

ROXANE GAY IS NOT SORRY

Getting to know one of our most important and accessible cultural commentators—a woman who can call out rape culture and sing the praises of *Law & Order: SVU* in a single op-ed

BY **JESSICA P. OGILVIE**

Sitting on an Eames-style bar stool next to a white marble kitchen island in her Los Angeles home, Roxane Gay swipes through a music app, searching for something to set the mood and singing the praises of her in-house sound system.

"Oh my God, it's the world's best speakers," she says. Settling on Beyoncé's *Lemonade*, she hits PLAY on "Hold Up" and the song comes washing in from all sides. Gay is an avowed fan; she all but live-tweeted the Carters' On the Run II concert at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, California last September.

Dressed in a slate-blue shirt and jeans, Gay is addressing a makeup artist, PLAYBOY's photography team and me. She's relaxed and chatty, her honey-smooth voice edged with a wry wit.

It's an outgoing side of the 44-year-old author and columnist—one that is not always on display. When we first meet, a few days before, Gay is decidedly more reserved. Opening the door with a warm hello, she pads quietly past two carefully curated bookcases, offering me water and a seat on the couch. She joins me, sitting beneath the slanted living room roof and across from a sliding glass door that looks out onto a sun-drenched patio, and we chat about John Branch's book *The Last Cowboys,* a copy of which is on the table.

But Gay keeps her legs and arms crossed, responding to my attempts at small talk with single sentences capped by faint smiles. I don't know whether to read this as innate shyness or a practiced technique to avoid revealing too much to journalists. After all, over the past several years Gay has put her opinions and her personal life on display through her writing, becoming a go-to critic on the most urgent cultural buttons: rape culture, #MeToo, gun control, racism, Louis C.K., Brett Kavanaugh and Roseanne Barr. Unafraid to call out privilege, hypocrisy or entrenched social injustice, Gay has an ever-growing corpus, 530,000 Twitter followers tracking her every move and legions of fans lined up at her events, clutching books for her to sign.

So it's understandable if she's tired of saying what she thinks—or wary of what might be made of her words.

"I'm still a work in progress," she says. "I'm giving myself permission to be human and to be flawed and also to protect myself. It's taken a long time to get to a place where I'm willing to do that, but I am."

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Roxane Gay emerged as a public thinker to reckon with sometime around the early

PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RYAN PFLUGER**

"MEN NEED TO START HOLDING EACH OTHER ACCOUNTABLE AND SAYING, 'YOU KNOW WHAT? THIS IS UNACCEPTABLE.'"

2010s with an explosive essay published on an indie blog. But she was a fiction writer first, beginning at a very young age.

Raised primarily in Omaha, Nebraska by Haitian parents, Gay traveled frequently thanks to her father's work as an engineer. She routinely started over at new schools with new friends, returning to Omaha between her father's projects. This constant change, along with what she describes as her naturally "not super social" temperament, fanned her love of storytelling—a love she discovered around the age of four, when she would pen short fables on napkins. She followed this passion through high school, college and graduate school, eventually landing a job teaching English at Purdue University in Indiana.

Gay wrote essays and reportage in addition to her fiction, but it wasn't until she penned a 2011 piece for The Rumpus that demand for her voice began to intensify. The essay, "The Careless Language of Sexual Violence," was a response to a *New York Times* article about the gang rape of an 11-year-old girl that focused on the aftermath of the event and the way it affected the town and the perpetrators' lives—seemingly more interested in those concerns than the way the horrific crime affected the victim.

"The article was like, 'Oh, the poor town is reeling,'" she says, "and I was just like, 'Huh, really? I'm pretty sure the child is reeling.' I was just incensed, and so I wrote this essay in about two hours."

Her response took the newspaper to task, speculating as to how the writer, James McKinley Jr., could be "more concerned about the 18 men than one girl," and concluded that as a society we have become "anesthetized or somehow willfully distanced from such brutal realities" as gang rape. The essay became part of a teeming online conversation about how newspapers cover sexual assault—and put Gay on the map as a fearless and incisive cultural commentator.

"That was the first moment in this stage of my career," she says. "After that, there was an audience for what I had to say, and so I just kept writing my opinions."

Those opinions have since appeared in the pages of the *Times* itself, where she is a contributing writer, as well as in dozens of other publications. In 2014 she published a book of essays entitled *Bad Feminist;* it became a *New York Times* best-seller. She co-penned a Marvel comic, *Black Panther: World of Wakanda,* and 2017 saw the publication of her memoir, *Hunger,* as well as *Difficult Women,* a book of short stories. In 2018 she edited two books, *The Best American Short Stories* and *Not That Bad: Dispatches From Rape Culture,* plus a series of essays on the publishing platform Medium called *Unruly Bodies.*

Gay is known for her formidable output—in addition to the above publication schedule, she clocked at least 58 speaking engagements in 2018 alone—but she's most recognized for her singular way of wielding a pen. Her opinion pieces are pointed and unequivocal and yet delivered with keen self-awareness. She says what she means in clear, concise sentences, the English professor brought to bear. And she's not bashful about using herself as a reference point: She talks openly about the challenges of being a black woman, a bisexual woman and, in her own words, a "fat woman" in a society that would punish her for all of the above.

More recently, Gay has written multiple *Times* columns on the #MeToo movement and all its twists and subplots. A primary thread in her writing is our country's outsize concern for the welfare of the accused men, which tends to far exceed concern for the victims. In an August 29, 2018 op-ed entitled "Louis C.K. and Men Who Think Justice Takes As Long As They Want It To," Gay wrote that public figures like C.K. who have been accused of sexual misconduct have "fallen from grace, but they have had mighty soft landings." The victims, though, "have been disbelieved. They have had to withstand accusations that they are seeking attention. Justice has been grandly elusive."

She continued her train of thought following the Brett Kavanaugh Senate hearings, in an October 5, 2018 piece, "I Thought Men Might Do Better Than This." On the testimony of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, Gay wrote, "Despite everything we know about the prevalence of sexual assault and harassment, women are still not believed. Their experiences are still minimized. And the male perpetrators of these crimes are given all manner of leniency." She went on to note that a handful of accused men are beginning to complain about their treatment by the public, calling journalist John Hockenberry's *Harper's* essay examining his life after sexual harassment claims "aggressively self-pitying." Former CBC Radio host Jian Ghomeshi "presents himself as the misunderstood hero of his own narrative" in his *New York Review of Books* post-accusation essay, "Reflections From a Hashtag." And Kavanaugh, she wrote, was "a self-indulgent brat" during his confirmation hearings. (It's worth noting that her article, with its careful analysis and focused anger, begins with a meditation on *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit;* few critics can juggle politics and pop culture as deftly as Gay.)

When I ask her what drives this willingness to say what so many women—and, I presume, men—are thinking, Gay responds, "I just try to be as honest as I can and as open as I can."

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For her opinions, Gay attracts frequent dissenters, many of whom confront her on Twitter. But Gay, whose Twitter bio includes the line "If you clap, I clap back," seldom hesitates to respond. A brief scroll through her feed will turn up several such exchanges. With her talent for well-aimed ripostes, she has learned to enjoy the platform's famously indecorous tone.

"In general, I just try to engage with people who are interesting or funny, and then of course the occasional troll, and that's just for fun," she says. "It's like a pressure release. I mean, you have the audacity to speak to me that way? Well, then whatever happens next is on you."

For the most part, Gay says, she has no regrets about what she writes. Indeed,



her thoughts seem to roll out of her mouth fully formed; as our conversation continues, I often feel as if she's dictating an op-ed directly into my tape recorder.

"People are going to respond to my work how they respond, and that's fine," she says. "But I know I can handle the consequences of having my opinion."

I wonder aloud if Gay has ever experienced fear or regret with regard to her work—as most writers do—and by now I'm expecting a no.

"Yeah," she says, "only once. I mean, I always experience fear, because I write about fairly volatile topics, but the one thing I was afraid of and that I regret not doing more was writing in support of Hillary Clinton during the 2016 election."

At the time, she explains, it felt dangerous. Clinton supporters were picked apart, as was the candidate herself. And in an uncharacteristic moment, Gay let that outside pressure affect her.

"I really thought that Hillary was an outstanding candidate, but people have so many very vocal and very deeply entrenched opinions about her, and when you support her publicly, there's a lot of backlash," she says. "There were definitely times when I thought, Oh, I could write an op-ed about this, and I just got overwhelmed. And I thought, I don't have the time to deal with this, and I do regret that."

After Trump was elected, she says, she promised herself she would never again hold back out of fear. "I'll just live with the fear

and make myself uncomfortable," she says, "and say what needs to be said."

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Gay's followers might fervently agree with her politics, but her work also resonates with many on a deeper level. A large part of her writing in recent years has centered around self-revelation, around publicly digging through the darkest parts of her past and the darkest corners of her mind. In *Hunger*, she writes frankly and heartbreakingly about the gang rape she suffered at the age of 12. She writes about how she used food as a way to take back a semblance of control, to make "my body into what I needed it to be—a safe harbor rather than a small, weak vessel that betrayed me."

In doing press for the book, Gay repeatedly explained that she didn't really want to write it but felt compelled to do so.

"I was just reluctant to write the book because I knew it was going to require a level of vulnerability that was going to be difficult," she says, "and it was going to make me feel very exposed out in the world. But I also knew that I wanted to write a book about fatness that I would have loved to have read at any point in my adult life, and one that wasn't grounded in inspiration and weight loss."

It's that ability to be so raw in her prose, says actress and author Amber Tamblyn, that's behind the zeal of Gay's fans. Tamblyn hosts a reading series with Gay called Feminist AF, and she believes that Gay possesses a combination of intellect and openness rare among Ph.D.s—and that she's one of the very few academic writers willing to descend from the ivory tower.

"She comes from this high-status world as a professor, as a woman of that stature, which I think often is a world that talks down to people," says Tamblyn. "But Roxane writes and speaks from the heart. When you read her work, you feel like, 'Oh my God, I am sitting in the living room with this dope-ass woman who is really funny and really smart and I'm learning a lot from her.' But it feels like you're getting to know her on a deeper level too. She's just a really down-to-earth person, and that's a breath of fresh air."

As willing as she is to put herself in the line of fire through telling her story and speaking her truth, Gay recognizes that doing so is not for everyone, particularly at a time when speaking one's truth for the greater good does not necessarily result in change.

"It's women and marginalized people who consistently do things for the greater good, and the greater good tends to be widely indifferent to that," says Gay. "I think it's a personal choice [to tell your own truth]. I think you don't have to."

What she would like to see is more men leading the charge to change the climate.

"Men listen to other men," she says. "They don't listen to women. We clearly see that, so men need to start holding each other accountable and saying, 'You know what? This is unacceptable. You don't get to be out in the world acting any old way.' And until men hold one another accountable, I don't think we're going to see any change at all."





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Back at the shoot, *Lemonade* continues to fill the room as Gay gets her hair and makeup done. She's still bantering with the photo team when the opening strains of another song come on—the taut, insistent beat of "Sorry."

As I get up to leave, the chorus begins. It could be a direct response from Gay to anyone who would ask her to keep her truths, in all their pain, rage, humor and complexity, to herself:

Sorry, I ain't sorry
Sorry, I ain't sorry
I ain't sorry
No no, hell nah. ■