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Roxane Gay, “What’s Feminism Got To Do With It?—In Conversation with “Bad Feminist” Roxane Gay (May 4, 2017, at the Sydney Writers Festival), and Anthea Taylor, *Celebrity and the Feminist Blockbuster* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

PUBLISHED IN 2016, Anthea Taylor’s book *Celebrity and the Feminist Blockbuster* is a timely analysis of and reflection on a selection of notable popular feminist books, their authors, and the popularisation of feminist ideals through iconic publications. Borrowing a term from Shane Rowlands and Margaret Henderson, Taylor calls these iconic books “feminist blockbusters.”¹ As Taylor writes, feminists blockbusters are bestselling books that have generally served to “persuade readers of the validity of their critique of gender relations and limiting patriarchal assumptions around femininity, and indeed masculinity.”² Taylor’s book traces the history of these “blockbuster” books and the rising celebrity of their authors, ranging from Betty Friedan’s cultural critique *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) through to Lena Dunham’s recent memoir *Not That Kind of Girl* (2014). Taylor

describes these authors as “celebrity feminists,” a term that she further explains:

A celebrity feminist is someone whose fame is the product of their public feminist enunciative practices; that is, they are famous because of their feminism. In this definition, the feminist blockbuster author reigns supreme, even in the twenty-first century.³

Rather than these authors being established celebrities who promote feminist ideals, their celebrity status is derived directly from their feminist politics. These feminist blockbusters and those who pen them are notable for the way in which they popularise feminist ideas, bringing them both into popular consciousness and the broader discourse. Perhaps more importantly, these books offer a vantage point from which the average reader may begin to engage with feminist theory; and they serve as springboards for further and more nuanced discussions of feminism in popular culture.

Taylor’s book makes a point to identify where Roxane Gay and her book *Bad Feminist* (2014) are situated along this continuum of celebrity feminists and their blockbuster books.⁴ In her examination of Roxanne Gay’s influence, Taylor elaborates that Gay employs her “celebrity feminist persona” in order to “destabilize the dominant discourses of both postfeminism and post-racism” that have been set up by early celebrity feminists and blockbusters.⁵ The position of postfeminism and post-racism is one that is common in popularised forms of feminist theory and one that focuses almost solely on middle-class, white, heterosexual women. Taylor notes that “Gay’s very public visibility challenges the normative whiteness at the heart of much popular feminism.”⁶ By this Taylor implies that Gay offers a new feminist narrative for readers that many people are ready and very eager to engage with. This new narrative has perhaps contributed in part to Gay’s growing celebrity status and popularity as a feminist figure.

Earlier this year I was able to experience Gay’s influence and popularity firsthand when I attended “What’s Feminism Got To

Do With It?”—In Conversation with “Bad Feminist” Roxane Gay, at Leighton Hall within the University of New South Wales, as part of the Sydney Writers Festival.⁷ While the event was sold out (and packed with an eager audience), the casual nature of the event—an open conversation between Gay and cyber-bullying academic Emma Jane of the University of New South Wales—created a pleasant and intimate atmosphere. Gay’s position as a “celebrity feminist” (as Taylor describes her), as well as the fact that she is a prolific, outspoken author, and a voracious Twitter user, offers an accessible gateway to intersectionality and unique feminist ideals that is not often offered by other celebrities. During the conversation, Gay noted that part of the reason she calls herself a “bad feminist” has to do with her desire to “claim feminism,” despite the fact that she feels like she “falls short” of the “idealised” feminist politics practised and promoted by those whom Gay calls “good feminists.” Gay’s scholarly background—she has a PhD in rhetoric and technical communication, as well as master’s degree in creative writing—ensured that we the audience were offered a more substantive and considered discussion about the realities of feminism and practising feminist ideals in contemporary life than that we might expect from other “celebrity” feminists. Rather than an overly theoretical discussion of “idealised” feminism, the conversation focused on the actualities of trying to live as a feminist today in a patriarchal society.

A highlight of the evening was when Gay offered her opinion on how one might consume media that is sexist while still upholding one’s feminist values. Much of the evening seemed to centre on this point, with an overwhelming number of questions from the audience asked either for validation or advice regarding their individual media consumption habits. In answer, Gay acknowledged that there is an expectation that feminists must “be perfect in our politics and always consistent, and in many ways superhuman”; however, she noted that it is better to acknowledge one’s flaws and stay media literate than to aim for an unattainable political ideal. It is more important, she said, to understand the way sexism operates within the media we consume, rather than to avoid consuming or enjoying that media, given that sexism

is prevalent in almost all forms of media, ranging from classic literature, through famous operas, to modern rap music, all of which Gay and her audience alike used as examples.

On this subject, Jane recalled a point that Gay had made in her 2015 TED Talk, “Confessions of a Bad Feminist,” about boycotting media deemed unhelpful to the feminist cause.⁸ Gay clarified her point by explaining that in order to create change, we must “make better choices about what we consume.” “When we affect the bottom line,” she elaborated, “the people who make this kind of pop culture are going to pay attention.” Gay then agreed with Jane’s sentiment that “this is, of course, easier said than done.” This is perhaps why so many people feel affiliated with the notion of being a “bad feminist,” as remaining consistent and strict in one’s personal politics can prove challenging, especially when faced with media saturated with and based on sexist and patriarchal values.

At one point during the evening, Jane mentioned her and Gay’s shared enjoyment of hip hop music, despite the fact that the genre often contains misogynistic lyrics. This moment stood out as another notable example of Gay’s wisdom regarding how to engage with inherently sexist media. It was also notable in the way that Gay actively took popular, which is to say white, perceptions of feminism to task, and articulated her view that all music, not just rap and hip hop, can be misogynistic:

Jane: [I find myself] singing along to words that mortify me. A lot of the lyrics are about as misogynist as you can get.

Gay: Yes, but the one thing I want to be clear on is that it’s not just hip hop. All music is misogynistic, and hip hop often gets isolated as the problem child. And I’m like: “Have you listened to country music lately?”

In what seemed like a casual comment that aimed to call out all music genres for their misogyny, Gay actually highlighted how easy it has become to focus on the obvious misogyny of hip hop while ignoring the sexism in predominantly “white” music genres

such as country. As Gay furthered commented, this sexism is a result of the choices made by music artists: “They always make the easy choice and that easy choice is to degrade women.” By pointing out how popular culture is geared towards misogyny, Gay reminded the audience of her earlier commentary on the importance of media literacy. The message to take from all of this seemed to be that one should be conscious of the media one consumes, be aware of the misogyny present in media, and attempt to make better choices.

While much of what Gay said during the interview was relatable, and not necessarily a cutting-edge or radical approach towards feminism, her perspective was refreshing. For instance, Gay’s comments against “choice feminism” were very accessible, particularly as she outlined the limitations inherent in the concept. Choice feminism, a term coined by Linda Hirshman, refers to the notion that choosing is an inherently feminist act.⁹ But the choices themselves escape criticism and scrutiny, which allows for the continuation of patriarchal social structures under the illusion of feminist progress. Rather than supporting this form of choice feminism, Gay noted that feminism needs to have a core set of principles and, while “they can be flexible,” these principles cannot work if it is assumed that everything an “informed feminist” might choose to do is acceptable, or if each of their acts is held uncritically as “a feminist act.” While this is hardly a new idea within contemporary feminist theory and the surrounding academic discourse, it is rare to find it in popular feminist discussions.

When asked if she thought that current feminism was inclusive, Gay responded,

Feminism has a lot of work to do . . . Part of calling myself a bad feminist was partly tongue in cheek. Part of it was [that] good feminism has typically served the interest of white, heterosexual, middle-class women. And if that is good feminism, then I want no part in it.

Gay’s acknowledgement of how much further feminism has to go seemed to be the at the heart of the event. Her ongoing pro-

fessionalism, valuable insights, and readiness to accept all of the questions put to her—regardless of time constraints—demonstrated why so many people had decided to attend this event. As a celebrity feminist who is committed to intersectionality within popular feminism, Gay holds a unique position among other “celebrity” feminists. The sheer amount of people in attendance looking toward Gay, wanting to hear her talk, and wanting to understand her take on feminism is testament to this.

If there was one main thing to be taken away from the event, it was Gay’s point that dialogue around feminism and women’s issues should continue and change. In particular, Gay noted that the continuation of the conversation about reproductive rights, though it might seem repetitive and redundant, is necessary for changing perceptions of birth control and a women’s right to choose. Gay did comment, however, that although these conversations have continued in various forms since the 1970s, the discussion about women’s rights, and further to that discussions about abuse survivors and recovery, must continue to improve, evolve, and progress into “*better* conversations.” Many audience participants echoed this call to arms to expand and contribute to “the conversation” in order to give it longevity. The questions the participants asked reflected this desire to move feminism and feminist discussions forward. I, for one, could not help but feel affected by Gay’s relatability and clarity of argument, and mostly I appreciated being there, being part of the conversation, and the knowledge that I am not and do not have to have these conversations alone.

Notes

1. Shane Rowlands and Margaret Henderson, “Damned Bores and Slick Sisters: The Selling of Blockbuster Feminism in Australia,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 11, no. 23 (2010): 9–16.
2. Anthea Taylor, *Celebrity and the Feminist Blockbuster* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 36.
3. *Ibid.*, 3
4. See Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist: Essays* (New York: Harper, 2014).
5. Taylor, *Celebrity and the Feminist Blockbuster*, 211.

6. Ibid.

7. A sound recording of the event is available via the UNSW Arts & Social Sciences on Soundcloud; see <https://soundcloud.com/unsw-arts-social-sciences/whats-feminism-got-to-do-with-it-in-conversation-with-the-bad-feminist-roxane-gay/>.

8. See Roxanne Gay, "Confessions of a Bad Feminist," TED Talk, June 22, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fxt_MZKMdes.

9. Linda Hirshman, *Get To Work: A Manifesto For Women of the World* (New York: Viking, 2006), 1.