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FYW Symposium, April 2017  
University of Hawaii at Manoa  
“Beyoncé, Roxane Gay, and Bad Feminism”

Thank you so much for sticking around and attending the last session of our symposium! First, let me tell you a little about myself **SLIDE 2**: I grew up in Kaneohe and earned a BA in English here at UH. I went to Duquesne University in Pittsburgh for my MA and PhD, and now I lecture in First Year Writing here. I have a couple publications on queer and Gothic women’s writing in the eighteenth-century; please email me if you’re interested in any of those things! I’ve been teaching FYW for almost 8 years now, and I generally try to incorporate ideas from my own research and work—on a slightly less complex level—into my first-year-writing classes, particularly when I’m guiding my students through critical thinking.

**SLIDE 3**: Today, I want to model a very short version of a lesson I use almost every semester. It encourages students to practice critical thinking and introduces them to media literacy. In this teaching demo, I’ll explain what I ask students to do before class and during class. I’ll also ask you—the audience—to participate in some of the activities (on a smaller scale to account for time). Finally, I’ll wrap up my presentation by challenging the first Focus Writing Hallmark, which I hope will produce some engaging discussion.

**SLIDE 4:** Before they come to class, I ask my students to watch Roxane Gay's Ted talk called "Confessions of a Bad Feminist"—it's roughly 12 minutes long. I ask them to just take note of Gay's argument as well as their personal reactions to the talk. I ask them to think about whether can they relate to what Gay is arguing and why? Ideally, they all come to class with Gay's talk and their reactions fresh in their minds.

**SLIDE 5:** In the lesson, we begin by watching a live musical performance of the song, "Flawless" by Beyoncé. It's a 2-minute excerpt from her 15-minute 2014 MTV Video Music Award's performance. Here's where I'll ask you to participate, as if you were students. As you watch this performance, think about the major visual elements of the performance—what draws your eye and your ears, what strikes you?

### **2 mins of Beyoncé performance**

**SLIDE 6:** Let's generate a list: what are some of the visual elements of the performance?

- Words on the board from Chimamanda Adichie's talk "We Should All be Feminists," big "Feminism" sign, skimpy costume with sparkles

And how does Beyoncé engage her audience? What struck you?

- Talks to her audience, involves them, makes them feel special

In class, we'll spend about 10 minutes talking about this. We might also share some first-impressions of the performance. Students often bond over their love or hatred of Beyoncé. If I am teaching a 75-minute class, I also ask them to watch Beyoncé's music video for the song, "Flawless," and we compare the live performance to music video. However, for 50-minute classes and for the purposes of this short presentation, we'll focus just on her live performance.

**SLIDE 7:** The next step is to incorporate a secondary source—Roxane Gay. Before they watch the video, I usually tell them about who Roxane Gay is and what she's known for. I also remind them briefly during the lesson. Then, we watch an excerpt from Gay's talk to refresh their memories. I ask them to pay attention to Gay's definition of feminism and to also pay attention to what she says about Beyoncé's performance. The performance she refers to in this talk is the one we just watched. In class, I have students watch a 6-minute excerpt, but that's a little long for today's presentation, so I'm going to show you a 1-minute excerpt to give you a flavor of Roxane Gay's talk.

**SLIDE 8: 1 min clip from "Bad Feminist"**

**SLIDE 9:** Here, I'll briefly demonstrate the kinds of questions I ask my students in this lesson in order to move from Roxane Gay's talk to a broader definition of feminism. Although we don't have time to discuss everything I usually touch on with my students, I'm going to ask for your participation in just

one of these questions. I begin by asking students to create a working definition of feminism from Roxane Gay's talk that we add to it as we go. Usually, they throw out words like "equality," "empowerment," and "justice" during that initial look at Gay's definition. Then I ask them to pivot slightly, and here is where I'll ask you the same question I ask my students so that you can help me generate a list: What are some stereotypes that come into your mind when you think of feminism? (Try to think like a first-year-writing student.)

- Hairy arm pits and legs, combat boots, man-hater, lesbian, bra burning

Where do these stereotypes come from for you? Where have you seen these stereotypes?

- Media

**SLIDE 10:** From here, I ask my students: What are some direct ways that Roxane Gay contradicts these feminist stereotypes? And why does she call herself a "bad feminist"? And then we discuss the answers to those questions. Generally, our talk about Roxane Gay's views of feminism is pretty broad and sometimes meanders down various paths. Eventually, I try to get my students to conclude for themselves that Roxane Gay calls herself a "bad feminist" in a tongue-in-check fashion. She uses the phrase "bad feminist" to point out that no feminism is perfect. We connect this back to the negative stereotypes of feminism as well as the way Beyoncé is judged for her feminism or lack of feminism. Usually at least one student will

question whether or not Beyoncé is really a feminist; if they don't, then I bring up the question myself.

The question about Beyoncé's feminism centers on the way she sexualizes her body for the viewer's consumption. Students often enjoy a lively debate about the role a sexualized female body is able to play in feminism. Most of my students believe a woman can "do whatever she wants with her body," so I often play devil's advocate and question whether Beyoncé's body is really her own. We address questions such as: Who really has power in the relationship between a celebrity and the public? Is Beyoncé using sex as a tool for empowerment or a marketing strategy? And does it matter either way?

This leads us into a talk about how female celebrities are often required to display their bodies—bodies that usually have to fit a particular type of size and dimension—in order to maintain their popularity. In 75-minute classes, we also address the issues of intersectional feminism, and we talk about the way that Beyoncé—even in "Flawless" which is on her self-titled album but certainly in *Lemonade*—addresses issues of blackness as well as feminism. She asks us to see these two identifying categories as necessarily coexisting in a discussion about women in America. Near the end of the lesson, whether its 50 or 75 minutes, I remind students about the call to action Roxane Gay makes near the end of her TED talk (which you did not get to see). She is clear that "bad feminism" is where

many of us exist in our daily lives, but it should not be the end goal. We want to always be striving toward equality, even as we have grace for ourselves when we fall short. She is particularly careful about asking us to balance two difficult concepts: on the one hand, a desire to help achieve equality for sexes, genders, races, religions, and sexualities; on the other hand, grace for ourselves in our own imperfections.

**SLIDE 11:** My primary goal in this lesson is to help students begin to question how the media can be used to promote stereotypes and provoke change; in addition, I want them to start thinking about how analyzing media can move our collective thought-process *about* a topic forward. This is the beginning of a unit on media literacy that culminates in their own presentations in which analyze a piece of media. This lesson also helps students practice applying a secondary source (Gay’s talk) to an analysis of a text (Beyoncé’s performance), which they will also do in their presentation. My secondary/not-so-subtle objective for this lesson is to help students understand the importance of feminism and how they can live *out* feminism and examine the role of feminism in their own lives.

**SLIDE 12:** In my view, this lesson engages with the first Focus Writing Hallmark because it introduces students to academic discourse about feminism. But I would also contend that this lesson demonstrates the importance of critical thinking—which is, I believe, not emphasized enough in the current Hallmarks.

The first Hallmark indicates that a focus writing course should “introduce students to different forms of college-level writing, including, but not limited to, academic discourse, and guide them in writing for different purposes and audiences.” And one of the notes to this first Hallmark reads: “The primary goal of W Foundations classes is learning to write.” Now, in my lesson, I don’t have my students reading anything. So does that mean they aren’t being introduced to academic discourse? My students engage in some fairly complex discussions about feminism, gender, and race in this lesson, but they don’t read a word. I am not arguing that we should do away with reading critical essays in first year writing courses. But I do question why the Hallmarks don’t emphasize the thinking work that must be done before the writing can begin. And generally, I have found that introducing students to academic discourse through visual media actually helps them to better engage with it because they are more familiar with the medium. I believe it would benefit us to consider how to include in the Hallmarks *language* about critical thinking and discussion as skills. Because strong writers are born out of strong critical thinkers, and teaching students how to think critically is an important part of teaching the entire writing process.