

Black in Middle America

by Roxane Gay • September 12, 2016 [17 Comments](#)



I spent five years in Michigan's Upper Peninsula—a place I didn't even know existed until I moved there to attend graduate school. I lived in a town of four thousand people. The next town over, over the portage bridge, had seven thousand people. In my town, the street signs were in both English and Finnish because the town had the highest concentration of Finns outside of Finland. We were so far north that my blackness was more curiosity than threat. I was a woman out of place but I did not always feel unsafe. There were the abandoned copper mines and the vast majesty of Lake Superior and so much forest cloaking everything. During fall, deer hunting, so much venison. The winters were endless, snow in unfathomable quantities, the aching whine of snowmobiles. There was loneliness. There were my friends, who made the isolation bearable. There was a man who made everything beautiful. What I cannot forget is my landlady, who rented my apartment to me over the phone and who, when she first met me, told me I didn't sound like a colored girl.

In rural Illinois, I lived in a town surrounded by cornfields, in an apartment complex next to an open meadow, the site of ambition thwarted when the developer who built the complex ran out of money. The meadow was wide and green, bordered by trees. In the fall, I often saw a family of deer galloping across the field. They reminded me of Michigan. Especially early on, they made me think, *I want to go home*, and I would startle, that my heart, my body, considered such an unexpected place home. The man didn't follow. The man didn't understand why I would not, could not raise brown children in the only place he had ever called home. There was more to it, but there was also that. At the end of every summer, a farmer threshed the meadow and hauled the hay away. I stood on my balcony and watched as he worked, methodically, making the land useful. I had a job, I kept telling myself. At least I had a job. This town was bigger. I nurtured a very small dream—to live in a place where I could get my hair done—without knowing if that dream would ever come true. There was a Starbucks, though not much else. There was loneliness. There were a few very, very unsuitable men who made everything ugly. We were three hours from Chicago so my blackness was less of a curiosity, more of a threat. And there were the black

students on campus, the nerve of them, daring to pursue higher education. In the local newspaper, residents wrote angry letters about a new criminal element—the scourge of youthful black ambition, black joy. In my more generous moments, I tried to believe the locals were using anger to mask their fear of living in a dying town in a changing world.

Four years later, I moved to Central Indiana, a much bigger town, a small city really. In the first weeks, I was racially profiled in an electronics store. Living here never got better though local acquaintances often tried to tell me, in different ways, “Not all Hoosiers,” when I lamented how uncomfortable and unhappy I was, I am. There is loneliness. The confederacy is, inexplicably, alive and well here. There is a man who drives around in an imposing black pickup truck with white supremacist flags flying from the rear. My dental hygienist thinks I live in a bad part of town. There are no bad parts of town here, not really. In the local newspaper, residents write angry letters about a new criminal element in town. “People from Chicago,” they say, which is code for black people. On campus, pro-life students chalk messages on sidewalks like, “Planned Parenthood #1 Killer of Black Lives,” and “Hands up, don’t abort.” My blackness is again, a threat. I don’t feel safe but I know how lucky I am, which leaves me wondering how unsafe black people leading more precarious lives must feel.

Friends in cities have long asked me how I do it—spending year after years in these small towns that are so inhospitable to blackness. I say I’m from the Midwest, which I am, and that I have never lived in a big city, which is also true. I say that the Midwest is home even if this home does not always embrace me, and that the Midwest is a vibrant, necessary place. I say I can be a writer anywhere and as an academic, I go where the work takes me. Or, I said these things. Now, I am simply weary. I say, “I hate it here,” and a rush of pleasure fills me. I worry that I can’t be happy or feel safe anywhere. But then I travel to places where my blackness is unremarkable, where I don’t feel like I have to constantly defend my right to breathe, to be. I am nurturing a new dream, of a place I already think of as home—bright sky, big ocean. I know the where and the why and even the who might be waiting there. I just need to say when.

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Roxane Gay’s writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Best American Mystery Stories 2014*, *Best American Short Stories 2012*, *Best Sex Writing 2012*, *A Public Space*, *McSweeney’s*, *Tin House*, *Oxford American*, *American Short Fiction*, *West Branch*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, *NOON*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *Bookforum*, *Time*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Nation*, *The Rumpus*, *Salon*, and many others. She is also the author of the books [*Ayiti*](#), [*An Untamed State*](#), [*Bad Feminist*](#), and *Hunger*, forthcoming from Harper.

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