



## “Trauma and Memory Dynamism in Roxane Gay’s A Memoir of (My) Body”

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### ABSTRACT

Identifying herself as the other in a world whereby whiteness, thinness, and maleness are the passport to ecstasy and social acceptance, the Haitian immigrant Roxane Gay impregnates her memoir *Hunger* with a plethora of traumatic experiences she withstands in American society. The text is a complex blend of memories of violence, fat-shaming, and cultural alienation. The paper explores the multifarious mechanisms of traumas and how Gay’s retrieval of such remembrances leads to her metamorphosis and development, from an outcast and fat-phobic persona to a self-assured and assertive woman. It offers a fertile ground for the grasp of the workings of memory and how people are controlled by its dictates. The first part highlights the multifaceted oppression Gay experiences referred to as intersectionalism; i.e. the overlap of compounded forms of discriminations, ranging from race injustices to gender inequity and stereotypical labeling. The ultimate part charts the dynamism of memories through its intricate symbiosis with identity formation.

**Key words:** trauma, memoir, memory, intersectionalism, violence, identity.

### Introduction

The word root of “memoir” is the Latin terminology “memoria”, meaning “reminiscence” or “memory”. Its history is dated back to the first century BC (Eryazici 439). Memoir mustn’t be confounded with autobiography as the two overlap in diverse aspects. The former is more selective zeroing in on a particular life span; the later chronologically charts detailed portrayal of the writer’s whole life starting from birth and onwards. In *Writing Life Stories*, Bill Roorbach contends in the preface that memoir is a famous genre which undergoes a metamorphosis. From being fraught with controversies, it becomes a substantial part in the world of letters and humanities, enjoying extreme kudos and worth (13). Providing a pertinent definition of this genre, he argues that memoir is a non-fiction story inspired from the writer’s memory, “with an added element of creative research” (14).

Notwithstanding focusing on events that impact one’s life, it is interwoven with historical and social facts. It is one of the substantial tools of fathoming socio-political concerns and anxieties (Eryazici 437). From spreading stories, the focus of memoir has shifted to include global concerns and raise awareness concerning the whole world. This genre, henceforth, plays a crucial role in identifying problems that pave the ground for solution-oriented works. Migration, viciousness, traumas and discrimination are among the intricate issues that a memorist may hanker to unravel. The aim behind such an insertion of socio-political anxieties is to spread awareness of the detrimental effects of racism, androcentric hegemony, gender-based violence, and other stereotypical labeling.

Such a concern is examined by Roxane Gay. Born on October 15, 1974, Gay is an American writer, an Assistant Professor of English at Eastern Illinois and Purdue University, anthologies editor, and social critic. Her archive of work is prolific and rich, comprising novels, fiction, memoir, non-fiction, stories, and comic books.

The most notable works are *Bad Feminist* (2014), *An Untamed State* (2014), and *Difficult Women* (2017). Such books make her rise to stardom and celebrity to become one of the most outstanding feminists of her generation. Her latest project is entitled *Hunger*, a dismal account of a traumatic journey caused by fatness in a world that tried to discipline unruly bodies (Fernandez 11). Roxane Gay's *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* has been pigeonholed and has received little attention by literary critics. It has been disparaged as literature of minor importance by literary circles given that it is strictly inspired from the writer's personal account (Price 8). The present article, however, gives significant importance to memoir, and unravels that it is tainted with universal concerns. Chandra Talpade Mohanty argues that memoir is inextricably associated with resistance. It can be counter hegemonic forces in history and society (83). Such a genre has been applauded by numerous critics. Vivian Gornick contends in *The Situation and the Story* that memoir is a narrative prose whose center stage is the self and which plays a fundamental role in shaping experience, changing events and delivering wisdom (91). It is the roadmap towards making sense of who we are, who we were and what memories shaped us. Both readers and writers will be nourished by the journey, bringing along many associations with questions of their own.

*Gay's Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* is an engaging space of reflection upon an ideal body- hooked culture where people are constantly reminded that their physical appearance is at odds with the idyllic body type advertised through mass media. Bearing in mind the target readership, this sort of book meticulously makes readers "trace the connections between broader structural forces and personal experience" (Price 9). Far from being purely personal, *Gay's Hunger* challenges our shared anxieties over weight, popular culture, appearance, and health. Beneath the tragic and personal hardships flooding her memoir lurk ideological and cultural knowledge, giving voice to smothered and muffled voices. Gay strives to put an end to collective violence and agony foisted on women who possess similar bodies like her. She gives a particular nod to the endless toxicity of a culture that nourishes in women self-revulsion when not matching the beauty standard. Despite the equality achieved between the sexes, they remain at the heel of a system which strips them of their true subjectivity. Female and male bodies are not given the same scrutiny by society when it comes to beauty ideals of thinness. Whereas women are given less leeway in their body size, men are expected to have larger bodies and take up more physical space. In this manner, the stigmatization of fat and pressure to be thin are infused with patriarchy and are highly gendered (Gailey 374). In addition to giving a harrowing glimpse at women's deterioration by the current beauty standard, *Gay's* memoir hints at other forms of oppressions attributed to a mixed combination of race and gender. Besides giving vent to the unspeakable and the unsaid, memoirs hold therapeutic value since they pave the ground for self-discovery and realization (Eryazici 439). Very often memoirists bring back their past for the sake of sustaining a present existence and rebalancing their self's sense of worth.

## 1. Trauma and Intersectionalism

Trauma' is derived from the Greek word *traumatikos*, which means a severe physical wound. Later, the terminology has evolved to shed light more on emotional harm. It refers to the emotional injuries triggered by a traumatic event in an individual's life. Trauma highlights a severe and disruptive experience that has a severe influence on a person's emotional security and wellbeing. It can bring about emotions of anguish and psychological disequilibrium, and it can also affect an individual's capacity to behave normally (Richter 65). Cathy Caruth defines trauma as "a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (3). She goes further to state that the "wound of the mind" differs tremendously from that of the body. Instead of being an event subject to healing and cure, it resurfaces several times in the survivor's lifetime through repeated nightmares and flashbacks (4). When diverse traumas intersect, it is called "multiple jeopardy". This concept is coined by Deborah H. King to refer to the "dual and systematic discrimination of racism and sexism" in addition to other "dynamics of multiple forms of discrimination" (qtd. in Price 7). This convergence and interacting matrices of oppression are referred to, as well, as "intersectionality", a term coined by the American law professor Kimberlé Crenshaw. This refers to the way variegated forms of injustices operate and exacerbate one other. An intersectional approach illustrates that people's identities are an overlap of compounding forms of discrimination and injustices (Carastathis 75). This rings a bell to *Gay's* case. Besides belonging to the lower class as she descends from a Haitian origin, she has to endure heart wrenching insults due to her gender coupled with being black and fat.

### 1.1. Childhood Sexual Trauma

Childhood trauma deals with traumatic events occurring at an early age. Such memories cannot be easily erased from a person's memory and can have an enduring impact upon an individual emotional and psychological welfare. This can include physical or sexual abuse, humiliations, abandonment, violence, and threats, triggering long-lasting grief. As Janet Walker notices, "a person who is traumatized will re-experience such events as "recurrent and intrusive distressing recollections of the event, including images, thoughts, or perceptions, that may take the form of memories, dreams, flashbacks, hallucinations, recurrences, and/or dissociation" (106). Thoughts of past sexual abuse resurface incessantly in *Gay's* mind, overwhelming her perspective of the present. She lays bare reminiscences of

sexual abuse that she swallowed for decades by dismantling the conventional way rape is documented in mass media or books. Without euphemism or ornamental language, she writes: "I was splayed out in front of his friends. I wasn't a girl to them. I was a thing, flesh and girl bones" (Gay 42). She further adds: "he just unzipped his jeans and knelt between [her] legs and shoved himself inside of [her]" (Gay 43). Trauma language floods this statement to highlight the young black girl's body dehumanization. As if on a surgeon's table, her body is mercilessly torn apart. She states that her beloved "switched places with the boy who was holding [her] arms down" (43). This latter "refused to look at [her] spat on [her] face [and] laughed" (43). Such straightforward descriptors are a canvas whereby raped female bodies are atrociously slayed and stripped of the respect and passion a human being may deserve (Washington 39). The horror of rape makes Gay so hesitant to re-experience such thorny event anew. Borrowing her words, writing a memoir of her body was among the most difficult moments of her life, "cut[ting] her body 'wide open" (5). Gay argues that the use of "detached language", such as "assault", "violation", or "incident", is much easier than directly stating: "when I was twelve years old, I was gang-raped by a boy I thought I loved" (41). She asserts that she grapples with finding ways to restore the true violence to this crime, as she states, "we need to find new ways [. . .] for not only rereading rape but rewriting rape, ways of rewriting that restore the actual violence to these crimes". Commenting on the grief that permeates every corner of the book, Leigh Gilmore asserts that Gay's helpless words and structure within are telling that "something terrible happened to Gay and continues to happen to women and girls every day" (683) and must be urgently unraveled.

### 1.2. Sexual Abuse and Haitian Culture

What further exacerbates the unimaginable humiliation she succumbed to following her sexual exploitation is her Haitian descent. Being anxious of what her parents "might say and do and think" (47) about her rape, she prefers to be subjugated to "a fearful silence" as she states: "What those boys did . . . had to stay secret" (46). Having Haitian origins, she must abide by certain cultural expectations, rules, and dictates. Commenting on her cultural tradition, Gay contends: "A Haitian daughter is a good girl. She is respectful, studious, and hardworking. She never forgets the importance of her heritage" (55). Gay gives a meticulous portrayal of Haitian culture as a place governed by rigid morals and principles, which are violated by a raped girl in her perception. She writes, "I was disgusting because I had allowed disgusting things to be done to me. I was not a girl. I was less than human. I was no longer a good girl and I was going to hell" (46). It is no surprise that she severely rebukes herself instead of perceiving this "disgusting" act as something inflicted upon her and out of her control. Not abiding by the law of good / mad morality wrenches her psyche and drives her anxious at her deeds. In a later chapter, she thinks that she "became less and less the good girl [she] had been" (51) following this event. Gay's use of "good" is "a composite of the racialized, gendered messages that we receive, even in childhood, that tell us how to behave, how to be, in order to be valuable, deserving" (Fernandez 80). Gay disparages the rigid binarism that has informed and shaped girls' psyches since childhood. Her vehement criticism is directed against the long-entrenched racist and sexist systems, which make girls enchained and unable to burst out of the straightjacket of patriarchal belief and its rigid good / bad morality.

Besides fuelling her fears and insecurities, Gay's sexual assault is a traumatic and nightmarish event that influences the very fabric of her emotions and perception of the world. Such types of reminiscences are deemed by Freud as "pathogenic" due to the pathologic symptoms that they may engender and bring about. (Breuer and Freud 245). In the aftermath of this abuse, she resorts to diverse coping mechanisms, including "turn[ing] to food". The American therapist Paula K. Lundberg-Love contends that the brain is made of several neurotransmitter systems, which get influenced by sexual traumas. This affection is mainly manifested through multifarious eating disorders (79). This is quite remindful of Gay's case. To fill up the void of the wound, she eats mindlessly and voraciously. She sought to vilify, "demoniz[e]" and shame her body for its ineffectiveness. Meanwhile, the more her body "expands[s] and explodes[s]", the safer she feels. Such layers of skin create boundaries between her and the men who try to approach her. She strives to make a fortress out of her body so that she becomes impermeable to sufferings and hurt, arguing that becoming fatter is a safety valve where she becomes "more solid, stronger," and "safer" (15). She further adds: "I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away" (5). Like numerous women who become fatter after sexual abuse, (Slatman 676) she wants to be physically ugly so that she drives men away and resists them. Unfortunately, this clandestine behavior offers no help but becomes a cage and opens the doorway only to despair, fat-phobia, and ill-treatment from family, friends, and partners.

### 1.3. The Trauma of Fat Shaming

Gay's unruly body becomes a fertile ground for discrimination, fat-shaming, and anguish. Besides being condemned for her race and gender, she is refused accommodation in American society due to her excessive weight (Washington 38). Using her unruly body as a site of resistance, Gay illustrates the daily abuses she faces in a society hooked on thinness (31). While looking at herself in the mirror, Gay sees "bruises" swamping her body because she is constantly crammed into "seats not meant to accommodate [her]". She declares that "physical spaces punish [her] for [her] unruly body" (202). Fat's weight engenders physical pain, discomfort, and welts. Several are the instances

whereby the writer articulates her inability to sit comfortably in plane seats, toilets, and move easily between people. She folds herself as much as she can, and walks at the edge of the sidewalk so that she bothers no one (157).

Such material misfits extend the physical manifestation of her fatness to illustrate that she does not fit within the confines “of the physical and psycho-social incompatibility” (Fernandez 61) as she contends:

When you're overweight, your body becomes a matter of record in many respects. Your body is constantly and prominently on display. People project assumed narratives onto your body and are not at all interested in the truth of your body, whatever that truth may be. Fat, much like skin color, is something you cannot hide, no matter how dark the clothing you wear, or how diligently you avoid horizontal stripes [. . .] Your body is subject to commentary when you gain weight, lose weight, or maintain your unacceptable weight. People are quick to offer you statistics and information about the dangers of obesity, as if you are not only fat but also incredibly stupid, unaware, delusional about the realities of your body and a world that is vigorously inhospitable to that body. This commentary is often couched as concern, as if people only have your best interests at heart. They forget that you are person. You are your body, nothing more, and your body should damn well become less. (120-121)

Gay's description conveys the idea that her inner self is shaped by the external environment. She is unable to adapt herself with a hostile environment that exacerbates her inferiority complex, a perspective that has a corrosive impact on her emotionally charged self. The hyperbolic discourse and exaggerated sensibilities unravel the writer's self-rejection. Instead of being a source of satisfaction, her body becomes the benchmark of “shame” and a nagging reminder of her incongruence with the standard of elegance and a hindrance in front of her comfort with herself and others. Sabrina Strings, in her insightful book entitled *Fearing the Black Body: the Racial Origins of Fat-Phobia*, contends black women's bodies “became legible, a form of text from which racial superiority and inferiority were read” (67). String's declaration underscores that fat becomes a “material signifier”, which is entangled in a process of signification. The moment bodies are considered as material signifiers, they “invite hateful readings resulting in exclusionary and stigmatizing practices” (Slatman 685). This is quite noticeable in the pejorative associations that people attribute to Gay on account of her extra-weight such as “stupid”, “unaware”, and “delusional”. Her unruly body is viewed as “concern” because it does not adhere to the standardized beauty created by popular culture. The “rude comments”, in tandem with the “stares”, “laughs”, and “snickering”, become the nasty companion wherever she goes (120-121). Such cruel attitudes weigh so heavily upon the writer's psyche, strangulating her to suffocation. Even her gender is denied; mockingly, people address her as a man. She states: “I am often mistaken for a man. I am called Sir” (31). This is the reason why the writer shuts herself down away from the viciousness of the world surrounding her. She says: “I spend most of my time talking myself out of leaving my house” (50). The thought of being an odd member of the group gnaws on her psyche, so she seeks refuge in isolating herself altogether from worldly life.

In addition to receiving daily denigrating attitudes vis-à-vis her body, Gay goes further in giving heartbreaking accountings of her “invisibility” despite being highly “visible”. Gailey contends that hyper(in)visibility is a way of “Othering”. This is manifested through social interactions rife with hurtful labeling, stigma, and maltreatment. Gay's body size makes her highly seen, but people have intentionally ignored her. They “step on [her] feet”, “brush and bump against [her]”. She writes, “My body receives no respect or consideration or care in public spaces. My body is treated like a public space” (Gay 208). It is no wonder that her body is subject to torture, humiliation, and violation. To borrow the Nancian's terminology, her “being-body” is denied because it is not a seminal part of “being-with” and conforming to the crowd (122). Standing up against plurality paves the ground for bodies piled up in a mass or unbody. This is manifested in Gay's statement as she argues that people –upon seeing her– project “assumed narratives” about her. In his illuminating article entitled “A Cross-Cultural Examination of Fat Women's Experiences”, Gailey claims that numerous people believe they know many things about fat people. “Collective knowledge” highlights that their fatness emanates from overeating, absence of physical activity, and lack of self-care. In other words, they are to be blamed for moral defects. It is no coincidence, consequently, that Gay is “treated like a public record” (Gay 120) and space. This may justify the parenthetical reference put around the possessive pronoun (my) in the title of the book, “(My) body”. Gay excoriates a society wherein a body is a subject of comments by every person and anyone. This is manifested in the meticulous portrayal of how her identity is defined by people's gaze as she states: “I understood, from the way I saw people stare at fat people, from the way I stared at fat people, that too much weight was undesirable” (15). Extra weight is not only a trigger of stigma and neglect but also the source of overwhelming fear, a fear reinforced through media paradigms coupled with medical community's assertion.

#### 1.4. The Trauma of Fat Phobia

Gay is severely traumatised by stigmas reinforced by media portrayal and TV shows. In section III of *Hunger*, Gay's musings are centered on weight-loss programs. With a mixed combination of candor, helplessness, and power, she rebukes shows like “The Biggest Loser” for its continuous stigmatization and fear of fat bodies. This show is rife with fat shaming and fat phobia mantra and constantly perpetuates societal pressure to maintain a “thin” body. It disseminates the belief that fat is an “enemy” to be eradicated and the “unruly” body must be “disciplined” by all

possible means. The destructive impacts of these kinds of displays cannot go unnoticed, engendering depression, low-self-esteem, and self-hatred. Such TV paradigms endorse “the tyranny of physical perfection”, pushing women to blindly yield to what is socially regarded as feminine beauty standard (Bastos and Maria 250). Being exposed to “semi-naked, slim and tanned people who walk about by the sea” as “winners when it comes to sex appeal” (249), many women wonder how long it would take to have a body like these (244). This is quite perceptible in the comparison Gay makes between her body and that of those ladies whom her beloved is attracted to. She pens that he is appealed by those “naked women, mostly young white blond thin taut”. Such women are more attracting and exciting in comparison with a “fat”, “pliable”, and “unworthy” lady like her (13).

Gay’s disparagement is directed, particularly, to Oprah Winfrey’s *TV Show* “produced through failed classed, fat, and gendered bodies”. Oprah insists that “inside every overweight woman is a woman she knows she can be” (138). This corresponding TV paradigm, in Gay’s perception, is based on derision and fat-phobia as it highlights what Gailey refers to as “liminality”. This means that fatness is regarded as a transient “phase” that must be left behind to return back to “living and humanness” (Gailey 383). Within the same vein, Oprah invites women to suppress their hunger to reach self-admiration and ecstasy. Likewise, being fat is advised against by the white medical community, which, in Gay’s opinion, brings the obese body to heel. Health-care institutions “have fueled an “anti-fat discourse and discrimination against fat persons, particularly women by maintaining that the rising number of fat persons is a global crisis” (Gailey 385). The hurtful labels associated with obese people are the fruit of the “obesity epidemic”, engendering fat phobia in that chubbiness has become so disdained that “no one wants to be fat” (Gailey 385).

Gay gives particular attention to her hatred of doctors’ offices as well as clothing stores because they are sites of constant humiliation. At every doctor visit, she writes that once in a blue moon does she consult doctors because they debase her for her obese body. Whenever being in the examination room, the writer portrays how she is “on guard”, being ready to fight “for [her] dignity, for the right to basic medical treatment”. “Morbid obesity” is the recurrent expression she hears from doctors and health-care workers alike (133). The humiliation a woman faces in such a situation can only be traumatizing, hurting her ego. As a result of unbearable pain seizing her lower abdomen, Gay goes to the campus infirmary seeking help. Much to the reader’s surprise, the staff there bombards her with questions related to the possibility of being pregnant. She is asked “over and over”, whether she “might be pregnant” (68). To them, pregnancy is “the most likely problem a teenage girl could have” (68). The little black girl laments, “the medical community is not particularly interested in taking the pain of women seriously” (68). In her engaging book called *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*, Harriet A. Washington gives horrendous accounts of fat black ladies who are put through the wringer by undergoing surgical operation without anesthesia. The breeding ground of this problem, in her perception, is inequity based on a mixed combination of race and gender. Instead of laying bare all the aforementioned agonies, Gay prefers to swallow the bitter truth, which “turns rancid” and “spreads through the body like an infection” (45). This is the turning moment whereby she finds herself in dire need to smash the chains of silence and writes a memoir of her body; what her body has endured, the weight she has gained, and how heart-wrenching it has been to live with a fat and black body. Going through such thorny remembrances paves the ground for the construal of a different identity.

## 2.1. Memory and its Dynamism

### 2.1.1. Memory and Identity Formation

Writing a memoir of her body proves to be therapeutic and a fertile ground for the construction of a different identity and selfhood. In “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat”, the neuropsychologist Oliver Sacks explains the importance of the narratives that revolve around personal life upon one’s subjectivity by affirming that each person has “an inner narrative”. Going through such accounts through perceptions, feelings, thoughts, or actions is pivotal in the maintenance of one’s identity, one’s self (qtd. in Gog 7-8). Reshaping and representing foregone stories lead to the building of an altered selfhood. Such a claim resonates with narrative psychologists’ perception. They illustrate that a first-person story is not only meant to preserve a perished past but is also used for the service of the present and the future selves. William Hirst, for example, espouses a psychotherapeutic attitude vis-à-vis memory recreation by underscoring the starring role of memories in influencing, altering, and building a person’s current self. Hirst links memories to building blocks persons use to fashion the self, which he perceives as a “complex palace” (253). He argues that “memory may serve the raw material of autobiographical telling, and the resulting narrative may in turn guide the construal self” (253). It follows then that, as Edward Reed maintains, recalling past events at face value may divide two selves oscillating between two axes of times, past versus present; nevertheless, such a very oscillation bridges the gap and later coordinates diverse complex mental states (279). Memory, he argues, “both divides and coordinates the self, creating a special duality-or even multiplicity of the self” (279). Memory comprises two selves: a “remembering self” at the present time of events narration, “the wiser voice that clarifies and provides context”, and that of a “historical one”, belonging to a past state, “a historical self” (Birkerts 6). Gay’s handling of memory in *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body* offers ample scope to deduce that memory is the tool wherein the relationship between past events past and present existence is negotiated. As previously mentioned, Gay succumbs to an abyss of emotional

distress and agony due to her inability to find conciliations with gnawing remembrances. Nevertheless, she diminishes the sufferings engendered by her life traumas and snatches herself from the jaw of defeat. She comes to realize that sinking into chaos and sorrow is her choices and decisions alone.

### 2.1.2. Memory and Gay's Metamorphosis

Gay's personality has undergone a considerable growth following the revival of past traumatic remembrances. The remembering self of the writer's self "is not the historical self of yesterday, but only a reconstructed version, a different version—a new remembered self" (Birkerts 8). Her inadequacy and pathology are part and parcel of a past state of affairs, of a past self who undergoes a noticeable change in the present time of the discourse level. Being introduced to the "vocabulary for what [she] had been through" (Gay 70) by her school counselor turns out to be like sandbags that fight back tides of gloom and low self-esteem. Memoir writing brings about a healing narrative that uplifts a fragmented self to a powerful position of "psychological agency" (Washington 45). The retrieval of traumatic remembrances of being a raped woman and a vilified body gives her the agency she was deprived of. Reopening anew previous wounds and casting a glance at "[her] guiltiest secrets" (5) grant the writer some spacio-temporal distance from the anchorage of the initial traumatic event. Gay is granted the opportunity to see her trauma between her hands, and "understand it enough to name the pain and make all or at least some of the hurt go away" (hooks 12). While stitching together the threads of memory and collecting the dots of her traumas, Gay tactically and purposeful moves between two consciousnesses dissociated from each other and divided between past and present. This split is between an "I" speaker and an "I" spoken of, an opposition of "discourse" versus "story" times (Birkerts 8). This division, which highlights that the writer is "both narrator and protagonist", is highly redeeming and empowering, paving the way for a pragmatic and unified self. Complete mental and psychological remoteness is achieved given that she talks about herself as "a third person, who is psychologically and deictically excluded from the spacio-temporal present of the deictic space" (Birkerts 8). Sidonie Smith refers to this dichotomy as a "doubled subjectivity" of one self which experiences, and another which interprets or narrates her history (17). Bringing to the page bygone traumas makes Gay in the position of an external biographer who comments on a retrieved past and aloofly gives his opinion vis-à-vis such reminiscences.

This self-distancing offers Gay a fertile ground for acquiring a powerful identity. She shrewdly becomes in full control of her life and body, arguing: "Here I am, finally freeing myself to be vulnerable and terribly human. Here I am, reveling in that freedom" (Gay 304). In *Memory: A Very Short Introduction*, Jonathan K. Foster elucidates that irrespective our intention to bring to the fore past events or not memory plays a vital role (6). Likewise, Freud contends that the retrieval of painful remembrances is a mournful task. Yet, it leads to reconciliation and acceptance. Gay's intersectional traumas render her ambitious. The concluding chapter offers ample evidences to her ambitious nature. Gay culminates with a positive tone by assuredly asserting that she doesn't want to change who she is. Gay proclaims that she is "not the same scared girl that [she] was" and she is "learning to care less what other people think" (303). From claiming that her body is nothing but "a thing to be used," "a repulsive" (153) "cage" (20), she asserts that it is a pivotal site for symbolizing sovereignty, self-representation, liberation, and control. She writes: "I am overweight. I hope to not always be, but for now, this is my body. I am coming to terms with that. I am trying to feel less shame about that" (Gay 119). This statement stands in sheer opposition to the first declaration she makes at the opening of her memoir, wherein she affirms that her story is far from being a story of victory. Such antagonism declares the role of memory in the process of giving voice to her body. Her denied identity as a woman is reclaimed as she comes to accept herself as a complex subject (Gay 129). Gay manages to perceive fat not as a stain of shame but as a reality of her body. She even becomes its monopolizing agent (Washington 25).

Gay's body is boisterously celebrated with its curves, solidity, and fat, as she states: "Today, I am a fat woman. [...] I don't think I am ugly. I don't hate myself. I'm a feminist and I know that it important to resist unreasonable standards for how my body should look". Within the layers of such a statement resides a joyous proclamation of fatness. Indeed, the nagging feeling of apprehension, coupled with uneasiness, is metamorphosed into self-love and self-appreciation. She no longer denies and devalues her body, but she loves and nurtures it. Part of healing, as she proclaims, is "taking care of your body and learning how to have a humane relationship with [it]" (Gay 182). In an article published after the book release and entitled "What Fullness Is", Gay comes to appreciate her body maintaining: "I am strong and tall. I enjoy the way I take up space that I have presence" (4). Commenting on this article, Washington argues that such a journey from self-loathing towards self-admiration is the eighty-ninth chapter added to the eighty-eight ones encapsulated in her *Hunger* book, a chapter about the healing potential of her "scriptotherapy" (62). Gay comes to assert herself as someone valuable and worthy of hearing and paying attention to in the midst of a society that very often intimidates those who do not match the physical image of female elegance.

Being at the forefront of fat acceptance movement, she calls women to accept their bodies at every size. Gay's memoir turns out to be a "thwarting lipoliteracy" (Slatman 677), i.e. deconstructing the current beauty standard and reading against the grain of rigidified binarism splitting bodies into opposites poles (Huzjak 122). Gay's memoir overturns pejorative discourses on fatness and destabilizes cast-iron biases and beliefs about fat, as she declares: "This

body is resilient. It can endure all kinds of things. My body offers me the power of presence. My body is powerful" (272). Needless to say, Gay's defiant announcement destabilizes rigid meanings and beliefs concerning what a fat body is. Shallow readings of bodily "signifiers" are dismantled. Nancy asserts that "the body is neither a signifier nor a signified". It is instead "the architectonics of sense" (25). This declaration subverts the deep-seated inclination to perceive a material thing, a sign or a body, as something that nods to something else.

Gay challenges the reader to look beyond the process of the rigidified signification attributed to the obese body to discover its precariousness. This is noticeably shown through her disparagement of Oprah Winfrey, an example of a purveyor of female oppression and progenitor of bodily hierarchies in the writer's frame of reference. She rejects particularly Oprah's belief that fat women's true identity is thinness, saying: "I think about how fucked up it is to promote this idea that our truest selves are thin women hiding in our fat bodies like imposters, usurpers, illegitimates"(31). To highlight the latter's erroneous statement and emptiness, Gay refers to her failed experiences with eating, yo-yo dieting, and bulimia. In Gay's opinion, Oprah's program is commercial, targeting Weight Watchers and making them believe that now time is ripe "to make this the year of our best bodies". The message that lurks beneath the layers of such shows is that the body that a fat woman has is not the best one (Gay 139). Besides perpetuating the toxicity of a diet-culture, this sort of media outlet objectifies women's bodies and makes them think that their true worth is inextricably intertwined with their bodies (Wittezaele 5). Gay contends that even Oprah, "a billionaire and one of the most famous women in the world, isn't happy with her body," zeroing in on "how pervasive damaging cultural messages about unruly bodies are" (139). In this regard, Gay pokes fun at the equation between thinness, health, and satisfaction, arguing "even as we age, no matter what material success we achieve, we cannot be satisfied or happy unless we are also thin" (139). This correspondence disguises a sugar-coated lie that woman's happiness is contingent on a certain body shape. The "long-term recovery" that Gay endorses, on the other hand, is to be liberated from the clutches of a diet-hooked culture, "not short-term cyclical diets comprised of any number of days" (Washington 55).

The doorway to happiness, in the perception of Gay, is not through a slender or a particular shaped body. "Unconditional self-acceptance" and self-love are the weapons to challenge the social construction of the ideal body image (Gay 139). What is truly needed to boost weight loss is not fat shaming but an increase in self-esteem so that the person feels prompted to "look after" his body by adhering to healthy lifestyles. This transformation can only be fulfilled if that person feels backed up, embedded within, and fully integrated in the breast of his local community and social networks (Slatman 680). Gay's *Hunger* hints at the societal framework as the true problem not the body per se. The socio-political and material constellations must be taken into consideration (Slatman 677) in the assessment of one's body in the writer's frame of reference. This is noticeably revealed in the following assertion: "I live in a world [. . .] where the open hatred of fat people is vigorously tolerated and encouraged. I am a product of my environment".

Not only does Gay give justice to herself but she also helps all those trodden and stereotyped against. Her experience makes her develop great empathy vis-à-vis others, contending: "My body has forced me to be more mindful of how other bodies, of differing abilities, move through the world" (Gay 272). In a nutshell, it goes Gay's memoir opens doors for empathy through inviting people to reflect upon the injurious and lifelong effects fat phobia and other physical desirability can trigger. It nourishes political awareness in the readers, allowing them to grasp and experience the tyrannies that weigh upon people who do not match the standardized beauty criteria. This paves the ground for a sane environment wherein all bodies, irrespective of shapes, capacities, or colors, can live peacefully and equally. This is the exact world that Gay hungers for, a world where all types of people jiggle through life with dignity and pride. As a result of socio-political concerns impregnating her memoir, Gay receives an award from the Obesity Society. Unflinchingly and with a defiant voice in a Twitter post of 2020, she proudly asserts: "In an unexpected turn, I received a presidential medal" and "I still take issue with pathologizing fatness" (qtd. in Washington 62). In spite of being a book about "sharing [her] truth and [hers] alone making visible what's left of her heart" (303), *Hunger* becomes "a prolonged moment of scriptotherapy" or a "life-writing project". This project expands the medical discourse vis-à-vis obesity. It interrogates societal frameworks that sentence bodies like Gay's in a hermetically sealed circle of silence (Washington 63). As such, she becomes part and parcel of a Black feminist writing tradition. In "Theory as Liberatory Practice", hooks writes that women are able to create a ground-breaking feminist theory that addresses much hurt and give them therapeutic works and curative strategies.

## Conclusion

Within her *Hunger* book, Gay stitches together memories of agony brought about when fatness, blackness, and womanhood converge and intersect. Such intersectional paradigm serves certain pragmatic ends. What is personal is political and universal. Instead of grappling purely with forces of personal harm and intimidation, Gay's memoir is inextricably intertwined with the nation's violent history, hinting at the racism and sexism embedding all facets of social life. The memoir collected in *Hunger* is a high-caliber endeavor that echoes the detrimental impact of gender and race discriminations. Gay' memory unravels harrowing details about the Black experience, especially that of obese women. Memory turns out to be a tool for resistance and an engaging strategy not only for the recovery of

the past but also for the record of historical facts. It is a powerful agent to spread awareness on gender development and present bites of the reality sandwich.

Giving vent to the unspeakable and the smothered is not the sole role of memoir as a literary genre. In fact, as the present paper has explored, memory is dynamic and intricate and is inextricably associated with identity formation. Traumatic memories, though painful, have to be understandable and acceptable at the same time. The construal of a personal identity hinges on the multifaceted linkage between past and present selves. Memory can be corrosive and exceedingly detrimental to person's welfare and psychological equilibrium if the conciliation between past and present axes is not attained, as in the case of Gay's case. It is in this acceptability that a person can reconcile between his present self and past one. Understanding and acceptance are what Roxane Gay fulfills in the aftermath of her memoir writing. Instead of sulking over, Gay embraces her traumas, extracts whatever she desires from it, and strives. This has been illustrated through becoming self-righteous and the owner of a strong mind. All such attributes are the byproduct of accepting her traumatic past.

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