

‘Only the bad gyal could do this’: Rihanna, rape-revenge narratives, and the cultural politics of White Feminism

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Abstract

In July 2015, Rihanna released a seven-minute long video for her new single, entitled *Bitch Better Have My Money* (more widely known as *BBHMM*), whose violent imagery would divide feminist media commentators for its representation of graphic and sexualised violence against a white couple. The resulting commentary would become the focus of much popular and academic feminist debate over the intersectional gendered and racialised politics of popular culture, in particular coming to define what has been termed ‘White Feminism’, in particular intersecting with debates about rape culture and the extent to which celebrity culture operates to secure consent to social relations of violence and inequality. *BBHMM* is not the first time Rihanna’s work has been considered in relation to these debates: not only has she herself been very publicly outed as a survivor of male violence, she has previously dealt with themes of rape and revenge in an earlier video, 2010’s *Man Down*, and in her lyrics. In this article, I read these two videos through the lens of feminist film theory, in particular focussing on the ways in which Rihanna’s output fits in a wider history of the figure of the ‘angry girl’ in rape-revenge cinema. In doing so, I explore how such representations mobilise affective responses of shame, identification and complicity that are played out in feminist responses to her work, and how these reproduce themes of surveillance and victim-blaming that potentially operate to silence women of colour’s experience of violence.

Keywords

Rihanna, celebrity, rape culture, surveillance, shame, revenge, intersectionality.

Introduction: Rihanna unchained

“Literally as I was watching the BBHMM video I thought ‘white feminists bout to have a field day with this one’ (Twitter user, cited in Ethans 2015)

The question of what role media play in normalising gender-based violence, always a central focus of feminist media studies, has recently been the subject of much debate. As fourth-wave feminism has revitalised debates about media, violence and especially rape culture, the extent to which media operate to secure consent to social relations of inequality have been at the forefront of public discussion: at the same moment, it seems, media representations of sexual violence are suddenly everywhere. In particular, they occur in media aimed at women ranging from the hugely successful film franchise the *Millennium Trilogy* to the Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*. The figure of the woman who takes violent revenge on her rapist, even exceeding the violence of the original assault, is so culturally visible that a recent episode of *Orange Is The New Black* coined the phrase ‘going *Girl With a Dragon Tattoo* on his ass’ in a knowing intertextual reference to its most famous example. In 2009, when Lisbeth Salander (a fictional character created – as is often the case with ‘vengeful victim’ figures - by a man) restrained, anally raped and permanently marked her attacker with the word RAPIST emblazoned across his chest, she ushered in a new subgenre of quasi-feminist exploitation cinema aimed squarely at a mainstream, multiplex-going and – crucially – mixed-gender audience. It is significant that at this particular moment the rape-revenge genre is undergoing a revival at the very moment that the question of who consumes constructed and actual images of rape, and of how we are affected by images of sexual violence, has never been more central to feminist debate; and also, at a moment that neoliberal government policy has entailed cuts to victim-survivor support services in the developed world, and to increasing inequality on a global level. It is also notable, then, that this genre has undergone a shift, becoming both more mainstream and more directly aimed at a female audience. This would be unremarkable if these new representations simply

reproduced the linear plots and obvious motivation of the original male-authored texts: but as typified by Rihanna's recent output they are more complex, at once more opaque to interpretation and yet messier¹.

What is interesting about these new images of sexual violence is that they often fuse of tropes borrowed from 1970's exploitation cinema with contemporary feminist concerns: they are concerned with making visible the actual lived experience of rape victims, but at the same time with spectacular tropes of revenge in which female characters take back power against their attackers, often in graphically bloody ways. It is in the context of this re-invention of the imagery of 70's rape-revenge cinema that I want to interpret two recent videos by R n' B superstar Rihanna, exploring the ways in which her work becomes a site of struggle for debates about mediation, race and feminism. The figure of the 'angry girl', As Kimberley Roberts calls her, thus embodies a form of escape from a social reality dominated by the fear or the reality of male violence: and it is this figure that Rihanna embodies, I would argue, in her videos (Roberts 2002).

In July 2015 Rihanna dropped a seven-minute long video for her new single, entitled *Bitch Better Have My Money* (more widely known as *BBHMM*), a song overtly inspired by a loss of \$10 dollars due to the incompetence of her manager which, in the process of writing, became something else: a song the white feminist writer Barbara Ellen, would describe as 'self-indulgent ... ear dung' accompanied by a video, a 'painfully obvious self-indulgent attempt to revive industry interest in her God-awful acting', whose violent imagery would divide feminist media commentators for its representation of graphic and sexualised violence against a white couple (the 'bitch of the title is male), and which constituted, according to Ellen, 'woman-hating, sub-snuff video' with 'no nuance, no artistry' whose 'blatant female-on-female hatred' attempted to make violence against women 'SEXY!' but excuses this on the grounds that 'because the visuals are great and you're a bestselling artist, mwah, mwah?' (Ellen 2015).

Whatever the limitations of this reading – and I will unpack the complex relations of disgust, shame and shaming at stake in white feminist readings of black popular culture below – there is some justice in the

Ellen's claim that a certain defence of the video in question relies on 'artiness' as an alibi, a means of explaining away its use of transgressive violence imagery. **The song** itself represented a notable departure from Rihanna's established musical style: written by the star herself and a team including Kanye West, its dark, driving sound references Trap, a dubstep/hiphop hybrid musical style originating in the Southern US and associated with lyrically gritty representations of street life. Initial responses focusses on the video's ambitious, cinematic tone, with many reviewers pointing out obvious resonances with contemporary action cinema, especially Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino, a significant comparison since Rihanna directed the clip herself: aspiring not only to follow Beyoncé in making the crossover from music to film, but to exceed this typical trajectory by taking on the role of director. Further, comparisons with these hallowed male directors were general favourable: as one website summed up, 'Quentin Tarantino better watch out' (Song 2015). That the video was clearly inspired by Tarantino, as well as by his major influence Rodriguez, is important: it is therefore grounded both in uneasy relations of artistic and cultural appropriation, and in the work of a white male director notorious for his 'race problem', but also for his gleefully violent revenge thrillers: the *Kill Bill* series in which Daryl Hannah goes on a violent rampage after her wedding party is slaughtered, the WWII revenge fantasy *Inglorious Basterds*, and the slave revenge thriller *Django Unchained*. As well as this cinematic borrowing, the song itself includes snatches of other compositions including a track appropriately called *Psychopath* by the French experimental composer Denis Levailant (whose most recent notable credit is for the queer romance *Blue is the Warmest Colour*). These elements contribute to the video's cinematic feel, underlining the marketing campaign to present this as something more upmarket and 'important' than a mere disposable rock video. But in this article, I argue that although the sophistication of Rihanna's creative output deserves to be recognised the 'defence' of the video as art is as inadequate as white feminist responses that dismiss it as mere exploitative misogyny. This is not to deny that the repudiation of this work as 'mwah-mwah lovey nonsense needs to be read in the context of a long history of dismissal

of Black women's artistry. In fact, the notion that 'artiness' constitutes an overstepping of the mark – that pop ought to know its place, - is central to the dominant white affective regime of consumption through which inadmissible loathing of the Other is recuperated through the internalisation of that loathing: it is easier to admit to a 'guilty pleasure' in pop music than to examine the prejudices at stake in producing some pleasures as guiltier (more shameful) than others. In reducing a Black female artist's work to mere misogyny veiled with pretension, then, the white feminist reading reproduces the relation of shame at stake in voyeurism, in looking at the body: a relation Elspeth Probyn succinctly sums up as 'you make me ashamed, you ought to be ashamed' (2008: 80).

While we need to be conscious of the racialised bodily politics at stake in white feminism, though, it is not enough to suggest that as 'art', the film somehow becomes immune to political interpretation. In fact both readings – the recuperative and the shaming - fail to account for the complex relations of shame and intersubjectivity at stake in Rihanna's use of violent imagery: and most crucially, both fail to do justice to the excessive howl of rage and disgust, that this film constitutes: disgust at *the very regimes of objectification, violence and consumption that it itself reproduces*.

INTRO SENTENCE The clip depicts Rihanna as the leader of a girl gang: dressed in outlandish costumes, they resemble nothing so much as Bratz dolls, those children's toys whose racially fluid, fashion-forward style attracted much opprobrium from White Feminists a few years back. Furious at being cheated by a white male accountant, played by Danish actor Mads Mikkelsen, they break into his apartment and kidnap his model girlfriend, played by Canadian model Rachel Roberts. The video starts with a scene of a large trunk, seen from the back, from which a pair of bloodied female legs emerge: it is framed within a vista of the Hollywood hills; as the camera pulls back, we hear the ambient sound of birdsong. We then cut to Roberts applying makeup and putting on diamonds: with her blown-out blonde hair, her extremely thin body encased in white silk lingerie under a white suit, framed by crystal

chandeliers and lilies, and carrying a pedigree Pomeranian, she is a parodic, excessive vision of white femininity. In cutaway scenes, we see Rihanna and her gang pull up to the apartment block toting the oversized Louis Vuitton trunk: as Roberts steps into the elevator the doors close, only to open again to show Rihanna and the trunk with Roberts now apparently trapped inside: it is loaded into the trunk of the car as Rihanna sings ‘your wife in the backseat of my new foreign car’, the potentially sexually ambiguous lyric in counterpoint to the violence of the imagery. Roberts is taken to a warehouse, stripped, bound, hung upside down and taunted before being apparently drowned in the swimming pool on Rihanna’s yacht (although she is later shown to be still alive). All of this is intercut with excessive scenes of rock-star swagger as the gang party and posture, and with images of the high-rolling Mikkelson, labelled in the onscreen caption as ‘ACCOUNTANT aka The Bitch’, defiantly refusing to pay up. Finally, he himself becomes the target of violence as the gang capture him and tie him to a chair: Rihanna is shown lovingly caressing a series weapons, including a chainsaw and various vicious-looking knives: this scene is interposed with flashbacks, scenes of his partying apparently with sex workers, and grainy black-and-white images of blood spatter, to an ominous slowed-down repetition of the song’s hook. Finally, we cut from Mikkelson’s terrified but resigned face to the same green, tropical landscape shown in the opening scene. The camera pans closer to the trunk which is revealed to contain a naked and blood-drenched Rihanna, reclining on a bed of dollar bills as she lights and smokes a cigar in a parody of both conventional sexualised femininity (the trope of the swooning woman in a state of post-coital bliss) and violent masculinity (the mob boss reflecting, with satisfaction, on his latest kill).

This was not the first time Rihanna’s videos had dealt with themes of sexual violence and revenge. The violence of feminist responses to the video are all the more striking when compared to an earlier Rihanna clip that also deals with sexual violence and revenge. *Man Down*, one of the singles from the 2010 breakthrough Def Jam album *Loud*, is presented as a pastiche of reggae murder ballads in the tradition of *I Shot the Sheriff*. The lyrics consist of a first-person ballad narrative in which the protagonist shoots a

man 'in central station, in front of a big old crowd' and subsequently becomes a fugitive, expressing remorse for killing 'somebody's son'. In the video itself, the lyrics are interpreted as a standard rape-revenge plot. The clip begins with the Rihanna character's apparently motiveless shooting of a young black man. The story then unfolds in flashback. The setting is the Caribbean: throughout, Rihanna she is positioned in relation to other women of colour as special, set apart by her light-skinned beauty in relation to the darker-skinned bodies that surround her. She is shown dancing in a club, dressed in a bra top, enjoying the attention of the crowd and dancing with the man who later becomes her attacker. The framing of this scene, with the performer's desirable body highlighted through juxtaposition with darker-skinned and less thin dancers, represents a knowing comment on the use of Black dancers in videos by white artistsⁱⁱ, albeit one which still reproduces the same real-life relations of labour and capital as its white counterparts. Here, the camera's look repeats the banal voyeuristic gaze identified by Christian Metz, Laura Mulvey and others as characteristic of cinematic representations of women (Metz 1982, Mulvey 1975, 2009). This voyeuristic look, focussed on the light-skinned feminine body, is characterised by desire. But as it becomes clear that this is a narrative of rape, not romance, the spectator's expectations are ruptured and their complicity uncomfortably called into question. The moment of revenge operates within the text to embody the rage and shame of victimhood in a context which denies justice to raped women.

The narrative twist by which romance becomes rape-revenge story recalls Tarja Laine's work on shame and desire, the voyeuristic gaze is always inherently violent: it is a 'superior, sadistic and objectifying distant viewing position' (2007: 33). Following Sartre, Laine traces the ways in which the gaze 'creates' the other; a voyeuristic look is 'structurally empowering' since it creates the object on which it appears to gaze. Voyeurism hence reduces the Other to a pure object, but more than this, it is a means of losing the self, a 'pure mode of losing oneself in the act of looking' (2007: 33). The gaze of cinema hence always

has the potential to ‘embarrass, humiliate and shame its object’, even as it is apparently entranced by her beauty (ibid).

What is radical about this depiction of rape, then, is the way it twists the spectator’s expectations of the traditional music video. By showing a scene of feminine display that culminating in the consummation of heterosexual romance, the viewer is made uncomfortably complicit with the regime of spectatorship through which black women’s pleasure is subject to hostile and violent scrutiny, becoming an object of violence. In this context, the shooting is not a literal call to violence, pace the feminist anti-sexualisation blogger who claimed the video’s message to rape victims is ‘just smoke ‘em’ (Shewmaker 2011). Instead it can be read as an act of symbolic revenge against the very regimes of surveillance that produce women’s bodies as responsible for the violence they are assumed to engender.

Reading rape-revenge cinema: shame, complicity and spectatorship

As Laine’s analysis suggests, then, in images of rape, the spectator is hence ambiguously positioned in relation to the bodies onscreen: while the objectified woman is imagined as shameful, this positioning is always ambiguous, threatening to turn back on the spectator. This instability suggests a different reading of cinema through intersubjectivity: such a reading suggests screen media constitutes a ‘shared space’; not ‘some kind of objectified external universe cut off from the spectator by an impassable barrier’ but ‘a matter of affects’ that connect the inside of the self and the ‘outside’ of the world (10). The intersubjective perspective hence ‘maintains that in contemporary cinema the traditional, dialectical poles of inside and outside, subject and object, seeing and being seen no longer seem to be valid’ (2007: 10). This, she argues, represents a new ‘way of looking’ that can be found not only in film but in art, photography, television as well as in the city, the street and in relationships between subjects (2007: 10-11). Moreover, I would add to this that intersubjective looking is not ‘new’ necessarily, rather than

contemporary media make visible and legible what has always been at stake in embodied relations of looking: and this is nowhere more obvious than in the complex webs of mediated affect that surround celebrity in the contemporary digital age. Rihanna's videos, then, open up complex life-spaces in which questions of sexuality, racialisation, violence, gender and embodiment are negotiated and struggled over. As Laine argues, when we consider intersubjective relations of looking, we are not just passive spectators: 'we participate, we are challenged, we have to respond' (2007: 12). This, I would argue, is not to suggest that media spectatorship does not involve ideology: instead it suggests a new orientation to the politics of looking, since the spectator becomes deeply implicated in the transmission and circulation of ideological constructions of race and gender.

In order to understand how rape-revenge is reinvented in Rihanna's output – how it crosses a boundary from the dominant liberal framing of shame in 'banal psychological terms as a merely personal affliction' (Probyn 2008: 83), (in this case shame as an affect that is culturally understood to 'stick' to the body of the victim) to precisely the more complex intersubjective framing of shame that feminist affect theory calls for (2008: 84) - we need to consider her videos in the context of the history of such narratives as a subgenre of exploitation cinema, as well as thinking through the ways in which exploitation films are located in a wider historical and social context. Although examples can be found as early as the 1920's (Lilian Gish appeared in *The Wind* in 1928, for instance), it is in the 1970's and 80's that rape-revenge peaked in terms of public visibility: Tarantino's own films, especially *Jackie Brown*, often explicitly reference this period. Peter Lehman describes how in this genre, 'a beautiful woman hunts down the man who raped her and kills them one by one, frequently revelling in the man's agony when he realizes who she is and what she is about to do' (2012: 103). In these films, men who rape are hunted down and killed in a variety of imaginative ways: 'methodically' tortured, castrated, dismembered and finally murdered by their erstwhile victims (2012: 105). tatto

As Lehman notes, rape-revenge contains some of the most critically reviled films ever made, the most infamous being the archetypal ‘video nasty’ *I Spit On Your Grave*. As with BBHMM, responses to these films have often been framed in terms of repugnance. For example Lehman quotes Roger Ebert’s review of the latter, which is remarkable for its language of disgust: the film is a ‘vile bag of garbage’, ‘sick, reprehensible and contemptible’, ‘diseased and perverted’: it leaves the viewer ‘feeling unclean, ashamed and depressed’ (2012: 103). Crucially, Lehman argues this disgust lies in both the male spectator’s horror at his own identification with the rapist and with an uncomfortable sense that women in the audience might take a similar identificatory pleasure in the victim’s revenge (2012: 104): the film, he argues, is not ‘merely’ a series of graphically violent scenes stitched together by a flimsy narrative: rather ‘the meanings and pleasures of the genre are much more complex than such a description implies’ (2012: 104). Rape revenge cinema is further notable for its representation of race. Although classics including *I Spit on Your Grave* reproduce the racist trope of a white woman assaulted by minority ethnic men, black women are differently represented in Blaxploitation film which, as film critic Alexandra Heller-Nicholas notes, often feature a ‘tough, sexy, avenging black woman’ taking revenge for sexual violence (2011: 64). These movies, she argues, are often aimed at a female, even feminist audience, and code sexual violence in gendered as well as racialised terms, ‘becoming a metaphor for racial power and relations’. For example *WAR: Women Against Rape*, depicts a group of victims banding together to punish a rapist who is revealed to be a police officer. This, Heller-Nicholas suggests, ‘clearly articulates the connection between the literal violation victims suffer at the hands of rapists and the continuing symbolic violation received by an unsympathetic legal system’ (2011: 64-65). The Angry Girl thus becomes the avatar for a female spectator always already living with the reality of rape culture: as Sydette Harry’s response to BBHMM has it, ‘only the Bad Gyal could do this ... Rihanna’s take the hyper masculine road movies, revenge fantasy, heist movie and is unapologetically feminine, with not an ounce less violence’. The difference, as she notes, is that unlike in male-authored cinema, ‘our amazing heroine lives’ (2014).

(Not) talking about race: White Feminism and the politics of popular culture

Rape-revenge tropes, then, do not simply operate to normalise sexual violence: instead they interpellate the spectator through reproducing social relations of shame that circulate in rape culture. Rape-revenge thus threatens to disrupt any simplistic understanding of how media operate to reproduce relations of power. Shame is invoked differently in spectators who feel complicit with the rapist than in those who feel interpellated as actual or potential victim-survivors. In this section, I want to explore how this becomes complicated further through Rihanna's racialised remixing of the rape-revenge narrative: how the rupture inherent in *being made to feel complicit*, but *feeling that one ought not to be made to feel complicit*, becomes a site of tension between 'White Feminists' and intersectional feminist fans, especially through white feminists complaints about being 'silenced' by fandom.

For some feminists, White Feminism is encapsulated in white commentators' responses to female celebrities of culture in contrast to white women. Most recently, a widely circulated blog post by feminist popular culture writer BattyMamzelle articulated White Feminism as that which 'celebrates Tina Fey, Lily Allen and Lena Dunham, but tears down Nicki Minaj, Beyoncé and Rihanna' (BattyMamzelle 2016). While white celebrities are just as likely to be regarded as what Roxane Gay calls 'bad feminists' (2014) – as essays by Rona Murray and Kate McNicholas Smith in this volume show – the notion of White Feminism, arising from digital activist and fan spaces, draws attention to the ways in which feminist accounts of the politics of popular culture marginalise black women's experience. Paying attention to the racialised politics of media critique, then, means taking an intersectional approach to the politics of popular culture, acknowledging that as Kimberle Crenshaw has argued, 'because women of color experience racism in ways not always the same as those experienced by men of color, and sexism in ways not always parallel to experiences of white women, dominant conceptions of antiracism and feminism are

limited, even on their own terms' (1995: 360). Further, Rihanna is a significant figure in this regard, since of the three women of colour mentioned, she has tended to be seen as the 'least feminist' and has attracted the most visceral criticism. I want to track some of this criticism across media platforms and political positions, to show how responsibility for rape culture 'sticks' to black women's bodies and performances, and how this is disputed in online feminist space.

As predicted by the Tweeter cited above, BBHMM's anarchic, cartoonish and celebratory portrayal of violence did indeed result in a 'field day' for White Feminism. This is nothing new. In the past Rihanna has been described by the tabloid press as 'repugnant', 'seeping', and a danger to 'public health' and associated with 'crotch-grabbing, boob-holding, laser-boner-light-sabered, dog-humping electronic media jacket, and foul-mouthed coarseness' that leaves enlightened audiences 'wincing' even as it 'desensitises' young fans (Jussel 2011). *Daily Mail* columnist Liz Jones branded her a 'toxic role model for her army of young fans', accusing her of 'infecting our high streets with her gun tattoos, her false nails and fake hair, her bogus bad-ass shenanigans that try to portray her as 'real', as 'street', as her own person, as strong and single-minded' but in fact 'poisonous' and 'inviting rape' (Jones 2013). A later article in the same paper, by Sarah Vine, described BBHMM as 'the video that should turn every mother's stomach. In it she suggests that Rihanna ought to be reported to the police for 'pornography, incitement to violence, racial hatred' before speculating, without apparent irony, that she 'might not have some kind of medical condition which prevents her from keeping her legs — as well as her stupid trap — shut' (the irony of reporting a Black woman to the police for hate crime, in the current climate of police violence against people of colour, is apparently lost on the author). Vine concludes by discussing the likely effect on '12-year-old' fans, concluding that 'the message' is 'clear': if people don't give you exactly what you want, then you're perfectly within your rights to go on a drug-fuelled killing spree' (Vine 2015).

The connection made here between Rihanna's performance of femininity, especially its artifice; and the suggestion of immorality, infection and toxicity through which she is portrayed as both a cancer on society and a contagion that affects the (young, female, impressionable) audience, speaks to a longer history of racist cultural politics with which, I would argue, Rihanna's video is precisely concerned. As Stacia Brown notes, surveillance of Black women's bodies has its roots in colonialism and slavery.

Current 'fashions' in depictions of Black women, including the trend for 'big booty' exemplified by Rihanna, Beyoncé and Minaj and extolled by the white fashion media, recall the way women of colour were 'stripped of their agency, placed "fully on display" against their wills, and sold to enslavers who used their free labour to feed the textile industries that have fuelled the fashion market' (Brown 2014 cited in Harry 2014). The important point, here, is that it is not Black women's own self-expression that Brown is calling to account, but rather the ways in which it is taken up and appropriated by the dominant gaze of white privilege.

What is disturbing here is that Rihanna is often being held responsible for male violence in precisely those publications that have profited from her real-life experience as a survivor of intimate partner violence. In 2009, she was subjected to a brutal assault by her then partner, the R&B singer and actor Chris Brown (for which he subsequently received a sentence of six months' community service with five years' probation). Although her identity was officially kept confidential by LAPD, following protocol, a police photograph of her horrific facial injuries was leaked to the press, originally appearing on gossip website TMZ but eventually spreading to both digital and offline media, including the Mail. Coverage of this incident centred on the familiar gendered and racialised trope of the Black male perpetrator of violence as 'monster'. But as Brown has rebuilt his career, it is Rihanna's own work that has been subsequently subjected to the most scrutiny Eminem duet *Love The way you lie*, which explores a violent relationship, and the lyrics to her album *Anti* in which the line "[Love] beats me black and blue but it fucks me so good / And I can't get enough," it has been claimed, proving that 'she was happy to stay in

the violent relationship for the sex' (Rainbird 2016)ⁱⁱⁱ. As Janell Hobson has noted, it was precisely after this experience of both violence and media re-victimisation that Rihanna's public image evolved to combine 'hardcore masculinity and dominatrix-type femininity', replacing her previous highly feminised image with a fantasy persona redolent of strength and courage (2012: 82); a reinvention which arguably finds its apotheosis in the 'angry girl' figure that explodes onscreen in *BBHMM*.

Here, then, the individualistic and spectacular gaze of celebrity culture becomes an alibi for racism and misogyny: by producing Rihanna as an individual whose life is characterised by excess, by 'drama', our attention is diverted by a wider culture in which women of colour's bodies are continually subjected to forms of surveillance and are constantly produced as the natural objects of violence. At a historical moment when #blacklivesmatter is using digital media to draw attention to the ways in which the mainstream media both profits from and naturalises racist violence, the tenor of (some) media coverage of Rihanna is that they matter only objects of a sensationalised white gaze.

However, the racialised and gendered looking I have discussed so far are not confined to the tabloid press: as I have argued, they are also perpetuated by liberal feminists on the left. Barbara Ellen kicks off her evisceration of Rihanna with the caveat, 'It seems traditional to apologise for being too white and past-it to comment on any video by a young black artist. But tough, because I'm not going to' (Ellen 2015). Another key example, which attracted much criticism from anti-racist voices online, is a New Statesman article by Helen Lewis. In it, Lewis – very much in line with 2015's trend of white feminists using their platforms in mainstream media outlets to complain of being 'no-platformed' - argues that she feels silenced Rihanna fangirls. Her article begins by quoting the line,

to those currently drafting your thinkpiece about how it wasn't very #feminist of Rih to torture that poor rich lady: nooooo one cares about your basic-ass probably non-intersectional praxis.

Rihanna doesn't need to spell it out for you if you still don't get it yet; time is money, bitch
(Lewis 2015)

This is in fact a quote by the music writer and artist Meaghan Garvey and is part of a discussion of the video transcribed on Pitchfork, the music website, which also contains nuanced discussion of the racial and sexual politics of the gaze (Pitchfork 2015). But by reducing fans' defence of Rihanna to a stereotypically 'street' utterance that is produced in marked contrast to her own measured tone, Lewis calls on discourses of the fan, and especially fans of 'black' music, as inarticulate, threatening and aggressive. Taking this single quote from a relatively niche music site as an attempt to place constraints on her freedom of expression, Lewis sets out to establish that she does indeed have a right to argue that, as she puts it, 'It was not very feminist—not even very hashtag feminist—of Rihanna to “torture that poor rich lady”’, a project that she nevertheless makes clear is little more than a distraction from her real work, with discussion of 'workforce structures, equal pay, childcare entitlements and how they disadvantage women throughout society' (ibid). Defender of BBHMM, she claims, are themselves unknowingly complicit with the male gaze: as she puts it, 'a lot of men who get off on images of women being tortured are going to be turned on by this video'. Since 'Rihanna is an astonishingly good-looking woman, with a well-documented allergy to clothes', she concludes it is naïve to read the piece as anything other than 'a turn-on', a piece of torture porn (2015). The performer's body is hence again made responsible for the gaze of an imaginary, violent male voyeur: it is not the content of the video but Rihanna's looks that are imagined to engender male violence. Lewis' critique then turns to questions of race, in relation to which she again claims to have been silenced:

I want to finish up by talking about race, which I am think I am *definitely* not meant to do. This is where the basic-ass nature of my praxis is really going to be revealed. I've read some suggestions that the video is *supposed* to be disturbing—it's a comment on how black women's

bodies are routinely sexualised and objectified in our culture in a way that is both racist and misogynist.

This argument, once touched, on, is brushed away: instead Lewis goes on to concede that a 'hierarchy of oppression' does exist, citing Catherine MacKinnon on whiteness to conclude that nevertheless, 'Even rich white bitches, the type with tiny dogs and fur coats and partners who have taken Rihanna's money, experience sexism'. Black women's critical voices are hence entirely silent in an article whose every attempt to focus on racism ends up returning to whiteness, although Lewis does concede that she needs to read more on 'the racial angle' from 'people better-qualified than me' (Lewis 2015). White feminism is thus reconstituted as the voice of reason in response to angry, abusive and profane black voices: the hegemonic dominance of White feminist representational politics is therefore restored at the expense of both Rihanna as overt object of critique, and more covertly of Black fan voices. The rationality of the former is threatened by the latter, by the literal filth ('ear-dung' as Ellen put it) that threatens to invade the self by crossing bodily boundaries, rendering the white critic (whose feminism is always imagined in terms defined by white masculinity, as reason) corporeal and hence vulnerable. The latter's critique of white feminism, stripped of its context in a humourous, politicised and astute discussion, is heard only as stereotypical street slang, through terms like 'basic-ass ... time is money, bitch,' language which is presented as at once risible and yet threatening to speech itself and hence to knowledge (ibid). For all the overt defence of an intersectional representational politics, feminism is universalised at the expense of race, which is reduced to a niche 'angle' that exists solely to silence white voices; the province of 'better-qualified' experts (though not feminists of colour, and not *the actual experts on African-American music* cited in the article, since their speech is deemed too crude to be meaningful). The politics of pop culture are produced, paradoxically, as always already harmful (pop culture is examined for signs of sexism: having found them, a negative effect on the vulnerable female viewer is assumed) and yet at the same time, not political at all (pop culture is trivial in comparison to the 'real issues'). Seen in this light, Lewis'

and Ellen's responses become less polemical attacks on Black popular culture and more renderings of discomfort, of fear: they embody a kind of yearning nostalgia precisely the comforting regimes of spectator theory, of the dialectic relations between 'passive observer and active signifying image, or sadistic gaze and penetrated form' that MacCormack's work suggests is always already transcended in the actual bodily experience of consuming film (2013: 226). What is at stake for these authors, and by extension for white feminism, is not simply the revelation of particular texts as anti-feminist, but the supremacy of white feminism itself. This is apparent in the very language by which Ellen holds Rihanna accountable: 'Rihanna cannot pretend', she concludes, apparently without self-awareness, 'that this video was forced on her' (Ellen 2015). Black female artists, it seems, can be recuperated only insofar as they can be redefined as objects, their output 'forced upon them' by patriarchal capitalism.

From angry girls to black cyborg bodies: doing intersectionality in digital feminist spaces

Given the content of the text and the excessive if inevitable nature of white feminist critique cited above, it is unsurprising that BBHMM and its responses by white feminists became the subject of much debate in intersectional feminist spaces, especially online. Many of these responses focussed on the way white media accounts of Rihanna as object ignored her status as director: could it be that the panic engendered by this particular media artefact had something to do with a woman of colour taking control of the way she is represented, and doing so in a way that failed to fulfil white feminism's sense of what a feminist looks like? As feminist blogger Sandra Song asks:

[I]sn't it more important to consider that the video says more about her creative agency rather than her purported "anti-feminist" leanings? After all, the mere fact that the woman who directed this entire video is Rihanna herself is laudable -- an action that could even be interpreted as a subversion of these typically male-run narratives that Tarantino & Co. tend to go hog-wild with sans repercussion. (Song 2015)

This is echoed by feminist blogger Paula Ethans of intersectional anti-racist blog *Paula Vs. Patriarchy*, who traced the link between reactions to Rihanna's work, and judgments about her personality morality:

Could it be we are all shifting in our seats because a black woman made this? Because a black woman commanded a bold cinematic experience of violence and rage? Because she challenged the status quo that historically only applauds white men for it? Yes, of course some people are disturbed by the depiction of violence, even made by white men, but society respect their artistic vision and never questions their morality (Ethans 2015)

Rihanna, she argues, produces 'brilliant work that addresses concerning and complex issues about gender and race', but in common with other female artists of colour, she is disproportionality judged and shamed for her inappropriate conduct.

This hostile reading of pop culture as antifeminist, then, recalls Sydette Harry's work on surveillance and racism. Crucially, Harry argues that 'media, even on the left, believes dissecting black women, tracking their online habits, consuming illegally obtained images of them, and demanding education is a "right" (Harry 2014). As she argues,

What we have decided to call surveillance is actually a constant interplay of various forms of monitoring that have existed and focused on black people, and specifically black women, long before cameras were around, let alone ubiquitous. Surveillance technology is a dissemination of cultural standards of monitoring. Our picture of surveillance needs to factor in not just tech developments, but the cultural standards that have bred surveillance, especially towards black culture, as part and parcel in our world.

This is not new or confined to contemporary media, but is rooted in a history of slavery and colonialism in which black bodies have always been produced as object, even as black experience has been silenced.

The demand that people of colour 'educate' the white audience, which extends to white feminism, is hence part of this history. Following Harry's argument, I would suggest a short film made by a woman of colour needs to be read in this context: as she asks, 'for populations whose fundamental problem under surveillance is the inability to declare privacy and boundaries, what kind of solution is being made to expose one's self "voluntarily," to invite more observation into one's life?' (2014). BBHMM and Man Down need to be read in the context of a media context that has precisely denied women of colour 'the right to declare boundaries': in a culture that displays with relish the battered face of a woman known for her beauty and talent, what kinds of negotiations might be possible? It is in this context, I would argue, that we need to consider Rihanna's career and the way that she refuses to recite the expected survivor narrative, instead taking on the role of author in a violent narrative that arguably subverts culturally expected tropes of black woman as victim. Read alongside her narration of her own experience of intimate partner violence, Rihanna's performance of the 'angry girl' avenger takes on a deeper significance as a fantasy of gaining back control, of empowerment. As Carine Mardorossian notes in her study of the social and cultural framing of 'the rape victim', what is at stake in speaking out is not 'the recovery of a "foundational centre", a "hidden truth"' so much as 'the voicing of the experience, the act of narrativizing itself' (2014: 65). Sexual violence 'is a reality that feels anything but real to the victim', yet this very unreality 'can become the basis of a representation the speaker can manipulate and feel in control of, that can command an audience's attention and be made intelligible in other than available cultural terms'. Empowerment, she concludes, is therefore not simply a vacuous anti-political term, as it is sometimes understood in feminist critique, but is 'about accessing one's own life as material rather than about depth.' (2014: 65). And it is in this context, I would argue, that we need to interpret Rihanna's output: not as a celebration of violence but as a cathartic, escapist fantasy that precisely speaks to a culture in which women of colour are coded as both natural victims of violence, and as its originators.

The loud cries of the spectator who, in subjecting a black woman's body to paranoid scrutiny, is made to feel complicit with the rapist drawn out the experience of a female audience for whom sexual and racialised scrutiny and the accompanying threat or actuality of violence is already a daily reality. In this, RiRi's *Angry Girl* can be read in the context of a longer history of the black female performer as cyborg, as discussed by Derica Shields in her piece on Janet Jackson and 90's music video. Shields argues that the vintage videos now being re-discovered on Tumblr and in wider online fan communities appeal to a contemporary young female audience because of 'the ways that people who are most vulnerable to premature death and destitution had imagined themselves as more than human, post-human, or cyborgian.' Jackson and her 'cadre of girls' represent 'a sense of control but also invulnerability' in which the black female body is 'completely invulnerable and profoundly self-sufficient.' In contrast to dominant representations of Black women as victims or as dependent on the state, the cyborg 'lives in this world in which she is entirely self sufficient' (***). She links this to Cathleen Woodward's discussion of the cyborg as fantasy figure that embodies 'the possibility of an invulnerable and thus immortal body is our greatest technological illusion', and which resonates with women of colours' need for survival in a racist and misogynist culture. As *Guardian* columnist and blogger Mia McKenzie argues:

White women have been unapologetically violent towards black women for centuries. They've used the power of the state, of the police, of the courts, of the media, and of individual white men to harm black people, including black women, time and time again ... what really has white feminists upset is that in the video Rihanna, a black woman, puts her own needs before a white woman's needs ... White women will fight to obtain food stamps for black women, but don't let us have a yacht, pretty clothes or – God forbid – payment of money we are owed (McKenzie 2015).

White feminists' 'field day' with Rihanna's output, presented as resistance to rape culture, needs to be read in the context of 'the patriarchal state's initial preoccupation with women's morality and decency' which, as Rosa Linda Fregoso has argued in another context, is a form of institutional violence that makes women primarily responsible for the violence directed against them', and how white women have historically been complicit in this violence' (Fregoso 2006: 4). The effect of such critique is to hold black female artists responsible for a rape culture that continually subjects women of colour to symbolic and actual violence. In this context, the fantasy violence of *Man Down* and to a greater extent *BBHMM* dramatise the impossibility of 'being paid what one is owed' in a culture that produces women of colour's bodies, morality and personal trauma as abjected object of consumption. Rihanna's performance of violent Black femininity ultimately speaks to the impossible demand placed on women artists of colour by white feminism, in which appropriate feminism as well as appropriate femininity is intimately entangled with the ability to enact and inhabit idealised whiteness, to focus on 'the real issues' determined by patriarchy. In producing prominent Black women as both victims and perpetrators of violence, white feminism is not simply ignorant or innocent of recognising its own white privilege: rather, I would argue, it *needs* the spectacle of Black woman as victim in order to know itself as innocent. Yet representations like Rihanna's cause discomfort because their knowing depiction of racialised and gendered violence are in excess of the rescue narrative that White feminism offers: White Feminism thus finds itself in the paradoxical position of applying a 'paranoid' reading, in Wiegman's (2014) terms, to what is *already* a paranoid reading of dominant culture. In this context, Rihanna's video represents not so much an attempt to change this culture of racist and sexist violence but - by inviting the female spectator to identify with the gleefully and unapologetically violent, charismatic and insatiable Angry Girl - to dramatize the sense of rage and helplessness it engenders. As Harry asks: 'what is the solution for being constantly watched, if no one sees you at all?'

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ⁱ For example, in the OITNB episode cited above, two female characters drug and strip the male perpetrator in preparation for assaulting him with a lubricated broom handle, only to find themselves unexpectedly moved to pity and unable to repeat the act. Similarly in Sally Wainright's popular crime show *Happy Valley*, the female protagonist resists the opportunity to kill her daughter's rapist: to do so, she realises, would effectively make her an accomplice to the violence and chaos he embodies. Themes of affect, collective guilt and shame, and intersubjectivity saturate female-authored rape revenge narratives, raising wider questions about how spectators are made complicit through consumption of media images, as well as about the fine distinction between consumption and witnessing.

ⁱⁱ Most recently, Lily Allen's video for 'Hard Out Here' attracted criticism for a scene in which Allen is surrounded by multiracial twerking dancers while she sings the line 'don't need to shake my arse for you 'cos I've got a brain' (2013). Such representations, are of course common in music video: what is new about Allen's mobilisation of the racialised and gendered trope of the hypersexualised black body is that it is explicitly framed as feminist. Black culture is therefore made responsible for an assumed 'sexualisation of culture' and a white artist presented as its saviour, without reflecting on the racialised and gendered politics inherent in this framing.

ⁱⁱⁱ In an interview with *Vanity Fair*, she recounted how her ambivalence and difficulty in leaving Brown and her subsequent inability to form close relationships were exacerbated by this media surveillance, drawing connections between this and the experience of ordinary victim-survivors in a culture in which 'the victim gets punished over and over' through victim blaming (Robinson 2015).