

“Where Them Bloggers At?”: Reflections on Rihanna, Accountability, and Survivor Subjectivity

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Through objectification—the process by which people are dehumanized, made ghostlike, given the status of Other—an image created by the oppressor replaces the actual being. The actual being is then denied speech, denied self-definition, self-realization; and overarching all this, denied selfhood—which is after all the point of objectification.—Michelle Cliff (1990)

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, DESPITE ITS BRAND, IS USUALLY NOT CONSTRAINED TO A domestic sphere or a zone of privacy.¹ It spills over the tenuous boundaries of an abusive relationship, implicating a public who share a knowing, witness the shadows, or sustain the consequences from the violence. Bound to a situation they cannot control, others often attempt to manage the disquiet of domestic violence by crafting overly confident explanations about the relationship and investing in the comfort of a coherent narrative about something that defiantly resists coherence. People who share community with individuals within an abusive relationship tend to provide the most primary and impactful response. Yet their own biases, premises, and needs frequently drive their evaluations and choices, which puts demands on how the principal target of violence and the person responsible for a pattern of violence are defined and narrated. How can survivors of domestic violence lay claim to the subjective accounts of their own lives as they appeal to their communities for support and repair? How can a community that mobilizes for an intervention create the testimonial space that survivors need to articulate complicated, messy, and contradictory descriptions of their experiences? Moreover, how are community-based accountability efforts imagined in scenarios with survivors who are vulnerable to being evaluated through a prism of historically rooted and institutionally reinforced discourses about the impossibility of their violability?²

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Consider the fervent public response to the February 2009 news that Chris Brown had brutally assaulted his girlfriend, Rihanna, and abandoned her in a car on the side of the road on the night before their scheduled televised performance at the Grammy Awards. The online media quickly and extensively covered the event. They rushed to capitalize on a potential scandal between two young, beautiful, black, and famous pop stars. This sensationalist coverage inadvertently created an almost unprecedented opportunity for a broad-based, prolonged, and well-archived discussion about domestic violence.³ As a regular reader of celebrity and political blogs, I followed these discussions with special attention to the actions discussants believed Chris Brown should take to account for his apparent involvement in the violence. However, in the ongoing online commentary and debate about the relationship between Brown and Rihanna, the focus stubbornly remains on Rihanna. Specifically, discussions seemed fixated on the theme of *Rihanna's* accountability. What had she done to provoke Brown that night? What is she teaching girls about staying in abusive relationships? Why isn't she prosecuting her abusive boyfriend? How could she collaborate with a rapper known for explicitly misogynistic lyrics? What kind of treatment does she expect when she admits to enjoying BDSM (erotic bondage and discipline)? Feminist, political, black, and mainstream celebrity blogs demanded that Rihanna account for "her role" in what happened, "her responsibility" to young women, and "her respect" for herself as a black woman and survivor of domestic violence. As Rihanna's choices came under the evaluative glare of the public and paparazzi, accountability for the survivor, not the abuser, was much more compelling to online investigators. I suspect that offline sources mirrored that focus.

The following reflection concentrates on how the online arena of blogs and YouTube interpreted Rihanna's experience of violence, her persona, and her choices, as well as how an online community of invested spectators imagined and pursued the project of accountability. Drawing on Rihanna's November 2009 interview on "20/20," which circulated on YouTube and blogs,⁴ on her more casual Twitter commentary, and on performative statements via her artistic choices for representing ideas about gendered violence, I explore how she attempted to communicate her narrative about her relationship and her views on accountability. I look as well at whether her attempt to transition from physical evidence *for* a discourse to active subject *within* the discourse was possible in the context of celebrity culture, popular media, and the dynamics of racism and sexism. Perhaps an examination of this unusually public exchange about domestic violence will illuminate the expectations placed on domestic violence survivors in the everyday, offline world.

Online reactions as a record of genuine public sentiment could perhaps be dismissed because those who comment on blogs have a notoriously provocative reputation or because the broad public audiences generating these online exchanges were strangers to Rihanna and Brown. They do stretch what we usually imagine as "community." Yet the comments and commentary about Rihanna used here are consistent with racial and sexual political histories and dynamics through

which this discourse is galvanized. Dismissing the views of blog respondents as antisocial or depraved elements creates a false sense of superiority for offline commentators. Though the latter may not express their beliefs as frankly as they might under circumstances of online anonymity, their reasoning is embedded in the same political framework.⁵ The public intuition about accountability found in many of these discourses, I contend, roughly reflects the premises and logic that offline, more intimate communities employ when demanding accountability for gendered violence.

Black Women's Vulnerability and Violability

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm so hard

So hard, so hard, so hard, so hard.—“Hard,” performed by Rihanna

Two weeks after the Grammys, “TMZ” (2009), a popular celebrity blog with a knack for acquiring and posting the private legal documents of celebrities online, published a close-up photo of Rihanna that revealed significant injuries to her face. The Los Angeles Police Department took the photo when gathering evidence to criminally prosecute Brown. Two police officers were placed on administrative leave while they were investigated for selling the photo to “TMZ” (Blankstein and Winston, 2009). A powerful visual representation of the level of injury that Rihanna sustained from Brown, the photo’s web publication was widely shared and republished, escalating what was already an animated Internet-based discourse about “what really happened.” Judgments about the moral character and possible motives of Rihanna and Brown, as well as attitudes toward domestic violence, quickly proliferated on a broad spectrum of blogs with diverse audiences and distinct missions.

When the physical evidence of Rihanna’s face—wounded, exposed, eyes closed—was made widely accessible through relentless commercial transactions, insatiable celebrity consumption, and the mass online media, what was usually imagined as a closed door event became alarmingly public. After the Grammys, speculation about Brown’s assault of Rihanna advanced. Jay Smooth, editor of the “Ill Doctrine” hip hop blog, posted a YouTube video of an interview he had conducted with Elizabeth Mendez Berry. She had authored a 2005 *Vibe Magazine* article, “Love Hurts,” about domestic violence in the hip-hop community. In the video, Berry reflected on the reaction to the news of violence within Brown’s and Rihanna’s relationship, noting:

What really saddened me was the degree to which, within hip hop, R&B, and the so-called urban community, there was a really strong backlash not against Chris Brown, but against Rihanna. The fact that we minimize this, the fact that we’re so unwilling to accept the possibility that maybe she didn’t deserve something like that—that’s something that really struck me (Smooth, 2009).

Berry's assessment was consistent with my review of the comments section on black celebrity gossip blogs ("The YBF," "Bossip," and "Urban Daily," among others), where a common response asserted that Rihanna must have provoked Brown—she *must* have hit him first—and women who hit men should not cry foul and should not be considered victims when they are hit back (Tami, 2009). Such assertions were not necessarily framed as a position that explicitly favored violence against women; bloggers and their communities of commenters tried to rationalize the sometimes vicious statements as rooted in issue of fairness and the existence of a double standard for women and men. Relying on speculation, many commenters seemed remarkably certain that Brown could not have behaved violently without cause; there had to be more to the story. Black celebrity blogs covered a statement released by the National Coalition for Men (NCFM), a "men's rights" organization, which suggested that Rihanna should "woman up" and admit that she had assaulted Chris Brown first.⁶ Commenters who condemned domestic violence on these blogs seldom attacked Brown's character and sometimes expressed the hope that he would seek help. However, comments asserting that Rihanna deserved to be beaten were usually laced with contempt and hostility. In other words, not only was she "held accountable"⁷ for provoking the violence she endured, the potential for transformative possibility that Brown's critics often extended to him was not, in turn, proffered by critics of Rihanna. Instead, her failings were characterized as *intrinsic* to her disposition.

Perceived "innocence" and racialized sexism also helped to drive this discursive pattern. Brown's image was that of an approachable black boy on the block who youthfully idolized Michael Jackson and wore bow ties. In contrast, Rihanna, the "supposed victim," was transitioning from a sweetheart image into a black woman performer who was increasingly forward with her sexuality. Since she hailed from Barbados, public consumption of her image was mapped onto a specific political trajectory of race, sexuality, and conquest. Patrice Elizabeth Grell Yursik, the Trinidadian editor of "Afrobella," a black beauty and culture blog, examines this aspect in the comment sections of celebrity blogs:

Take a gander at any of the popular gossip blogs right now, and read those comments if you want to feel your blood pressure rise. I'm not about to link to any of the posts that *really* got my goat, but I need to get this off my chest. As a proud Trinidadian woman, a West Indian woman, a woman from the islands ... I do *not* appreciate the stereotypes that are being thrown around by commenters seeking to condone or explain this act of violence. I'm seeing all kinds of nonsense. And I quote:

"He better watch himself, those island women are crazy."

"Who didn't tell chris that island women were nutso?"

"Caribbean women are crazy, she probably cut him."

"That island b***h probably put some roots on him."

“Chris Brown laying the *smackdown* on Caribbean joints. [frank lucas voice]. My ni**a!” ...

Where do these kinds of twisted interpretations and stereotypes even begin? When did we get to this point, where we instantly blame the victim (Yursik, 2009)?

Within the United States, Afro-Caribbean women are constructed through a prism of violent ideologies that are rooted in historical processes of British colonial expansion and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and reinforced through contemporary U.S. imperial interests and transnational tourist industries in the Caribbean and Latin America. Jacqui Alexander (1996) argues that the sexual commodification of blackness drives the white-dominated Bahamian tourist industry. In fact, “white imperial tourism would not be complete without eroticized blackness. European fantasies of colonial conquest, the exotic, the erotic, the dark, the primitive, of danger, dread, and desire all converge here on virgin beaches and aquamarine waters, enabled by Black state managers and their white multinational counterparts.” Americans, in turn, consume these cultural scripts that define Afro-Caribbean women as “out of control,” “crazy,” and “dangerous.” This manufactures justifications for racialized, gendered violence and encourages patriarchal dominance over black women from the West Indies.⁸ Black people in the United States are not immune from colluding in these transnational dynamics of gendered violence. Indeed, as we might infer from the last blog comment that Yursik cites, camaraderie among black American males can be forged through an affirmation of this violence. Though the material circumstances of Rihanna’s life are radically different from those of most Afro-Caribbean immigrant women in the United States, her resources did not prevent her public persona from being haunted by these archetypal stereotypes of “island women,” which served as a paradigm for interpreting her experience of domestic violence.

Black women who have survived violence exist within a dominant conceptual space that makes it difficult for them to easily occupy the status of “victim.” Some of these reactions were described by many feminist bloggers as classic “victim-blaming,” which does not necessarily require a particular racialized context to proliferate. The insistence that Rihanna caused this violence, however, is consistent with the conceptualization of the vulnerability of black women in the U.S. cultural imaginary. Accounts of black women who have been blamed and subsequently criminalized and pathologized for experiencing and/or resisting violence are numerous and diverse. Among the high-profile examples are: Joan Little, who was prosecuted in 1975 for killing a prison guard who tried to rape her; the New Jersey 7, a group of black lesbians who were attacked in New York’s West Village and prosecuted for defending themselves; Angel Rosenthal, a teenage black girl in Seattle who was punched in the face by a police officer and was subsequently pressured to apologize to him; and Janice Wells, a Georgia woman who police

officers tasered for failing to name the person they believed had perpetrated domestic violence against her. In these cases, which occurred in complex circumstances and social conditions, black women were regarded as culpable instigators of their own violence rather than as victims of gendered assault that deserved support and respect. Unlike those women, Rihanna had access to resources that helped her to navigate around the potential consequences of this level of censure. Still, the blog responses indicate that black women are vulnerable in a deeply *contested* space that creates a precarious tension in the process of parsing what happened within an abusive relationship and determining who is accountable for what. Characterizing this dynamic as “victim-blaming,” which salvages the notion of a “victim” but contends that the victim enabled the violence, misses a key point. Black women who are victims of violence are not simply accused of bringing it upon themselves, they are dis-positioned as its *perpetrator*.

The second major single from Rihanna’s *Rated R* album (released nine months after she was beaten by Brown) was “Hard” (Nash, 2009). This song claims a space of feminine toughness in the face of media backlash that rejected the idea that she could be a “victim” of violence. The song ironically suggests that black women would have to be *hard*, or impervious to others’ attacks and devoted to one’s self worth, in order to retain the resilience necessary to defend their own narratives of their victimization. “Hard” can be read as Rihanna’s declaration of victory over such discourses. However, others used it as an opportunity to ridicule her for being victimized. For example, the top 10 results in a Facebook (2011) search of “Rihanna Chris Brown” yields pages that almost uniformly denigrate Rihanna. Many of them use “Hard” to ridicule and challenge the idea of her vulnerability. The second-largest page, with over 40,000 non-anonymous “likes,” is entitled “If Rihanna is so hard, why didn’t she knock Chris Brown out?” Seemingly, when black women are violated, their experiences of it and testimonies of resilience and resistance are vulnerable to politics that define their actions as instigating the violence. Black women’s attempt to offer subjective accounts of surviving violence are corrupted by this distorting pattern in which others can only see blame in the space of black women’s experiences and articulations of their victimization, survival, and resilience.

Victim Blaming and Victim Displacing

We were criminals.

As we were burning,

The world called the police.— “Fire Bomb,” performed by Rihanna

Some black and mainstream celebrity gossip bloggers showed more willingness to disparage Chris Brown, with commenters on these blogs registering a mixed bag of opinions. Cuban-American blogger, Perez Hilton of *PerezHilton.com*, whose site hovers around the top of the list of high-traffic celebrity gossip blogs, amplified his condemnation of Brown by nicknaming him “Chris Beat-Her-Down” and referring

to him as a “monster” (Hilton, 2009a). Hilton’s characterizations emphasized the need for the public to take Brown’s violence seriously, but they cannot be severed from the dominant, violent, racialized narratives that define black masculinity through the tropes of aggression and sub-humanness. Classifying Brown as a “monster” creates an almost non-negotiable framework for Rihanna because the unspoken expectation is that people who are attacked by *monsters* should pursue the most severe—even violent—punishment possible.⁹ If survivors fail to endorse this level of punishment, they presumably collude with the violence and are nearly as guilty as the perpetrator. This logic puts Rihanna’s persona in a bind: if she does not leave the relationship, engage the criminal justice system, and fully participate in the state’s prosecution of Brown, others will presume that she implicitly endorses his violent actions, making her no longer credible or deserving of support. This is not an unusual dynamic for survivors who are pressured into plans of action that stem from others’ shock, anger, and anxiety about their lack of control over the situation, rather than the needs or priorities that survivors articulate. Rihanna’s case is remarkable because this dynamic was open to public participation and public witness on a mass scale. When reports appeared that Rihanna had reunited with Brown a few weeks after the assault, and that she had resisted cooperating with the Los Angeles district attorney’s office in the prosecution of Brown, a second wave of backlash followed. Hilton protested,

Okay, Rihanna, we really felt for you when this whole mess erupted. But you’re sort of making it hard to continue to love you! First, we hear you’re back together with your abuser, Chris Brown. Then, we hear you are recording a duet with *Beat Her Down*. And, now we’re hearing that you don’t want to speak in court if asked to testify. Ridiculous! *Beat Her Down*’s lawyer, Mark Geragos, has requested a meeting with the judge in his assault case to discuss Rihanna’s possible silence in the courtroom. Rihanna’s attorney, Donald Etra, is in agreement with the request, both lawyers believing that Rihanna’s position was compromised when her involvement in the case and other information leaked, and that she should no longer be subjected to public scrutiny. Oh come on, Rihanna! You’re setting a bad example (Hilton, 2009b)!!!

Hilton, Rihanna’s most influential blog-based advocate, made it clear in this post and others that his support was predicated on the presumption that she would leave the relationship and engage the criminal justice system as a public demonstration of taking the situation seriously. That would apparently satisfy his interpretation of justice, but not necessarily hers. Other bloggers and commenters on celebrity gossip blogs likewise strongly advocated for Rihanna to participate in Brown’s prosecution.

The pressure for Rihanna to endorse the criminalization of Brown was defended not just as a call for justice, but as an act of public messaging against domestic violence, whereby Rihanna, as a popular and young artist, could lead by example.

Rihanna's endorsement of Brown's prosecution was conflated with a public and official stand against domestic violence that could potentially influence other young women, so Rihanna was held publicly accountable for hesitating to contribute to the prosecution. The district attorney's office prosecuted Brown and Rihanna ultimately participated in that process. We do not know why she did so, how she navigated within the demands of prosecution, or if she still resisted to some extent. We do know that, after cooperating with the police, the confidential photo of her wounded face taken by police officers was sold to a gossip site and went "viral." Rihanna said the court-mandated protection order forced *her* to stay 50 yards away from Brown, which disrupted her professional work. In her words, this created a "spectacle" (Brown and Surdin, 2009; PopularMusicWorld, 2009a). Meanwhile, Brown satisfied his sentence of community service and completed a 52-week domestic violence course, the certificate for which he shared publicly through his twitter account (Brown, 2010). Many commenters on various celebrity blogs regarded Brown's completion of his sentence as a sign that he had taken his actions "seriously," that he had officially accounted for his guilt, and that the challenge for everyone else was to accept this state-sanctioned resolution of his acts of violence ("YBF," 2010; Morrissey, 2010). Brown should be able to publicly demonstrate regret for his actions as evidence of his transformation. For these commenters, however, the most trusted source for gauging his seriousness about accountability was not Rihanna, but the state. Meanwhile, after being shamed and pressured into cooperating with the criminal justice system, the institution *injured* Rihanna, a fact that received very little notice and discussion on the mainstream feminist and gossip blogs covering the story. This is unsurprising, as public reliance on the police, prosecution, and incarceration as the most legitimate infrastructure for accountability rarely accounts for the way in which these systems can stigmatize, or *criminalize*, survivors of violence, depending on their access to resources and social capital.

The most intense online pushback came from Rihanna's temporary decision to remain with Chris Brown soon after the assault (Leonard, 2009). Hortense Smith, a writer for "Jezebel," a feminist celebrity blog, recounted a sampling of the comments on the mainstream gossip blog, "Oh No They Didn't":

i probably won't ever look at them the same again now.
at least rihanna's career had a chance, but that just flew out the window.
fuck em both! he needs to hit her ass again! if she didn't learn the first time
If this is true I'm not gonna feel sorry for her when he hits her again
it's really upsetting to me how many people are blaming rihanna, calling
her stupid etc. it's not as simple as getting up and leaving. there's a lot
more to it than that.
I'm sorry but I no longer feel sorry for her, because she's going right back
to the person who put her in that situation

I feel worse for her now. So many women don't have the strength to remove themselves from abusive situations. That makes me incredibly, incredibly sad (Smith, 2009).

Smith characterizes these comments as "victim blaming," yet, some of these sentiments do not blame her as much as they express a high level of personal frustration and hopelessness about her choice. Coverage in "Bossip," a black celebrity blog, reflected a similar tension. (It had previously published many of the posts that criticized Brown.) After calling Rihanna's decision to return to Brown "dumb," it surveyed others on the question. Most agreed with the statement that she was "a poor example of a young black woman" (Bossip Staff, 2009a). "Bossip" editors endorsed Oprah Winfrey's public judgment:

"Let me tell you why she got back with him, in my opinion," Winfrey said. "If you go back with a man who hits you, it is because you don't feel you're worthy of being with a man who won't."

Winfrey said returning to an abusive relationship boils down to how the victim feels about herself. If you were raised right, she said, "and think you are a wonderful person, somebody hitting you is really offensive to you" (Bossip Staff, 2009b).

Again, while some of this discussion clearly belittles Rihanna, it also appeals to a kind of black sexual politics of respectability (Higginbotham, 1993) that reveals Winfrey's and others' anxieties about what Rihanna's choices communicate to others about black women and their worth.

Some writers on feminist (likely white-dominated)¹⁰ blogs critiqued this as "victim-blaming." It was unfair, they said, to expect Rihanna to leave the relationship. Any discussion about her reasons for staying should therefore be shut down. For example, on the blog "Pandagon," feminist blogger Amanda Marcotte asserted in frustration that, "a major reason men beat women is because we ask, 'Why doesn't she leave?'" Speculating on why Rihanna may have hesitated to leave, Marcotte (2009) finally concluded, "maybe she's really got one foot out the door. I hope so, for her sake."

Marcotte's management of the question "Why Does Rihanna Stay?" reveals a struggle to position Rihanna within representations of "appropriately" surviving domestic violence. The question inspires definitive judgment by Winfrey, "Bossip," etc., and is leveraged to communicate a larger disciplining claim about black women and self-respect. The scorn in Bossip's commentary demonstrates no real concern for Rihanna as an individual, but instead reflects an agenda about how her choice to stay *looks* and what it *represents*. To say that "Bossip" editors are victim-blaming is imprecise because a victim is barely present in their accusations. Instead, the discussion is victim-*displacing*, disregarding any real acknowledgment of Rihanna's deliberations or recognition of her inner life. Instead, we find a normative judgment

about what she ought to do to satisfy their gendered expectations about righting a wrong.

Another red flag in Marcotte's discussion is that Rihanna's reasons for staying are discounted on the grounds that it helps to legitimize domestic violence. The perennial question of why women stay is calcified with unspoken and unacknowledged premises that empower domestic violence, as well as with elements of frustration, judgment, and despair, rather than genuine curiosity. Also, partly due to sexism, the media's focus on Rihanna's choices greatly overwhelmed any sustained discussion of Brown's choices. However, discouraging rather than meaningfully engaging the question of why survivors stay can enact a different kind of politics of respectability, as if asking a question about survivors' choices *necessarily* amounts to their culpability for the violence that they endured. Marcotte admitted to flinching when faced with the question of why women stay. She argues that to avoid succumbing to victim-blaming, survivors would have to be seen as sympathetic as possible. However, while Marcotte recommends against pursuing the question because she believes Rihanna will fail to measure up to the status of sympathetic survivor, she proposes possible motives that *she* would take as reasonable for why Rihanna might stay. Finally, she asserts that she hopes Rihanna has "one foot out the door." Though she advises her readers not to ask why survivors stay, Marcotte proceeds to *answer the question anyway*, ultimately centering her own concerns and hopes rather than anything that has to do with Rihanna's actual needs, desires, or life. Perhaps without realizing it, Marcotte constructs her own map of sympathetic-ness, including the unexamined premise that Rihanna's departure from Brown would be the best thing for her.¹¹

Instead of boldly rejecting the conflation of choice and blame, Marcotte and others attempt to avoid victim-blaming by opposing the discussion about why some survivors remain in abusive relationships for their own expressed political principles, priorities, and trepidation. However, by not intentionally exploring the question, we risk objectifying survivors by rendering invisible and unintelligible their choice-making inside a context of danger and contingent conditions of oppression. Further, the conspicuous lack of race analysis in these blogs' coverage of Rihanna's situation obscures how anti-black racism creates a specific dimension of blame and contempt for black women survivors, making it even more difficult for them to disclose details about their agentic lives. Debates over why women stay is a precarious preoccupation within discussions on domestic violence, but defensively stigmatizing the question displaces survivors' subjectivities and actions, leaving little room for frank and public reflection about the complexity of their choices and narratives.

In a cross-blog debate on the politics of women remaining in abusive relationships, several white feminist bloggers engaged in victim-displacement. Concerning Rihanna's resumed relationship with Chris Brown, Linda Hirshman on the "Slate" blog challenged the notion that feminists should refrain from asking why women

stay. Hirshman (2009a) argues that holding women responsible for their own well-being, and therefore for remaining in abusive relationships, demonstrates a feminist practice that acknowledges their autonomy and capacity to reason.

Drawing upon her experience as a survivor and the testimony of other survivors, feminist political blogger hilzoy (2009a) offered in her “Obsidian Wings” blog a nuanced and interesting explanation of why women sometimes remain with people who abuse them. Hirshman (2009b) refused to engage hilzoy’s good-faith effort to explore the question. Doubting that Hirshman was interested in thinking the question through “from the inside,” hilzoy argued,

I do not think that [Hirshman] tried to understand what might lead people to stay in abusive relationships.... I think — and here I may be wrong — that Hirshman is more interested in using battered women to make a point about certain kinds of feminism than in battered women themselves (hilzoy, 2009b).

Hilzoy’s observation on Hirshman’s political agenda and seeming lack of concern with survivor testimonies resonate with my interpretation of the statements by Perez Hilton, “Bossip,” Winfrey, and the comments from “Oh No They Didn’t.” They express anger, disappointment, and anxiety over Rihanna’s choices, escalating into a downpour of judgments and demands, despite their scant knowledge of the details of her situation. For them, Rihanna is less a subject whose deliberations and actions should be thoughtfully engaged than a conceptual placeholder or symbol through which others define their values, ideas, expectations, and hopes, all of which were triggered by the unsettling fact of domestic violence. In these calls for “accountability” and action, Rihanna as a subject is displaced and replaced by a Rihanna avatar that represents others’ political and personal agendas. The ease with which others subvert her subjectivity is facilitated by the racial and sexual politics of objectification. Fellow “island girl” Blackamazon (2009) reflected on the commentary about Rihanna in her blog, “Having Read the Fine Print”:

That we had to be hypnotizing, or using the island hoodo to even have a man and thus it’s inevitable that if anything happens to us, it’s part of the flavor

That it’s completely acceptable to us that we would have to fight through life and even love

and no one cares about the island girl but about what it means for everybody else.

But island girls don’t actually get to talk bout this.

We just pay for it.

Facets of Rihanna's political status in the United States facilitated the marginalization of her subjective responses and reactions to violence and enhanced others' projections of their own expectations in its place. Yet her situation remained unusual because she was positioned in the public sphere as a person of influence who could potentially create testimony about her experience as a survivor of domestic violence via her global access to news media, social media, and outlets for pop art expression. I will now turn to her testimony, exploring conceptualizations of her accountability in circumstances of violence and celebrity.

Accountability, Community, and Contradiction

I just want to set you on fire

So I won't have to burn alone

Then you'll know where I'm coming from— Rihanna, "Fire Bomb"

As members of the Chicago-based Females United for Action (FUFA), Alex Pates, 15, and Ansheera Ace Hilliard, 17, published a nuanced analysis of the media coverage of domestic violence in the context of Rihanna's and Chris Brown's relationship on the *Chicago Tribune* online forum, "Exploring Race." Not much younger than 21-year-old Rihanna, they envisioned a more survivor-driven discourse. In their words,

Every time there is a story like this we never hear anything from the survivor's point of view. We really want to know how this is affecting Rihanna. What is life like for her now? We feel like in situations like this the young woman of color is always left out and forgotten about and more likely than not the blame is put on her. She is put to the side and told to get on with her life. But that is not so simple.

There are scars that will never heal and wounds that will never close. We will probably never even get to sympathize with her. We want there to be something out there that tells the story from the perspective of the survivor (Pates and Hilliard, 2009).

Rihanna's first-hand account appeared in a November 2009 interview with Diane Sawyer on "20/20." It was republished on the YouTube PopularMusicWorld channel and elsewhere.¹² Appearing cool and mostly composed in a white dress that conveyed toughness through its sharp, geometric cut, and softness via downy fabric with fur accents, Rihanna reviewed details of her relationship with Brown and carefully reached for narratives that could sustain her complex views concerning accountability. Asked by Sawyer whether she thought she would stay with Brown, she spoke to her responsibility to her young female fans:

It was confusing for me. I was attached by love, but I wasn't thinking about the reality of the situation. I felt like, I built this empire, and the

man that I love beat me, and because I'm going back, I'm going to lose it? No. And even *then*, you see, you start lying to yourself again. I felt, nah, that's selfish, I can't think like that. That's selfish, what if I *am* supposed to help him? But when I realized that my selfish decision for love could result in some young girl gettin' killed.... I could not be easy with that part. I couldn't be held responsible for telling them to go back. Even if Chris never hit me again, who's to say that their boyfriend won't? Who's to say that they won't kill these girls? These are *young* girls and I could not.... I just didn't realize [her voice breaking slightly] how much of an impact I had on these girls' lives until that happened. It was a wakeup call. It was a wakeup call for me big time (PopularMusicWorld, 2009b).

Rihanna here seems to recount a process of discerning the most ethical course of action given the pressure of being in love with, and abused by, the same person. *Returning* to Brown meant rejecting the idea that her career should take precedence over his well-being (a source of worry given his emotional reaction to the public backlash against him). *Leaving* him meant rejecting the idea that her love for him should take precedence over the potential impact her choices might have on young fans. Any idea that she should be held responsible for Brown's violence she rejects as based on ignorance; nevertheless, she identifies a sense of obligation to others through her roles as (ex)girlfriend and superstar role model. Some liberal feminists may critique the notion that Rihanna's concern for the safety of others, rather than for herself, drove her decision not to remain in the relationship. When women unreflectively deprioritize their own needs and fail to be motivated by their own self-regard, there are echoes of the patriarchal acculturation of women.

Although I would take issue with the idea that Rihanna should be held responsible for the abusive relationships of others, I contend that the dynamic between responsibility to her fans and transformative choice-making for her own life is an instructive process worth unpacking. In the confusion over how to do the right thing given the tension of competing needs (including her own) in the disorienting context of domestic violence, the alarm Rihanna expresses about the impact of her choices on other women appears to operate as a *clarifying* opportunity, plainly spelling out "the reality" of the situation in which she found herself. However, she lands on domestic violence's real potential for fatal consequences only when she brings her attention to the relationships of young survivors who follow her every move. In the following exchange, her concern for other survivors is an enabling frame for understanding her own relationship:

Sawyer: So many people said, she always seemed like the least likely person to be in a situation where that would happen. She always seemed strong....

Rihanna: I *am* strong. This happened to *me*. I didn't cause this. I didn't do it. This happened to me and it can happen to anybody. And I'm *glad* it happened to me.

Because now I can help young girls when they go through it. I'll say to any young girl who's going through domestic violence: don't react off of love. Eff love. Come out of the situation and look at it third person, for what it really is, and then make your decision. Because love is so blind... (PopularMusicWorld, 2009c).

Rihanna not only expresses worry about other survivors, she also *identifies* with them. Establishing her combination of strength and vulnerability—both global pop star exuding personal and sexual power *and* woman victimized by common gendered violence—facilitates solidarity between Rihanna and other survivors, while recognizing her amplified position can be leveraged as a model of a process of survival. Importantly, this model is not only for “young girls,” but also for *herself*. Read together, these quotes suggest that it is her regard for and identification with other survivors that enable her to conceptually “come out of the situation,” and evaluate it from the “third person,” which impacted her appraisal of her relationship with Brown. I read her as enacting a temporary and productive suspension of self-interest, while sorting out the emotional chaos caused by domestic violence. She employs empathy, community, and a robust sense of responsibility to others to do the labor of resolving ethical priorities and making the right choices. I submit that this process is an important kind of “community accountability,” in which Rihanna defines a community of survivors to which she belongs, and holds herself accountable to that community as a strategy to clarify and direct her choices in a context of loss and mayhem.

Other forces impelled Rihanna not to return to Chris Brown. As Pates and Hilliard (2009) note, “The *LA Times* recently reported that Rihanna had the reputation of representing ‘something very positive and in particular a strong female role model, and when she is associated with a situation like this it can have an impact.’ They quoted a marketing executive as predicting that companies are likely to shun her in the future.” In the “20/20” interview, Rihanna rationalized the threat that corporate sponsors could abandon her for staying with Brown, the potential damage to her public image, and the possible impact on profit margins:

Sawyer (in voice-over): Her corporate sponsors have been loyal amid speculation that they put pressure on her not to go back to an abuser.

Rihanna: I don't know that for sure, but it's normal for a corporate company like that to be concerned about my decision. So after I start saying it's okay to get beat up and go back and who cares if you die... [shakes head]. If I was a corporate company, I wouldn't want that either (PopularMusicWorld, 2009c).

Due to reports that she had reconciled with Brown, her endorsement contracts with Cover Girl, Gucci, and Gillette were in danger of not being renewed (Wheeler, 2009). Rihanna's evaluation of the reaction of corporate sponsors who profit from a carefully constructed and marketed version of “Rihanna” can be read in numerous ways. Pates and Hilliard (2009) note that before releasing a stream of hit pop records, she had built her early career primarily through endorsements.

By allowing corporate sponsors to influence choices related to her intimate life, she pragmatically protects her own interests by safeguarding a sizeable source of income and a core element of her pop stardom. However, in this exchange, she does not merely confirm that corporate sponsors have an interest in her choice, she affirms that they *should*.

Granting her point that conveying to the public that she does not regard her life as worthy of respect or care poses some problems, the pressure from corporate sponsors did not stem from an ethical concern about what her actions communicate to others. Their focus is on what they communicate to their *customers*, who may react negatively toward their products (“Rihanna” as product and, by extension, the products she endorses), which could undermine the profitability of both. Rihanna’s receptiveness to corporate sanction of her relationship choices helps to legitimize the privatization of survivorship in public space, giving corporations the power to drive our conception of appropriate actions for survivors of domestic violence.¹³ The image of a “survivor” that corporations are willing to purchase and sell is that of a person who would *leave* the relationship, institutionally reinforcing the widely unexamined premise that doing so is the only respectable option. Rihanna’s corporate sponsors would likely endorse a performance of “seriousness about domestic violence” by backing her participation in the prosecution of Brown. By endorsing and financially rewarding only “socially acceptable,” profitable choices, corporations define and discipline the public imaginary about acceptable models of survivorship.

Despite the troubling implications, it is difficult to imagine how she could have meaningfully challenged corporate manipulation while protecting her career and brand. In the interview, she attempts to reconcile her desire to defend her brand with doing what she thinks is ethically right. Although nothing in the interview suggest that she literally thought that it was “okay to get beat up” and she did not “care if she died,” she takes on the responsibility of this exaggerated messaging, which neatly aligns corporate demands and ethical conclusions about what ought to be done. She seems to be trying to meet and manage the needs of Rihanna as a subject and survivor and “Rihanna” as a corporate trademark, needs that may not always be reconcilable. This tension echoes the struggle of some survivors to attend to their own needs while also managing the messaging about their situation to others, when shame or the protection of one’s reputation can be overwhelming factors.

Rihanna’s interview responses were largely *prescriptive* as she explored what she owed to whom and why, but her artistic responses were more *descriptive*. In the latter platform, she created a public commentary on the nuances of domestic violence. These artistic commentaries tended to unnerve feminist and celebrity bloggers. “Russian Roulette,” her first single from *Rated R* (Ne-Yo, 2009), features an S&M-inspired cover photo of her apparently wrapped in barbed wire, holding a chain, and sporting a modernized leather-looking eye patch. Among the lyrics are these:

*And you can see my heart beating
 You can see it through my chest
 And I'm terrified but I'm not leaving
 Know that I must pass this test
 So just pull the trigger*

This striking description depicts what it might feel like when somebody participates in a relationship that could end their life, as well as the terror of realizing that one is in over one's head. Perez Hilton panned it for being "underwhelming"; on "Jezebel," Anna North criticized it for being "dangerous" and "creepy." Both questioned whether it was a wise comeback single (Hilton, 2009c; North, 2009a). The song upset North, who tried to accommodate the idea that the song described an experience, but questioned whether the choice to produce the song had anything to do with Rihanna. The inconsistency between "Russian Roulette" and a song North imagined a survivor of domestic violence should release, it seems, could only be explained if Rihanna were not in control.

An extended version of this discursive tension unfolded in the reaction to "Love the Way You Lie," Rihanna's music and video collaboration with Eminem (Mathers et al., 2010). Actor Dominic Monaghan, who was featured in the video, described the song as "essentially a look at the relationship that Eminem was in with his wife, Kim" (Kaufman, 2010), in reference to reports that Eminem battered Kim when they were together. Eminem's notoriously graphic descriptions of violence against women in his songs have been widely acknowledged, critiqued, and defended over the course of his career. Consequently, Rihanna's collaboration with him after her ordeal with Brown was perceived as provocative. She said this collaboration was something she "needed" to do:

It's something that, you know, [Eminem and I have] both experienced, you know, on different sides, different ends of the table.... It just was authentic. It was real. It was believable for us to do a record like that, but it was also something that needed to be done, and the way he did it was so clever. He pretty much just broke down the cycle of domestic violence, and it's something that a lot of people don't have a lot of insight on, so this song is a really, really powerful song, and it touches a lot of people (Kaufman, 2010).

Rihanna presumably performs the role of the primary target of violence within the abusive relationship by singing the chorus lyrics:

*Just gonna stand there and watch me burn
 Well that's alright because I like the way it hurts
 Just gonna stand there and watch me cry*

Well that's alright because I love the way you lie

I love the way you lie (Mathers et al., 2010)

Eminem's complicated verses express his emotional state when engaging in violence, including self-doubt, regret, contradiction, and a critique of the relationship discussed in the song. The song was commercially successful, but the sentiment that Rihanna's character would "like" the way the violence hurts and "love" the way the abuser lies to her disappointed many feminists who hoped for a more definitive repudiation of domestic violence from her. Feminist bloggers criticized the video aspect most severely. In their view, it glamorized domestic violence by casting Megan Fox, an actor known for her sex appeal, and by portraying sexual tension in the protagonists' relationship (e.g., Clark-Flory, 2010).

The video did resonate with some survivors. Although they did not concede that Fox's character deserved to be beaten, they argued that her portrayal of fighting back is an important representation of "domestic violence" that is rarely explored by antiviolence feminists. Anticipating that many feminists would not give the song and video the careful analysis they deserved, working-class Chicana blogger, brownfemipower, wrote on her "flipfloppingjoy" blog:

I hope that teh¹⁴ feminists slow down and really think through how they interpret this video and what sort of a reception they give to it. For everything that is deeply fucked up about Eminem—this is still one of the more realistic interpretations of violence in the home I have seen. I don't even know if I can call it domestic violence. At least not how mainstream feminist/anti-DV groups have defined domestic violence. This is the sort of fighting most women I knew (including myself) were a part of. The women I knew, including myself, explicitly refused "domestic violence" or didn't recognize what they were living in as domestic violence—because they fought back. Because they egged on and got some really good hits in. They didn't think they deserved the violence, they didn't think they were victims—they didn't sit on the stairs and cry with the swollen lip like in the public service announcements. They fought back. Or even started it. So it wasn't domestic violence. Or, it wasn't what they'd been *told* was domestic violence.... So many women I know (probably most) will see themselves in this video. See the violence they lived through in this video (brownfemipower, 2010).

Targeting the way in which the video subverts what we have been trained to imagine as "domestic violence," brownfemipower challenges what we imagine authentic survivors are *doing* while in the relationship, recasting "fighting back" and "egging on" while staying in the relationship as one genuine and interesting narrative of survival. Some feminist bloggers took issue with her post, revealing a tension about what kind of survivor actions are acceptable to explore in public

discourse. Specifically, can we make room to consider scenarios in which survivors of domestic violence do not necessarily reject violence, whether it is employed by their partner or by themselves, while still recognizing domestic violence as one defining aspect of the relationship? This complex topic exceeds the bounds of this essay, but several issues deserve further exploration. Rihanna's lyric, "I like the way it hurts," could mean, among numerous possibilities, finding value in nonconsensual physical violence (e.g., hurting the person who sustains the cycle of violence) or pursuing consensual BDSM as a way of safely exploring power and physical stimulation. (Rihanna freely admits enjoying power and pain play in her sex life, motivating some to question the authenticity of her claim to survivorhood; see *Rolling Stone*, 2011.) The use of violence by survivors is complicated in the context of accountability. Connie Burk at the Northwest Network of Bisexual, Trans, Lesbian, and Gay Survivors of Abuse in Seattle has advocated for thoughtfully crafting a conceptual space that can support survivors who have used violence and who want to account for those actions. It would be an alternative to either discounting the fraught and charged context in which survivors enact violence on others, or insisting that, because of the political and material circumstances of domestic violence, a survivor's desire to account for violence is somehow wrongheaded. Sanitizing the concept of survivorship from survivors' complex engagements with violence marginalizes some survivors and forces them into frameworks designed by a domestic violence politics of respectability, ultimately displacing them and their testimonies.

Eminem's work has been subjected to mainstream and feminist critique, generally for his offensive lyrics, but not for promoting inauthentic or imprudent representations of himself. White, once working class, and among the most popular rap stars in the world, Eminem is afforded the privilege of artistic distance, meaning his lyrics are defended as a creative description of an emotional experience, not a literal endorsement of violent actions discussed in his music. Rihanna is afforded no such privilege. As a survivor of domestic violence and a black woman, she tends to be consumed as evidence of a discourse rather than a subjective commentator with political and aesthetic views on the problem of violence.

In 2011, the video for Rihanna's single, "Man Down," portrayed a rape victim who murders her perpetrator in revenge. The character subsequently regrets taking the life of "somebody's son" and panics over having to leave home to escape incarceration. This representation of fatal vengeance transgresses survivor politics of respectability; particularly subversive is the fact that a black, Caribbean woman is the agent of this "bad survivor" action. Paul Porter, a representative of the Parent Television Council, invoked Chris Brown when arguing why "Man Down" should not be aired:

"Man Down" is an inexcusable, shock-only, shoot-and-kill theme song. In my 30 years of viewing BET, I have never witnessed such a cold,

calculated execution of murder in primetime. Viacom's standards and practices department has reached another new low. If Chris Brown shot a woman in his new video and BET premiered it, the world would stop. Rihanna should not get a pass and BET should know better. The video is far from broadcast worthy (Nuñez, 2011).

Here, Porter does not merely condemn the evocative imagery in the video, but disciplines Rihanna as a domestic violence survivor, citing the hypothetical censure of Chris Brown as the reason Rihanna should not "get a pass" for how she represents narratives about violence against women *in general*. Rihanna's identity as a survivor is the reason BET should police her subjective, artistic representations of violence and refuse her air time. Her aesthetic and political interpretations of gendered violence trouble and push the boundaries of "appropriate" survivorship, prompting a backlash from feminists and anti-feminists who are frustrated by her refusal to comply with their constraints for survivors. Despite public pressure, she did not pull the video. Rihanna (2011) publicly responded on Twitter: "I'm a 23-year-old rockstar with NO KIDS! What's up with everybody wantin me to be a parent? I'm just a girl, I can only be your/our voice!" Her response reinforces the discussion about her relation to young fans in her "20/20" interview by carefully defining her work away from parental prescription, and instead aligning herself with a community of young women survivors attempting to articulate the complex moral truths about their experiences of violence.

"She exists against an image, which exists in another mind." These words, by Jamaican American theorist Michelle Cliff (1990), describe Betye Saar's subverted "Aunt Jemima" in her artistic reconstruction, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. The description resonates with Rihanna's attempts to boldly affirm a more expansive, complicated, and often rule-breaking portrait of survivor subjectivity, agency, and accountability. She did so in the face of relentless objectification, displacement, and distortion of her persona. Objectification not only denies others selfhood, but also, as Cliff argues, it manages the process of deliberation, making others certain about the reasonableness and accuracy of their conclusions. According to Cliff, objectification "gives the impression of sanity to the process of oppression." How can the public, and those in a shared community with survivors of violence, disrupt this "sanity" to receive a more expansive, messier account of survivorhood that incorporates survivors' complex and multifaceted truths? We must learn how to develop community-based responses that are dynamic and flexible enough to adapt to the charged politics of survivors' choices, without forcibly molding them to fit simplistic narratives that are more politically convenient or emotionally reassuring for others. This is not to suggest that we uncritically idealize survivor testimonies or fail to incorporate other narratives and accounts about abusive relationships. I propose a critical mindfulness about the treatment of survivor testimonies and the pressures they are under to satisfy unexamined or unconscious expectations.

We must be open to complexity and contradiction, which is not easy to sustain in the crisis-based responses that domestic violence can trigger. However, critical reflexivity and a commitment to recognizing the subjectivity of survivors can help to map pathways to getting there.

NOTES

1. I am indebted to my compañeras and co-editors, Mimi Kim and Clarissa Rojas, for their rich feedback and insights. Thanks also to my supportive friends, Jakeya Caruthers, Xandra Ibarra, Nick Mitchell, and Emily Thuma, whose love for and commitment to the liberatory potential of pop culture inspire me and give me hope.

2. For definitions and discussions about concepts and politics of “community accountability,” refer to INCITE! (2003, 2005), Bierria et al. (2006), Chen et al. (2011), and Rojas et al. (2011).

3. Wide media coverage of domestic and sexual violence had occurred before, but none approached the response to Rihanna and Chris Brown. The 1994 murders of Nicole Simpson (and her companion, Ronald Goldman), as well as the ensuing trial of O.J. Simpson, became a racialized spectacle in the media. Since Nicole Simpson was dead when the event reached the media, public discussion did not focus on domestic violence, but rather on the politics of prosecuting O.J. Simpson. Rock star Tina Turner survived an ordeal with her abusive husband, Ike Turner. Discussion of domestic violence in the media unfolded slowly in public consciousness due to her song choices, autobiography (*I, Tina*, Turner and Loder, 1987), and the 1993 film, *What's Love Got to Do with It*. Public debate was protracted, with Turner's experience regularly acknowledged as people casually adopted it as a meme for domestic violence (see, for example, Alicia Keys' lyric in her 2005 song, “Unbreakable”: “We could fight like Ike and Tina...”). The closest recent corollary is the massive coverage and public debate surrounding Professor Anita Hill's sexual harassment charges against Clarence Thomas while she was employed at the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. In Thomas' widely covered (and deeply problematic) 1991 Supreme Court confirmation hearings, Hill testified about her ordeal and Thomas attempted to discredit her. Fierce public debate followed over the motives and credibility of both parties (with particular viciousness reserved for Hill). This revealed how the media could digest and repackage sexual harassment accusations (among other issues). Public discourse was communicated through media outlets such as Op-Ed articles, television interviews, conferences, and published writings, including Toni Morrison's (1992) superb collection, *Race-ing Justice, En-Gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality*. These media sources almost exclusively featured academics, journalists, and other “expert commentators,” predating the 21st-century mass social-media platforms such as blogs, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc., which enable much wider public and published discussion. Most of the discourse on Rihanna and Brown takes place in this more broadly interactive stage, which offers thousands of archived reactions to the news about their relationship. Significantly, most of the widely scandalized recent examples of intimate violence feature black people. As perpetrator and/or victim, they are central accomplices in the narrative, raising the question of whether the elements of blackness, anti-black racism, gendered violence, and celebrity stimulate the media spectacle of violence.

4. “20/20” is an ABC “television newsmagazine.” I am referring to its republication on YouTube, where it was accessible for broader review and enabled others to publicly respond and repost the interview elsewhere online.

5. In the October 1, 2011, episode of “Saturday Night Live,” “The Comments Section” skit featured three Internet commenters. Invited onto a show to discuss their boorish comments, after making their egregiously racist, sexist, and mean remarks, they were punched in the stomach as the audience laughed and cheered (Michaels, 2011). The skit is an unwittingly good representation of the way in which the views of blog commenters are dismissed as vulgar outliers whose comments are unrelated to the attitudes of refined civil society. This facilitates a sense of superiority for, and gives cover to, everyone else.

6. As evidence, NCFM referenced a link on a television news blog, which in turn references “TMZ.” “TMZ” only cites “sources” to back up this claim (NCFM, 2009).

7. This concept is tricky to write about because one person’s “holding accountable” is another person’s “persecuting.” Three rough categories are discernible in these commentaries: those attacking Rihanna for the sake of attacking her; those offering a genuine, good-faith attempt to sort out whether or what Rihanna needed to account for; and those occupying a complicated middle ground that persecutes Rihanna, but in the name of justice, however problematic. The NCFM statement falls into the latter category. I use the phrase here not because I think these statements are useful examples of “holding someone accountable,” but because this is what the commenters understand themselves to be doing.

8. Another similar public example was the media’s thorough undermining of the credibility and dignity of Nafissatou Diallo, a Guinean maid working at a New York hotel, when she accused Dominique Strauss-Kahn, the former French head of the International Monetary Fund, of sexually assaulting her in his hotel room. Beyond the criminal prosecution against Strauss-Kahn, the distorted coverage ultimately compelled Diallo to defend herself against public denigration by suing the *New York Post* for defamation (Rushe, 2011).

9. Hilton’s discursive choices echo a legacy of “monsterring” black men in the context of racialized discourse about sexual violence, which includes post-Reconstruction white supremacists who wielded this potent strategy by fabricating claims of sexual assaults on white women by black men, and then using those claims to justify the lynching of thousands of black men. One might dismiss Hilton’s choice of language because of his reputation as a blogger who can be obnoxious, but to read his characterizations as a consequence of his writing style or personality, rather than of being embedded within a historical trajectory that we all inhabit, too easily lets the rest of us off the hook.

10. Unless otherwise noted, the feminist blogs I reference—“Jezebel,” “Feministe,” and “Pandagon”—are probably white-dominated. It is difficult to know definitively, since blogs do not always include contributor bios and, when they do, white bloggers rarely identify themselves as “white.” Women of color engaged in blogging tend to racially self-identify, as is apparent in the blog’s style and content.

11. The instinctive desire for Rihanna to leave is understandable, especially given how egregious Brown’s violence was that night. Yet “leaving” is treated as if it were an unyielding ideology—a moralistic mandate rather than a survivor-driven outcome. Making it *universally* applicable to all survivors can obscure survivors’ experiences and their efforts at harm reduction and pragmatic resistance, discount their ethical and material priorities, wrongly presume that domestic violence is the worst and most urgent form of violence facing the survivor, and foreclose any possible imagined future of robust and transformational accounting and repair on the part of the perpetrator of violence. In the United States, with its law-and-order culture and anti-black racism, moralistic mandates often pathologize or criminalize survivors. As an ideology, “leaving” prioritizes an individual-based notion of intervention over a community-based one, heightening the burden on survivors to rectify a phenomenon that is buttressed by cultural and institutional forces. Since the profound injury caused by domestic violence should never be rationalized away or underestimated, how can we trouble and complicate our overly certain working assumptions about what survivors ought to do?

12. Aside from early discussions on the representation of and reports about Rihanna and her choices, mainstream feminist blogs, including “Feministe,” “Pandagon,” and another high-traffic feminist blog, “Feministing,” scarcely covered her interview. Anna North (2009b, c) did publish two posts via “Jezebel” on the embedded YouTube videos of the “20/20” interview. Most of North’s reaction to the testimony in these posts was to critique and correct Rihanna’s description of her relationship with Brown and her ideas about accountability.

13. Many thanks to Mimi Kim and Clarissa Rojas for helping me to articulate the language needed to describe this dynamic.

14. I have never seen an explicit explanation, but one blogger intentionally uses “teh” instead of “the” to parody the misspellings that occur when bloggers and commentators write quickly and carelessly.

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