



Shattering Silence and Stereotypes: Rihanna's Lyrical Reaction to Spectacular Violence

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Abstract: *In this article, I take up the charge of exploring how Rihanna's celebrity status has allowed audiences to see her humanity, even amidst her dehumanization through an objectification supported by the media and society. In the wake of that infamous 2009 incident, Rihanna was denied her privacy specific to these events, largely because of her celebrity status. In this way, her celebrity proved a double-edged sword: it exposed her as a figure provoking the public's attention while simultaneously generating cognitive dissonance. This dissonance stemmed from the illusion that celebrities remain untouched by the harsh realities of everyday life, including intimate partner violence. That Rihanna became Everywoman even as she remained a superstar held in tension this reality, which speaks to the normalized violence that pervades our society. Ultimately, however, it was Rihanna's celebrity status that helped to shatter the silence of violence.*



Caught Between a Rock and a Hard Place

In 2009, Rihanna was en route to a music awards show with then-partner, Chris Brown. The two singer celebrities, then a couple, failed to make it to the show, as Brown battered Rihanna along the way. What seemed like a reasonable, even relatable, partnership between two young, gifted, black music stars unravelled before the public's eyes. Media reports made a spectacle of Rihanna's bruised face, neglecting to protect her privacy, as reporters tend to do with victims of various forms of violence. After the felony assault, attention turned to Brown's increasingly explosive behaviour and easily angered temperament. In a *Good Morning America* interview on 22 March 2011, the audience witnessed Brown throw a chair through a backstage window. (Luckily, no one below the building's window was hurt.) Rather than politely decline or refuse to answer anchor Robin Roberts's question, Brown chose to express himself in anger. This acrimonious display of emotion typified Brown's disposition in the years surrounding his assaultive behavior. Increasingly, audiences received more and more information that begged the nagging question, "Why is he so angry?"

Later reports revealed that Brown was likely processing not only his own actions as a perpetrator but also his experiences as a victim of sexual violence. While this likelihood aligns with research on survivors of violence, what failed to align, in some people's imaginations, was that a young black man might be making such an admission. Brown's stereotypically brutish behaviour impeded potential sympathies – his violence recognizable but his victimization largely invisible, illegible, and incomprehensible. Brown's own victimization as a child complicates the idea that he embodied any real or imagined threat and distorts the collective imagination about black men, violence, and victimization. That this perpetrator had been a victim of violence himself should have tempered the righteously angry public response to him. However, his violent acts simply worked to strengthen age-old stereotypes about black men as savage and brutal (see Bogle 18).

Brown's actions and the suggestion that he suffered sexual abuse in his childhood demonstrate that he can be both a perpetrator and a victim. However, these two images remain distorted in the public imagination, "the menacing specter of the Black rapist" perpetually following people around (Davis 184). This overarching cultural image made it difficult for some to understand black men and boys as potential victims. Tommy Curry explores this conundrum in *The Man-Not*, arguing that black men are so steadily constructed (and therefore perceived) as criminal, threatening, and impenetrable that they are seldom seen as vulnerable (3). Black men are rarely considered both impenetrable *and* vulnerable, the former characteristic so indelible a mark on the latter that vulnerability cannot even cohere, at least theoretically, in tandem with this real or imagined violence, criminality, and impenetrability. But seeing black men as vulnerable shatters the enduring stereotypes of the always already black male rapist, of black men as perpetually threatening; in the place of these stereotypes, it interjects the complexity of black men, especially in relation to black women and society.

By drawing attention to his own violence, Brown's actions actually worked to make visible the reality of gender and interpersonal violence. Brown drew attention to his own victimization as well, which implicitly illustrates how violence endures and how it connects to itself in what I call a "web of violence." In many ways, Brown's actions did as much to create a crisis for the singer and for the couple – as Rihanna became a target of relational violence – and the couple's relationship eventually ended. Rihanna was just one of many "bodies in crisis" (per Barbara Sutton's formulation in her book of the same name), whose celebrity status created a curious paradox: it enabled her to escape the harsh conditions of poverty and violence with which she was familiar in her native Barbados, but it failed to protect her from the same sort of violence from which people might imagine she escaped upon her arrival in the United States. That Rihanna's presence in the United States failed to protect her from harm speaks volumes about vulnerability and precarity of brown and black women's bodies around the world and to the work that must be done to recognize global gender violence.

From Provocateur to Provocative Violence?

That Rihanna's celebrity status may have in fact provoked such violence invites us to consider similar scenarios that have unfolded both recently and in the distant past. Consider how the case of Rihanna shares historical and contemporary links with other brown and black women celebrities, including Tina Turner (see hooks); Melanie Brown, better known as Mel B and formerly "Scary Spice" of the Spice Girls (see Bitette); and Beyoncé (see Fu). All of these cases involve black women with varying degrees of celebrity status and brown and black men who appear easily angered or provoked by the success of their respective partners. Rather than find ways to support these women, the men instead find ways to diminish them.

The case of Melanie Brown involves a domestically abusive husband who claims to be the son of Harry Belafonte. Friends and family members of the singer formerly known as "Scary Spice" reportedly encouraged her for years to leave her toxic relationship. Past references to her "scary" side, however, mitigate the

cultural perception of the fears Melanie Brown might have for herself, her children, and her family, her ostensible “scariness” understood as being capable of contending with any elements of the nightmares that unfold for her. Meanwhile, as her husband employs scare tactics of his own, he, too, much like Chris Brown, works to resuscitate dominant narratives of aggressive and assaultive black masculinity and manhood.

In the cases of Tina Turner and Beyoncé, both women have enjoyed meteoric success, standing out as exemplary bodies in the music world. Yet their bodies, much like Rihanna's, have been scrutinized for approximating a white western beauty ideal (see Hunter). In *Black Looks*, bell hooks launched an incisive critique on Tina Turner, wondering about the singer's decision to don a blonde wig, which hooks identifies as “an endorsement of a racist aesthetics which sees blonde hair as the epitome of beauty” (68). She has recently picked up her criticism of popular black female singers with a similar critique of Beyoncé as well. In her work, hooks interrogates the sociopolitical and historical context that informs many of the decisions black women make in terms of media representations:

Bombarded with images representing black female bodies as expendable, black women have either passively absorbed this thinking or vehemently resisted it. Popular culture provides countless examples of black female appropriation and exploitation of “negative stereotypes” to either assert control over the representation or at least reap the benefits of it. Since black female sexuality has been represented in racist/sexist iconography as more free and liberated, many black women singers, irrespective of the quality of their voices, have cultivated an image which suggests they are sexually available and licentious. Undesirable in the conventional sense, which defines beauty and sexuality as desirable only to the extent that it is idealized and unattainable, the black female body gains attention only when it is synonymous with accessibility, availability, when it is sexually deviant. (65–66)

That brown and black women celebrities may feel compelled to present themselves in the ways hooks describes suggests that they may intentionally construct public personas as provocateurs, appealing to mass audiences on the basis of a presumed hyper-heterosexuality. But the men who were once intimately involved with these women celebrities would likely chafe at the actuality of this idea: that these women would be sexually available and accessible or up for public consumption. Rather than offer protection to these (or any) women – who are represented by the media in ways that may not align with their own self-perception or their intended self-projection – these men risk endorsing one set of stereotypes (about black men as sexually aggressive) for another (about black women as sexually available). Their actions thus reveal the residue of gendered racism and of the legacy of black women's physical and sexual exploitation during slavery.

In this historical moment, what threads together the narratives and storied lives of these singer-celebrities is their relationship to a public that has learned to consume blackness in more complicated ways. The commodification of blackness has meant that these women have likely enjoyed greater material wealth as a result but also, to my point, greater injuries as the men in their lives grapple with their escalating popularity and success. Sutton argues that feminists

have shown women's bodies as sites of both oppression and resistance. They note that in order to enforce women's subordinated position, societies across the world have, at times, defined various kinds of female bodies as deficient, inferior, monstrous, unstable, unpredictable, dangerous, weak, vulnerable, overly sexual, or too powerful and in need of restraint. (4)

Women in elevated positions or with higher levels of prestige and social status may find others' efforts at subordination both futile and effective.

In all of the aforementioned cases, the men arguably closest to the women were the ones who enacted violence upon them. This fact reflects a statistical reality for women of any racial category, with studies indicating that the majority

of incidents of sexual violence are committed by perpetrators casually acquainted with or intimately familiar and close to their victim(s). It also highlights how this violence may be heightened at the particular intersections of being a black woman celebrity. This consideration helps to reframe the idea that celebrity status would protect women from violence rather than provoke violent acts against them. In addition, when heteronormative and toxic masculinity mandate physical domination over others, men are encouraged to actualize the subordination of women by expressing themselves in aggressive, assaultive ways (see Kaufmann). Black men face a unique conundrum, as they are seen as always already aggressive and assaultive. We can see evidence of this charge among the men involved with the celebrity women mentioned above – and perhaps most pointedly and recently in the case of Chris Brown.

Given the construction of black manhood and the attendant stereotypes or controlling images associated with black men, Brown (like the other men referenced above) did little to dispel the notion of black men as dangerous, domineering, and threatening (see Bogle 2001) – a “racial difference,” Patricia Hill Collins writes, “constructed from ideas about violence and dangerous sexuality” (27). Instead, he seemed to fuel the fire by experiencing and enacting rage, blurring the line between the hypothetical/stereotypical and the actual black brute. His behaviour did little to cultivate the sympathies of the public, even as people learned about his early experiences of childhood sexual trauma. By the time of that revelation, it appeared that people had chosen their allegiances, with most seeming to support Rihanna. With more visible injuries of violence, Rihanna garnered more sympathy from the public than her former partner, who would eventually be charged with felony assault. Although both she and Brown likely struggled privately with their respective relationships to violence – given the later disclosure that she, too, had been previously victimized before, the target of and witness to violence in her home environment – the 2009 incident, and the

disclosure that both had been victimized in the past, made the two appear to be vying for the sole role of victim.

Rihanna ultimately became the beneficiary of much of the public's compassion, if only because Chris Brown made it quite difficult for audiences to forgive his injustices. In theory, if the two were ever wrestling for public sympathy, it seems likely that neither would garner much compassion, given the persistence of anti-black racism in the United States. And, at their respective intersections of race, gender, class, and nationality, the two celebrities might still find themselves confronting individual and institutional social forces that not only devalue blackness but also often appear to be working in service of its eventual disappearance. Consider Samantha Master's point: "It is critical that histories of white supremacy in America recognize that as long as there have been black women in America, the anti-blackness of the state has fashioned itself to eviscerate black women just as intentionally as it has black men."

Yet audiences seemed to miss the mirror that Rihanna and Brown were holding up, a reflection of institutional, interpersonal, intimate, relational, domestic, public, and global violence for everyone to see. Perhaps not just the individuals involved but the mirror as well had been shattered by this violence, echoing across time and space, permeating people's lives through its expansive and insidious reach. Perhaps the mirror could no longer adequately capture the extent of the problem, or perhaps the public could no longer look at its own troublesome reflection in the mirror. Perhaps the celebrities paused for a moment to take a look in the mirror and recognized themselves as (un)willing participants in a process of global, mediated violence.

Visualizing Violence

Consider that the violence enacted by Chris Brown towards Rihanna was not only mapped out onto her body but also mapped out onto the world, her bruised face documenting his violence and her status as a victim of violence. By publicizing Rihanna's face in the immediate aftermath, the media arguably re-victimized her.

They exposed her not only as a target of violence in that particular moment with Brown but also, as audiences would later learn, as a target of and witness to domestic violence in her childhood home. Picturing Rihanna's face as a body in crisis also arguably made her more susceptible to the harsh scrutiny of some viewers, especially those who dared to hold Rihanna accountable for Brown's actions, a peculiar if not predictable response, given the extent to which women are so often deemed responsible for the actions of men. Pictures of Rihanna's face could serve as an invitation for further violations, as the literature on victimization suggests that victims often experience re-victimization numerous times. That is, prior victimization heightens the attention of predators or perpetrators of violence, who mark victims as prey.

This view of increased vulnerability is largely maintained by a myopia that ignores existing evidence of black women's vulnerability, such as historically unprecedented levels of mass incarceration and indicators of poor health among many black American women. Among Caribbean black women, specifically, there is evidence of compromised wellness and poor mental and physical health (see Lacey and Mouzon). Lacey, Sears, Matusko, and Jackson attend to the differences between US black women and Caribbean black women in relation to domestic violence and public health: "Understanding intimate partner violence experiences of US Black women requires recognition of key intragroup differences, including nativity and immigrant status, and their differential relationships to women's health" (719). Thus, Rihanna's face literally and figuratively serves as a reminder of the violence black women encounter in this society, in its historical and contemporary manifestations and the risk factors that compromise the quality of life and healthy living of black women (see Arriola, Borba, and Wilkins).

Black women's bodies have been vulnerable to the threat of sexual and physical abuse and exploitation for centuries, and the spectacle of Rihanna's face reminds us of the way black women's bodies have been viewed so often without consent. With her privacy denied, Rihanna became what Karla Holloway describes

as a public text, that which “takes a private event of the body [...] and renders it public” (14). Holloway further contends that black women are always already public, their bodies considered public texts available for others to consume visually, sexually, and even medically: the “narratives [...] that are attached to all women and to blacks of both genders have an inordinate control over the potential for private personhood” (7). While Holloway writes about the unusual violation of medical rights as it relates to Henrietta Lacks, her research also relates to the way the violence targeted at Rihanna was handled. That photos of her face were so widely disseminated underscores the points Holloway makes about the public consumption of black bodies generally and black women's bodies in particular.

Rihanna's celebrity status seems to confound the abusive situation in which she found herself and in which the public found her. The public's reaction betrayed the statistics. In other words, while many people acted surprised that such violence could happen to a “good girl gone bad” (as the singer's lyrics go), the public should not, in fact, be surprised by the now normalized acts of gender and sexual violence that occur in the United States, especially given that some historians argue that such violence is embedded in the country's very foundation. Amidst the problematic display of Rihanna's face and body is the opportunity for fans to see the celebrity as one of us, to see how her experience facilitated conversations about relational violence, including how celebrities suffer from and perpetuate it.

The disregard for Rihanna's privacy paralleled what could be seen as a disregard for her humanity. Arguably, the visual spectacle surrounding her victimization heightened her chances of further victimization: the exposure of her face as evidence of the violence visited upon her in fact constituted another form of violence. In neglecting to protect her privacy, the media enacted a different form of violence upon her. As the media circulated allegations of Brown's violence against Rihanna, they perpetuated their own violence by repeatedly naming her and exposing pictures of her injured face. The usual anonymity with which people

typically handle cases of such violence was here not respected. In its place came increased attention to, if not fascination with, the details of the event. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag discusses the powerful sway of photography and mediated images:

Nonstop imagery (television, streaming video, movies) is our surround, but when it comes to remembering, the photograph has the deeper bite. Memory freeze-frames; its basic unit is the single image. In an era of information overload, the photograph provides a quick way of apprehending something and a compact form for memorizing it. The photograph is like a quotation, or a maxim or proverb. [...] It is a shocking image, and that is the point. (22)

While Sontag here specifically focuses on the adverse impacts of war, we can apply much of her sentiments to the spectacle surrounding other forms of conflict and violence too. That the media compels consumers to look at, rather than away from, the horrors of everyday life underscores the manner in which humans respond to such imagery with a combination of “compassion, or indignation, or titillation, or approval, as each misery heaves into view” (18).

Perhaps an alternate explanation or interpretation of the media spectacle rests on the notion of Rihanna's body as evidence, or on her drawing attention to similar bodies in crisis. That Rihanna's bruised face was circulated through the media can be seen, on one hand, as violation and re-victimization and, on the other, as documentation. Were Chris Brown to deny any allegations of violence or refute the charges against him, the footage – Rihanna's documented body as evidence – serves the purpose of incriminating him. Neither he nor Rihanna could deny the incident, nor could viewers retreat into a fantasy that violence does not exist or does not impact celebrities. That moment forced viewers out of any of their escapist entertainment fantasies and starkly showed them a brutal reality (of which many were likely already familiar, given the statistics on this form of violence). Sontag argues that, subsumed into the mediated dream worlds created for our visual consumption, we describe things as “‘unreal,’ ‘surreal,’ ‘like a

movie'": "‘It felt like a movie’ seems to have displaced the way survivors of a catastrophe used to express the short-term unassimilability of what they had gone through: ‘It felt like a dream’” (22). Perhaps a more apropos observation here would point out the way that some dreams become nightmares.

What is perhaps instructive here, in Rihanna's experience, is that the event draws attention to global and local violence and to the differences across the intersections of race, gender, class, and nationality. It seems to be the case that the topic of gender and sexual violence focuses on specific sites yet fails to connect the dots between different forms of violence. Analyses of this kind of expansive web of violence can be daunting or overwhelming; otherwise, people might not be sensitized in ways that would enable them to consider these connections across sites of violence. Here, Rihanna's migratory patterns may prove useful as a lens through which to see how the movement of people within and across national boundaries complicates discussions about the violence people experience, witness, or perpetuate. I want to link those discussions to a disappeared discussion of the specific kinds of sexual and gender violence that black Caribbean women face.

Disrupting the Silence of Violence: “Telling to Live” and “Living to Tell”

In her book *Surviving the Silence*, Charlotte Pierce-Baker writes about her personal experiences with sexual violence, documenting how a black man stranger entered her family's house and raped her. Her account suggests she is initially shattered by the sexual violence, that the feeling of being victimized in her home, a space constructed as safe, haunts her: “I knew *fear*; it was inside my body. But anger was foreign and disturbing. My one secure place had been taken from me – my home. *If you can get home, you're safe*. And my body was no longer just mine. I had so much to recuperate, to reclaim” (51). This recuperation and reclamation included grappling with the particularities of her own assault as well as, more generally, with historical and contemporary assaults on black bodies. This meditation and reflection allowed her to explore what it means to be a black

woman who acknowledges and confronts, both publicly and privately, this violence against black women's bodies.

In ways that parallel what Pierce-Baker describes, we see Rihanna mapping out her own accounts of the abuses and violence she endured. Much of the silence that women endure pertains to the minimization of violence or a denial of its incidence in the lives of women. Rihanna and other women find avenues appropriate for them and their unique ways of telling their truths. In the following section, in order to explore the meanings embedded in and expressed through music, I discuss Rihanna's singles "We Found Love," "S&M," and "Work." The lyrics of these songs serve as my texts of analysis, and I offer my interpretation of these texts from a black feminist perspective. I also consider the composite picture of Rihanna's repertoire throughout my lyrical and visual media analysis of these songs, as textual analysis allows for an examination of the messages and ideas conveyed by the singer. Arguably, Rihanna is singing music with debatably autobiographical lyrics, which can be understood as part of a process of storytelling. Feminist scholars find women's storytelling practices not only worthy of interest but also potentially life-saving. In this way, Rihanna recounts her stories of survival and ensures her continued survival by telling stories and sharing the truths of her reality.

Choosing songs in which the singer herself speaks to some of the public's speculation about her private life also proved to be important criteria. As a feminist researcher and practitioner, I maintain the importance of centring women's voices and providing the space for women to speak for themselves. Following the Latina Feminist Group – their collection *Telling to Live* inspires the title of this section – I echo the sentiment that women can both "live to tell" but also "tell to live." This telling stands in contrast to the Caribbean notion of "telling stories," a term used to contest the authenticity of an author's claims, insinuating lies or deception on the part of the storyteller. However, the kind of storytelling in which I am interested has to do with the stories women "tell to

live.” Perhaps both kinds of discursive practices tell us something about the truths and lies that women must tell, all in the name of survival. It is certainly not an unfamiliar charge launched against women, that all-too-common accusation that we are lying about the incidents of violence we might suffer. The practice of “telling stories” remains central to feminist research and everyday activism as it invites women to speak truth to power, to share their truths, so as to shatter the silence of violence.

When women speak about the ways that they experience or are subjected to violence, they are often asked to stop “telling stories.” These charges serve to counter any charges women issue as they engage in storytelling and truth-telling. In my interpretation, Rihanna does not use her celebrity platform to call out those close to her for leaving her alone or abandoning her in moments of crisis. Instead, I interpret her lyrics as an expression of her own truth-telling, an invitation to others who find themselves in a crisis to practice “telling to live.” This practice has historically put women in a precarious place, or extended their positions of precarity, as crisis is an always already precarious place. With numerous young fans as consumers of her music, perhaps Rihanna is strategically both sharing her story and telling her truth, her version of hip-hop’s mantra of “keeping it real.” She might also be trying to communicate the importance of intervention, thereby sensitizing audiences to consider their own role (and even complicity) in the perpetuation of violence.

Singing about the reality of violence also works to disrupt social practices of “protecting the perpetrator” or concealing violence through silence. William C. Gay makes a broader point about the powerful consequences of language, arguing that “linguistic violence occurs across a continuum that stretches from subtle forms such as children’s jokes to grievous forms such as totalitarian and genocidal language” (436); as such, language wields the power to normalize and reify violence. Arguably, language that intends to protect the perpetrator becomes its own form of violence, another mode of maintaining the silence that surrounds

violence. Linguistic violence distorts the prevalence of violence by focusing exclusively on victims rather than identifying perpetrators and holding them accountable.

While this silence conceals and thus distorts the incidence of violence, it operates as an additional injury to sexual and physical violence. The silence that surrounds violence effectively works to protect perpetrators, not its many victims. As the literature I cited above notes, the victims of this violence are many. Both directly and indirectly, there are people who directly experience violence, and there are its secondary victims, people who hear these stories of trauma. In many ways, one could argue, perpetrators of violence are always already witnesses of violence, but they are not the desirable kind of witnesses. They will likely deny what they witnessed, cloaking their actions in silence, which serves as another iteration of the violence of silence. Additionally, music videos and songs that loosely or specifically reference violence also invite the public to bear witness to violence. In this light, I will discuss what it means to listen to Rihanna "telling stories," to discursively shift into an interpretation of her "telling to live."

"Nobody Text Me in a Crisis"

In her extremely popular (if equally misunderstood) song "Work," Rihanna articulates perhaps the most explicit or direct reference to her personal experiences with Chris Brown on that night in 2009. She offers a small but significant glimpse into her world of pain. Her casual reference to feelings of isolation and abandonment become apparent in her critique of the ostensible community that typically surrounds her. When she sings, "Nobody touch me in the right way, / Nobody text me in a crisis," she gestures to the gap created in the wake of violent acts. Not only was Rihanna subject to the violence of her then-partner; she was also subject to the silence of violence. That the people presumably closest to Rihanna were the most absent speaks volumes about the specificity of this celebrity's experience of gender and sexual violence, as well as

about how women experience a silence that surrounds any violence they face from men.

That Rihanna draws attention to the irony that, despite being a celebrity – someone “followed” virtually by people in social media and generally in the public eye – no one was there to bear witness to the crisis to which she refers in “Work.” It wasn’t until after the crisis that Rihanna received arguably too much attention, that too many people surrounded her. The matter of timing seems key here, as the absence of people in her moment of crisis was a critical one; no one was present to provide necessary intervention into the violence she experienced. The presence, if not proliferation, of people who emerged afterwards advances the idea of Rihanna as a spectacle. That Rihanna alludes to this sense of isolation reflects a dynamic typical of abusive and unhealthy relationships, a dynamic previously kept private before the publicity of her relationship with Brown on that night in 2009. As scholars note, the power and control dynamic of toxic relationships involves an escalation of violence often followed by profuse apologies and a seemingly sincere acknowledgment of wrongdoing. Such wrongdoing is commonly denied by abusers before any acknowledgement in the form of an apology, however, and it often leads to a recurrent act of violence.

The aforementioned lyric from “Work” speaks to a few more important issues worthy of discussion. Notably, Rihanna first asserts her agency by noting a lack of satisfaction with the way she has been touched. We can also interpret this observation as a potential critique, that she is effectively saying that she has not had pleasurable experiences with regards to being touched. Perhaps she is also letting listeners know that she did not consent to the violence visited upon her by Brown, that she did not comply with or “provoke” his violent action. Something in the way she words the above lyrics suggests that she wants to make clear her resistance, that she is not what Foucault calls a “docile body” (135), subjected to the abuses of others. “Nobody touch me in the right way” tells us a lot about what Rihanna longs for rather than rendering her tainted by abusive acts. She also

speaks to the recurring theme of the troublesome and pleasurable aspects of touch link that she sang about in "S&M."

The Pleasure of Pain?

In her hit song "S&M," Rihanna appears at first blush to be singing about sex, but, upon closer inspection, alternate interpretations emerge. The first verse begins with the lyric "Feels so good being bad, / There's no way I'm turning back. / Now the pain is for pleasure / 'Cause nothing can measure." We can extrapolate from this lyric that what seems like a song about sex is more broadly about the simultaneously pleasurable and painful aspects of any romantic relationship, particularly hers, situated under the harsh glare of the celebrity spotlight. We can also see that Rihanna may be processing her romance with Brown through the provocative perspective of what many consider kinky sex. By doing so, Rihanna reminds consumers of what they are socialized to at once normalize and deny: black women's sexuality.

That Rihanna references a pain that is pleasurable hints at the way in which she has repurposed her pain for pleasure, as experienced through material gain or profits from record sales, or through the act of owning all of her experiences (the good, bad, and ugly), truth-telling in such a way that it evokes empowerment. Lyrics such as "Now the pain is for pleasure" appear to be double entendres, allowing Rihanna to reference the failure of her past relationship and the costs of abuse, the way one's sexual agency can be recuperated through the subversive act of sexual play. When Rihanna sings sexually assertive lyrics and ideas, she can be read as reclaiming space for black women to own their own bodies and to celebrate their sexual selves. A complicated example appears in the chorus: "Sticks and stones may break my bones, / But chains and whips excite me." While Rihanna runs the risk of trivializing the physical injuries one can acquire during acts of interpersonal violence, she also pushes back on black respectability politics and the continued pressure to regulate black women's bodies and sexualities.

In many ways, we can link Rihanna's "S&M" and her depiction of ostensibly liberated black female sexuality to Tina Turner's depiction of her own sexuality in her autobiography, *I, Tina*. As hooks notes, Turner "presents a sexualized portrait of herself – providing a narrative that is centrally 'sexual confession'" (66). This image contrasts with that of a virtuous and innocent woman. Rather than reconcile these seeming incompatibilities, Turner creates an uneasy marriage between pain and pleasure: "Well, it hurt so bad[.] [...] I was just dying[.] [...] But I did it for love. The pain was excruciating; but I loved him and he loved me, and that made the pain less – Everything was right. So it was beautiful" (qtd. in hooks 66). Following Turner, Rihanna's "sexual confessional" in "S&M" seems strangely similar – "Feels so good being bad." Perhaps both Turner and Rihanna, separated by several decades, are simply continuing the project of black liberation and sexual freedom. As survivors of different forms of violence, the two singer-celebrities perhaps incorporate these confessions, albeit contradictory ones, into their music so as to recuperate parts of themselves lost in the wake of trauma. (Equally plausible, perhaps, is that both artists simply perform such lyrics as a playful act of entertainment.) Turner's and Rihanna's music makes clear that the entanglement of pleasure and pain is a messy one. Enjoying autonomy in the aftermath of violence and trauma can prove particularly challenging and is thus all the more important, as evidence of at least partial healing from these wounds and injuries. Rihanna, like Turner, appears to be comfortable profiting from a dynamic in which she regards her own pain and maximizes it for her own gain.

Finding Love in a Hopeless Place

Rihanna's healing, much like any shattering she experienced through the spectacle of violence, was made public through one of her songs released on the heels of that crisis. In 2011, the singer released a collaboration with Calvin Harris titled "We Found Love." Speculations persisted about how well Rihanna was recovering or recuperating from the incidence of violence; many, however, seemed caught up in the celebrity-singer's impression management, worried that she was

adversely impacting her young fans. Few public discourses created space to acknowledge the extent to which many of these young fans would recognize their own realities in that of Rihanna. Although the media muddies the line between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality, many young viewers might have felt less isolated in the moment that they saw themselves in Rihanna or felt addressed in her songs. They, too, could take her new single's title to heart by finding love in a hopeless place. Any speculations about the adverse impact on young fans failed to fully consider the demands placed on those who have survived violence and its attendant silence, the work of recuperating from such trauma, which often includes shattering one's own silence as well as that of families, communities, and societies. Rihanna's experiences, and then her lyrics, provided a way for young girls to avoid the trap of a discourse that will not protect them. Young girls who become victims of violence will know to heed Audre Lorde's prescient warning: "My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you" (41).

Conclusion: On the Importance of Shattering the Silence of Violence

Over the course of her career, but particularly within the past decade or so, Rihanna has not only popularized but also reinvented herself. By doing so, she has provided a space for more public discussions of gender and sexual violence, of what it means (and looks like) to be a survivor. She sings about the silence of violence as it relates to the lacuna created in the absence of support. One of the enduring concerns about Rihanna relates to her visibility (if not hypervisibility), her powerful and empowered embrace of her sexuality, and her impact on young fans. While this impact might be speculatively harmful to those audiences who find her lyrics triggering, her lyrics, conversely, can work to counter any sense of isolation that victims feel amidst the silence of violence. In this way, Rihanna has extended the path paved in previous generations by women put in compromising positions by men who commit violence. By sharing her truth, Rihanna makes herself more accessible to those who view her as exceptional rather than as

everyday. Perhaps her fans, and even some of her critics, can relate to her moment of crisis. Perhaps the popularity of this celebrity and her music punctures the silence and encourages people to open up and share their stories of survival, to effectively and compassionately listen to those who are “telling to live.”

Constantly armoring up for the world encourages men towards the violence researchers empirically observe in the social world. Yet the prevalence of everyday violence hides in plain sight. Consider that, despite the constant surveillance of the Panopticon that is popular culture and social media, Rihanna found herself in a lacuna that failed to capture the moments preceding her crisis, yet those instruments of surveillance conveniently emerged afterwards to photograph and document her and the abuse she suffered. Rihanna utilizes her talents to talk back to myths and distorted images of black women. Her music affords her this power which can be seen as in service of social justice for all victims of violence. Seeing Rihanna in the context of violence allows us to also see her in the space of agency, as a survivor who has shattered stereotypes about what it means to be a celebrity target of interpersonal (and other forms of) violence. She shattered the silence that surrounds violence, the myth that a celebrity lacks humanity and vulnerability, and the idea that lovers, friends, and family cannot also be perpetrators.

Rihanna's lyrics and life experiences remind us not only of the importance of making more resources available, affordable, and accessible for victims of violence, but also of carving out spaces in social life for people to honestly share their direct and indirect experiences with violence. Doing so will also shatter the silence that surrounds violence, conceals violence's many contours, and diminishes or minimizes violence's adverse effects. In many ways, Rihanna's lyrical references to victimization and survivorhood help narrate a way out of “hopeless places,” a way of encouraging victims of violence to find needed resources and supportive communities. While Rihanna seemed initially shattered – if only because she was surprised by the violence itself or perhaps the publicity

of it all – we might now finally apprehend that shattering not as a shattering of the self but as a shattering of the silence of violence.



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