

## The Case of Rihanna: Erotic Violence and Black Female Desire

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Note: This article was drafted prior to Rihanna and Chris Brown's public reconciliation, though their rekindled romance supports many of the arguments outlined herein.



Fig. 1: Cover of *Esquire*, November 2011 issue, U. S. Edition. Photograph by Russell James.

The November 2011 issue of *Esquire* magazine declares Rihanna “the sexiest woman alive.” On the cover, Rihanna poses nude with one leg propped, blocking view of her breast and crotch. The entertainer stares out provocatively, with mouth slightly ajar. Seaweed clings to her glistening body. A small gun tattooed under her right arm directs attention to her partially revealed breast. Rihanna’s hands brace her body, and her nails dig into her skin. The feature article and accompanying photographs detail the hyperbolic hotness of the celebrity; Ross McCammon, the article’s author, acknowledges that the pop star’s presence renders him speechless and unable to keep his composure. Interwoven into anecdotes and narrative scenes explicating Rihanna’s desirability as a sexual subject are her statements of her sexual appetite and the pleasure that she finds in particular forms of sexual play that rehearse gendered power inequity and the titillation of pain.

That Rihanna’s right arm is carefully positioned both to show the tattoo of the gun aimed at her breast, and that her fingers claw into her flesh, commingle sexual pleasure and pain, erotic desire and violence. Here and elsewhere, Rihanna employs her body as a stage for the exploration of modes of violence structured into heterosexual desire and practices. The biographical details of Rihanna as one who has suffered at the hands of her lover offer a referent for the suggestive violence of the

magazine cover image, one that resonates from the realm of fantasy. The knowledge of her assault by boyfriend Chris Brown heightens the risks involved in her pursuit of forms of attachment and pleasure; it also registers with heteronormative male fantasies of what can be done to her body under the rubric of consent.

*Esquire's* feature explicitly creates an exchange with another highly circulated image of Rihanna. It is a photograph of the singer, beaten and bruised, after her much publicized assault in 2009, on the eve of the Grammy Awards, by R&B singer Brown when she was twenty-one and he nineteen. The gossip site TMZ.com, which shot the photograph that was used in the police investigation, was widely criticized for releasing it. Yet the criticism of TMZ.com served as an opportunity for more "legitimate" news sources to re-release the image, describe it in detail, and comment on the physical injuries that Rihanna sustained. In the photograph, Rihanna's eyes are closed, which Sarah Projansky interprets as Rihanna's refusal to participate in the dominant narrative of racialized and gendered violence. Projansky writes: "While commentators expressed shock, that shock worked—along with the graphic representations—to intensify the (image of) violence done to a woman of color. In short, this photograph is a reminder of the cavalier way U. S. popular culture treats violence against women of color. Might Rihanna have closed her eyes in order not to see this mediated, racialized violence—again?" (Projansky 72). Projansky also argues that Rihanna's closed eyes can be seen as a strategy of producing privacy by not returning the gaze of the audience.

Another strategy that the artist and her producers took in the months after her assault was to cultivate a deliberate image and sound for the artist that incorporated acts of violence in intimate relations and sexual practices, at times explicitly referencing her relationship with Brown and the psychic and physical injuries resulting from it. Rihanna's references to violence include the injuries caused by Brown as well as the media and public's handling of the assault. Rihanna's injured body took on heightened eroticism through incessant revelation of more details about the incident itself and speculation about what led to it. The singer's strategy of incorporation, instead of denying or minimizing the incident, served as a highly successful commercial venture that has only increased her appeal and success as a mainstream pop star.

Since her debut single "Pon de Replay" in 2007, Rihanna has been known for her shifting image and style, along with her hip hop-inflected and Caribbean-influenced dance music. However, image-crafting and sound-making took on heightened meaning after the assault. The *Esquire* feature serves as one of many vehicles for Rihanna to work aggressively to explore the relations among violence, attachment, pain, and longing through image and sound, since having been "outed," labeled a victim of intimate violence by the media at large. While never denying the violence she experienced in her relationship, Rihanna worked to distance herself from the language of victimization and image of helplessness that often accompany the label "battered woman"; instead, she cultivated a closeness to erotic pleasure that incorporates practices of pain. bell hooks writes that

the term "battered woman" is used as though it constitutes a separate and unique category of womanness, as though it is an identity, a mark that sets one apart rather than being simply a descriptive term. It is as though the experience of being repeatedly violently hit is the sole defining characteristic of a woman's identity and all other aspects of who she is and what her experience has been are submerged. (272)

Rihanna's strategy of incorporation of what was revealed about the suffering she experienced through intimate partner violence becomes part of her public persona as a highly eroticized and highly desiring woman. In so becoming, Rihanna has received a firestorm of criticism from activists, cultural critics, and music consumers, and has been subjected to particular forms of regulation by some of the most ardent opponents of gender violence and supporters of black female empowerment.<sup>1</sup> The outcry among mainstream feminists and journalists has grown increasingly strident since her reconciliation with Brown four years later.

This essay examines Rihanna's post-assault performances and personae, both onstage and offstage, to consider how she cultivates erotic fantasy, sexual play, and intimate attachment, despite public pressures to conform to a familiar narrative of black female victimization and survival. I write this essay out of concern with how the culture of shaming and the disciplining of desire places a stranglehold on black women's sexual experiences and explorations of longing, attachment, and erotic pleasure. Rihanna's exploration of sexuality and intimate relationships reveal attachments to highly eroticized forms of racialized and masculinized violence. Instead of abiding by the protocols of the black female survivor of violence who repudiates her abuser, Rihanna sticks close to the scene of her assault and continues to rehearse and restage the interplay of love, violence, and erotic attachments in deliberately shocking ways. And in many respects, she performs complicity in "scenes of subjection," to borrow Saidiya Hartman's phrase. I argue that Rihanna promotes an erotic figuration of black female sexuality through a coalescence of sex and violence in intimate relations—one that I do not condone, but one that needs to be understood in ways more nuanced than how women's relationship to sexual violence gets conceived through typical victim/abuser frameworks. Her post-assault performances and public image do not cohere with a therapeutic and state-sanctioned model of recovery from intimate partner violence, in which a healthy and conforming female subject emerges after being "saved" from her abuser.

I examine the case of Rihanna with larger concerns about the links between erotic violence and desire in black heterosexuality, and to examine black female sexualities in ways that do not conform to dominant frameworks of exploitation, of racial uplift and respectability, or of romanticized engagement with black icons and celebrities as sexually liberated figures. How do cultural critics account for highly eroticized attachments in black heterosexual intimacies that are hinged on the force of masculinized violence? In moving the analysis of sexual subjugation beyond the framework of fantasy, we need to fashion analytic tools to examine black women's sexual practices where pleasure and attachment are interwoven with the threat or reality of physical harm. How do we make sense of intimate and erotic arrangements that demonstrate complex involvement with systemic forms of violence? These questions are not meant to challenge the crucial, lifesaving work of activists and agencies against gendered violence, or to excuse practices that put black women at higher risk. Instead, they are meant to raise concerns about projects against gendered violence that frame "domestic violence" in isolated ways and through approaches that pathologize and shame some black women who maintain connections to violent partners. These women's participation in violent relationships may be more complex than that of victims of always already pathologically violent black men.

Throughout the essay, I will use "the case of Rihanna" to refer to the assault, the reportage of the assault, the media coverage in the immediate aftermath, the way in which the incident gets folded into domestic-violence activism and rhetoric, and the continued media and scholarly scrutiny of both Rihanna and Brown since the incident. The phrase is a riff on Fred Moten's essay, "The Case of Blackness," in which he posits "the word 'case' as a kind of broken bridge or cut suspension between fact and lived experience," between what he troubles as blackness and the black subject (180). Here, "the case of Rihanna" suspends that gap between public perception and Rihanna's unknowable lived experience. It is a term laden with irony in positing Rihanna as the one who must either be defended or defend herself, given that she has been the subject of multiple assaults and accusations by Brown, fans, journalists and pop-culture commentators, antiviolence activists, and academics.

Rihanna's articulated and performative position of exploring the boundaries of sexual ecstasy and pain can be seen as reactive against what Lisa Thompson argues are the conservative sexual protocols and self-presentation associated with black female middle-class respectability.<sup>2</sup> While we as scholars, concerned with marginalized

positions of black women and other marginalized groups, have benefited tremendously from research on how the politics of respectability have shaped historical and contemporary understandings of black female sexuality, there remains a gap in research that critically troubles and probes possibilities for black sexual practices that are not framed through dominant frameworks of suffering, resistance, or exploitation. The complexity of Rihanna's post-assault performances and persona has very much to do with the dangerous zone she foregrounds, in which the hard-fought struggles of black women's activism to make legible certain forms of suffering

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**In the case of Rihanna, then, her performances link  
erotic violence to gendered attachments  
that animate heterosexual intimacies.**

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come into contact with the routine violence of the state's forcible intervention and regulation of black life, intimacies, and sociality. The case of Rihanna highlights the truly messy connections between fantasy life in mass-mediated forms through Rihanna's videos, and the violence of her lived reality: from the assault to the public labeling of her as a victim of domestic violence. Moreover, this case exposes the crisis in examining black women's sexuality, in public culture and scholarship, in ways that do not repeat a history of pathologizing discourse or narratives of exploitation that have long shaped the subject.

I argue that three dominant frameworks have been employed to analyze Rihanna's onstage and offstage performances and personae since the assault: an universalizing narrative of domestic violence victimization; a familiar narrative of black female survival; and a coercive agenda that I call black recuperative heterosexuality. These frameworks work to limit our understanding of erotic practices and intimate attachments that are not considered healthy, productive, or rehabilitative. The inability to engage these forms of intimacy, and, dare I say, love, grows more rigid when considering black women's entanglements with black male lovers. To borrow a phrase from Ann duCille, this is due not only to the long history of problematizing the derogated subjects' coupling conventions, but also the more recent mode by which some black women become legible in dominant public culture—that is, through narratives of survival from abusive relationships with black men.

These three frameworks operate in tandem and at times in tension to script limited erotic and emotional possibilities for black women. By universalizing domestic violence victimization, I refer to the conventional rendering of women as passive subjects of male aggression who must be protected by the state. By the framework of black women's survival, I refer to how black women are brought into dominant narrative folds as victims of unbearable suffering and how they use a narrative mode that is based in sentimental transcendence. Finally, black recuperative sexuality is a conservative framework for regulating black intimacy, reproduction, and family by romanticizing forms of heterosexual coupling that privilege normative and middle-class notions of relational contracts. Black recuperative heterosexuality grows out of a sexual conservatism in both black masculine projects of racial uplift and black feminist projects that, as Jennifer Christine Nash argues, “foreground examinations of black women's sexual exploitation, oppression, and injury at the expense of analyses attentive to black women's sexual heterogeneity, multiplicity, and diversity” (52).

All three frameworks place a heavy weight and particular bind on black female sexuality, particularly in relationships with men. From these perspectives, prescriptive notions of sexual intimacies are put forth, based on narrowly defined notions of

healthy relationships and highly contained expressions of eroticism. These frameworks privilege a narrative of uplift and triumph at the expense of more complex attachments and drives that affect intimate practices of pleasure and pain, of longing and belonging, that register differently, based on subject positioning. Equally significant is the repression of negative emotions and consensual practices that do not cohere in a progressive, transcendent, or uplifting personal, gender, and/or racial narrative. Feelings or desires that do not support racial uplift or female survival result at worst in public shaming by those who self-identify as advocates of gender nonviolence and/or black female empowerment. Moreover, these frameworks do not adequately examine black heterosexual intimacies within what I call “intimate networks of violence,” which shape issues of safety, vulnerability, risk, and protection among many black subjects.

### Narrating Black Women’s Survival

Black women musicians have a long history of employing music and performance to depict intimate partner violence and eroticism in black coupling. Black women artists from Bessie Smith and Abbey Lincoln to, more recently, Mary J. Blige and Angie Stone, sing about heterosexual intimate abuse and erotic attachments to violent men. This music is part of a broader tradition in black women’s cultural practices and social activism that foregrounds how intimate forms of violence affect black women’s lives. Moreover, in developing black feminist studies in the 1970s and ’80s, black women writers and activists became committed to combating forms of violence against black women. Patricia Hill Collins argues that contemporary black feminists and writers have gone against a longstanding tradition of relegating gendered and sexual violence (*i.e.*, physical force occurring in private) as subordinate to ostensibly racial (and public) issues (227).

These modes of address have influenced particular forms of storytelling and narratives of survival produced by black women. In theorizing these narratives, Rebecca Wanzo examines how black women employ sentimental storytelling to garner public sympathy and legibility. She locates these performances of self-determination in a brand of black feminism with roots in nineteenth-century sentimental literature, which “requires producing a story about uplift and transformation, negotiating the history of representations of proper victims and black suffering” (5). Within this tradition of individualizing progress, it requires a looking back at one’s suffering from a position of having overcome.

Wanzo analyzes Oprah Winfrey as an exemplar of a popular form of sentimental narrativizing in contemporary media. According to her, Winfrey, through her persona and various media platforms, also functions as a vehicle for other subjects to perform versions of sentimental storytelling. Wanzo writes that

Winfrey is preoccupied by the traumas resulting from deviance from the cultural norm in the United States, and she consistently makes trauma into a grounded moment in time that the victim-survivor and audience (occasionally the same) can place in the past, as she turns the traumatic event into the exposition in a tale of recovery and spiritual renewal. She transforms these real ‘freakish’ circumstances or traumatic events into contained fictional narratives that can function as romanticized originary moments of individualistic rebirth. (88)

The familiar script of narrativized self-determination was evident in Winfrey’s interview with Rihanna in August 2012. In the interview, Rihanna plays with and against the conventions of sentimentality and therapeutic recovery. She confesses to Oprah:



[Brown] was the love of my life. He was the first love and I see that he loved me the same way. We were very young and very spontaneous. We ran free. We ran wild. We forgot about ourselves as individuals. . . . I truly love him so the main thing for me is that he is at peace. (“Rihanna Opens Up”)

While she acknowledges the impact of domestic violence on her childhood, she refuses the recuperative subject position of a woman who needs to be “saved.” In addition to the violence that Rihanna experienced in her relationship with Brown, the artist has also elsewhere discussed her childhood in Barbados, in which her father, whom she has called an ex-drug addict, physically abused her mother.<sup>3</sup> During her interview with Oprah, Rihanna states that her relationship with Brown forced her to deal with the anger toward her father. In forgiving her father, then she was able to forgive Brown. In other interviews, Rihanna has discussed these details to make sense of her erotic drive and intimate connections to forms of violence.

Her performances and public images are difficult to incorporate within the framework of shared experience of black survival narratives and domestic violence victimization that have emerged as a result of hard-won political gains by antiviolence activism. One of Rihanna’s strategies for performing erotic attachment and incorporation of heterosexual violence is through sticking close to the scene of the violent exchange. What I mean by this is that Rihanna has performed a number of songs as a solo artist and in duets with male artists about intimate partner violence, erotic longing, and negative attachments, which I will explore in the next section.

### Close to the Heat: Eroticism and Intimate Violence

Less than a year after the incident, Rihanna released the album *Rated R*, considered a semiautobiographical tale of intimate struggles and partner violence, with direct references to her relationship with Brown. In a review of *Rated R*, Ann Powers acknowledges that Rihanna is an odd poster child for feminist campaigns against violence, given her pre-assault image as “a style of female empowerment that predates and still stands outside of feminism: the lone female warrior who summons strength and endures danger to make progress in a man’s world.” For *Rated R*, Rihanna collaborated almost exclusively with men and, according to Powers, Rihanna stated that talking with them about her relationship with Brown was part of the healing process. In Powers’s figuration, Rihanna chooses a male-dominated space to process her relationship and to forge modes of articulation, which serves as a very different model of healing than those offered by feminist activists and state-sanctioned domestic violence practices. While the spate of male collaborators can be read as antifeminist or antiwoman, her choice to work with men also falls in line with a strategy of incorporation.

The sexually aggressive, dub-influenced call for a hypermasculine sex partner in her song “Rude Boy” was one of the album’s biggest hits, but perhaps the most nuanced and thoughtful song on the album is “Russian Roulette,” written by Ne-Yo with Chuck Harmony, in which the artist sings of suffering, afflicted love, and an awareness of participating in forms of “deep play,” to use Clifford Geertz’s concept of when the risks involved in forms of play outweigh the reward, as the title of the song suggests. The video, directed by Anthony Mandler, is a dark foray into a highly orchestrated torture chamber for the singer, a masochistic setting of her own making. One might read “Russian Roulette” as a meditation on the limitations placed on Rihanna’s public life by her celebrity status and media inquiry to register pain, vulnerability, fear, and disappointment. The song might be read as from the viewpoint

of the battered photograph of Rihanna released by TMZ.com, wherein the young black celebrity cannot retreat to the realm of privacy.

While *Rated R* was a commercial success and served as a vehicle for Rihanna to reimagine her persona post-assault, her collaboration with Eminem on “Love the Way You Lie,” a love ballad of sorts about a violent intimate relationship, generated more attention in light of her personal experience and her partnership with the popular white rapper from Detroit. The song is from Eminem’s critically acclaimed *Recovery* album, in which the artist divulges his struggles with drug addiction, alienation, and family and relationship violence. Noteworthy is the fact that Eminem has been the subject of much media scrutiny for his misogynistic and homophobic lyrics, as well as his volatile and violent relationships with his ex-wife and his mother.<sup>4</sup>

“Love the Way You Lie” is on one level a duet about a straight couple caught in a cycle of relationship violence, as both Eminem and Rihanna sing in first person, offering different perspectives on the relationship. The song builds around a familiar narrative of intimate partner violence in which possessive emotion leads to jealousy, rage, and explosive outbursts. Then, shame and disappointment are followed by the couple’s reconciliation, or “the Honeymoon phase,” as they continue to reproduce the pattern of violence and dependence. This song’s video begins with a closeup of Rihanna singing the refrain in lament. Interspersed are images of a white couple in bed. Next, the white woman, played by actress Megan Fox, sits on the floor holding fire in her hand. The video depicts several explicit signs of danger and volatility, as flames also radiate behind Rihanna’s face. In another scene, the couple toys with shards of broken glass after a heated fight. Eminem, who identifies at times with the narrative’s working-class white man of shaved head—one similar to his white, urban, working-class upbringing in Detroit—raps from a safe distance, the space of recovery. He is in a field of wide expanse with beautiful setting sun. Rihanna stays close to the heat, singing in front of the burning house.

Rihanna is evocative in gesture, facial expression, and lyrical delivery as these relate to her public persona, her assault, and her erotic attachments. In the opening of the video, Rihanna turns her lip up as she approaches the word “hurt.” We see a closeup of her face, dramatically made up and with shiny red hair. She brings her hand to her face to reveal a gloved hand with fingers exposed, long nails polished in flaming red. Rihanna digs her nails into her face, in a way similar to the clawing of her flesh on the *Esquire* cover. Toward the end of the video, as Rihanna sings the refrain with a worn, ironic smile across her face, the other characters, aflame, are juxtaposed with her. She is the only one not burning.

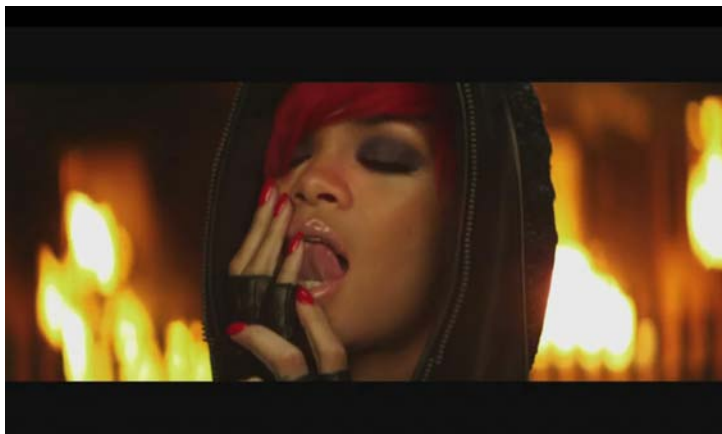


Fig. 2: “Love the Way You Lie,” video still, © 2010 Interscope/Aftermath Entertainment and Shady Records

The video is a contemporary rewriting of the classic television drama of domestic violence, *The Burning Bed*, in which Farrah Fawcett plays an abused wife who kills her violent husband by setting his bed aflame. But in this hip hop version, a sort of racial surrogation takes place, to use Joseph Roach's concept as a form of substitution that is connected to the process of collective memory.<sup>5</sup> In this case, Rihanna gives voice to white celebrity Megan Fox, but more precisely to Fox's character—a white, working-class Everywoman as victim. Rihanna sings of her vulnerability and attachment, of her rage and passion, of her pain and complicity with her abuser. Yet, instead of the hopefulness that the abused will escape or seek retribution, the song and video for "Love the Way You Lie" ends with the abuser having the final say.

Throughout the video, Rihanna's facial expressions and hand gestures convey a space where intimate pain meets erotic pleasure, a space that can be expressed through the tense commingling of her bodily gestures, the lyrics, and her attenuated delivery. The lyrics of the song express the intertwining of erotic violence and intimate attachments; the music video heightens the erotic appeal of an intimate relationship that hinges on violence. Rihanna's presence as chorus, as figure who stands outside of the home, and as body who is not engulfed in the flames of desire or violence, adds another affective quality to the video. On one level, Megan Fox performs a surrogation as the victimized Everywoman. On another, Fox represents Rihanna, post-assault. Fox's character is locked within the confines of the home and it cannot untangle itself from the stickiness of violence and desire. Outside the home, Rihanna both sings with the irony of hindsight, "I love the way you lie," as she surrogates the erotic pleasure and pain of Fox's character. And yet, Fox also stands in for Rihanna as the indexical victim of our collective memory. As the music video's narrative comes to a murderous/suicidal end, Rihanna remains alone, standing outside the home, outside of the diegetic world, through a mode of survival that keeps her attached to the scene.

### **A Beatdown or a Breakdown: Theorizing Black Heterosexual Desire and Erotic Violence**

Structuring black female sexualities through histories of violence has led to a familiar theoretical position in which sexual life for black women is rendered as a pleasureless pit, a site of unbearable woe. In advocating for a greater exploration of "the erotic life of racism," Sharon Holland cautions against the reliance on framing black sexuality through historical violence and exploitation: "If we tie the black female body to the inevitability of slavery's abusive sexual terrain so that every time we think of enslaved black women and sex we think pain, not pleasure, then we also fail to acknowledge our own *intellectual* responsibility to take seriously how the transatlantic trade altered the very shape of sexuality in the Americas for *everyone*" (56; emphasis in original). Holland's charge is to study how racialization and other quotidian forms of racist practices, and particularly, the black/white binary, structure erotic lives and sexual practices for all constituted subjects.

Holland's critique, as well as contemporary scholarship on racialized pornography and queer erotics, encourages a more rigorous analysis of how race, sex, and violence configure erotic lives.<sup>6</sup> This important turn to the erotic pays homage to Audre Lorde's classic essay, "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," in which the erotic is celebrated as a mode of self-determination for marginalized subjects. Recent work, however, moves us away from an understanding of the erotic as wholly celebratory and positive. For my purposes here, the erotic functions in the realm of "the very principle of life and creativity" (Kellner xvi), as articulated (though with very different implications) in the works of Lorde, Herbert Marcuse, Sigmund Freud, and others.



At the same time, I incorporate Georges Bataille's theory that "the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation" (16). Contemporary black music is rife with expressions of erotic investments that are both deeply pleasurable and also troubling in their violent configurations as heterosexual practices.

In considering the performances of Rihanna post-assault, what are the possibilities of the artist to enact erotic play and pleasure in ways that do not return her to the status of battered woman? And what if her attachments and desires are oriented toward a subject so entrenched in his own particular forms of pathology and violence that the normative racialized public, and counterpublics, advocates of marginalized identity positions, and critics-at-large, recoil at what constitutes love, desire, erotic attachment, and commitment between herself and Brown? In the case of Rihanna, her performances on stage and screen mesh with enactments of violence in her (public) intimate life in ways that then fuel media production of the star in scripted scenes that blur with the realities of violence.

Rihanna performs precarity, where her pleasure—both often socially unacceptable forms for black women—is framed by the forces of violence, surveillance, and shame, issues explored in the following sections.

### **"What's My Name?": An Articulation of Desire and Subordination**

Rihanna's much-anticipated album, *Loud* (2010), might be seen as an overstatement of the artist post-assault. It is a departure from the immediacy of grappling with the emotional devastation and public scrutiny noted in her album *Rated R*. The songs amount to an insistent articulation of a young black female pop star who makes decisions and lives by her own rules, in what one might call formulaic, post-feminist manners. Even if, as cultural critics and scholars, we understand this position as a familiar narrative trope, it nonetheless can function as an affective, and thus relevant message for both the artist and her audience. In "What's My Name?," Rihanna crafts the scenario under which she will bring her suitor under her control. He must succumb to her through recognition of her power over him, and an articulation of his desire for her.

Such a configuration is at play in "S&M," the album's first song. White female pop stars, from Madonna, to Pink, to Lady GaGa, have toyed with the aesthetics and power-play of S&M sexual subcultures as modes of female sexual desire and perversion. Cultural critics have both lauded and criticized these attempts as modes of expressing female sexual liberation, foregrounding more complex sexual exchanges, or exploiting difference to increase their fame and wealth. Sado-masochistic aesthetics and enactments have been incorporated into mainstream pop culture as a mode of performing a type of female rebellion. It is less frequently employed by black female pop stars of previous generations, as these predecessors had to balance sexual seduction and black female respectability. Rihanna, as one of the most successful pop stars of the twenty-first century, has pushed the aesthetic and performance of sexual explicitness for female artists of various races.

In the video for "S&M," directed by artist Melina Matsoukas, Rihanna plays the role of dominatrix, guiding a man on a leash on a suburban lawn, and then later, a masochist who carefully orchestrates her relinquishment of control in a world of her own making. Throughout the video, newspaper headlines intercut the various scenes with words like "slut," "whore," "daddy issues?" She is pinned against the wall by the violent inquiries and desires of journalists and critics, only later to flip the script. She "is a victim in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes"

(Deleuze 20). Rihanna is in a multiracial, mixed-gender sex community that is visually juxtaposed against the scenes of her interrogation by the media and public. In another scene, dressed in pink latex—the plastic aesthetic of masochism that “suspend[s] gesture and attitudes”—she performs as both spectator and entertainer of the drama of her own creation (Deleuze 70). Enjoying pink popcorn, she then enters a torture chamber while carrying a whip; the same members of the press who were interrogating her are now bound and gagged. They tremble in anticipation of what she will do to them. But instead, Rihanna merely poses and prances with the whip, what Deleuze calls “[t]he whip or the sword that never strikes” in masochism (70). At one point, she simulates a kiss with a middle-aged black woman who is gagged and bound. Here Rihanna performs the classic masochist, according to Deleuze, in control of the scripts that degrade, define, and ultimately reinforce her power. As the masochist, she educates and conditions the press by preempting their moves and reactions.



Fig. 3a: “S&M” still, © 2010 The Island Def Jam Music Group



Fig. 3b: “S&M” still, © 2010 The Island Def Jam Music Group

Ross McCammon writes in *Esquire* that “Rihanna is the indisputable champion of carnal pop. At this moment, in this room, she is the essence of *Fuck*” (111). In working toward a sex-positive framework for examining black women’s sexuality and erotic lives, Shayne Lee argues that while black popular culture has served as a site for black women’s exploration and embrace of sexual agency, black feminist

thought continues to reproduce models of black women's sexual exploitation and marginalization. Post-soul, twenty-first-century black singers like Rihanna and Ciara have ventured into the pop version of the S&M aesthetic. In an interview with *Rolling Stone*, Rihanna plays up this position:

"I like to take charge, but I love to be submissive," she says. "Being submissive in the bedroom is really fun. You get to be a little lady, to have somebody be macho and in charge of your shit. That's sexy to me. I work a lot, and I have to make a lot of executive decisions, so when it comes to being intimate, I like to feel like I'm somebody's girl."

What else does she like? "I like to be spanked. Being tied up is fun. I like to keep it spontaneous. Sometimes whips and chains can be overly planned—you gotta stop, get the whip from the drawer downstairs. . . . I'd rather have him use his hands." (Eells)

While Rihanna's erotic performance has been well received by many of her fans and by the music industry, what does it mean for a black female pop star to play with masochism and subjugation, particularly when the performer was the subject of intimate partner violence in her offstage life? In her *Rolling Stone* interview, Rihanna is quoted as saying, "I do think I'm a bit of a masochist. . . . It's not something I'm proud of, and it's not something I noticed until recently. I think it's common for people who witness abuse in their household. They can never smell how beautiful a rose is unless they get pricked by a thorn" (Eells).

August Brown, in a review of *Loud* for the *Los Angeles Times*, notes the deliberate effort of the album to shift the artist's image away from the emotionally wrought themes of *Rated R*, but the critic queries whether some of the songs are so "foamy and spunky" that "they come off as little more than image recalibration. That's her prerogative as an artist, and it's certainly earned. But it underscores the one thing we've always wondered about Rihanna—what is she really feeling?" Brown's question, framed as critique or a lack on the part of the artist, reveals perhaps the intended effect of Rihanna's post-assault performance to explicitly display and yet reveal very little. This strategy seems especially salient when much of what we know about the artist offstage has been revealed without her consent. In *Rolling Stone*, Josh Eells quotes Rihanna as discussing the period after her assault and the widespread publicity: "I put my guard up so hard. I didn't want people to see me cry. I didn't want people to feel bad for me. It was a very vulnerable time in my life, and I refused to let that be the image. I wanted them to see me as, 'I'm fine, I'm tough.' I put that up until it felt real." This provides an emotive and embodied link to her gestures in her music videos.

Rihanna's comment on putting up her guard, and at the same time exploring explicit sexual fantasies, hints at the vulnerability and contingency of intimacy in her life as a celebrity and as a young, racialized woman. Lauren Berlant's query about intimacy and public life is useful here in considering the case of Rihanna: "How can we think about the ways attachments make people public, producing transpersonal identities and subjectivities, when those attachments come from within spaces as varied as those of domestic intimacy, state policy, and mass-mediated experiences of intensely disruptive crises" (283)? This question takes on a different tenor when applied to a celebrity who has Rihanna's visibility, who has been labeled "the sexiest woman alive," and who continues to be known as much for her relationship to intimate violence as for her musical career. The complexity of Berlant's provocation grows when we consider who has access to sanctioned forms of intimacy, particularly in public. Candice Jenkins argues that blacks have "a particularly complex relationship to the exposure of intimacy, and to its peculiar vulnerabilities, because of the vulnerability that many blacks already experience through racial identity and its associated dangers." Jenkins partly attributes these vulnerabilities to "the manner in which African American sexual and familial character has traditionally been stigmatized as *uncivilized* in the United States, from the days of slavery

onward. . . (4). Rihanna's music and comments about her post-assault defensiveness speak to the ways in which intimacy is structured through public discourse and mediation. This is true even more so for celebrities and for black women, whose private lives and intimate relations are severely regulated.

### Rihanna's Revenge: Fantasies of a "Man Down"

While much of the music on *Loud* consists of songs of self-determination, autoeroticism, and pleasure-seeking, "Man Down," the most controversial, is also the song most socially engaged. It is about a young woman who kills a man after he rapes her. The video of "Man Down," also directed by Anthony Mandler, disturbs on a number of levels. First, there are the competing narratives of the song lyrics and video that jar the viewer. The lyrics are of regret for killing a man, while the video begins with the artist in character committing premeditated murder. Contributing to the tension between aural and visual are the different portraits of Rihanna, as singing artist, as young island-girl in her home environment, and as criminal reflecting on her actions. Rihanna sings in a West Indian dialect, and the music deliberately frames the tale as one of regional and cultural difference. The use of a sepia lens not only darkens the pictures, but it also periodizes and regionalizes the scene. The scene and texture of the footage are detached from the contemporary moment and material world in which Rihanna is an international icon, so that the audience interprets the violence as storytelling. Rihanna, playing both victim and perpetrator, continues to stick to the scene of gendered and sexual subjugation. Here though, pleasure and play exist only in isolated moments before the assault.

In the opening scene, Rihanna, an ominous figure in a billowing black dress and long, flowing red hair, shoots a man at a transportation station. He drops the suitcase and falls to ground, his head turned toward his murderer. The opening scene offers no context for the crime. Then the screen fades to black with text, which reads: "Yesterday morning." The music begins with visuals of Rihanna smiling while riding a bicycle in daylight. We are taken through a montage of coquettish innocence: Rihanna wears a revealing but childlike white outfit, laughs and plays with neighbors, friends, and relatives of different ages in this idyllic tropical setting. Of note is Rihanna's description of flirtation, which turns to sexual violence, and eventually leads to murderous violence, finally becoming "a sticky situation." In the video, she sings these lyrics from a closed, intimate space in her bedroom. This space and time are distinctly different than the world narrated through the lyrics; this is a space of reflection and retreat. As the lyrics darken, there is visual foreshadowing of what leads to the moment of crisis and murder. As night falls, Rihanna's character, the island-girl, transforms into a sultry party-girl. Later, she is at a party where she meets the man whom she killed in the opening scene, a moment that has not yet occurred. He approaches her and they dance suggestively. He becomes aggressive and she leaves the party. He pursues her. He traps her. She fights him, but he dominates her. He covers her mouth and she cowers—literally and symbolically assaulted and silenced. The rape scene is cut in such a way that we see the narrative of rape exposed. She is held captive and forced to succumb, though no penetration is revealed. We then see the aftermath: Rihanna shaken and bruised. Interspersed throughout this violent unfolding are dreamlike, or interior snippets of Rihanna in water, alone on a raft in a grotto, dressed in white. At the end we see her in this grotto, holding herself with head bowed. The scene that preceded the murder cuts the final scene in water. Rihanna's character, now as rape survivor, gets her revolver out of a bureau in her bedroom. This final scene has no music. The ambient sound is

both diegetic and extradiegetic. In discussing the song and video, musicologist Guthrie Ramsey writes: “The musical address in the piece never heightens or shifts emotional gears during these scenes. Semiotically, the viewer’s experience is, therefore, flattened and naturalizes everything that has occurred—bike rides, sunshine, beach, rape—because in a narrative sense, the only aspect of the video that is bracketed is the non-scored opening sequence” (Ramsey). While Rihanna’s use of violence in “Man Down” has been read as the singer’s post-assault revenge fantasy, I am more interested in how the song and video contain possibility and pleasure, perhaps for Rihanna, perhaps not, in the fantasy of her existence in a virginal state, unaware of the threat of sexual violence hovering nearby. Furthermore, the distinct shift in her character that happens through a discontinuous mode of storytelling suggests a woman coming into self-recognition through sexual violation. The Rihanna character of “yesterday” is a budding girl full of possibility; the Rihanna character who opens the video is a fully determined woman on a mission of revenge, as survival through violence.

### “We Found Love” and Other Wayward Pursuits

The song and video for “We Found Love” are Rihanna’s most elaborate exploration of erotic violence and desire in heterosexual intimacies. The dance song is a collaboration with Scottish DJ and producer Calvin Harris, and is her most popular to date (Trust). With minimal lyrics and a frenetic beat, the song conveys wayward emotions, erotic attachments, and directionless pursuits.

Directed by Melina Matsoukas, who also directed the video for “S&M,” the video begins with voiceover narration to a montage of images of Rihanna alone and with her lover. Here Rihanna tests the limits of her exploration of eroticism, violence, and negative attachment. She and her lover are strung out on love and other bad highs, as they are holed up in a seedy room in fits of ecstatic suffering because of insatiable appetites, negative feelings, and unmet desires. Replacing the metaphors of deep play in songs like “Russian Roulette” is the hypervisual aesthetic of Rihanna in several scenes of excess and degradation with her lover—doing drugs, stealing, raving, fighting, and suffering. The video takes its cues from Darren Aronofsky’s 2000 film, *Requiem for a Dream*, in an attempt to capture animated sensation of drug- and love-highs and lows. Rihanna scripts “Yours” in fire across the screen; her lover brands her buttock with a tattoo that reads “Mine.” The video relentlessly spirals downward, in fits of possession and violent outbursts, but it also offers an escape, for the viewer at least, by framing the narrative as a game. In an early scene, the words “Play Now” float across a slot machine in a casino. Then later, we see Rihanna and her lover at the slot machine playing, as the word “Losers” flashes across the screen. They react violently, shaking and kicking the machine. In another scene, Rihanna, high and disheveled, vomits on a public street but instead of bodily fluids, she expels colored streamers from her mouth—a moment of levity and humor in an otherwise dark unfolding.

“We Found Love” explicitly restages the lows of the love hangover and maps Rihanna’s personal life onto the scripted scenarios of music video narrative. The video received a great deal of attention and criticism for how it exploits and restages public perception of her relationship with Chris Brown. In one scene, Rihanna is in a heated argument with her lover in a car, which eerily recalls the site of her assault by Brown in 2009.





Fig. 4: "We Found Love," video still, © 2011 The Island Def Jam Music Group

Toward the end of the video, Rihanna appears to leave her love as she walks out, until the final frame reveals her huddled in a corner, and shivering. Leaving is a diegetic possibility for her character, but it is not actualized in this fantasy of love as a bad fix.



Fig. 5: "We Found Love," video still, © 2011 The Island Def Jam Music Group

### Black Women and Intimate Networks of Violence

Perhaps what is more unsettling than Rihanna's exploration of the commingling of violence and erotic attachment in heterosexual relations is how she has positioned herself in relationship to the male perpetrator of intimate violence through her music and performances, public statements, and dating life since her assault (*i.e.*, her close alignment to such characters in her videos and to Chris Brown). Rihanna has received considerable criticism from activists against violence toward women, journalists and critics, and fans for not completely excising Brown from her life. For many, she has not taken a firm-enough stance against intimate and gender violence.<sup>7</sup>

As the case of Rihanna demonstrates, one is shamed publicly for showing any concern for men identified as perpetrators of intimate violence. As the label of

battered woman sticks to Rihanna, so does the label of woman-beater to Chris Brown. I am especially critical of activism and literature opposed to gender violence that reduce black men to nothing more than abusers. Linda Mills argues that public and legal responses to such violence conform to historical and contemporary practices of profiling and criminalizing black men, and of regulating black women through the interventions of social services and governmental agencies (31). I would venture that this is one of the reasons why there is such a considerable gap between how many young and black fans interpret the case of Rihanna, and how mainstream media represents it. This is in no way to suggest that men who abuse women or men should not be convicted and punished.

In Rihanna's post-assault performances, there is a refusal of a particular sexual and racial politic of uplift and transcendence. I understand these responses as a refusal of the three dominant frameworks by which black women are made legible as discussed earlier in the essay. To be clear, I do not consider this refusal an emancipatory or radical position, but one that points to a considerable discrepancy between different generations and classes of blacks in terms of what are viable forms of loving, belonging, and attaching to others.

There are concerns that such nuanced discussions of violence, and acknowledgements of women's participation in intimate partner violence, will lead to "blaming the victim," while also reinforcing stereotypes of black women as aggressive. More crucially, there is the fear that such discussions will result in even less public concern for the well-being of black women and girls. But these concerns have resulted partly in analyses that do not take into account the complex networks of violence that affect black women's and girls' lives. Scholarship by Nikki Jones and Cindy D. Ness demonstrate the critical importance of thinking about violence in black women's lives in systemic ways, including women's participation in forms of violence that support or refute normative codes that render their lives legible, though limited. In her review of recent scholarship on black girls' participation in violence, Aimee Meredith Cox points to the importance of understanding how violence functions strategically, as the girls develop various strategies of navigating its myriad forms (Cox 771). Cox reviews the work of sociologist Nikki Jones, who considers how black women and girls navigate violence in their daily lives. Applying Elijah Anderson's influential theory on "codes of the street," Jones examines strategic performative categories employed by young black women and girls to protect themselves against systemic and relational violence. She writes:

Inner-city girls work the code with the understanding that they are always accountable to these gendered expectations and that gender violations are likely to open them up to a series of public and private sanctions. Girls' lives seemed to be defined by this everyday struggle to balance the need to protect themselves with the pressure to meet normative expectations associated with their gender, race, and class positions. . . . [G]irls' accounts of violent incidents reveal that they embrace, challenge, reinforce, reflect, and contradict normative expectations of femininity and black respectability *as* they work the code. (Jones 208)

Jones's ethnographic research documents shifting approaches of young black women and girls to discourses of racialized femininity and respectability politics. These strategies do not necessarily make them less vulnerable to forms of violence, but they do expose a gap between fact and lived experience—to return to Fred Moten's phrasing in "The Case of Blackness."

In the case of Rihanna, then, her performances link erotic violence to gendered attachments that in turn animate heterosexual intimacies. This is a link that the dominant culture effaces with romantic sentimentality and narratives of seduction and love. Eroticizing violence is a commonplace framework for making desire and aggression legible in public culture. Aggression saturates public life as legitimate modes of communicating need, attachment, fear, and longing. The entrenched and deep history of black male and female bodies as objects of erotic violence contribute to

the normalization of certain configurations of intimate attachments, suffering, and relationality among black subjects, especially in heterosexuality and heterosociality.

Rihanna orchestrates moments of dark play that are always in tension with a public outing where, in multiple ways, and through multiple forms of violence, she is subjected to the actions of others. As she pushes buttons about her own relationship to violence, she plays on the notion of choice as a mode of consumption. Choice, as explored throughout the artist's music and performances, is a particularly rarified commodity object that belongs in the realm of the international pop star. Her staging of various sexual scenarios, scenes of seduction or subjugation, and various outcomes suggests a type of plentitude. Whereas she sticks close to the scene in which private, intimate relations merge with public shaming and trauma, she is also able to create new scenarios for her self-making through sexual conquest, subjugation, or forms of undoing that are scripted as modes of self-revelation. In these strategies, we can see an uncanny likeness to the project of sentimentality, in which modes of consumption, choice, and individualized notions of agency are privileged.

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1. For example, Projansky cites examples of parents refusing to let their daughters listen to her music after the assault and the public urging of Oprah Winfrey and activists for Rihanna to repudiate Chris Brown publicly as a message to fans against domestic violence.

2. See Thompson.

3. See "Exclusive: Rihanna Speaks Out," *20/20*, *ABCNews.com*, 9 Nov. 2009, Web.

4. See Dennis Abrams, *Eminem* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007); Sady Doyle, "Why 'Love the Way You Lie' Does Not Redeem Eminem," *The Atlantic*, 18 Aug. 2010, Web; "Eminem Gives Deposition Against Mom," *ABC News*, 15 Sept. 2000, Web; Charles Huxley, *Eminem: Crossing the Line* (New York: St. Martin's, 2000); Stephanie Lane, *Eminem* (San Diego: Lucent Books, 2004); Stephen M. Silverman, "Kim Mathers: Eminem Nearly Drove Me to Suicide," *People*, 15 Feb. 2007, Web.

5. See Roach. Also see Daphne A. Brooks, "'All That You Can't Leave Behind': Black Female Soul Singing and the Politics of Surrogation in the Age of Catastrophe," *Representin': Women, Hip-Hop, and Popular Music*, Janell Hobson and R. Dianne Bartlow, eds., spec. issue of *Meridians* 8.1 (2008): 180-204.

6. Here, I am referencing recent works by Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Jennifer Christine Nash, Juana María Rodríguez, Dariack Scott, Chandan Reddy, and Jafari Sinclair Allen.

7. Mills argues that part of the problem with domestic violence laws and policies is that they are often modeled after criminal laws against stranger violence, in which victims do not know their perpetrators and presumably will not see/interact with them again. This is a provocative claim that further helps clarify why Rihanna's determination to stick close to the scene upsets so many.

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## Discography