GUY RAZ, HOST:

It's the TED Radio Hour from NPR. I'm Guy Raz. And on the show today, The Person You Become - how, over the course of our entire lives, we re-evaluate and redefine our identity.

ROXANE GAY: You know, I think identity is all the things that make us who we are. And some of those things are mutable, and some of them are immutable.

RAZ: This is Roxane Gay. She's a writer and a professor of English at Purdue University.

GAY: I think that there are things that shape who we are, where we come from, where our families come from and the culture that we're raised with. But then there are also the expectations of others and what people expect from certain identity markers.
RAZ: Identity markers like feminism and the expectations and assumptions that other people have about what it means to be a feminist. And it's something Roxane has thought and written a lot about. Here she is on the TED stage.

(SOUNDBITE OF TED TALK)

GAY: I'm a feminist, but I'm a rather bad one. So I call myself a bad feminist. Or, at least, I wrote an essay, and then I wrote a book called "Bad Feminist." And then in interviews, people started calling me the bad feminist.

(LAUGHTER)

GAY: So what started as a bit of an inside joke with myself has become a thing. Let me take a step back. When I was younger, mostly in my teens and 20s, I had strange ideas about feminists as hairy, angry, man-hating, sex-hating women - as if those are bad things.

(LAUGHTER)

GAY: These days, I look at how women are treated the world over, and anger in particular seems like a perfectly reasonable response. But back then I worried about the tone people used when suggesting I might be a feminist. The feminist label was an accusation. It was an F word, and not a nice one.

When you're younger, you think you know everything. And I certainly did throughout my teens and 20s. And throughout my 30s in my early 40s, I have found that I don't know everything and that it's OK not to know everything. I think I've also become a lot less myopic, and I recognize that even if I'm not experiencing a given struggle, that doesn't mean I shouldn't care or can't do anything about it.
(SOUNDBITE OF TED TALK)

GAY: As I got older, I began to accept that I am indeed a feminist, and a proud one. But let me be clear. I'm a mess. I am full of contradictions. There are many ways in which I'm doing feminism wrong. When I drive to work, I listen to thuggish rap at a very loud volume.

(LAUGHTER)

GAY: I firmly believe in man work, which is anything I don't want to do, and including...

(LAUGHTER)

GAY: ...All domestic tasks, but also bug killing, trash removal, lawn care and vehicle maintenance.

(LAUGHTER)

GAY: Pink is my favorite color. I watch "The Bachelor" and romantic comedies, and I have absurd fantasies about fairy tales coming true. Some of my transgressions are more flagrant. If a woman wants to take her husband's name, that is her choice and it is not my place to judge. If a woman chooses to stay home to raise her children, I embrace that choice, too. When we talk about the needs of women, we have to consider the other identities we inhabit. We are not just women. We are people with different bodies, gender expressions, faiths, sexualities, class backgrounds, abilities and so much more. We need to take into account these differences and how they affect us as much as we account for what we have in common. Without this kind of inclusion, our feminism is nothing.
RAZ: If you were to - if somebody would say, what is your identity, how do you identify yourself? What would you say?

GAY: I would say that I identify myself as a Haitian-American woman, bisexual and writer. Those are all the things that I think are most important to my identity.

RAZ: Do you think your writing has helped you understand these other aspects and parts of your identity?

GAY: Oftentimes throughout my life, writing has helped me figure things out. I have written my way to the answers that I need. And I teach creative writing in the MFA program. So mostly it's fiction workshops. And last year - not last year. My first year at Purdue, I taught a fiction workshop on writing outside of your subject position. And so for each of the stories the students produced, they had to write from an experience that they did not know. And at first there was a lot of resistance in that, you know, they didn't want to be told what to write about. But I was just like, you can literally write about anything. (Laughter). You just can't write me a story about a white man if you're a white man. (Laughter). But once they got into it, they really started to think about, like, what fiction can be and what fiction can do. And they ended up each producing really complex and provoking, challenging work that I appreciated very much. I was really proud of what they did.

(SOUNDBITE OF TED TALK)

GAY: The last line of my book, "Bad Feminist," says I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all. This is true for so many reasons, but first and foremost, I say this because once upon a time, my voice was stolen from me, and feminism helped me to get my voice back. There was an incident. I call it an incident so I can carry the burden of what happened.
Some boys broke me when I was so young, I did not know what boys can do to break a girl. They treated me like I was nothing. But I had writing. And there I wrote myself back together.

I read the words of women who might understand a story like mine and women who looked like me and understood what it was like to move through the world with brown skin. I read the words of women who showed me I was not nothing. I learned to write like them. And then I learned to write as myself. I found my voice again. And I started to believe that my voice is powerful beyond measure.

RAZ: Do any of your identities - I mean, writer, feminist, Haitian-American - you know, all these different identities that you have, do any of them conflict, like ever conflict?

GAY: It's not that they conflict necessarily, but there are definitely days when I don't know which identity to lead within a given space because - and this is, like, why we talk in feminism about intersectionality because we have multiple identities. And my blackness informs my womanness (ph) informs my sexuality informs my political outlook informs my work. And so it's not - I can't separate any of it. But there are definitely days when I'm pulled in multiple directions.

RAZ: How do you sort of think of - you - sometimes you hear people say, well, I have no identity. I'm a human or I'm...

GAY: (Laughter).

RAZ: Right? Yeah.

GAY: That's nonsense. Yeah, that's what white people say because they can afford to because no one is ever going to question that they belong in a given
space. It shows what power does to identity. Power makes you feel like you belong everywhere. And that is actually the underpinning of colonialism. So the two are intertwined. But for some of us, it makes us recognize the limits of our power. And for others, it makes people think that there is no limit to their power.

RAZ: Roxane Gay. She's a writer and a professor of English. Her most recent book is a collection of stories about the Haitian diaspora experience. It's called "Ayiti." You can see her entire talk at ted.com.
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