

Done with these Niggas: Revenge Fantasies and Black Female Sexuality

Joshua Reason

Introduction

On July 2, 2015, Rihanna released the music video for “Bitch Better Have My Money.” Like much of her postabuse¹ work, the video was critiqued by both activists and everyday music consumers for its vulgarity, eroticization of violence, and portrayal of women assaulting other women. In defense of the video, music correspondent Roisin O’Connor wrote a thinkpiece for *The Independent* titled, “Who cares if Rihanna’s BBHMM video is feminist or not?” Supporting Rihanna’s right to artistic freedom, Roisin makes a poignant statement that deserves further contemplation:

The people criticising Rihanna for her highly stylised video are happy to gush about Quentin Tarantino’s genius and his creative vision, and controversial as he is they would rarely question his authority as an auteur. There was little fuss over the raped and murdered bank teller in *From Dusk Till Dawn*, the brutalised prostitutes in Frank Miller’s *Sin City*, or the bikini clad college girls snorting coke and shooting down pimps in Harmony Korine’s *Spring Breakers*, all of which are hailed as “cult classics”. (O’Connor)

Why is Rihanna, and Black women artists like her, so harshly critiqued for using the revenge fantasy as a method of storytelling, while filmmakers such as Quentin Tarantino establish their entire

cinematographic career on the genre? The critiques outlined above reveal the degree to which Black women are expected to uphold certain “feminist” or “pro-Black” standards in their artistry, whereas men and white women in the same line of work are seldom asked to do the same. By looking at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and violence, it becomes clear that revenge fantasies contend socially accepted narratives around what Black women should do (or are capable of doing) for their survival.

In a pop culture landscape that regularly depicts Black women as auxiliaries to men and White women, Black women artists have inherited the task of producing representations of Black womanhood on their own terms. As such, music videos serve as a highly visible, widely circulated platform for Black women artists to tell their stories of love, abuse, betrayal, and other salient life themes. Beyond dismantling critiques of Black women’s artistic work, this article elucidates how revenge fantasies starring Black women are not purely for shock value. For many Black women cultural producers, the revenge fantasy is a genre through which Black women’s subjectivity can become legible to the public.

During the past decade, Black women in the music industry have increasingly reimaged their sexuality via revenge fantasies. While the image of

Joshua Reason is a masters student at the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies (UT Austin). A former Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow and Fulbright alumnus, his research explores how Black queer and transgender Brazilians navigate urban space in light of institutional and individual attempts to restrict the mobility of nonnormative bodies.

the dominant, vengeful Black woman has long existed in the American pop cultural psyche,² only recently have Black women artists begun to reclaim and reinvent that image as an assertion of Black female sexuality in the public sphere. In doing so, Black women artists have rewritten dominant scripts regarding Black female sexuality, specifically the idea that they are either (i) always readily available for male consumption; or (ii) devoid of sexuality (e.g., the mammy figure).³ Using conceptual frameworks developed by Ariane Cruz and several other Black feminist theorists, I will provide a deep reading of three contemporary music videos starring Black women: “Bitch Better Have My Money” (henceforth referred to as “BBHM”) by Rihanna, “Love Galore” by SZA, and “Quick” by Tank and the Bangas. While these artists span a variety of genres, cultural backgrounds, and life histories, each music video portrays a sexual revenge fantasy enacted upon bodies that are intimately tied to the oppression of Black women (i.e., Black/White men and White women). By depicting the interplay between violence and pleasure, these artists are disrupting notions of Black female sexuality as a male-serving, state-relegated social practice.

Understanding Erotic Violence & Revenge Fantasies

Before diving into the contemporary scholarship on erotic violence and revenge fantasies, it is essential to situate this debate within the larger sociohistorical conversation around the construction of Black female sexuality. In her book on Black women’s activism during the Antebellum era, Shirley Yee argues that Black women came to represent the antithesis of the attributes that fall within the *cult of true womanhood*: piety, purity, domesticity, and submissiveness. In contrast to the “good” White woman who embodies all of the aforementioned characteristics, “[t]he image of the ‘bad’ black woman. . .portrays her as sexually promiscuous and, because of her hard work as a laborer, physically powerful” (Yee 41-42). By this

definition, neither under the conditions of chattel slavery nor postabolition could Black women be considered “true women.” In fact, the archetype of the “bad” Black woman was essential in reinforcing the cult of true womanhood, “. . .stereotypes of black and white women were mutually reinforcing images, not simply opposites; the assumption that black women were sensual and physically strong served to buttress the notion that white women were delicate and passionless” (Yee 42). Black female sexuality, under the cult of true womanhood, was leveraged to propagate controlling images of Black women and concretize them in the American cultural psyche.⁴ While not rooted in any truth regarding Black women’s sexual practices, the cult of true womanhood has had substantial consequences on the representation of Black female sexuality in contemporary popular culture.

To further comprehend the exploitation of Black women’s bodies for the self-making of White women and men, Yee’s analysis must be put in conversation with Ann duCille’s article on the unhealthy obsession with Black women in the academy, specifically within the field of Black feminist studies. More than a play on words in reference to the cult of true womanhood, duCille presents the “occult of true Black womanhood” as a critique of Black women’s status as object within the academy, treating their existence as some well-kept secret in need of dissection. After listing a number of prominent works within the field of Black feminist studies, duCille reflects on her own identity as a Black woman:

For reasons that may already be obvious, the books named above and numerous others like them have led me to think of myself as a kind of sacred text. Not me personally, of course, but me black woman object, Other. Within and around the modern academy, racial and gender alterity has become a hot commodity that has claimed black women as its principal signifier. I am alternately pleased, puzzled, and perturbed—bewitched, bothered, and bewildered—by this, by the alterity that is perpetually thrust upon African American women, by the production of black women as infinitely deconstructable “othered” matter. Why are black women always already Other? I wonder. To myself, of course, I am not Other; to me it is the white women and men so intent on theorizing my difference who are the Other.

(591–92)

In calling out the exotic treatment of Black women within the academy, duCille positions

Black feminist studies as a field that actively marginalizes the voices of Black women, the foremothers and daughters of the discipline, by overvaluing the contributions of White women and men. In line with Yee's assertion that Black women's role within the cult of true womanhood is to bolster the image of the "good" White woman, duCille explains that this preoccupation with Black women's lives is not meant to validate or transform their existence, but rather to aid white women and men in their self-making: ". . . to be valid—to be true—black womanhood must be legible as white or male; the texts of black women must be readable as maps, indexes to someone else's experience, subject to a seemingly endless process of translation and transference" (623). As I demonstrate in the remainder of this section, the use of Black women's work and lives for the self-actualization of White women and men is all too common in both academia and popular culture. In order to communicate the full importance of the music videos that will be analyzed in the subsequent sections, it is critical to establish that Black women's bodies have, and continue to be, exploited under the guise of valorization and acceptance.

The representation of Black female sexuality in popular culture is a central concern for contemporary Black feminist theorists. *The Color of Kink* is a key text that addresses this topic by analyzing Black women's performance in BDSM pornography. Although pornography often sets unrealistic expectations for sexual practice, Cruz argues for a reading of BDSM "as a mode of speaking the unspeakable of and for black female sexuality" (5). In connecting Black women to kink, Cruz also asserts that Black women, regardless of their involvement in BDSM, have come to represent sexual deviance in our cultural psyche. As such, Black women in BDSM not only transgress socially acceptable sexual practice they also create a space through which we are confronted with the messiness of erotic violence. For this article, I refer to erotic violence as physical and emotional abuses performed for the sake of mutual intimacy, arousal, and/or orgasm. BDSM is an ideal point of departure for discussing erotic violence because it

disrupts the separation of pleasure and pain that is often ascribed to Black sexual practice. Early Black feminists, including Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, critiqued BDSM for its inaccessibility to Black women (Cruz 38–39). To them, the performance of BDSM replicates violent hierarchies of power that Black feminists should be dismantling in lieu of embracing.⁵ However, Cruz argues that this assertion oversimplifies the ways in which BDSM is practiced, specifically the reasons why Black women choose to engage in it.

As Cruz states, her work explores "how violence and aggression become a source of sexual pleasure and possibility for women and how women are active agents of violence and domination rather than passive victims" (9). In other words, Cruz asks us to consider how Black women's performance of BDSM, as both dominant and submissive, can be a liberatory practice. Analyzing race play, "fucking machines," and other forms of play in BDSM communities, Cruz makes legible the liminal space where pleasure and pain coalesce in Black female sexuality. In response to Foucauldian reflections on BDSM, Cruz argues that Black women in these communities "provide evidence that their pleasure, though highly conflicted, is informed by histories of chattel slavery and racism, interracial sexual violence, racialized exchanges of power and it is also about finding innovative new modes of accessing pleasure" (71–72). Erotic violence resignifies and disrupts the dichotomous relationship between pleasure and pain by suggesting that Black female sexuality is both completely informed by trauma and refuses to be limited by it. As such, erotic violence becomes the optimal performative device for Black women to represent their sexuality.

While Cruz presents a foundational study for understanding Black female sexuality as it relates to erotic violence, she fails to consider BDSM performances outside of the Black–White binary. What does it mean for Black women to engage in play with men and women of color? While Black women may still be inventing new avenues for accessing pleasure in these relationships, it would be remiss to claim that non-White BDSM is embedded in the same hierarchies of power as

Black–White BDSM. Furthermore, Cruz only touches upon Black women’s revenge fantasies in the context of pornographic slave narratives in which the slave woman becomes the master after being raped (102, 122). To capture the complexity of Black female sexuality, the revenge fantasy must be theorized within the context of all assaults on Black women’s bodies, including intraracial sexual violence and metaphysical assaults via their representation in popular culture.

Black feminist theorists have analyzed the portrayal of Black female sexuality in nonpornographic forms of popular culture as well, namely film and music. In her analysis of the critically acclaimed films *Crash* and *Monster’s Ball*, Erin D. Chapman theorizes White male-centric redemption narratives as sexual assaults on Black women’s bodies. In *Crash*, Chapman focuses on the relationship between Officer Ryan and Christine. After sexually assaulting Christine in front of her husband earlier in the film, Ryan is tasked with saving her from a car crash. The rescue scene is shot with bright lighting, slow music, and close-up shots of their forced physical proximity, romanticizing the relationship between oppressor and victim. In a similar vein, *Monster’s Ball* tells the story of Hank, a racist White prison guard who falls in love with Leticia, a Black woman dealing with financial and emotional hardships. In addition to being racist, Hank is also responsible for executing Leticia’s husband on death row. As Chapman shows in her analysis, both films suggest that oppressor-victim intimacy and proximity will ultimately lead to a postracial future.

While only *Crash* presents an actual case of sexual assault, Chapman argues that both films showcase Black women’s bodies as conduits for racist White men’s redemption. Instead of recognizing Black women as the recipients of sexual abuse/exploitation, these films seduce the viewer into identifying the “men characters as ‘real’ victims of oppression” while simultaneously promoting the “dissemblance of dominance in abusive relationships through the deployment of sentimental images of reciprocity, romance, consent, and affection” (143). In watching these films, we are forced to displace our recognition of Black

women in pain with empathy for White men, romanticizing relationships that are entrenched in violence, abuse, and exploitation.

Chapman uses the term *rape fantasies* to describe the parasitic relationships depicted in *Crash* and *Monster’s Ball*. She defines the rape fantasy as “the racial family romance eliding violence, exploitation, domination, and the happiness and harmony achieved at the expense of black women’s humanity and through society’s willful ignorance of their pain and oppression” (Chapman 144). If, as these films propose, a Black woman achieves intimacy through ceding her pain, oppression, and humanity to those that purvey violence against her body, then Black female sexuality is always in service of someone/something other than herself. In this sense, White male-serving representations of Black female sexuality in popular culture are as heinous as rape because they romanticize interracial intimacy without attention to the regimes of violence in which Black women’s bodies are entangled.

Likening these redemption narratives to slave-master intimacies, Chapman makes a poignant, timely assertion: “As with Thomas Jefferson’s rape of Sally Hemings, we must either deny it or refashion it as a love story, a rape fantasy of seduction and taboo romance” (155). Using Black female sexuality to facilitate White men’s redemption reproduces folkloric ideas about sex between Black women and White men during chattel slavery. When understood in this way, rape fantasies become the antithesis to erotic violence. In ignoring Black women’s relationship with violence, rape fantasies recreate the same violence they allegedly seek to displace. Erotic violence, on the other hand, deploys Black female subjectivity to reimagine Black women’s relationship with violence and intimacy on their own terms. In doing so, erotic violence poses new possibilities for Black women’s representation in popular culture.

Although neither a Black feminist text nor explicitly concerned with Black female sexuality, James A. Crank’s article on *Django Unchained* also explores how violent intimacy between slave and master is leveraged to create a postracial future. Given that most of Tarantino’s films fall

within the realm of revenge fantasy (rape-revenge in particular), it would be remiss not to analyze how his work has come to define the genre. Using queer plantation camp, displacing the seriousness of slavery with overexaggeration and same-sex slave-master intimacies, as a conceptual framework, Crank argues that *Django Unchained* “obscures real histories of violence—especially discursive disfigurement and state-sanctioned violence, the kind routinely inflicted on black bodies in the twenty-first century” (109). In creating a film that he envisioned would get “white *and* black audiences—in a slightly different pitch, a different key—cheering wildly at the end,” Tarantino reveals the limits of White renderings of Black revenge (Barshad). White cultural producers, like most White Americans, prioritize self-preservation over truly dismantling White supremacy. As such, their visions for Black revenge are more concerned with destroying overt, historicized White supremacy than combating daily, contemporary assaults on Black bodies. This observation furthers the argument for centering Black women’s subjectivity in the creation of Black revenge fantasies, as doing so restores the possibility for the genre to be directed toward bodily autonomy and healing from racial/gendered trauma.

Much of the recent scholarship on Black women in the music industry has been focused either on critiquing their oversexualization or analyzing the career trajectories of prominent Black women artists. Nicole R. Fleetwood’s article on Rihanna’s music career postabuse by Chris Brown falls into the latter.⁶ Fleetwood applies Black feminist theory, queer theory, and pop culture critique to several of Rihanna’s discographies, presenting an argument for reading Rihanna as a Black woman who has reclaimed her sexuality via erotic violence. In describing Rihanna’s work postabuse, Fleetwood states:

While never denying the violence she experienced in her relationship, Rihanna worked to distance herself from the language of victimization and image of helplessness that often accompany the label “battered woman”; instead, she cultivated a closeness to erotic pleasure that incorporates practices of pain.

(420)

Although it would be careless to suggest that the entirety of Rihanna’s postabuse work is an

attempt to escape the label of “battered woman,” it is important, as Cruz and Chapman mention, to return to sites of violence so as not to obscure the realities of Black female sexuality. Unpacking societal expectations for women who have experienced sexual violence or domestic abuse allows us to understand why many cultural critics, scholar activists, and music consumers find Rihanna’s work counterproductive. Instead of conceptualizing her embodiment of erotic violence as personally healing and liberating, they extrapolate her performance of Black female sexuality as cosigning violence against women. Fleetwood dismantles this misinterpretation of Rihanna’s work, and what it offers to the conversation on Black female sexuality, by acknowledging her artistic practice as a careful meditation on erotic violence and self-representation.

While Fleetwood’s article is rich with analyses of Rihanna’s music postabuse, I am more interested in how she leverages Rihanna’s work to envision a Black female sexuality “that [is] not framed through dominant frameworks of suffering, resistance, or exploitation” (422). Beyond Rihanna as a cultural icon, Fleetwood is concerned by the scholarly and pop cultural preoccupation with putting Black female sexuality in a box. One of the three conceptual frameworks that Fleetwood deploys to make sense of this obsession is *Black recuperative heterosexuality*, “a conservative framework for regulating black intimacy, reproduction, and family by romanticizing forms of heterosexual coupling that privilege normative and middle-class notions of relational contracts” (422). Perhaps a response to the hypersexualization of Black women under the cult of true womanhood, Black recuperative heterosexuality is yet another hegemonic mindset through which society, Black and non-Black, seeks to control Black female sexuality. The idea that a Black woman’s sexual practice/performance must always be in service of something other than herself (i.e., men, survivors of domestic abuse, the State) reinforces a good-bad binary that obscures the multiplicity of Black female sexuality. By theorizing Rihanna’s music as a space of self-making via performance of erotic violence, Fleetwood

shows how centering Black female subjectivity in analyzing Black women's cultural production will lead to more thoughtful reflections on how that work impacts Black women's representation in popular culture.

To analyze "BBHMM," "Love Galore," and "Quick" in a way that honors the diversity of Black female sexuality, I will be in conversation with the aforementioned scholars to posit how each music video impacts the scholarly and pop cultural discourses on erotic violence and revenge fantasies as they relate to Black women's sexual practice/performance. For "BBHMM," I will use Cruz and Fleetwood to argue that Rihanna deploys erotic violence as a tool for self-actualization beyond sexual liberation. For "Love Galore," I will use Cruz to discuss SZA's BDSM performance as a way of processing toxic relationships, emotional abuse, and struggles with mental health. For "Quick," I will use Chapman and Crank to highlight how Tank and the Bangas disrupt both rape fantasies and queer plantation camp to make low-income Black women's sexuality legible. In recognizing the specific conditions under which each artist is curating their representation of Black female sexuality, I hope to contribute a thorough exploration of how Black women artists contest the boundaries of their sexual representation via erotic violence in revenge fantasies.

Pay Me What You Owe Me: Rihanna's Revenge in BBHMM

"BBHMM" features Rihanna and her multicultural girl gang torturing her fraudulent accountant's wife, played by model Rachel Roberts. While much of the 7-minute music video is focused on torturing Roberts, the "bitch" described in the lyrics and video is the accountant, a stand-in for Peter Gounis, the person who mismanaged Rihanna's finances in 2009, resulting in a \$9 million loss for the artist (McDonald). Since settling outside of court for \$10 million in 2014, Rihanna has successfully rehabilitated her career, with this video representing the final nail-in-the-coffin of her toxic

relationship with Gounis. While it is clear that "BBHMM" is a revenge fantasy in direct response to the gross mismanagement of her funds, how can it be read beyond this incident? By analyzing the erotic violence enacted upon Roberts's body throughout the video, we see that Rihanna's revenge is also about bodily and artistic autonomy. Roberts becomes a vehicle through which Rihanna channels her violent energy toward Gounis and others in the industry that dare to infringe upon her financial success and artistic freedom.

As Fleetwood discusses in her article, Rihanna's postabuse work deploys erotic violence to make her trauma legible to music listeners. From her BDSM performance in "S&M" to the Barbadian aesthetics of "Man Down," Rihanna uses her music to reflect on topics such as sexual assault, domestic abuse, and erotic violence. "BBHMM," however, represents both a departure from and an extension of her previous postabuse work. On the one hand, Rihanna created this song and music video as a response to nonsexual assaults on her body related to financial capital and artistic freedom. On the other, the performance of erotic violence in "BBHMM" mockingly rejects the criticisms Rihanna has received for daring to embody violence as someone who has been "violated." In order to concretize how these responses manifest in the music video for "BBHMM," I will provide a deep reading of two scenes: the warehouse and the motel.

After kidnapping Roberts from her Los Angeles mansion, Rihanna and her girl gang take Roberts to a secluded warehouse. There, they bond her with ropes, suspend her from the ceiling with her breasts exposed, and push her back and forth like a pendulum. While the BDSM play (suspension bondage) presented in this scene is a clear form of erotic violence, what is happening around the violence is equally important. During the warehouse scene, Rihanna does not touch Roberts's body once. Instead, her girl gang is tasked with swinging Roberts back and forth while Rihanna, dressed in haute couture, attempts to blackmail the accountant over the phone (Figure 1).

From the production of the music video to her on-screen performance, Rihanna is in complete



Figure 1 “Bitch Better Have My Money,” video still, © Universal Music Group. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

control of the scene. By foregrounding the erotic violence enacted upon Roberts’s body while not actively participating in it, Rihanna is asserting her dominance as both a CEO and an auteur. As the ringleader of the girl gang, she ensures that every action (BDSM/torture, phone call, etc.) is in service of getting her money back. Off-screen, Rihanna is securing her artistic vision through close collaboration with the video producers. In an interview for *Billboard*, one of the production crew members said that in this particular scene, Rihanna requested for Roberts to be naked (Weiner). Purposefully emphasizing Roberts’s humiliation and torture, Rihanna stages the warehouse scene in a way that shows the metaphorical lengths she is willing to go for her financial capital and artistic freedom to be kept intact.

After several other scenes of Roberts in captivity, Rihanna and her girl gang end up at a remote motel where they have a slumber party with weed, alcohol, makeovers, and dancing. The girl gang facilitates Roberts’s participation in the party: applying fake lashes to her blindfold, curling her hair, pouring liquor into her mouth, and providing her with a hit from Rihanna’s bong. Similar to the warehouse, Rihanna foregrounds the scene with minimal contribution to handling Roberts’s body. While still maintaining the captive–captor hierarchy of power, this scene begs the question of what it means for Roberts to be involved in a sexually charged slumber party with her oppressors. While one purpose of this scene is to make viewers understand that the “bitch” may not be Roberts, the scene also reminds viewers

that, whether through torture or indulgence, Roberts is no more than a prop for Rihanna’s self-actualization, reversing the role that Black women have traditionally played in popular media.⁷

A key moment that reminds viewers of Roberts’s disposability is the image of her lifeless body positioned next to Rihanna’s backside in the motel pool. The juxtaposition of erotics (Rihanna’s backside) and violence (Roberts’s corpse-like body) in this moment confirms that Roberts, while not the “bitch” that owes Rihanna money, serves the sole purpose of holding Rihanna’s rage (Figure 2).

Reminiscent of mob bosses and other leaders of organized crime, Rihanna uses Roberts as an example of what happens to those that defy her. She does not need to get her hands dirty for her vengeance to be realized. Instead, she leverages both her financial and artistic resources to make a mockery of Roberts and what she represents (the industry, cultural critics, etc.). The genius of “BBHMM” is not just that it plays on Rihanna’s lived experience, but that it also addresses ongoing critiques of her audacious self-making via erotic violence, a form of artistic expression and embodiment of sexual practice that disrupts Black recuperative heterosexuality. In other words, “BBHMM” is a demand for the industry and her followers to see Rihanna, not as a battered woman or victim of assault, but as a woman capable of deploying various forms of violence to get what she wants, deserves, and is owed. Rihanna’s revenge in “BBHMM” is a prime example of how Black female subjectivity is deployed to make Black



Figure 2 “Bitch Better Have My Money,” video still, © Universal Music Group. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

women's experiences and perspectives legible in a sociocultural landscape that opts to ignore assaults on their bodies, character, and overall representation.

Gaining CTRL: Sexual Liberation & Mental Health

Solána Imani Rowe, popularly known as SZA, is an alternative R&B artist from St. Louis, Missouri. Much of her music reflects on her challenges with mental health, processing depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and toxic relationships. In an interview with *Afropunk* following the release of her debut album, *CTRL*, SZA meditates on what it means for so many people to identify with her music, "It's actually super comforting to grow with this many people at the same time. . . It feels like a family" (Ziyad). Engaging art as a medium for solidarity and community building, SZA simultaneously heals her personal traumas while dismantling the silences in American popular culture around Black women's mental health as it relates to sexuality and desire. In "Love Galore," SZA accomplishes this tenet of her artistry by performing BDSM to enact revenge on toxic male lovers, represented by Travis Scott.

The video for "Love Galore" is split into two temporalities: reality and dreamscape. In reality, SZA is depicted as a seductive dominatrix about to engage in BDSM with a recently incapacitated Scott. In the dreamscape, SZA is surrounded by monarch butterflies, emphasizing the youthful innocence embodied by her gestures (e.g., wrist twirls) and aesthetics (e.g., pig tails, bangs, and glistening lip gloss). While SZA is dressed the same in both reality and the dreamscape, these contradictory readings of herself produce what can be described as a Lolita-dominatrix hybridization. A departure from the *femme fatale*, which reinforces male-serving sexual practice by representing women as manipulative and misandrist, the Lolita dominatrix embodies both the sexualized youthful innocence associated with Lolita and the aggressive, violent sexuality of a dominatrix. In depicting herself as such, SZA shows that Black

women can simultaneously embody sexual innocence and deviance, disrupting singular notions of Black female sexuality (Figure 3).

In analyzing the video within the context of the lyrics, it becomes clear that SZA is also using contradiction and erotic violence to process toxic relationships with past male lovers. The opening hook of the song captures SZA's warring emotions of love and vengefulness. After singing the chorus, "Love, love, love. 'Long as we got. Love, love, love. 'Long as we got," SZA immediately expresses her displeasure with men: "Done with these niggas. I don't love these niggas. I dust off these niggas. Do it for fun." (SZA). The stark contrast between her desire for love and disdain for men who have done her wrong is a clear example of SZA evoking contradiction to demonstrate how toxic relationships have impacted her mental well-being. When the one you desire is also the source of your pain, it becomes nearly impossible to rectify your wants for both intimacy and peace of mind. In tying these lyrics back to issues of mental health, SZA's BDSM performance (seducing, bonding, and slapping Scott) becomes legible as a method of processing relational trauma through a Black male body that represents a selection of past lovers who have needlessly complicated her romantic life, compromising her mental and emotional wellness.

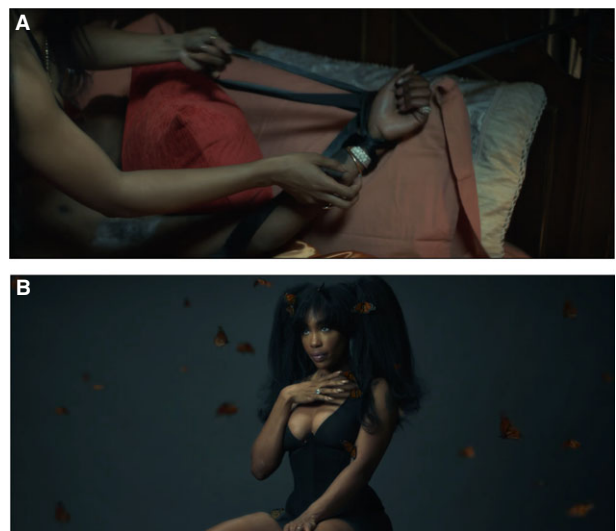


Figure 3 "Love Galore," video still, © Top Dawg Entertainment. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

By fashioning an artistic space that holds both her pain and pleasure, SZA poses two invaluable contributions to pop cultural representations of Black female sexuality. First, she reminds both music consumers and future lovers that they cannot have Black women's bodies without also holding space for their pain. As Chapman states, we exist in a culture of consuming Black women (visually and sexually), more willing to suspend belief than to recognize when they are hurting. Second, SZA destigmatizes the idea of a Black woman with mental health issues embracing the breadth of her sexuality. Similar to women who have experienced sexual assault or domestic abuse, women with mental health issues are often cautioned against engaging in "unhealthy" sexual practices. How can someone dare to be sexual when they are not right with themselves? Through her BDSM performance with Travis Scott, SZA shows that this is possible. By receiving pleasure through enacting and embodying pain, SZA presents new possibilities for Black female sexuality amongst women whose mental health has been afflicted, in part, by toxic male lovers. "Love Galore" fuses erotic violence and Black female subjectivity to make issues of mental health amongst Black women legible to audiences that are accustomed to ignoring Black women in pain.

Who's Gonna Save Me?: Low-Income Black Female Sexuality & State-Sanctioned Violence

Tank and the Bangas are a funk-soul band from New Orleans, Louisiana who became popular after winning the NPR Music Tiny Desk Contest in 2017. Their submission entry was an unplugged version of their now popular song, "Quick." While their competition video ascribes an upbeat playfulness to the song, the lyrics talk about a low-income Black woman who is both the recipient and purveyor of sexual violence. In Tank's own words, the song is about "a guy that tried to

really get a girl, and she's just planning on getting him back" (NPR). While this may be an understatement when contextualized by the music video (released six months later), the revenge fantasy framework still appears in Tank's comments. In analyzing the music video and lyrics, I will demonstrate how Rosy, the protagonist, leverages sexual assault to exert autonomy as a low-income Black woman whose sexuality is linked to financial survival and resistance to state-sanctioned violence. While I do not condone sexual assault, it would be remiss to present a moral argument as to whether or not Rosy is justified in her actions. Instead, I will direct my theorization toward answering the following question: How do Black women from the hood learn to love and defend themselves in a regime of state sexual terror and other socially justified assaults on their bodies?

"I be worried about you in them streets," are the words that open the video for "Quick," a dialogue between Rosy and her mother in the hood of New Orleans. Between the dialogue, we see Tank and her girlfriends seated on the family's cement stoop, dressed in eccentric multicolor outfits. The song and video proceed to tell Rosy's story, with Tank and the Bangas narrating her escapades. Wearing pink box braids and a yellow romper, she leaves the house and goes to a colorful, lively bar. During her night out on the town, she flirts with a Black man, "slips a mickey in his vodka," and proceeds to have sex with him while he is incapacitated. Rosy then steals his car and money, riding joyfully off into the night. The climax of the video occurs when she is pulled over by a Black police officer, who is then revealed to have assaulted her in the same way just a week before. Rosy is then forced to "think quick" about how to escape this situation. She throws her license out the window and speeds off, evading the police officer. After stopping the car in an empty junkyard, the officer catches up to her, uses his flashlight to choke her, drags her out of the car, and proceeds to assault her again. Rosy successfully resists, straddling and bludgeoning him with the same flashlight he used to choke her. To finish him off, Rosy hides his body in the dump, returns the car to her victim from the night before,

and avoids all repercussions for her actions (Tank and the Bangas) (Figure 4).

While the narrative itself is rich with content for analysis, it is worth contemplating the stark contrast between how visions of the South manifest in “Quick” and another piece of visual media, Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*. As Crank describes in his critique, *Django Unchained* relies on queer plantation camp to elide real, continuous histories of anti-Black violence, creating a postracial fantasy in which the plantation (a symbol of overt White supremacy) is burning to the ground. As a counterpoint, “Quick” evokes the “Dirty South” in a way that honors both the mundane (sitting on the stoop, smoking, wearing a headscarf, etc.) and the vibrant (crisp, colorful outfits, the club, sex, drugs, etc.).⁸ Not to mention that the only White person in the video is Albert Allenback, the flautist/saxophonist in Tank and the Bangas. By centering Black female subjectivity and deemphasizing whiteness, *Quick* presents a Southern narrative that draws minimally from romanticized conceptualizations of the region. Instead, Tank and the Bangas pose a meaningful commentary on what it

means for low-income Black women to navigate intraracial violence in zones of legal and social abandonment.

In response to the rape fantasies framework posited by Chapman, Tank, and the Bangas use the tempo of the song to engage viewers in the breadth of Rosy’s emotions and experiences. The fast-paced funk beats mimic moments of euphoria during her night out: seducing the man, riding off in his car, and evading the police officer. In contrast, the slow, soulful tune that plays while Rosy is being assaulted in the junkyard, paired with a montage of close-up and midclose shots, focuses all of the attention on her assault. Unlike *Crash* and *Monster’s Ball*, where the cinematography prevents viewers from engaging with Black women’s pain, “Quick” plays with tempo and videography to make Rosy’s pain the centerpiece of the assault scene, refusing to compromise her body for the sake of a more palatable storyline. By forcing Rosy’s sexual assault to be seen, Tank and the Bangas leverage Black female subjectivity to disrupt the rape fantasies framework, proving that truth-telling and multidimensionality do not have to be compromised for Black women to be represented in popular culture.

The music video for “Quick” also confronts viewers with the ways that pleasure and pain coalesce to shape Black female sexuality for low-income Black women. At the heart of this confrontation is Rosy’s violent sexual relationships with two Black men. How can we make sense of Rosy’s position as both a victim and perpetrator of sexual violence? Depicting Rosy in this way forces viewers to renegotiate their understanding of morality as it relates to sexual violence. This is not to say that the video cosigns sexual assault perpetrated by women. Rather, it exposes the realities of living in a low-income Southern neighborhood where the established social order and rule of law not only fail to serve Black women but actively surveil and assault their bodies (e.g., Rosy and the police officer). When the video is read in this way, it becomes clear why Rosy is our protagonist: she has the audacity to survive and resist within an environment controlled by Black men, not just for herself, but for the women in her family.



Figure 4 “Quick,” video still, © Live Nation Video Network. [Color figure can be viewed at wileyonlinelibrary.com]

The song lyrics also reflect the centrality of survival and resistance to Rosy's narrative. One line that captures this sentiment perfectly is sung by Tank right after Rosy escapes to the junkyard: "*I've gone too far. In the deep end. So who's gonna save me? Who's gonna save me now?*" (Tank and the Bangas). Tank and the Bangas have created an anthem for Black women living in zones of legal and social abandonment who, left without options, have learned to protect themselves. Being confronted with the messiness of this situation so quickly does not leave room for moral judgment. Instead, we as listeners are called to check our prejudices at the door and root for the Black woman protagonist who navigates her sexuality and physical survival outside of the realm of legality.

Conclusion

We are in a new moment of Black cultural production in the United States, one that is marked by social activism, #BlackGirlMagic, and popular media created by and for Black women. Work like this cannot be overlooked; by breaking away from the idea that Black women and their experiences must represent something other than themselves, Black women artists are creating spaces in which their lives can be legible on their own terms. In this case, all three music videos contest mainstream notions of Black female sexuality, using erotic violence in revenge fantasies to examine the breadth and complexity of Black women's sexual experiences. That said, the following question remains unanswered: Is it necessary to return to sites of trauma for Black female sexuality to be understood? While Black women's participation in erotic violence is at least partially informed by histories of violence toward their bodies, it is not the sole factor of their participation, nor is erotic violence the only form of liberatory sexual practice available to Black women. If I were to expand this investigation, I would explore how returning to these sites of trauma publicly also puts Black women artists at risk of harsh critique and shaming.

Acknowledging the limits of erotic violence as a way of knowing Black female sexuality also reveals the limits of using popular culture to make sense of social relations. While representation matters, it is dangerous to overstate the role that popular culture plays in speaking of and for the sexual lives of Black women. The visibility that these artists have given to diverse forms of Black female sexuality, while significant, must be analyzed within the context of their personal backgrounds and artistic visions. As the negative commentary surrounding Rihanna's embodiment of erotic violence has shown us, extrapolating performances of Black female sexuality to serve as exemplars of Black women's sexual realities can lead to misrepresentation, ultimately eliding the power and authenticity of the art in question. Therefore, as responsible consumers of popular culture, we must hold space for the specificity of Black women's artistic work and remain realistic about the broader implications of that work in society writ large.

Despite recent victories in Black women's representation, American popular culture continues to be fraught with images of Black women that reinforce stereotypical ideas of race, gender, and sexuality. These images continue the work of establishing Black women as Other in American society. Black women artists, like the ones discussed here, undo that work by depicting black women as human through their artistry, embodying duCille's eloquent assertion that Black women, of course, are not Other in relation to themselves (592). By valorizing the space that Black women's cultural production has created to discuss and dismantle longstanding prejudices against their bodies, we as cultural consumers will keep the door open for new cohorts of Black women artists to inundate the pop cultural landscape with diverse images of Black women.

Notes

-
1. On February 7, 2009, Rihanna was assaulted by her boyfriend at the time, Chris Brown. Since then, Rihanna has released numerous songs and videos that reflect on topics of domestic abuse. For more

information, see Fleetwood, *The Case of Rihanna: Erotic Violence and Black Female Desire*.

2. For example, Eartha Kitt (Catwoman) and Pam Grier (Foxy Brown)

3. From *Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images*, “the mammy image is one of an asexual woman, a surrogate mother in blackface whose historical devotion to her White family is now giving way to new expectations” (Collins 74).

4. Also from *Mammies, Matriarchs, and Other Controlling Images*, “A final controlling image—the jezebel, whore, or ‘hoochie’—is central in this nexus of controlling images of Black womanhood. Because efforts to control Black women’s sexuality lie at the heart of Black women’s oppression, historical jezebels and contemporary ‘hoochies’ represent a deviant Black female sexuality” (Collins 81).

5. See Lorde, *Sadomasochism: Not About Condemnation* and Walker, in *Against Sadomasochism*.

6. While Rihanna is a Black woman from Barbados, she has made a significant impact on how Black womanhood is viewed/practiced in contemporary American culture via her career as a singer, actress, and entrepreneur.

7. For a selection of music videos that showcase Black bodies as props for white women’s self-making, see: *We Can’t Stop* (Miley Cyrus), *Shake it Off* (Taylor Swift), and *Dark Horse* (Katy Perry)

8. While “Dirty South” is generally used as either a (i) regional description of Southern Black America, or (ii) description of rap/hip hop music produced in this region, I am evoking it as a Black cultural aesthetic, both real and imagined, that belongs to this region of the United States.

Works Cited

- Barshad, Amos. “QT&A: Quentin Tarantino on Django Unchained: ‘I Cut Their Heads Off. They Grew Another Head, But They Were a Little Traumatized.’” *Grantland*, 21 Dec. 2012.
- Chapman, Erin D. “Rape Fantasies and Other Assaults: Black Women’s Sexuality and Racial Redemption on Film.” *Black Female Sexualities*. Rutgers UP, 2015, pp. 141–58.
- Crank, James A.. “The Plantation Is Burning: Queer Melancholies, Violent Intimacies, and Plantation Camp in Django Unchained.” *The Global South*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2016, pp. 99.
- Cruz, Ariane. *The Color of Kink: Black Women, BDSM, and Pornography*. New York UP, 2016.
- duCille, Ann. “The Occult of True Black Womanhood: Critical Demeanor and Black Feminist Studies.” *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1994, pp. 591–629.
- Fleetwood, Nicole R. “The Case of Rihanna: Erotic Violence and Black Female Desire.” *African American Review*, vol. 45, no. 3, 2012, pp. 419–35.
- McDonald, Soriya Nadia. “Why We Think ‘BBHMM’ Is about Rihanna’s Former Accountant Peter Gounis.” *Washington Post*, 5 July 2015.
- O’Connor, Rosin. “Who Cares If Rihanna’s BBHMM Video Is Feminist or Not? She’s the One with the Power.” *The Independent*, 3 July 2015.
- Rihanna. “Bitch Better Have My Money (Explicit).” *Iconoclast*. YouTube, 1 July 2015. Web.
- SZA. “Love Galore (Official Video) Ft. Travis Scott.” *TDE*. YouTube, 28 Apr. 2017. Web.
- Tank and The Bangas. “QUICK | OFFICIAL VIDEO.” *FosterBear Films*. YouTube, 31 May 2017. Web.
- Wiener, Natalie. “Rihanna’s Co-Directors on ‘Bitch Better Have My Money’: ‘People Can Hate It, People Can Love It’ (Exclusive).” *Billboard*.
- Yee, Shirley J. *Black Women Abolitionists: A Study in Activism, 1828–1860*. U of Tennessee P, 1992.
- Ziyad, Hari. “SZA: ‘It Makes Me a Little Sad’ That so Many People Connected to the Emotions of My Album.” *Afropunk*, 28 Aug. 2017.