

Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxanne Gay: Ethos or Alienation?

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Abstract

*This essay discusses the established ethos of Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me* and Roxanne Gay's *Bad Feminist*. By examining the authors against the standards of credibility as set by rhetoricians such as Erving Goffman and Aristotle, conclusions may be drawn about their efficacy. From that point, it may be derived how the ethos of the authors' messages is affected by their use of rhetoric.*

Ethos, one of three points on the rhetorical triangle, is multi-faceted. However, a simple, working definition is “the way in which a rhetor is perceived by the audience” (Connors 285). Authors and equality activists Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxanne Gay both published books detailing their personal testimonies with the end goal of spreading messages through the written word. In a country with constant battles of racism and sexism, understanding the voices helping to fight these battles, and whether or not they are rhetorically effective, is critical to making arguments even stronger. Coates’ *Between the World and Me* and Gay’s *Bad Feminist* are two powerful works using personal stories to address issues of equality and humanity, specifically those of race and gender, in modern society. While both have critical points to present to their intended audience, aiming to build their ethos, there is a question of whether or not they lose credibility, or even alienate their actual audience in this attempt. To determine whether or not these authors establish effective ethos, their work may be examined against the reputed Erving Goffman’s, Nedra Reynolds’, and Aristotle’s definitions on ethos.

Te-Nehisi Coates effectively develops his ethos in *Between the World and Me*; one of the main reasons for the efficacy of his credibility is explained in Nedra Reynolds’ “Ethos as Location: New Sites for Understanding Discursive Authority.” She writes that ethos can be derived from “the margins” of a particular group, because “Individuals can see differently when they are on the margins or borders of [them],” meaning that it is often easier to gain an objective view of a situation when one is an observer, rather than an active participant (Reynolds 331). He identifies himself with being on the margins of white America; Coates’ ethos and outside observations of this white America are thereby effective. From the beginning of the novel, the reader is able to derive that while Coates is an American citizen, much of his life is spent living as an outsider to the American life. One example of this living as an outsider may be seen when he writes about his time as a young boy in school. He notes that he was “Unfit for the schools...[and] lacking the savvy I needed to master the streets...I felt there could be no escape for me” (Coates 27). The reason for Coates feeling unfit for the school system directly relates to race: further examination of his story reveals that as a child, he felt excluded in an education system that seemed to be designed for white students only. Thus, because of his feelings of isolation, he deemed himself “unfit” for the school, and therefore, “on the margins.”

Through this story, the reader develops respect for Coates’ ethos; he has knowledge of the education system, but because he does not feel a sense of belonging in it, he is able to ask the difficult questions, such as “what was hiding behind the smoke and screen of streets and schools?” (Coates 28). Coates is not blind to the fact that there is racial inequality in the school system, and he

is able to ask why. This development of credibility may be described as corresponding with Reynolds' thoughts: "it is easier to observe from the outside, where the perspective is broader, keener, or productively different" (Reynolds 331). Therefore, since Coates understands the American education system from the perspective of a student going through it, and since he has experienced it from the perspective of a student who does not fit into the system's mold, the reader is more likely to trust his criticism of its flaws. Thus, through this story, Ta-Nehisi Coates develops his ethos "from the margins."

Another example of Coates' ethos from the margins may be found when he exhorts his son to remember that while he is, according to the law, a free man in a free country, he must "never forget that we were enslaved in this country longer than we have been free... You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law" (Coates 70). In this passage, Coates encourages his son to remember the past of his people, that their labor and presence were not an addition to the American tapestry of equity, but rather the "fuel for the American machine" (70). The reader is then forced to realize that while America now claims racial equality, its past is one of injustice. Once they recognize this fact, the audience can understand that, once again, Coates may provide insight into the American way of life from the margins. They may realize that while the lifestyle that many Americans idolize may seem like a dream to some, Coates echoes the voices of many in the black community in this sentence: "The [American] Dream seemed to be the end of the world for me," meaning that the lifestyle Americans strive for (a life including a nice house, picket fence, new car, and financial security), often referred to as "the dream," was built upon a foundation of historical persecution of black citizens by white citizens (Coates 116). It is once the reader gains perspective about the author's life, and the fact that he has been living on the outside of the American dream, that they may respect and appreciate his argument about its faults. Therefore, because of the reader's ability to appreciate Coates' perspective because of his ethos from the margins, he effectively builds his credibility through this rhetorical technique.

After examining Coates' ethos through rhetorical lenses, these same methods may be used to determine Roxanne Gay's credibility. Gay builds her ethos in *Bad Feminist*, and the essays within it, through several means. Two key ways that she adds to her credibility as a speaker, however, are through Aristotle's theory that ethos is built through goodwill toward the audience (qtd. by Amicucci 1). In this book, readers are invited into conversation where Gay writes from a genuine desire to further their understanding on modern feminism. She also adds to her ethos through Erving Goffman's idea that it is gained through presenting a good performance of self because "when an individual plays a part he implicitly requests his observers to take seriously the impression that is fostered before them" (qtd. by Amicucci 2). By analyzing the way that Gay's essays exemplify these two theories of ethos, theories that allow her to show the audience that she is genuine and cares about their understanding of feminism, it becomes clear why she appears credible to her readers.

From the beginning of her piece, Roxanne Gay seems authentic in her descriptions of how she has experienced feminism, as well as about who she is as an individual. She demonstrates this authenticity by sharing not only the highlights of her pursuit of feminism, but also the moments of her doubts and frustration. Gay shares that she had her doubts about feminism and was unsure of whether she wanted to be identified with it. In "Feminism (n.): Plural," she explains why, at one point in her life, she was afraid to identify with this group because "I was called a feminist, and what I heard was, 'You are an angry, sex-hating, man-hating victim lady person'" (Gay xi). She clarifies with her readers, however, that her initial feelings towards this movement were incorrect, and that she realized that "I am just one woman trying to make sense of this world we live in...[but] I would

rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all” (Gay xiv, 318). Gay is open about her doubts towards feminism and how she overcame them, thereby inspiring the reader to overcome their own doubts: if Gay overcame her frustration at being a “bad feminist” and decided to be part of the movement anyhow, then readers ought to be able to do the same. Thus, in inspiring her audience through her personal testimony of moving beyond obstacles, she demonstrates goodwill towards them. Gay wants readers to be free to explore their personal ideas on feminism, rather than feeling bound to a set theory. This desire for the audience to grow and become wiser correlates with Aristotle’s theory of ethos being built by having goodwill towards the audience (qtd. by Amicucci 1). Therefore, because she shows good intent towards her readers, Gay embodies Aristotle’s theory of ethos.

The next way Roxanne Gay builds ethos with the reader is through Erving Goffman’s theory that credibility is gained through performing a specific version of oneself (qtd. in Amicucci 1). In this theory, Goffman explains that people have different versions of themselves, and depending on the context, they must decide which version to present to the audience. He expands on this idea by stating that in order for the person to appear credible, they must be believably authentic. Goffman states, “If a performance is to come off, the witnesses by and large must be able to believe that the performers are sincere (qtd. by Amicucci 2). By examining Roxanne Gay through this theory, it may be determined that she appears authentic to her reader because of her raw, honest confessions about her life and experiences. There are numerous examples of this throughout her work, but one that stands out is when she describes an experience dating a man who had certain expectations of her as a woman. When Gay disagreed with him, he became angry, and she wanted to take a further stand, but “I remained silent, stewing...I was being chastised for having a certain set of beliefs” (Gay 305-306). She describes being angry both because of what he said and because of her failure to speak up, emotions other “bad feminists” can likely relate to. Because of confessions such as these, Gay is performing the “bad feminist” version of herself within this work, a self who wants to make a difference, and yet falls short of all she wants to embody.

This version of self may also be seen in “Peculiar Benefits,” where she discusses the privilege she has, as well as her challenge with accepting those benefits: “One of the hardest things I’ve ever had to do is accept and acknowledge my own privilege,” the privilege of having married parents, a quality education, resources to live a happy life, and the opportunities to become a published author (Gay 16). She then explains that “Surrendering to the acceptance of privilege is difficult, but it is really all that is expected” (Gay 17). In admitting to her readers that she had to put her pride aside to accept the truth of her privilege, she appears honest in her discussion of feminism and her feelings towards this social movement. Thus, because of her authenticity, readers are likely to trust her argument and credibility. Ethos is gained through various means in *Bad Feminist*, but her goodwill towards the audience and her authentic performance of self are the major catalysts that allow Roxane Gay to be effective in her argument.

While in general, Coates and Gay appear to build effective ethos in their respective works, the question remains of whether or not they seem credible to all of their readers. Thus, the question of “In an attempt to gain ethos and connect with their intended audiences, do they alienate their actual audience members and lose credibility?” must be answered. Through studying sections of each work where potential audience alienation may occur, an understanding of whether or not this deteriorates from their ethos may be gathered.

First, Roxane Gay’s arguments in *Bad Feminist* can be studied for statements that potentially isolate specific members of her audience, causing them to doubt her ethos. The first example of one of these statements is located in the introduction, “Feminism (n.): Plural,” where she explains

feminism's evolution. She discusses the fact that the movement has become more inclusive "because feminism has, historically, been far more invested in improving the lives of heterosexual white women to the detriment of all others" (Gay xiii). While this statement is likely intended to show the progress of feminism and how it now focuses on a much broader spectrum of women and their fight for equality, it could be read in a different way. It is possible that in trying to include more women in the feminist movement, she begins to alienate the white, heterosexual women that identify as feminists. This leaves the reader wondering why did Gay chose to show the contrast between old feminism and new feminism in this manner, and whether or not her point have been as effective had she simply focused on the women now included in the movement, rather than mentioning the negative comment about the original feminists. Her rhetorical choice in this sentence may have been merely an innocent comment intended to illustrate the positive expansion and inclusion of feminism. However, her statements such as this have the potential to cause some of her readers, specifically heterosexual white females, to feel as though they are part of the problem of women's rights issues, when in fact, they ought to be a part of the solution.

Another section where Roxane Gay uses statements to prove her point, and potentially turns audience members away from her ideas, is also located in the introduction. She writes about what feminism is, in its purest form, by stating "I believe in equal opportunities for women and men. I believe in women having reproductive freedom and affordable and unfettered access to the health care they need..." (Gay xii). While readers are likely to agree that women and men should have access to equal opportunities in life, the sentence following it about women's health care harbors controversy. Many women identifying with conservative values and political ideals may disagree with the argument that women should have access to reproductive health care and services, such as those offered by Planned Parenthood (Gay xii). While Gay explains to her readers that "We don't have to all believe in the same feminism," the conservative reader may disagree with Gay's later arguments in her essays because they disagree with this statement (Gay xiii). Once again, there is a question of why Gay would choose to phrase her ideals in this specific way. Perhaps she chose to write that in the introduction so that from the beginning, readers know where she stands on this particular issues, and therefore, are likely to classify her as being a liberal democrat from the beginning? While this is not an issue in some of her work, conservative readers may feel alienated when she discusses the political aspects of feminism. However, there is also the possibility that Gay makes the assumption that any individual interested in feminist issues will agree with her on this issue. Regardless of her intention behind this statement, it has the possibility to sway some women to disagree with Roxane Gay and her arguments, causing her to lose credibility with some of her conservative audience.

After analyzing Gay's audience alienation, Coates's writing may also be examined for areas of possible exclusion. Although this memoir written to his son focuses on the struggle of what he refers to throughout the book as "the black body" in America and the suffering it is put through, there are pieces of his book that seem to discriminate against those individuals who have not walked through the same path of life that he has; although he does not seem to wish hardship on these demographics, there are sections which seem to discount their understanding of pain because of their backgrounds. One specific example is towards the beginning of *Between the World and Me* where Coates discusses his childhood as a black boy who lived in a constant state of needing to protect his body when he felt as though "children did not regularly fear for their bodies... There were little white boys with complete collections of football cards, and their only want was a popular girlfriend and their only worry was poison oak" (20). While this passage may be interpreted as Coates attempting to show the contrast between his childhood of suffering and that of privileged children whose fears seemed meager in comparison to his own, white readers who grew up without major

struggles may feel excluded from the message he is trying to relay: a message that racism is not dead in America. However, this theme carries throughout his book without requiring him to make assumptions about all white children living childhood of privilege. Thus, because of blanket statements about white privilege, Coates alienates white readers who lived happy childhoods from fully understanding the overarching theme of his work.

Another way in which Coates uses a hasty generalization fallacy and prevents certain readers from objectively understanding his argument is through an assumption that all American citizens of color lived through the same experiences as him. Just as he makes hasty statements about white children and privilege, he also makes hasty assumptions about black children and suffering. This may be seen when Coates uses statements such as “In America, it is traditional to destroy the black body—*it is heritage*” (Coates 103). In writing this, and other similar statements, he builds his argument under the idea that all black bodies in America are under the threat of destruction. While it is true that racism still occurs and horrendous actions are committed against people of color, it is a stretch at best to claim that the experience of some is the experience of all. This failed attempt at pathos isolates the black demographic who has not lived through the need to protect their bodies in the ghetto, and therefore, causes them to question the solidity of Coates’ claims, and therefore, his credibility. Therefore, because he makes assumption and hasty generalizations about various demographics, both white and black, he loses some of his ethos as an author.

After examining both Roxane Gay and Ta-Nehisi Coates for areas of potential alienation, it becomes clear that each author makes statements in their respective works that cause different demographics of readers to question their arguments. Because each author includes these types of statements, and isolates different groups of readers from objectively understanding their arguments, it is impossible for either one to be entirely rhetorically successful. While they may reach their intended audience and are rhetorically effective in that sense, they are not entirely successful because of their lapses in ethos. Thus, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxane Gay both reach their intended audiences with their messages, but because they alienate certain demographics, they lack fully developed ethos and are unable to be completely rhetorically successful.

References

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