

## Digitizing the Intersections: Roxane Gay's Online Performance of Authorial Identity

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*As she has moved into literary celebrity status, Roxane Gay has developed into a central figure in the continued fight for equality. Her authorial identity is firmly entrenched in the intersections of literary culture, race, gender, and technology, which allows Gay to criticize and navigate the historical restrictions placed on women and people of color. However, Gay's emergence as a digital author places her within the battle between print and digital culture. This paper illuminates how Gay uses her digital presences to perform an intersectional authorial identity. Through this mediated performance, Gay destabilizes literary tradition, not only through her validation as a serious author of difference, but also as an avid proponent for digital authorship.*

Roxane Gay's development as a serious author is significant because she performs within the intersection of multiple identities, distilling them into the authorial identity audiences consume. Like other writers who began their careers during the late-2000s, Gay is digitally born. She embraces the Internet and the possibilities it provides to cultivate authorial identity and a body of work outside traditional publishing channels. Similar to other Indie-Lit writers, Gay finds tremendous value in digital platforms and publications. These tools become ways for her to engage with her audience but also ways to establish herself as a literary figure. Gay's early digital appearances represent the convergence of her many identities

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online, and to the current day, these presences operate as real-time texts that display the nuances of her intersectional authorship.

Gay posted her first tweet on June 20, 2007. The tweet read, "In my office grading and converting student presentations from .dv to .mov."<sup>1</sup> Her first writing venture on Twitter represents her academic identity. Academic life was on full display in this tweet. The tweet reads as a typical first tweet by a "regular" individual, not someone who will become a literary celebrity, and Gay's identity at this time was as a graduate student pursuing her PhD in Rhetoric and Technical Communication, not a future bestselling author.

The absence of a clear authorial identity was further emphasized by Gay's eight-month span between her first and second tweets. Her second tweet highlighted her eventual adoption of the platform as a performance prop. On March 25, 2008, she tweeted, "Finally, I am ready to drink the Twitter Kool-Aid. Do not want to grade."<sup>2</sup> From this tweet/date forward, Gay appeared on Twitter regularly, and she eventually used the platform to establish a connection to her identity as an author. She posted on September 4, 2008, "Today is one of those days when I feel like my writing career is in the biggest goddamned slump. I'm not even getting calls for submissions."<sup>3</sup> The first mention of Gay's identity as an author reflected a theme that appeared consistently during the development of her persona: the struggles of emerging authors against the traditions of publishing.

Twitter and other digitally born publications, like *HTMLGiant* and *The Rumpus*, provided her with ways to navigate around the traditional avenues of publication. Tweeting afforded her the chance to criticize how the publishing industry valued authors. Her strength and resolve against literary traditions becomes evident, but her online presences also reveal her desire to be seen as a credible member of the literary world. She tweeted on February 24, 2010 a quote from a rejection letter along with her inspirational retort: "'I hope your morale will survive this bad news.' MOFO, please. I'm a writer. I live for rejection."<sup>4</sup> This is one of the first instances where Gay declares that she is a writer on Twitter. By doing this, she fully assumes the role of the writer, and this includes negotiating the literary marketplace and its representatives. Gay put on a front to show strength through her colloquial language, implying that her authorial identity was built upon the pain of not being accepted for one's worth. Slang and vulgarity mark Gay's language throughout her media performances. Adopting this type of speech against refined literary language allows Gay to represent herself as an outsider, but also as an author attempting to stretch the connotations of literariness.

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<sup>1</sup> Roxane Gay (@rgay), Twitter, June 20, 2007, 2:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/113423762>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., Twitter, March 25, 2008, 9:39 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/777108123>.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., Twitter, September 4, 2008, 3:17 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/909772781>.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Twitter, February 24, 2010, 9:49 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/9606771733>.

However, her strength and resolve against rejection took a toll on her confidence, and her online presences worked through these effects. On *HTMLGiant*, where she was a regular contributor until 2014, Gay pondered the meaning of genius and its recognition in literary culture through the MacArthur Foundation in the essay "On Genius." She wrote, "The idea of genius is really interesting to me and it's something I feel I'm always trying to reach for, despite my limitations."<sup>5</sup> Gay undervalued her abilities as an author because she had been conditioned to interpret writing by people of difference as outside of the norms of literary culture. As Feminist critic Nancy K. Miller contends, women's Otherness in Western culture leads to "structurally important differences from that universal position" of white male identity.<sup>6</sup> The cultural connotations around genius are still, no matter the steps that have been made toward inclusivity, predominantly based in patriarchal and Western connotations. Gay's identities as a Black woman affected how she compared herself to the canon of literary geniuses that had come before her. She admitted, "As writers, some of us are always striving for genius or to write something ingenious."<sup>7</sup> It is important to note how Gay uses language to perform her authorial identity here. The language she employed masked her performance in a general statement, playing upon the popular connotations of art and artists by alluding to how reception plays a significant role in determining a cultural figure's value.

Furthermore, Gay described how she associated "genius with greatness" and how this perception affected her views on authorship. By conflating these characterizations, she expressed her desire to achieve this type of cultural recognition through her writing. Her authorial identity sought to break free from the hindrances of race and gender to compose a work that transcended identity markers to become, as she claimed, "evidence that I am exceptional." Breaking free from the cultural limitations placed upon her and her art becomes a prominent concern for Gay as she performs her authorship, and it is this concern that is steeped in Romantic conceptions of authorship. The image she constructs through this early online appearance is one of aspiration, but at the same time the image suffers because it does not meet the traditional standards of Romantic genius. Gay must confront her desire to be considered a serious and "great" author in literary culture by refining her identity through writing.

One issue that allowed Gay to refine her identity performance through writing was the stigma toward digital texts often held by traditionalists within literary culture. Gay placed herself at the intersection of print and new media. Even

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<sup>5</sup> Roxane Gay, "On Genius," *HTMLGiant*, September 28, 2010, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/random/on-genius/>.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader," in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, ed. Seán Burke (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh), 197.

<sup>7</sup> Gay, "On Genius."

though she aspired to publish traditionally, she understood that the Internet could generate an audience and attention.<sup>8</sup> However, she did not understand how her peers did not find this beneficial. On August 18, 2010, Gay tweeted about how authors fetishize print as the predominant literary medium: "I don't understand why writers are so obsessed with print. 750 ppl will read a print issue. 7500 will read you online in one month."<sup>9</sup> The tweet provided a glimpse into Gay's views on literary culture's misguided traditions. Her tweet stemmed from her role as editor of *Pank*, an online literary journal she founded with M. Bartley Seigal in 2006.<sup>10</sup> As both a writer and an editor, she knew from her experiences the benefits the Internet provided to the emerging writer's authorial identity.

Gay extended her critique of this stigma in the essay "Once There Was Great Writing Here," published on *HTMLGiant*. The essay took on the issue of writers pulling their work from online publications to make their print publications more appealing. Gay criticized how she, as an editor, had received requests to remove certain works from the web, something she found extremely troubling and disrespectful. She believed the privileging of print over digital publication set "a bad precedent" because it not only devalued new media but it also kept alive the idea that online work was ephemeral.<sup>11</sup> Even though she admitted to being "a big proponent of electronic and online publishing," Gay felt that "there is a permanence to a physical book or magazine that cannot be denied." She acknowledged that print can "disappear," but she highlighted the ease at which online writing can "disappear entirely." Her concession showed that print traditions have an effect on her own performances of authorship. The value she placed upon digital media was lessened through her fetishization of print and the myth of permanence. It was ironic that she admitted this in a digital only magazine, instead of in a prestigious print publication such as *The New Yorker*.

At the same time, the digital does not offer the same opportunities as print to authors for economic and cultural capital. Gay understood this and used Twitter

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<sup>8</sup> See Roxane Gay, "Toward a More Complete Measure of Excellence," *The Rumpus*, December 2, 2011, accessed August 28, 2017, <http://therumpus.net/2011/12/toward-a-more-complete-measure-of-excellence/>. In this essay, Gay criticized *The New York Times* Best Books List and how authors from major presses dominate it. Gay contended that this limits our ability to connect with diversity.

<sup>9</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, August 18, 2010, 1:49 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/21508365746>.

<sup>10</sup> "About," *Pank*, n.d., accessed November 29, 2017, <https://pankmagazine.com/about-2/>. *Pank* publishes both print and online versions now.

<sup>11</sup> Gay, "Once There Was Great Writing Here," *HTMLGiant*, October 1, 2010, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/behind-the-scenes/once-there-was-great-writing-here/>.

to comment on how authors romanticize poverty in their authorial performances.<sup>12</sup> Although she contended that the myth of the poverty stricken artist needed to be dismissed, Gay tweeted on November 8, 2010 that “giv[ing] away a lot of writing for free” was something she and “all” authors did regularly because it was what had traditionally been done.<sup>13</sup> It can be assumed her position in online literary communities allowed her to easily publish this critical analysis without the benefit of traditional payment. However, the place of publication proves Gay’s point that “the publishing industry sometimes shoots itself in the face and takes a scenic tour of a graveyard” because the flexibility of digital publications like *HTMLGiant* and social media like Twitter and Tumblr allow for the inclusion of not only many different texts but nontraditional voices as well.<sup>14</sup>

Gay’s push for equality in the literary world becomes a primary trait of her authorial identity across digital media. Her performance of the author as intersectional develops out of her concern with equality across all areas of social and cultural life. The historical view that writers of difference were not as artistic nor culturally important as white male authors and their works represents the conflict Gay meets head on. In “A Profound Sense of Absence,” she criticized the publishing industry’s lack of racial diversity. Toward the end of the first paragraph, which described Gay’s admiration for Richard Russo’s novels and her “expectations” for his guest editorship of *Best American Short Stories 2010*, Gay stated bluntly, “I know people will disagree with my thoughts here and that’s fine, but I really think shit is fucked up in literary publishing.”<sup>15</sup> According to Gay, a lack of diversity was present across all cultural fields, and she believed it occurred because of “the inequities that are present in society at large.”<sup>16</sup> For Gay, this mirroring of larger socio-cultural inequalities whitewashes the publishing industry. At the same time, all participants in the literary sphere, including Gay, are held accountable. She

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<sup>12</sup> Gay (@rgay), “I think some writers need to be reminded that poverty is not noble. Like, you don’t get bonus points for brokeassness. Jesus,” Twitter, October 12, 2010, 3:04 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/27165555766>.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., “I give away a lot of writing for free. We all do but I’m reflecting on myself because this is Twitter,” Twitter, November 8, 2010, 10:56 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/1845524583948288>.

<sup>14</sup> Gay, “Once There Was Great Writing Here.”

<sup>15</sup> Gay, “A Profound Sense of Absence,” *HTMLGiant*, December 3, 2010, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/random/a-profound-sense-of-absence/>. The use of vulgar colloquial language again demonstrated Gay’s attempts to craft her performances outside of traditional literariness. Digital publication allowed for her to use this type of language because of the niche audience, and the informal aspects embedded within connotations of the medium.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. See also Gay, “The Anger of the Male Novelist,” *Salon*, January 20, 2012.

admitted to not reading as widely and diversely as she should, and she acknowledged that there were “tokens” that were recognized by the mainstream and have their works read by white audiences, but this was not enough. Gay admonished the literary establishment for consistently validating the works of white male authors and a select few women and people of color. At the end of the piece, she laid out her reasons for judging writing beyond socially constructed identifiers:

There are many characteristics of great writing. While there's no consensus, I believe great writing can and should transcend things like race and gender and class. Great writing should be writing that is so powerful it elevates us beyond the things that characterize us in our daily lives. And yet, I also believe that writing should tell us things we don't already know and give us insights into the lives of people who are completely different from us or anyone we know. Great writing should challenge us and make us uncomfortable and push our boundaries.<sup>17</sup>

Like earlier in the piece, Gay asserted that literature was an art beyond the limitations of socially constructed identities. Her lived experiences and her identities reveal the way her authorship attempts to cast literature as an art form for revealing the many voices present in U.S. society, not just those of a privileged few.

Gay's self-reflexivity caused her to act out her socio-cultural views through her appearances across multiple websites. As her audience grew, Gay's identity as an author who critiqued the literary establishment became more legitimate. Responding to a follower on Twitter on February 23, 2011, she used the opportunity to restate briefly her views on writing media and cultural recognition: “I think writing is writing regardless of the medium. Bloggers have a more visible platform, so they get some of the bigger deals.”<sup>18</sup> This showed Gay, again, considering the media attention that developed around some bloggers and the value placed upon writing within digital and print media. She collapsed the boundaries that had been set up within the literary world to guard against devaluing print.

Similarly, Gay performed her authorship as a voice for Others. In “To Write As a Woman Is Political,” published on *HTMLGiant* on the same day she tweeted the reply above, Gay recapitulated the feminist mantra of the personal being political. She discussed how she received a letter from a woman telling her that the story “Strange Gods” had been deeply affecting. This, combined with thoughts about other women readers' letters of solidarity and current political attempts to “legislate women's bodies,” spurred Gay to delve into this issue. She admitted that she and other writers often attempt to avoid acknowledging the political traits of their authorial identities out of fear that their work would be misinterpreted and

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, February 23, 2011, 10:25 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/40613138185330688>.

judged not as art but as commentary on the political climate at the time. She confessed that she suffered from “an inferiority complex,” because she viewed her fiction as “domestic stories,” which in her mind did not carry “the imprimatur of political writing.”<sup>19</sup> Disrupting the traditional notions that the domestic world is insignificant within the canon of great literature must occur before the literary world can open itself up to a deeper range of human experiences.

Ultimately, writing allowed Gay to think through these feelings of inadequacy and see categorizations as “simply a matter of scale.” In the final paragraph, Gay performed a dramatic act, that of declaring her intent to create political art:

For now, though, I guess I would say the female body and its experiences is my war, the war I do know of and the legislative attack on the female body is where I want to start to stand my political ground as a writer. [...] Anytime I write a story about a women's [sic] experience I am committing a political act. I am trying to say these stories matter, these kinds of people matter, that these stories are as critical and consequential as the kinds of stories more traditionally considered political. I'm a relatively unknown writer. I don't know how far my voice will ever reach. [...] I do know, however, that my writing reached one girl today and that feels like a good start.<sup>20</sup>

Through this performative act, she placed her authorship firmly within the intersection of art and politics. Writing from lived experiences shows Gay's commitment from this moment forward to the fight for equality for women and for people of color, not only in the literary world, but in all areas of U.S. society. This type of act serves, according to The Combahee River Collective, as “the most profound and potentially the most radical politics [because it] come[s] directly out of our own identity.”<sup>21</sup> Gay's declaration at the end of “To Write As a Woman Is Political” becomes an accepted marker of her authorial identity, and her acceptance of the role of intersectional author requires her to engage with the traditions of not only serious authorship but also feminism in the U.S..

Just as she developed a digital intersectional authorial identity, Gay published her first print book *Ayiti* (Artistically Declined Press, 2011). This added another layer to her authorial performance. Not only was she a blogger, Twitter user, and short-story writer, Gay was a published author who now had to promote a book in the literary marketplace. Although a mainstream press did not publish *Ayiti*, the independent press Artistically Declined Press positioned Gay as a sig-

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<sup>19</sup> Gay, “To Write As a Woman Is Political,” *HTMLGiant*, February 23, 2011, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/random/to-write-as-a-woman-is-political/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement,” in *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., eds. Carole R. McCann and Seung-kyung Kim (New York: Routledge, 2013), 118.

nificant emerging author. In an interview on Melville House's blog, Gay was described as a "renaissance woman," which became other mediators' standard depiction of her.<sup>22</sup> Revealingly, Gay discussed her interaction with Artistically Declined Press while promoting the book. On being a published author and working with an independent press, Gay admitted that "it's awesome and surreal" because it was not something she expected. She stated she was grateful for the "pretty smooth" experience, and that the horror stories about the marketplace were unfounded in her experience so far. This revelation that allowed Gay to position herself as not only a critic but also a concerned member. Gay told Koski, "In terms of publicity we're pretty low key," and "I don't want to be all in your face, 'OH HEY I HAVE A BOOK.'" Furthermore, the main difference in promoting this book, besides for the standard "interviews and review copies" in Gay's opinion was that her blog, *I Have Become Accustomed to Rejection*,<sup>23</sup> provided her an opportunity to spread the news through not only her posts, but also through her followers' sharing. Even though she doesn't actively over-promote online, Gay's statement shows her willingness to participate in the literary marketplace to generate attention for herself and her writing.

Gay's participation in the literary marketplace did not cloud her criticism regarding how authors were represented. On February 25, 2011, she tweeted, "If you ever hear me use brand with regards to myself as a person, punch me HARD."<sup>24</sup> Gay's eighty-character tweet reveals the conflict all writers experience. Living within a society obsessed with celebrity and branding, writers are required to have specific identifiers that we can not only find solace in, but that they can also market. Gay's tweet highlights this fact, showing the absurdity of associating individuals with products, especially in the literary world.

A brand, however, had begun taking shape around Gay's authorial identity. In "Where I Write #9: A Cabin on the Lakefront," published on *The Rumpus* where she served as the first essay editor, Gay romanticized her work space. She discussed how she wrote in the cabin of a former lover while living in Michigan. In the middle of the essay, she claimed, "There is nothing interesting about where I write but I can write anywhere." She went on to state, "Everything about my writing, for better or worse, comes from inside me. I have always been this way."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Abby Koski, "Interview: Roxane Gay," *Melville House*, November 18, 2011, accessed September 26, 2017, <https://www.mhpbooks.com/interview-roxane-gay/>.

<sup>23</sup> This was the title of Gay's first blog. The blog was active until May 2011 when Gay changed over to Tumblr. The *Internet Archive* lists *I Have Become Accustomed to Rejection* under the web address roxanegay.com. Gay uses that address for her current Tumblr.

<sup>24</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, February 25, 2011, 2:10 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/41213403917848577>.

<sup>25</sup> Gay, "Where I Write #9: A Cabin on the Lakefront," *The Rumpus*, May 24, 2011, accessed August 28, 2017, <http://therumpus.net/2011/05/where-i-write-9-a-cabin-on-the-lakefront/>.



The Romantic myth of divine inspiration and the author functioning like a vessel for a higher artistic power did not seem to apply to her. Gay viewed herself as the primary creative being through her imagination and lived experiences. Her humility was on full display, and she used it to her advantage in representing her authorship. She did not make a grand declaration that the cabin or nature opened up her imagination, but the language she used emphasized the Romantic trope of author isolation.

Alongside reinforcing this Romantic view of literary creation, Gay presented the conflicts present in her authorial identity. Attempting to break down the traditional image of the author at work, Gay wrote, "I don't like writing at a desk. It feels forced, like I'm performing the part of the writer." This is a striking statement given the fact that Gay is "performing the part of the writer" whether she works at a desk or not. By distancing herself from this image, Gay showed how her authorial identity did not conform to these standards. Even as she cast herself as different, Gay disrupted her own performance. Directly after she discussed not using a desk when writing, Gay wrote, "I am always writing in my head. This sometimes makes people think I'm aloof." Here Gay participates in the idea of the author being consumed by her or his work, and the prevailing representation of Romantic genius.

Gay fleshed this image out in another essay, which dealt with literary culture's desire to know more about authors' inspirations. Writing again on *HTMLGiant*, Gay proposed that dreaming provided her with the ability to compose her works.<sup>26</sup> This declaration came after she poked fun at the fascination with authors' work practices. She stated coyly, "If I have a muse, it is an endless loop of *Law & Order: SVU*." Popular culture is one of Gay's intellectual interests, but in this statement, she uses her love of the popular crime show to deconstruct the literary muse myth. By claiming she wrote while binge watching, Gay destabilized the traditional trope of writer solitude and isolation. At the same time, she provided insight into her writing process through her "shitty sleep dream" as "a waking dream and I remember all of it." Gay revealed that her authorial identity included certain Romantic traits. The emphasis she places upon her dreams and their power outside of sleep becomes a representation of the author as divinely inspired. Ultimately, she downplays this Romantic version of her authorship by claiming it is "more exotic" to have a muse than it is to say, "I just play pretend." Gay's humility forces the reader to view her as an author who is concerned with her representation.

Appearing in the digital literary magazine *Full Stop* in December 2011, Gay participated in the publication's "update" of *The Partisan Review's* 1939 author

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<sup>26</sup> Gay, "My Muse Is Shitty Sleep Dream," *HTMLGiant*, December 20, 2011, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/random/my-muse-is-shitty-sleep-dreams/>.

questionnaire. The editors of the magazine described the need for “political questions” toward authors as important in 2011’s “year of global unrest.”<sup>27</sup> Gay clarified the political intent of her authorship by reinforcing how her works, whether fiction or nonfiction, come from her experiences as a Black woman: “My writing is lots of things but more often than not, the stories and essays I write reflect an allegiance to women and the concerns of women. A lot of my writing is an expression of who I am. I draw from my experiences heavily and shamelessly and if you read my writing you will know at least something about me.” Her choice to perform as a political author allowed her to cast herself as a champion for underrepresented voices, and she believed that through the author’s works audiences gained empathy toward Others’ experiences. She admitted during the *Full Stop* interview that she did not make a distinction between minor and grand political acts and that literature should “respond to the world we live in—the good and the bad, upheaval and calm, matters foreign and domestic.” She contended that literary culture’s traditional denigration of individual experiences as less important was “narrow.” The image Gay created during this interview continued the prevailing representation she began earlier in 2011. It is this image that becomes Gay’s brand of authorship, which required her to consistently maintain the image in all her media presences.

Tumblr provides Gay with another platform to perform her authorial identity and affect literary culture’s interpretation of her image. She deconstructs the boundaries between the author and the audience with her posts, adding another dimension to her authorial performances. The first post on Tumblr occurred on May 5, 2011. “Things I am Currently Charmed By” focused on her engagement with popular culture. She ended the post by claiming her “spirit animal is *One Tree Hill*” and how she was “more a Khloe than a Kim Kardashian or Team Kendra!”<sup>28</sup> Gay displayed how she wanted to be imagined as a Tumblr user. Instead of diving directly into her literary nonfiction regarding equality, something that emerged later, Gay showed her audience that she was grounded in popular culture and thus a relatable figure, similar to the ways David Foster Wallace attempted to perform this same trait through his essays on popular film and cultural events.

In an interview with the now defunct online literary magazine *Nano Fiction*, Gay discussed how she interpreted her blog:

My blogging is a lot of things. It allows me to get most of my crazy out in a manner that is not self-destructive. Blogging [sic] a great way for me to write

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<sup>27</sup> The Editors, “The Situation in American Writing: Roxane Gay,” *Full Stop: Reviews. Interviews. Marginalia*, December 9, 2011, accessed August 30, 2017, <http://www.full-stop.net/2011/12/09/features/the-editors/the-situation-in-american-writing-roxane-gay/>.

<sup>28</sup> Gay (roxanegay), “Things I’m Currently Charmed By,” Tumblr, May 5, 2011, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/5222521080/things-i-am-currently-charmed-by>.

without thinking and I'm actually starting to cull essays from blog entries because the writing just seems to come to me [...]. I also like talking about rejection because I think more writers should talk about the small failures, the things we go through, the frustration of trying to be great and often told, 'No try harder.' Writing can be lonely and blogging is mostly a way of making things less lonely.<sup>29</sup>

Tumblr becomes a way for Gay to test ideas and get audience feedback before publishing them as standalone essays. Unlike more traditional, primarily male, literary authors, Gay sees the value in a social media platform like Tumblr to create a following around her authorial identity.

Gay's new media presences broadened after 2012 to include appearances in more mainstream publications. As a result of the audience she cultivated through her early digital presences and print publications, Gay constructed an image around herself; she had become for many a significant cultural figure. The newfound attention did not drastically alter how she performed her authorial identity, however. In fact, mainstream recognition provided Gay with the broader platform necessary to perform her brand of authorship against the traditions of literary culture.

Over this time span, Gay refined her attitudes and their online presentation. "The Anger of the Male Novelist" showed her returning to the fight for equality in the publishing industry, except now with the intellectual cache of *Salon* to legitimize her views. Gay wrote toward the end of the piece, "Anyone who looks at the media coverage of contemporary writing can easily see that male novelists, even midlist novelists, receive consistent coverage."<sup>30</sup> She pointed toward one of the more pressing issues at stake for women authors, that of media attention. Throughout the essay, Gay described how *all* authors, save for Jonathan Franzen and other male literary icons, experienced the fickleness of contemporary publishing, and she asserted that this was not a sign of "the quality of our writing." Gay was not naïve toward the fact that the literary world was saturated with aspiring authors and that the publishing industry could not and/or would not put all its resources into promoting works they believed would not be commercially successful. The fact that the publishing industry was a business was not lost on Gay, and she made it clear that many authors would agree with her claims.

Nonetheless, Gay pointed out the similarities between writers regardless of race, gender, and other social identities. She declared that although authors appeared modest and adverse to the trappings of fame and celebrity, they craved

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<sup>29</sup> Sophie Rosenblum, "Five Questions with Roxane Gay and Brian Oliu," *Nano Fiction*, May 20, 2011, accessed August 30, 2017, <http://nanofiction.org/weekly-feature/interviews/2011/05/five-questions-with>.

<sup>30</sup> Gay, "The Anger of the Male Novelist," *Salon*, January 20, 2012, accessed August 29, 2017, [http://www.salon.com/2012/01/20/the\\_anger\\_of\\_the\\_male\\_novelist/](http://www.salon.com/2012/01/20/the_anger_of_the_male_novelist/).

cultural attention. She used Jonathan Franzen's anointment as "The Great American Novelist" by *Time* and Jeffrey Eugenides's image on a Time Square billboard as examples of the types of literary celebrity the majority of authors desired. It is this admission that characterizes her from this point forward. On the one hand, she seeks to work not for herself but for the underrepresented, while on the other, she is not immune to the attractions of literary celebrity. Some would argue that Gay's statement earlier in the essay about "rarely writing about" her own experiences when she criticizes the publishing industry absolves her of her jealousy toward Franzen and Eugenides, but it is difficult to remove her from the generalizations she makes. By drawing broad conclusions about "[c]ontemporary writers," Gay leaves room for her inclusion because she is, in fact, a writer who seeks to be considered a serious author, no matter how much she attempts to distance herself from it. Gay tweeted earlier in 2012, "If I am ever being a pretentious Writer in public slap me."<sup>31</sup> The tweet cast Gay outside of the images typically associated with prominent serious authors. In capitalizing "Writer," however, Gay emphasized the capital-I importance that many authors seek in literary culture. The tweet preceded the *Salon* essay, but the two revealed how Gay's online presences struggled with how authors were represented. This struggle provided her with an access point into defining more precisely authors' socio-cultural roles.

Tumblr provided Gay a platform to work through her ideas away from the stresses associated with mainstream publication. In a reply to a follower's question, Gay described how suffering for one's art had become a detrimental myth for aspiring authors: "Writing is not supposed to be painful. Writers have perpetuated a bizarre mythology about the angst of writing for far too long. Writing should be fun!"<sup>32</sup> This echoed her earlier critique of artistic suffering and poverty made on Twitter. Gay's answer showed that the myth of suffering for one's art was false, and this myth had become so ingrained that it obscured how writers approached their writing and themselves. Furthermore, Gay claimed, in the post "Here We Are," "Writing is always a pleasure."<sup>33</sup> She described how she used writing and reading as affective tools, and she asserted that these two activities needed "to overwhelm" individuals with emotion via language.<sup>34</sup> Although she admitted to not being fully prepared for the effects the public had upon her writing, Gay acknowledged that receiving news that her work mattered to just one person created joy and purpose. Connection and consolation through digital media are

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<sup>31</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, February 29, 2012, 5:35 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/174986189114327040>.

<sup>32</sup> Gay (roxanegay), "Hi, Roxane...", Tumblr, September 4, 2012, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/30909983377/hi-roxane-ive-found-myself-at-a-literary>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., "Here We Are," Tumblr, July 28, 2012, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/28225072261/here-we-are>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

essential for Gay's authorial performances. Through these experiences, she gains further validation of her performance of authorship.

Responding thoughtfully to their questions, the dialogue between Gay and her followers on social media becomes a central component of her authorial performances. Her answers reveal how she constructs her identity. Like other contemporary authors who use their Tumblr as places to interact with their audience, Gay links to posts to shed light on her attitudes. In the post "Zing," she answered a teenager's question about becoming a writer by providing a hyperlink to the post "How to Be a Contemporary Writer," which listed twenty-five points she believed were essential for contemporary authors. The first points related to each other: "Read diversely" and "Write."<sup>35</sup> Along the same lines, in "Zing," she stated writing and reading were synonymous acts; doing each one habitually improved anyone's abilities as a writer.<sup>36</sup> This became Gay's mantra when discussing how to become an author, but they did not fully represent the way she performed.

Instead, Gay provides her audience with a warning about the publishing industry that reinforces her feminist identity. She finds the lack of equality and its effects on writers of difference within literary culture highly troubling, and she uses her social media presences to continue crafting performances that disrupt the restrictions working inside the literary world. Gay made this clear in points five and five-a of "How to Be a Contemporary Writer." She wrote, "Accept that sometimes literary success is political and/or about who you know and that's not likely to change." Explaining but also providing encouragement to women and people of color, Gay asserted that these should not affect their aspirations to write and publish. In fact, she urged them to "[l]earn how to kick the shit out of those barriers" and to not "assume every failure is about your identity because such is not the case."<sup>37</sup> The insightful yet tough advice cast Gay as a realist. She knows social limitations exist and that they need to be removed in order to create a more diverse literary field, yet as a consequence of these historical effects, Othered authors must not fall into a self-loathing trap. Gay provides a way to push aspiring authors to work on their art and not blame their inabilities on the systemic limitations placed upon them.

Her pragmatic advice clashed with the Romantic traits she performed in "Zing." Even though she cast her authorial identity outside of Romantic inspiration by claiming she did not have "some deep spiritual explanation for writing," the majority of the Tumblr post detailed how Gay became inspired to write.<sup>38</sup> For

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., "How to Be a Contemporary Writer," Tumblr, August 15, 2012, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/29504832600/how-to-be-a-contemporary-writer>.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., "Zing," Tumblr, November 27, 2012, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/36668972002/zing>.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., "How to Be a Contemporary Writer."

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., "Zing."

Gay, "the zing" represented uncontrollable inspiration. The zing consumed her and caused her to "fucking *feel* it." The feeling Gay describes mirrors Romantic inspiration. Authors do not write out of their own experience; they write from a divine calling that is beyond their control.

The zing became not only a feeling but also a drug: "The feeling is so exhilarating. I think this is why I don't do drugs. I get my high from writing."<sup>39</sup> The image that appears in this post shows the conflict at play in Gay's authorial performance. While she attempts to provide real world socio-cultural criticism of literary culture, Gay, at the same time, professes to fall under the influence of some Romantic force. This conflict stems from the tensions that have plagued American authorship and literature historically. In an interview published on *NPR's* website, Annalisa Quinn claimed, "Gay never obscures her authorial self, never pretends that her writings were birthed immaculately, handed down whole from the mount whence cultural judgments are dispensed."<sup>40</sup> Quinn's description of Gay two years later contradicted the version Gay promoted in her post and struggled with in other online presences. At the end of "Zing," Gay called herself "a random writer." This characterization was steeped in Gay's signature humility, deflecting the authority many readers find in her persona. Nonetheless, this description fell short because the zing became the impetus for writing the post.<sup>41</sup> Gay struggled to keep the professional and the Romantic aspects of her authorial identity separate, and this difficulty affected Gay's perceptions around authorship and literary celebrity.

Gay struggled between recognition as a serious author and participating in the further commodification of authorship. Across her online media presences, Gay critiqued the celebrity system that had become a major part of the literary world. At the same time, the mounting attention around Gay and her work caused her to shift how she acted as an author. Commenting on how writers are perceived as commodities in a Tumblr post from January 3, 2013, Gay declared, "Great writers are canned goods."<sup>42</sup> She summarized her views on literary fads, such as the shift toward more personal writing and how these authors gained wide recognition as cultural authorities. However, she expressed that "no writing trend" altered the tradition of literary greatness because she believed that "a matter of time" was all authors needed to gain the rightful respect they deserved. Romanticism radiates from these statements. The idea that "Great writers" are often misunder-

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Annalisa Quinn, "Roxane Gay: 'Bad Feminist,' Real Person," *NPR*, July 5, 2014, accessed August 29, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/2014/07/03/328228837/roxane-gay-bad-feminist-real-person>.

<sup>41</sup> Gay (roxanegay), "Zing."

<sup>42</sup> Gay (roxanegay), "More thoughts on personal writing/journalism/etc.," Tumblr, January 3, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/39583844192/more-thoughts-on-personal-writingjournalismetc>.

stood in their own time and will receive their rightful respect from later generations is a hallmark of Romantic authorship. As she constructs an image of professionalism around herself, Gay cannot escape the lasting effects of Romantic conceptions of authorship.

The issue of performing the cultural role of the author becomes something Gay feels inclined to resist, even while participating in the commodification processes. In a tweet, she expressed her dismay at how up-and-coming authors felt the need to critique their literary predecessors: "This new trend of writers complaining about famous writers in essay form is very strange as is all the congratulation for so-called honesty."<sup>43</sup> Ten minutes after tweeting this, Gay added, "I get it. I have some extraordinary imaginary rivalries with famous writers. I just wonder about the topic as creative fodder."<sup>44</sup> Her tweets provided a short glimpse into how she viewed literary relationships. In order to create buzz, authors must engage in the tradition of the literary takedown, but Gay finds these to be short-sighted because they do not go beyond personal preference.

In June of 2012, Gay published "Someday Everything Will Matter: Shit Fancy Writers Say" on *HTMLGiant*. The title, once again, used Gay's signature vulgar colloquialisms to place her outside of tradition; she was not a "fancy writer." The essay addressed how authors have become celebrities, and through this continued turn toward celebrity, authors' roles and images change. Gay expressed her bewilderment with the Romantic traits authors act out in their public appearances. This was ironic because she allowed them to seep into her performances as well. She claimed that the literary marketplace was to blame for the shift in how writers approach their authorship: "There's writing and there's being a writer and the more success you achieve, the more you have to spend your time being a writer—being interviewed, writing op eds and essays, getting your picture taken, coming up with pithy lists of what you are reading or cooking or how you are spending each hour of the day and maybe, just maybe, writing new books."<sup>45</sup> Gay discussed Franzen, David Mitchell, Julian Barnes, Ray Bradbury, Umberto Eco, and *The Paris Review*. Her critique revealed that what the audience gained from the revelations these authors made in their interviews and public appearances shed no significant light onto their works or their creative processes. Ultimately, Gay claimed, "It must be exhausting *being a writer*, all that blah blah blah."<sup>46</sup> This represents the central conflict of literary culture and its fascination with literary celebrity. On the one hand, Gay criticizes celebrity culture and the literary

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<sup>43</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, August 16, 2012, 2:46 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/236172039952674816>.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 2:55 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/236174371956338688>.

<sup>45</sup> Gay, "Someday Everything Will Matter: Shit Fancy Writers Say," *HTMLGiant*, June 15, 2012, accessed September 15, 2017, <http://htmlgiant.com/web-hype/someday-everything-will-matter-shit-fancy-writers-say/>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

marketplace's push to brand personalities. On the other hand, Gay feeds into this feature by claiming that these public performances reveal aspects of the literary life to emerging writers.<sup>47</sup> The public desire for these types of performances clashes with Gay's own interpretation of authorship. Performing the role of an author involves embracing not only writing but the marketplace as well.

Gay's authorial identity becomes a site for the traditional tensions of American authorship, but instead of acting these out within the medium of print, she uses digital media to present her dilemmas with the continued commodification of authorship. Couched in a recipe post on Tumblr, Gay criticized the conflict between romanticized authorial identities and commercialism: "If you have major book deals, an agent, glossy coverage in major publications, you are very much part of the literary world."<sup>48</sup> This statement presented another central issue in serious authorship—the desire to transcend the marketplace. Many authors posture as if they are immune to the effects of commercialism. These authors vow that they are artistic, serious authors who find the fixation with celebrity and other commodity forms troubling because they dilute true art. Gay's brief admonishment of these types of authors revealed that this type of posturing was false because it took place from a position of privilege, that of mainstream publishing. She asserted that actions affected authorial images because it was through an author's works and other appearances that their value within literary culture emerged.<sup>49</sup> Gay's language implies she follows these principles, and it is through these principles that literary recognition is achieved.

Furthering her point in a tweet from October 5, 2013, Gay criticized Jonathan Franzen for his continued attacks on social and digital media as not worthy of the serious author's time and energy: "Hey Franzen. Instead of beating that dead ass technology horse, talk about contemporary writing you're reading or something. Jesus."<sup>50</sup> Gay was highly critical of Franzen and his views on social media, and she used Twitter and other online appearances to discuss the benefits of new media for emerging authors who do not have prestige like Franzen. Replying to @laurathepoet on Twitter, Gay stated, "Writers should do what they

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Gay (roxanegay), "So I Don't Fall Out," Tumblr, August 5, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/57488770104/so-i-dont-fall-out>. This was not the first instance of Gay inserting cultural criticism within a recipe post. Similar to how many people used social media—particularly Tumblr and Instagram—Gay posted recipes and photographs of food early in her presences on these media. Her Tumblr posts shifted in 2013 to more food posts, but instead of providing how to make the meal, Gay used these posts to spawn personal, social, and cultural analyses.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, October 5, 2013, 4:24 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/386587653442764801>.



want to do to promote their work. It is all about the hustle."<sup>51</sup> Gay values social media for its ability to make emerging writers more prominent. In doing so, she combats the criticism that prestige is diminished through selling the self.

In *Salon*, Gay urged emerging writers to "get connected." She believed "social networking" provided "these connections [to other authors and to potential readers] in a low-pressure environment."<sup>52</sup> She made clear that writers should "get over the 'self-promotion is gross' thing." These forms of "writing for free" allowed Gay to gain literary attention, build a support network of like-minded followers, and eventually have her work bought by publishers.<sup>53</sup> One of the central arguments about writing on social media and for online publications is that it does not pay. This is correct in the literal sense that publishing a print book versus publishing digitally can reward the author with more money, but this is not the type of payment Gay stresses here. In a Bourdieuvian sense, Gay's emergence as a legitimate author represents the types of payment digital writing provides. Although there are many arguments that can be made against using social media and online writing, Gay shows that through the actions and effort of the writer, one can construct an authorial identity that gains attention without succumbing to the negative effects of self-commodification.

Twitter and Tumblr become key tools in helping Gay assess the literary marketplace's effects on authorial identity performance. In "Franzen Doesn't Get Twitter," she claimed Twitter was the platform of choice "[i]f you like babbling about nonsense, and current events, and occasionally sharing links to your work."<sup>54</sup> This does not read like a deep revelation about Twitter, but it does provide insight into how Gay approaches it as a component of her authorship. Not only is Twitter a space for her to promote her art, but it is a space that fulfills her need for connection and social engagement. Twitter's character limit does not lend itself to the essays Gay produces; however, it allows her to craft 140-character critiques and self-revelations alongside the promotion of her works.

In the same manner, Gay's Tumblr becomes a site for taking the audience deeper into the intersection of authorship, commercialism, and technology, as well as race, gender, and body image. In "Some Thoughts on Promotion and Publicity + Free Books," Gay, again, analyzed the relationship between authors and social

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., April 30, 2012, 3:28 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/197044763214610432>.

<sup>52</sup> Gay, "Franzen Doesn't Get Twitter," *Salon*, March 7, 2012, accessed August 29, 2017, [http://www.salon.com/2012/03/07/franzen\\_doesnt\\_get\\_twitter/](http://www.salon.com/2012/03/07/franzen_doesnt_get_twitter/).

<sup>53</sup> Gay (@rgay), "I decided to stop writing for free at the beginning of the year but without writing for free I wouldn't have sold either book," Twitter, October 27, 2013, 11:15 a.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/394482604222599168>.

<sup>54</sup> Gay, "Franzen Doesn't Get Twitter."

media. Her signature bluntness was on full display, especially with the declaration, "Suck it up and get on board with self-promotion."<sup>55</sup> The post provided Gay an opportunity to flesh out her belief that social media allowed for a "behind-the-scenes" glimpse at the author, which was important to her authorial performance.<sup>56</sup> Here, she leveraged her social media presences against literary tradition. Instead of falling victim to the negativity around social media as lesser forms of writing, Gay valorized them. Through her continued crafting of her authorial identity on digital media, literary culture rewards her with the recognition she desires. By gaining a following and cultural attention, Gay moves out of the Indie-Lit world and into the mainstream.

From 2014 to 2017, Gay experienced a dramatic rise in her public visibility. This provided her with a larger arena to enact her authorial identity online. Not only did her Twitter reach 319,000 followers by 2017, she expanded her online reach into more prestigious publications. Her Tumblr posts became more socially conscious. The move from Indie-Lit author to public intellectual altered how she performed her authorial identity across online media. This newfound attention made her even more humble, as well as more committed to equality. Gay's literary celebrity made her an identifiable embodiment of the personal as political in the literary world.

Digital media allows Gay to collapse the boundary between the serious author and the literary celebrity. Unlike authors who attempt to define the boundary between high art and middlebrow/low art, popular culture deeply affects Gay's performance of the author as intersectional. By embracing and reveling in popular culture, Gay bridges the gap between literary culture and popular culture. As her renown rose, Gay tweeted on December 18, 2013, "My new writer goal is to pull a Chimamanda and show up on Beys next album."<sup>57</sup> Gay's tweet recontextualized her fascination with popular culture, showing her desire to reach a certain level of literary celebrity. By highlighting the use of an acclaimed author by a popular musician, Gay illuminated that the divide between these two forms of culture was less restrictive, something that she consistently made clear on Twitter and Tumblr by professing her love for reality television, Channing Tatum, and Beyoncé.

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<sup>55</sup> Gay (roxanegay), Tumblr, May 28, 2013, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/51583327821/some-thoughts-on-promotion-and-publicity-free>.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., December 18, 2013, 2:47 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/413395086676746240>. Gay referenced Beyoncé's song "Formation," which sampled Adichie's "We Should All Be Feminists." Recently, Adichie addressed Beyoncé's use of her work and its effects in an interview with the German magazine *de Volkskrant* (October 7, 2016). In this interview, Adichie criticized the attention the song provided her because it reflected how "unimportant" literature had become compared to popular music. Adichie's statement reinforced the connotation that literature should have a higher cultural standing than lower arts such as pop music.

More importantly, Gay's authorial identity became associated with online celebrity through her ever-increasing Twitter presence. Curating a following based around her Twitter persona, Gay performed her authorial identity, according to Shelia Heti, as a "Twitter celebrity" because Gay's "Twitter work" was more prominent than her other writings.<sup>58</sup> As her celebrity grew, Gay's sense of anonymity was ruptured. She admitted to Heti, "I also feel more exposed now that I've become a more visible writer but then I try to get over all that and just use Twitter the way I want."<sup>59</sup> Gay's self-consciousness toward her online image signified the platform's significance.<sup>60</sup> She desired to use it like the general public, but her role moved her further from this intention. Gay told Kocak, "There's a collapsing on Twitter that I think is very seductive."<sup>61</sup> She discussed how she felt "closer" to the public figures she followed on Twitter, and it was this relationship that fed her desire for more information about these people's lives and experiences. This feature is common among most social media users, and a majority of these users, more than likely, experience a fetish-like desire. With this in mind, Gay becomes a fan, but her cultural role no longer allows for this; she, in turn, becomes the fetish object.

In the Tumblr post "Needing Easy," Gay discussed her rising literary celebrity. She expressed reservations about the development of and expectations around performing literary celebrity because it required her to present more of herself to her ever-growing audience: "I feel exposed. It scares me to share so much of myself. I don't want the focus on me. I am just me. The writing is what matters, not the writer, right?"<sup>62</sup> Gay's question raises a central critique of authorship. The focus of the audience should not be on the author but on the literary work because the work is where meaning resides. Gay found the idea of writerly success strange, and she declared she was "loath to use the word" because she was "a writer."<sup>63</sup> Ultimately, success causes the writer to fully commit to the character that emerges within media images. This act shifts the focus toward the celebration of the author rather than the literary work.

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<sup>58</sup> Shelia Heti, "What Would Twitter Do?: Roxane Gay," *The Believer*, August 14, 2014, accessed September 25, 2017, <https://logger.believmag.com/post/2014/08/14/what-would-twitter-do-2?rq=roxane%20gay>.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Courtney Kocak, "Bad Feminist's Roxane Gay: 'I'm Loath to Use the Word 'Success,'" *Bustle*, October 9, 2014, accessed September 28, 2017, <https://www.bustle.com/articles/41797-bad-feminists-roxane-gay-im-loath-to-use-the-word-success>.

<sup>62</sup> Gay (roxanegay), "Needing Easy," Tumblr, April 28, 2014, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/84186204460/needing-easy>.

<sup>63</sup> Kocak, "Bad Feminist's Roxane Gay: 'I'm Loath to Use the Word 'Success.'"

Gay's character was that of an author working at the intersections of multiple identities and media. Literary celebrity made her conscious of her performance and its effects on her audience. For instance, Gay described in "Needing Easy" a book signing she did after a workshop in Columbus, Ohio. A young fan approached Gay and told her that she "was a celebrity to her." Gay admitted that the news was uncomfortable because it was not something she expected, but she played along and autographed the fan's hand.<sup>64</sup> Although she shied from the attention and categorization as a celebrity, Gay's actions reinforced the shift toward her as the desirable object. The autograph on the fan's body mirrors the images of musicians and actors signing, predominately female fans', bodies. This sexualized image is performative because it disrupts traditional authorial representation. Gay becomes for this young woman a fetish object, and the fan becomes for Gay a representation of her public desirability. Gay's first reaction does not remove the fact that she participates in the fulfillment of a desire. By autographing the fan's body, Gay collapses the line between her authorial identity and celebrity character.

In a similar but nonetheless stereotypical celebrity image, Gay tweeted, "Waitress just now: you are an author, aren't you. Nod nod nod."<sup>65</sup> The context of the tweet was unclear, but it could be assumed that the waitress was familiar with not only Gay's work but also her online appearances. The year difference between events showed that Gay's success and cultural recognition had spread wider, not only through her bestselling book *Bad Feminist* but also through her online presences. "Tweeting has definitely expanded the reach of my work," she told Heti.<sup>66</sup> This type of experience became common for Gay, and her reaction showed it was not an unalloyed pleasure. According to Gay, "social media has upped the ante for stepping out of line and that frightens me because it seems like there's less room for error—and I think we have to have room for error."<sup>67</sup> These encounters in real public spaces reinforce the encroachment of the performance upon the person. Instead of allowing the work to speak for itself, Gay must now perform her authorial identity outside of the confines of her media presences, making her lived experiences as a Black woman even more fraught.

The shift in Gay's recognition disrupts her performance of authorship because it makes her conscious of the expectations audiences have toward her as a public figure. Quoting Nina Bargiel's tweet, which asked about her "most unexpected" aspects of her life, Gay tweeted that "[h]aving to be public as a writer"

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<sup>64</sup> Gay (roxanegay), "Needing Easy." A photograph was included as proof.

<sup>65</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, October 5, 2015, <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/650749054159335426>.

<sup>66</sup> Heti, "What Would Twitter Do?: Roxane Gay."

<sup>67</sup> Kocak, "Bad Feminist's Roxane Gay: 'I'm Loath to Use the Word 'Success.'"

was the most unexpected because she “write[s] to be behind the scenes.”<sup>68</sup> Authors should be secondary to the text, not the primary focus, according to Gay. Even in today’s celebrity obsessed society, many writers do not imagine having to participate in this type of commodification. They believe that the traditional aspects of authorship still hold sway, while at the same time, they participate in writing for social media and other online publications. Being interviewed on *The Rumpus*, Gay discussed how she has dealt with her categorization as a public intellectual and its effects on her ability to write:

I never imagined that I would be the kind of person who is recognized when I am out and about just living my life. I never imagined any of the success I am currently experiencing. My dream was to write a book and see it published. I didn’t dare imagine anything beyond that, so, I’m trying to keep my head on my shoulders. I am trying so very hard to stay in the moment despite the ferocity of my ambition. I am trying to keep growing and improving as a writer. I don’t want the success to go away. I don’t want it to seem unearned.<sup>69</sup>

Two currents exist in Gay’s statement, which presents the tension between performative acts as writer and performative acts as public figure. Gay’s humility provided her with a way to downplay celebrity, but her language revealed the constant need to reinforce the Other’s validity within literary culture. As Gay admitted in the web publication *The Creative Independent*, “A lot of 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.”<sup>70</sup> The collapse between Gay as the writer and Gay as the author demands her to constantly perform. Hiding behind her Twitter, Tumblr, and other online writing is no longer an option because her audience and trolls directly engage her. Gay commented on this in a tweet on February 20, 2015: “I am a writer and critic. I share opinions. I tweet. We have fun. But I don’t owe you engagement.”<sup>71</sup> Gay attempted to maintain this separation across her online presences to avoid the damaging effects that constant performance, both virtually and in reality, entail for the celebrity.

Using the Internet and her literary celebrity, Gay attempted to change how writers of difference were represented in the literary world. Writing in *Slate*, she

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<sup>68</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, August 19, 2016, 10:06 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/766818567509516288>.

<sup>69</sup> Abigail Bereola, “The Rumpus Interview with Roxane Gay,” *The Rumpus*, January 4, 2017, accessed August 29, 2017, <http://therumpus.net/2017/01/the-rumpus-interview-with-roxane-gay/>.

<sup>70</sup> Brandon Stosuy, “Roxane Gay on the Importance of Storytelling,” *The Creative Independent*, November 30, 2016, accessed August 30, 2017, <https://thecreativeindependent.com/people/roxane-gay-on-the-importance-of-storytelling/>.

<sup>71</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, February 20, 2015, 4:27 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/568884677085245441>.

commented on the fact that although her identity as a Black woman labeled her and her work, she believed that it should not be the only defining characteristic.<sup>72</sup> She claimed that readers should not seek out literature based around gender or race alone because the text should speak beyond those identities. Gay did not deny her identity as a Black woman, although she knew her writing was informed by, but also transcended, these aspects of her identity.

At the same time as she made this claim, Gay reinforced these identities through the performance of the author as intersectional and a focus on personal experience. According to Gay, "Feminism is just a constant, it's just part of who I am, so I'm going to continue becoming a better feminist and a more intersectional feminist."<sup>73</sup> The performance takes place across all media, but especially in online publications targeting women audiences. Gay embraced the fact she could use her roles as a feminist and literary celebrity to fight for equality. She defined the responsibilities authors of difference have toward diversity in *The Rumpus* interview: "Diversity in literature is, in part, about representation — who is telling the stories and who stories are told about. People of color are not under any kind of obligation beyond working hard, doing their best, and learning from their mistakes. It is deeply unfair to task writers of color with unique responsibilities that we don't assign to all writers."<sup>74</sup> For Gay, it was not up to the authors who have traditionally been classified as Other to fix the issue because they were already creating art at the periphery of the dominant culture; prestigious literary figures must address inequality in order to enact systemic change.

Gay displaced these diverse experiences through her approach to fiction. She made clear to Stosuy that there was a greater need for political art in the U.S.: "I think there's a need for all kinds of art, and that includes fiction and poetry, plays. I think art, historically, had done a great job of responding to current events. [...] I'm more motivated than ever to write fiction. I'll continue writing nonfiction, because I do both, but I think now more than ever we need stories."<sup>75</sup> Gay asserted that the historical power of literary art was of great value in the digital age because our current political climate needed art to act as a guide.<sup>76</sup> In *The Rumpus* inter-

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<sup>72</sup> Gay, "The Trouble with 'Women You Should Be Reading Now' Lists," *Slate*, April 22, 2014, accessed August 29, 2017, [http://www.slate.com/articles/double\\_x/doublex/2014/04/\\_women\\_you\\_should\\_be\\_reading\\_now\\_lists\\_mostly\\_telling\\_us\\_what\\_we\\_already.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/double_x/doublex/2014/04/_women_you_should_be_reading_now_lists_mostly_telling_us_what_we_already.html).

<sup>73</sup> Kocak, "Bad Feminist's Roxane Gay: 'I'm Loath to Use the Word 'Success.'"

<sup>74</sup> Bereola. See also O'Neill, "Roxane Gay Teaches Us How to Be Bad Feminists." In this interview, Gay focused more on women writers' roles in creating diversity, which she also contended was "not our responsibility."

<sup>75</sup> Stosuy.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

view, Gay declared that one of the essential functions of literature was to “challenge us as much as it entertains.”<sup>77</sup> Challenging expectations and conventions was an essential task of any art, especially literature, according to Gay. The varied lived experiences of a diverse society provided audiences with ways to break free from their world-views through reading. Gay’s intersectional authorship initiates a dialogue on these issues across her digital presences.

By acting out this role, Gay became a target for many online trolls. This onslaught took its toll on her as an author, as well as a private individual. Twitter became a battleground, and Gay used the platform to reinforce her stance and to criticize the ways social media have been coopted to terrorize public figures who seek to enact change. On August 20, 2016, Gay tweeted, “I love writing and being able to talk about culture and social issues. I hate the constant harassment. It is soul draining.”<sup>78</sup> The trolling she experienced could be interpreted as simply backlash against a woman of color voicing her opinion. In other words, online trolls found it offensive that Gay shed light upon social oppression in public. Although Gay told Heti she believed, “Twitter has allowed the conversation [around feminism] to broaden and become more inclusive,” this broadening included the constant trolling from voices that sought to maintain an oppressive culture.<sup>79</sup> Trolls found Gay’s authorial identity to be a threat, and her public visibility made her an easy target. Again, social and other digital media blur the boundaries between private and public, creating an inability for Gay to escape from her public role. On April 6, 2016, she tweeted in regard to the slippage that often occurred when a person became a public figure: “I’m a writer but I am also a human being. If you forget that remind yourself.”<sup>80</sup> This collapse between the private and public selves shows that Gay’s authorial identity obscures how the public engages with her. By viewing her as a public figure and not a person, trolls and even her followers cast Gay as a media character, stripped of her actual self.

At the same time as she experienced this constant threat, Gay used her place as a prominent author to take down these trolls. For example, a major action Gay made in her performance of authorship was using her literary celebrity to affect how publisher’s approach potential authors. In January 2017, Gay pulled her upcoming book from Simon and Schuster because they were publishing a book by the extremist Milo Yiannopoulos. Gay provided *Buzzfeed* with her statement before any other publications. By giving *Buzzfeed* the scoop on this literary news, Gay lent it cultural capital. She published her full statement on her Tumblr, later,

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<sup>77</sup> Bereola.

<sup>78</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, August 20, 2016, 9:34 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/767173096939847680>.

<sup>79</sup> Heti, ““What Would Twitter Do?: Roxane Gay.”

<sup>80</sup> Gay (@rgay), Twitter, April 6, 2016, 2:11 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/717776791319023617>.

which was shared in mainstream publications such as *The Washington Post*. In "All I really need to say," Gay discussed how Simon and Schuster ignored the hateful rhetoric of Yiannopoulos, making them seem "fine with his racist and xenophobic and sexist ideologies."<sup>81</sup> Her identity as an intersectional author caused her to react, and she believed that pulling the book showed that authors would not be associated with a company that published someone like Yiannopoulos. With this in mind, Gay acknowledged that her place in the literary world allowed her to make this artistic and financial decision that less prominent authors could not make, and she understood their positions.<sup>82</sup> Through this performative act, she used her identity as a celebrity author to affect the publication of a person who supported harmful ideologies, providing an example of the power that literary celebrities hold to enact change within the system.

Digital media give Gay the opportunity to create and establish a following around her authorial identity. Performing her authorship within these media before publishing in print indicates how authors who emerge during the twenty-first-century place high value on new media. Gay's appearances in gynocentric online publications, emerging cultural sites, and social media permit her to construct an authorial identity based upon her politically charged lived experiences. The niche and inclusive nature of these media allow her to present herself as openly and "real" as she likes. At the same time as she embraces and uses digital media, Gay replicates many of the traditions of authorship. Her authorial performance "contain[s] multitudes," as she told Mensah Demary in *Electric Lit*.<sup>83</sup> These multitudes are affected by literary history and the issues of contemporary society often played out publically on digital platforms.

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<sup>81</sup> Gay (roxanegay), "All I need to say:," Tumblr, February 20, 2017, <http://roxanegay.tumblr.com/post/157506508260/all-i-really-need-to-say>. See also, Roxane Gay (@rgay), "Did I mention that Simon & Schuster moved the release date of *Dangerous* to June 13, the day *Hunger* is coming out? Oh wait.....," Twitter, February 20, 2017, 7:11 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/833831444355149824>, and Roxane Gay (@rgay), "But it was not a coincidence. It was malicious. And that's how I will forever think of Simon & Schuster," Twitter, February 20, 2017, 7:16 p.m., <https://twitter.com/rgay/status/833832717716439042>.

<sup>82</sup> Jarry Lee, "'Bad Feminist' Author Pulls Book From Simon & Schuster Over Milo Yiannopoulos Controversy," *BuzzFeed*, January 25, 2017, accessed August 29, 2017, [https://www.buzzfeed.com/jarrylee/roxane-gay-pulls-book-from-simon-schuster-in-response-to-mil?utm\\_term=.twWjvEvN#.ciDkkGBGE](https://www.buzzfeed.com/jarrylee/roxane-gay-pulls-book-from-simon-schuster-in-response-to-mil?utm_term=.twWjvEvN#.ciDkkGBGE).

<sup>83</sup> Mensah Demary, "Roxane Gay Is Feeling Ambitious," *Electric Lit*, January 3, 2017, accessed August 29, 2017, <https://electricliterature.com/roxane-gay-is-feeling-ambitious-bd4bf4458591>. Gay made this statement verbatim earlier in her career. See John Freeman, "Roxane Gay," *BOMB* 128 (Summer 2014), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/10067/roxane-gay>.



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