ALSO BY Roxane Gay

FICTION

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An Untamed State

Bad Feminist

Essays

Roxane Gay

HARPER PERENNIAL

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HARPER PERENNIAL

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also finding my people in unexpected places—California, Chicago, upper Michigan, other places, some not on any kind of map. Writing bridges many differences. Kindness bridges many differences too, and so does a love of *One Tree Hill* or *Lost* or beautiful books or terrible movies. There are times when I wish finding community was as simple as entering some personal information and lettin[illegible]where I belong. And then I realize that i[illegible]at the Internet and social networking ha[illegible]community.

Or perhaps I am [illegible]hm at all.

An algorithm is a p[illegible]problem in a finite number of steps. An [illegible]way of understanding a problem too co[illegible]nd to solve.

That's not what I[illegible]uis von Neumann said, "If people do not believe that mathematics is simple, it is only because they do not realize how complicated life is." Mathematics may well be simple, but the complexities of race and culture are often irreducible. They cannot be wholly addressed in a single essay or book or television show or movie.

I will keep writing about these intersections as a writer and a teacher, as a black woman, as a bad feminist, until I no longer feel like what I want is impossible. I no longer want to believe these problems are too complex for us to make sense of them.

Peculiar Benefits

When I was young, my parents took our family to Haiti during the summers. For them, it was a homecoming. For my brothers and me it was an adventure, sometimes a chore, and always a necessary education on privilege and the grace of an American passport. Until visiting Haiti, I had no idea what poverty really was or the difference between relative and absolute poverty. To see poverty so plainly and pervasively left a profound mark on me.

To this day, I remember my first visit, and how at every intersection, men and women, shiny with sweat, would mob our car, their skinny arms stretched out, hoping for a few gourdes or American dollars. I saw the sprawling slums, the shanties housing entire families, the trash piled in the streets, and also the gorgeous beach and the young men in uniforms who brought us Coca-Cola in glass bottles and made us hats and boats out of palm fronds. It was hard for a child to begin to grasp the contrast of such inescapable poverty alongside almost repulsive luxury, and then the United States, a mere eight hundred miles away, with its gleaming cities rising out of the landscape and the well-

maintained interstates stretching across the country, the running water and the electricity. It wasn't until many, many years later that I realized my education on privilege began long before I could appreciate it in any meaningful way.

Privilege is a right or immunity granted as a peculiar benefit, advantage, or favor. There is racial privilege, gender (and identity) privilege, heterosexual privilege, economic privilege, able-bodied privilege, educational privilege, religious privilege, and the list goes on and on. At some point, you have to surrender to the kinds of privilege you hold. Nearly everyone, particularly in the developed world, has something someone else doesn't, something someone else yearns for.

The problem is, cultural critics talk about privilege with such alarming frequency and in such empty ways, we have diluted the word's meaning. When people wield the word "privilege," it tends to fall on deaf ears because we hear that word so damn much it has become white noise.

One of the hardest things I've ever had to do is accept and acknowledge my privilege. It's an ongoing project. I'm a woman, a person of color, and the child of immigrants, but I also grew up middle class and then upper middle class. My parents raised my siblings and me in a strict but loving environment. They were and are happily married, so I didn't have to deal with divorce or crappy intramarital dynamics. I attended elite schools. My master's and doctoral degrees were funded. I got a tenure-track position my first time out. My bills are paid. I have the time and resources for frivolity. I am reasonably well published. I have an agent and books to my name. My life has been far from perfect, but it's somewhat embarrassing for me to accept just how much privilege I have.

It's also really difficult for me to consider the ways in which I lack privilege or the ways in which my privilege hasn't magically rescued me from a world of hurt. On my more difficult days, I'm

not sure what's more of a pain in my ass—being black or being a woman. I'm happy to be both of these things, but the world keeps intervening. There are all kinds of infuriating reminders of my place in the world—random people questioning me in the parking lot at work as if it is unfathomable that I'm a faculty member, the persistence of lawmakers trying to legislate the female body, street harassment, strangers wanting to touch my hair.

We tend to believe that accusations of privilege imply we have it easy, which we resent because life is hard for nearly everyone. Of course we resent these accuastions. Look at white men when they are accused of having privilege. They tend to be immediately defensive (and, at times, understandably so). They say, "It's not my fault I am a white man," or "I'm [insert other condition that discounts their privilege]," instead of simply accepting that, in this regard, yes, they benefit from certain privileges others do not. To have privilege in one or more areas does not mean you are wholly privileged. Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult; but it is really all that is expected. What I remind myself, regularly, is this: the acknowledgment of my privilege is not a denial of the ways I have been and am marginalized, the ways I have suffered.

You don't necessarily *have* to do anything once you acknowledge your privilege. You don't have to apologize for it. You need to understand the extent of your privilege, the consequences of your privilege, and remain aware that people who are different from you move through and experience the world in ways you might never know anything about. They might endure situations you can never know anything about. You could, however, use that privilege for the greater good—to try to level the playing field for everyone, to work for social justice, to bring attention to how those without certain privileges are disenfranchised. We've seen what the hoarding of privilege has done, and the results are shameful.

When we talk about privilege, some people start to play a very pointless and dangerous game where they try to mix and match various demographic characteristics to determine who wins at the Game of Privilege. Who would win in a privilege battle between a wealthy black woman and a wealthy white man? Who would win a privilege battle between a queer white man and a queer Asian woman? Who would win in a privilege battle between a working-class white man and a wealthy, differently abled Mexican woman? We could play this game all day and never find a winner. Playing the Game of Privilege is mental masturbation—it only feels good to those playing the game.

Too many people have become self-appointed privilege police, patrolling the halls of discourse, ready to remind people of their privilege whether those people have denied that privilege or not. In online discourse, in particular, the specter of privilege is always looming darkly. When someone writes from experience, there is often someone else, at the ready, pointing a trembling finger, accusing that writer of having various kinds of privilege. How dare someone speak to a personal experience without accounting for every possible configuration of privilege or the lack thereof? We would live in a world of silence if the only people who were allowed to write or speak from experience or about difference were those absolutely without privilege.

When people wield accusations of privilege, more often than not, they want to be heard and seen. Their need is acute, if not desperate, and that need rises out of the many historical and ongoing attempts to silence and render invisible marginalized groups. Must we satisfy our need to be heard and seen by preventing anyone else from being heard and seen? Does privilege automatically negate any merits of what a privilege holder has to say? Do we ignore everything, for example, that white men have to say?

We need to get to a place where we discuss privilege by way

of observation and acknowledgment rather than accusation. We need to be able to argue beyond the threat of privilege. We need to stop playing Privilege or Oppression Olympics because we'll never get anywhere until we find more effective ways of talking through difference. We should be able to say, "This is my truth," and have that truth stand without a hundred clamoring voices shouting, giving the impression that multiple truths cannot coexist. Because at some point, doesn't privilege become beside the point?

Privilege is relative and contextual. Few people in the developed world, and particularly in the United States, have no privilege at all. Among those of us who participate in intellectual communities, privilege runs rampant. We have disposable time and the ability to access the Internet regularly. We have the freedom to express our opinions without the threat of retaliation. We have smartphones and iProducts and desktops and laptops. If you are reading this essay, you have some kind of privilege. It may be hard to hear that, I know, but if you cannot recognize your privilege, you have a lot of work to do; get started.