

*Hi Bro
This article
will help you
understand
The "me"
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believes*

BEST-SELLING
AUTHOR
ROXANE GAY
REFLECTS ON
THE JOYS AND
TRIALS OF
BEING THE
AMERICAN-BORN
DAUGHTER OF
HAITIAN
IMMIGRANTS



LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS

I was explaining to my therapist that Haitian parents don't believe in boundaries and he did not quite believe me. The week before that conversation, while my parents were visiting me in Los Angeles, I was telling them about therapy and how I was working on establishing and maintaining better boundaries both personally and professionally.

My mother laughed, genially, and said, "Boundaries? There is no such thing with your family." I smiled and bit my tongue and understood that boundaries do exist, no matter how willfully some people try to ignore them. I also understood that for my mother, and in our culture, boundaries do not really exist. Or perhaps more accurately, boundaries exist but they are ignored and trespassed at will, with generally the best of intentions.

As the daughter of Haitian immigrants, I've always had to hold on to multiple truths and live with multiple identities. Most first-generation kids are familiar with the negotiations over who we are at home and who we are in the wider world. On the whole, I'm the better for it. I am better for the benefit of enjoying diverse cultural experiences and knowing exactly where I come from. It's a familiar story: Growing up, I was Haitian at home and American at school and out in the world. There were different rules for each world I moved through, and I had to learn those rules quickly. I knew nothing about boundaries or other such *American* things. My American classmates rarely understood the rules I lived by at home, and my parents were bewildered by the permissiveness of those classmates' parents.

This was particularly true where privacy was concerned. There were no closed doors in our household. A closed door meant we were probably up to no good. A closed door meant we were trying to shut our parents out of our lives when they wanted nothing more than to have their lives wholly entwined with ours. My parents were then, as they remain now, deeply invested in the lives of me and my brothers. This investment rarely felt overbearing, but the older I got, the more I realized that they loved and nurtured us in a very specific way.

My parents loved us with their whole hearts. They wanted the best for us and expected the best from us—at school with our grades and how we behaved in the classroom, at home with how we treated them and each other, at church as we practiced our faith.

All of this expectation was intense, but I know no other way of being part of a family, of being loved. And it wasn't just my parents, both of whom come from big families. My aunts and uncles and grandmothers were and are just as intense in their love. Now that we're all adults, my brothers and cousins and I have largely adopted our parents' ways of loving and looking after each other and our children. The only thing really separating us from one another is our skin, and even that is incidental.

Sometimes when I think of how I am loved, I am overwhelmed. I can't breathe. I can't wrap my mind around people caring that much about me. Even when I rejected my parents, they were there; they were steadfast in their devotion and determination to love a child who did not want to be loved by them, by anyone. They loved me through the worst things I've endured and the worst ways I've behaved toward them. They loved me through my

tumultuous tweens and twenties. In my thirties, as my life started coming together, they became my friends. Now in my forties, we talk daily. They generally use FaceTime because they don't just want to hear my voice, they want to see me so they can determine for themselves how I am doing. They continue to parent, because Haitian parenting does not end when their children turn 18. We do not ever really leave home, even when we eventually leave home. Haitian parents parent forever and do so unapologetically.

A few months ago, my mom texted me about my propensity for profanity, particularly on Twitter: "Clean it up; it's time," she said. I had no idea what she was talking about, so I asked and she elaborated, chiding me about "the four-letter word you overuse." I could only respond, "OMG. Stop stalking me," to which she quickly replied, "I will not." That stubborn refusal to let me be a fully grown adult who can make decisions about how she speaks sums up our relationship. That she will not stop caring about who I am and how I am in the world is her way of loving me, my boundaries be damned.

My father also stalks my Twitter account for extra information about me. He knows more about my travels and publications than I do. He is the keeper of my archive. He reads the comments on nearly anything I write, even though I consistently warn him not to, knowing the cruel nature of online discourse, and then he gets furious and righteous on my behalf. Both of my parents attend my events when they can, beaming proudly as I talk about my latest book. They are often flanked by my aunts and uncles, my cousins and their children. I don't just have a family, I have an army. They are omnipresent and overbearing and confident that their way of loving me is the right way, the only way.

The older I get, the more I understand why my family loves the way they do. I understand what it took for my parents and their siblings to come to the United States. They had no money. They did not speak the language. They had no guarantee that the American dream would extend to them. All they had was each other and a fierce kind of love to see them through. When I consider what they sacrificed, what they went through as they made this country their own, and how they never let go of where they came from, it makes perfect sense that they would love without boundaries. They are people who have spent the whole of their lives crossing borders that were often unfriendly and unwilling to welcome them. They could not, I imagine, tolerate inhospitable borders within their own family. So they loved us in a wild, irrepressible, boundless way. They taught us to love that way in return, and so we do. ♪

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