of thinking for young women. Gay notes, the series documents the ways that the main character Christian Grey’s “girlfriend,” a term that can only be used loosely, submits to her special Prince Charming. Gay explains, “The trilogy represents the darkest kind of fairy tale, one where controlling, obsessive, and borderline abusive tendencies are made to seem intensely desirable by offering the reader big heaping spoonfuls of sweet, sweet sex sugar to make the medicine go down.”

Given that an estimated one-third of the world’s women will endure an abusive relationship, it is difficult to see how glorifying power and control by one partner over the other is a good thing. Indeed, a study published in the *Journal of Women’s Health* in September 2014 found that young women who read the series were more likely than their peers to experience domestic violence, to have been stalked by a partner, and to suffer from eating disorders. The idea is that when people immerse themselves in stories, what has been called “experience taking,” the result may be, just like with video games, that it is experience-reproducing as well.

Further, the fact that we may appreciate the beat but not the message of a song is a complication that is challenging for those who hew to a straight-line view of feminist. Gay expresses, equally, her love and dismay for misogynistic lyrics, highlighting the fact that even concerned people, even feminists, are affected by the ubiquity of

popular culture. Given that this is a topic that comes up in a variety of communications, gender studies, sociology and other courses, Gay's chapters on these subjects could be an important and user-friendly way to engage in critical dialogue about the production and reproduction of images and messages that continue to marginalize women, as well as how students and faculty can work together to promote and even create alternate imagery and storylines.

I also appreciate Gay's critique of *The Help* and *Django Unchained*. As a White ally, I clearly don't always read the same messages from films or other media as does a person of color, despite my best attempts. I generally liked both films and thought them to be important additions to the cultural understanding of the oppression of Blacks. However, both are still part of the same modus operandi. The "white savior" and "magical negro" storyline is so deeply engrained that it is easy to believe. Older films like *American History X* and *A Time to Kill* also show that it is White people who are typically the change agents who really matter. But, because they are visually compelling, feature all-star casts, and even attempt to grapple with the difficult subjects of racial oppression, Gay points out, many automatically presume such films are doing a social good.

The chapter called "How to Be Friends with Another Woman" also resonated with me and I believe will with readers. Too often, women are pitted against one another, and I would argue that it is even worse among those who self-identify as feminists. As Gay advises, "Don't tear other women down, because even if they're not your friends, they are women, and this is just as important. This is not to say you cannot criticize other women, but understand the difference between criticizing constructively and tearing down cruelly" (pp. 48-49). The chapter is both serious and comical and offers a lot for students and the general public to consider in terms of developing and maintaining relationships. It also can be used as a springboard to examine why women do not support one another and how that can be changed.

Additionally, Gay's addressing of rape culture is thoughtful and sometimes raw, especially her recollections of her own sexual assault. She bravely admits that it is both important for feminist authors and artists to discuss and represent rape in their works and challenging,

as the line between “getting it right” and gratuitous violence is amorphous. As Gay points out, comedians can sometimes offer keen insight about difficult issues like rape but that when delivered by a young white man like Daniel Tosh, such jokes contribute to the problem, not the solution. One point that should be emphasized more is the fact that there is also a big divide in the world of sexual and domestic violence advocacy. While survivors like Gay have a wealth of experience and can offer important insights into what communities can do to end abuse, many traditional domestic violence and sexual violence shelter staff who are survivors disdain academics, though if one has not lived abuse one has no useful knowledge. Again, these binaries reduce the power that could come from collective feminist work.

One concern with the book was that several chapters seemed elitist. While Gay acknowledges her humble background, it seems as though her upbringing was far from that of most people in the lower socioeconomic statuses of the U.S. For instance, her reference to literature that most have never consumed comes off as presumptive. The concern is that readers may be alienated when entire chapters focus, and in great detail, about specific books that even scholars of literature and communications may not be familiar. The whole point is that the essentialist feminist leaves some out, but it seems as though the inclusion of this material could do exactly that.

While I wouldn’t necessarily recommend the entire book for courses with a feminist or gender studies emphasis, many of the chapters would be useful. The explorations of popular culture are useful for stimulating dialogue about popular films and music, as well as difficult conversations about the degree to which and ways U.S culture is still patriarchal. Besides the several chapters that were particularly dense with literary references, *Bad Feminist* is accessible and offers interesting commentary that will resonate with students across a wide range of courses. In sum, the book offers an important and generally reader-friendly exploration of how anyone can and should be feminist activists, and that key to challenging the patriarchy is working together and not against one another.

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