

# VICTIM, RISQUÉ, PROVOCATEUR: POPULAR CULTURAL NARRATIVES OF RIHANNA'S EXPERIENCE OF INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE

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**Abstract** Using lenses of Black and Brown feminisms, this article examines popular music artist Chris Brown's 2009 assault of his then partner, Rihanna. Since the assault, Rihanna's identity has been continually written and represented as both inherently victimised and somehow responsible for provoking Brown's violence. The article draws attention to young Black and Brown women's constructions as both 'at-risk' and 'risky', and how Rihanna's 'risqué' public personae has been misinterpreted by some sectors of the community, including the media, as victim ('at-risk') and provocateur ('risky'). Rihanna's 'risquéness' is constructed on her gender (female), race, ethnicity and nationality (Bajan, Black, Carribean, islander, migrant). Due to her gender, race and overtly 'sexual' positioning, Rihanna has been subjected to victim-blaming at the hands of the media, but her implied 'risquéness' was also demonstrated through hyper-surveillance by the media after the assault. This representation is both highly gendered and racialised. Despite being subjected as 'at-risk' and objectified as 'risky', Rihanna found a voice to document and voice her experience of violence. This article unpacks these scripts about her experiences of violence to recognise similar issues young Black and Brown women experience within intimate relationships and to further open up the dialogue in this area.

I see the mask, sense  
the girl and the woman  
you became, wonder if mask  
and woman are one, if  
pain is the sum of all  
your knowing, victim the  
only game you learned.  
-Sherley Anne  
Williams  
'Some One Sweet  
Angel Chile'

## Introduction

Using lenses of Black and Brown feminisms, this article examines a violent incident in which popular music artist Chris Brown assaulted his then partner and fellow popular

music artist Rihanna. Rihanna was born in Barbados in 1988 and is one of the most successful recording artists of all time, having recorded seven studio albums, with sales of approximately 30 million albums and 120 million singles worldwide. She has received seven Grammy awards, eight American music awards and 22 Billboard awards. She has sold-out tours in the Americas, Europe and Oceania. In 2005, she signed a six-album record deal with the Def Jam label. As well as her singing career, she has also starred in Hollywood films and produced a reality fashion show (Eells 2011; Patterson 2007).

As discussed below, Rihanna's former partner, popular music singer and dancer Chris Brown, assaulted her in 2009 when they were travelling to the 51st Grammy Awards in Los Angeles. There have been reports that Brown inflicted serious and visible injuries, especially to the face, as well as making serious threats of harm (Swash 2009). The purpose of this article is to shift and maintain attention to men's culpability for violence in intimate heterosexual relationships, rather than continuing explicit and implicit 'victim' blaming. The following discussion navigates the complex, explicit and subtle issues of gender and race within heterosexual relationships, especially for young women of colour. It uses this particular example because of the ways Rihanna has been blamed for and connected to a violent episode committed by a man, which was heavily reported in mainstream media outlets in countries such as the USA, Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand.

It must be stressed that Rihanna's behaviour before, during and after the incident should not be used to exculpate criminal assaults and threats, nor should any woman be seen to provoke men's violence. While this article discusses the media surveillance of Rihanna after the assault, the authors wish to emphasise that although Rihanna has been and continues to be positioned in relation to another person's violence, she did not do anything to cause the assault and threats. As she in her own words stated 'I don't want that to happen. That's not what I want to teach people. ...I didn't cause this. I didn't do it. This happened to me, and it can happen to anybody' (ABC 2009; Vena 2009). Further, as with any criminal act, the initial incident can never be fully known and has different recollections by those involved. Through this research, we invite readers to consider issues of implicit and everyday racism associated with these issues. For example, why were other people, such as the police and the media,<sup>1</sup> so invested in holding Rihanna accountable for Brown's actions? Why were Rihanna's decisions about her involvement with Brown seen as the problem, rather than Brown himself? Have we considered intimate partner violence within non-Black celebrity relationships in the same way? For example, actress Pamela Anderson's former partner musician Tommy Lee was arrested for spousal in 1998 (McAllister 1998), but Anderson's decisions about her involvements with Lee do not seem to have garnered the same level of negative attention as Rihanna.

Since the assault, Rihanna's identity has been continually written and represented as both inherently victimised and somehow responsible for provoking Brown's violence (Bierria 2013). This article aims to refocus the attention to Brown's violent actions, but the research also draws attention to young Black and Brown women's constructions as both 'at-risk' and 'risky', and how Rihanna's 'risqué' public personae has been misinterpreted by some sectors of the community, including the media, as victim ('at-risk') and provocateur ('risky'). Her 'risquéness' is situated in an aesthetics of artist, performer, celebrity and commodity that at times draws in her personal life and is embodied through photos and reports of her multiple tattoos, alleged cannabis use and bisexual desires, edgy and revealing clothing and sensual and erotic live performances (see Enck and McDaniel 2012; Fleetwood 2012, for further discussion). Her implied 'risquéness' was also demonstrated

through hyper-surveillance and interrogation of her by the media after the assault (Bierria 2013, 102–105). It continues when the media persistently links her to Brown, either romantically (even when they are not in an intimate relationship) or by invoking her as the complainant in the assault for which he is currently on probation, when reporting on his other criminality.

Rihanna's 'risquéness' is constructed on her gender (female), race, ethnicity and nationality (Bajan, Black, Caribbean, islander and migrant). Rihanna has, due to her gender, race and overtly 'sexual' positioning been subjected to victim-blaming at the hands of the media (Bierria 2013). She is forever the (Bajan) good girl gone bad.<sup>2</sup> It is our contention that this representation is both highly gendered and racialised.

Despite being subjected as 'at-risk' and objectified as 'risky', Rihanna found a voice to document and voice her experience of violence. This research unpacks these scripts about her experiences and reflections of violence to recognise similar issues young Black and Brown women experience within intimate relationships and to further open up the dialogue in this area. In challenging the conflicting meanings popular culture creates about gender roles within intimate relationships and how these meanings may impact efforts to reduce intimate partner and familial violence, especially for young Black and Brown females, this article examines how Rihanna's navigation of the media has implications for wider understandings of social responses to intimate partner violence (Hopson 2009, 107–108, 110).

### The Assault

The highly publicised incident launched Rihanna, the female pop icon, into a very public identification with gendered violence in an emotional relationship. She was forced into the role of spokesperson and role model about intimate partner violence, especially for young Black and Brown women because of his actions, rather than through her desire. Brown was charged with assault and making criminal threats.<sup>3</sup> The incident and the pair's relationship status continue to attract media attention and Brown does not appear to have resolved his issues with violence, as discussed below. The assault occurred in Brown's car after they left a music awards ceremony in 2009. Rihanna was photographed with horrific facial injuries after the incident and then endured humiliation and embarrassment when a photograph of her injuries was leaked to the media (Hopson 2009, 107; Itzkoff 2009, 2011).

The violent attack against Rihanna, at the time, seemed like a one-time occurrence as Brown, in a schoolboy sweater and bow tie, pleaded his case on *Larry King Live* (CNN Larry King Live Interview with Chris Brown 2009), asking the world for forgiveness while promising that this behaviour would never happen again (Enck and McDaniel 2012, 633). Since the domestic violence attack on Rihanna in 2009, Brown has repeatedly faced judicial charges, been jailed, ordered to rehab and anger management because of violent acts. In March 2011, Brown is alleged to have destroyed a dressing room in a television studio, after a *Good Morning America* host asked him questions about the assault (Enck and McDaniel 2012), as well as allegedly threatening recording artist Frank Ocean (see Itzkoff 2011; McKinley 2013). He was most recently jailed for multiple probation violations (see *Los Angeles Times* Staff Writer 2014 for further discussion). The embattled pop star, now faces further jail time, as Rihanna, tries to move on as more than a survivor of domestic violence and Brown's displaced rage.

## Black and Brown Feminisms

As outlined above, this article challenges the conflicting meanings popular culture creates about gender roles within intimate relationships and how these meanings may impact efforts to reduce intimate partner and familial violence, especially for young females of colour. We have included a variety of theories and perspectives of feminists of colour. Black and Brown are social constructs of race and ethnicity, based around skin tones other than Caucasian or white, which are heavily embedded within sociality. These terms also embody cultural significance and meaning of one's experiences of racism. As well as these negative aspects, there are also affirmations and appropriations of these terms and the racialisation of individuals in the collective understandings of the world we interact in, such as Blackness, Black America, Black women and Black feminism or Brown women and Brown feminism. The term 'women of colour' is also used throughout the article to indicate women whose cultural and racial identity is impacted by constructs of race/ethnicity based on skin tones other than whiteness or Caucasian.

We in no way imply that all women of colour have the same experiences of violence or intimate relationships, and we recognise the complexities of and in each relationship as unique, fluid, evolving and dynamic. We also recognise that Rihanna often occupies an unusual position because of her celebrity and economic success but that does not deny her own experiences of racism, sexism, heterosexism and Eurocentrism, rather it enables her a platform to speak about her experiences (as her own) and as experiences that may provide counter-discourses of intimate relationships for all women, but especially young women of colour (Bierria 2013, 112).

In Gayatri Spivak's (1988) article, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' she addresses the manner in which the 'subaltern' woman is a subject already positioned, represented, spoken for, constructed as absent or silent or not listened to in a variety of discourses. This article explores Spivak's theory with reference to Rihanna and asks the question of how her voice was and is heard. It seeks to create a larger space in which to consider gendered violence by considering how violence touches the lives of young women and forces them to question their own place and space. This article also attempts to explore how Rihanna's celebrity expanded the messages available for young women of colour when they negotiate (abusive) relationships and how her actions have been heavily surveilled and she was/is made culpable for the violent relationship.

While the assault appeared to disrupt a 'perfect' relationship of 'Black love', it may actually authenticate some of the complexities of desire, especially for women of colour and the men they love. As women, we may be conditioned to expect men to behave in certain ways. Barnes (2009, 1–28) has very eloquently highlighted how young women experience a multitude of confusing messages about intimate relationships, which are often confounded by the diffuse discourses of love and racial identity. She particularly highlights how culture imagines desire through what she names as the 'Cinderella/Prince Charming complex'. Although she says that women often take on androgynous roles within intimate relationships, she also identifies how exaggerated feminine and masculine romantic ideals are deeply-embedded within sociality. She demonstrates how these gender roles can provide distorted lenses for navigating intimate relationships.

Rihanna and Brown had been cast within popular musical and cultural imaginations as the Black Cinderella and Prince Charming. Rihanna, who was born on the Caribbean island of Barbados, and Brown, who is an African-American, were seen as American pop

sweethearts, especially within urban music scenes. Rather than being her soulmate (her metaphoric other half), Brown initially became the villain, the 'expected' offender (young, Black and male). Further, Rihanna's experiences of violence were situated within neocolonialist notions of victimhood (Bierria 2013, 104–105). Her racial and cultural Otherness (as a Black woman from Barbados) was collocated with notions of abuse perpetuated on myths about poverty and violent victimology. From appearances, Brown was the clean-cut All-(African) American boy next door, yet as discussed above, this seems to have been somewhat of a façade and a public persona which was invested in his global marketability, and he has emerged as more of a 'bad boy' persona since the incident, including becoming heavily tattooed and allegedly engaging in abusive encounters with other artists and public personalities. On *The Tyra Banks Show* in 2007, Brown acknowledged the trauma he experienced from witnessing violence in his childhood home, committed by his mother's ex-partner. He also vowed that he would never inflict violence on his own partner (see also Fontaine 2009).

Rihanna, as the good girl gone bad, has become representative of the historical Jezebel image (Aymer 2011, 354). Rihanna's abusive relationship with Brown allows a re-examination of the historical, social and cultural legacy of the 'bad Black girl' stereotype, Jezebel, while also debunking the myth of the multiple 'global' stereotypical representations of Black women: their sexuality, their ideas of beauty and their identity formation:

Jezebel or the 'bad-Black-girl,' originated during slavery when white slave owners exercised almost complete control over Black women's sexuality and reproduction. Value on the auction block was determined by childbearing capacity and rape, perpetrated by both Black and White men, was routinely used to augment the slave population. Offspring of these unions were frequently sold at the whim of the owner. Physically, Jezebel was often portrayed as a mixed-race woman with more European features, such as thin lips, straight hair, and a slender nose. Unlike the Mammy image, Jezebel tended to be closer to the White standard of beauty. She functioned primarily in the role of a seductive, hypersexual, exploiter of men's weaknesses. (Jewell 1993)

Historically, this image has been the most protested and challenged by Black women (Hines 1989), however, it persists and continues to be a frequent representation (Aymer 2011, 354). Intertwined with other historical, yet stereotypical, images such as Mammy and Sapphire, Black women are all too often categorised around limited typologies (Aymer 2011, 354). The Jezebel image is particularly cumbersome because it is fully loaded with negative connotations surrounding Black women, sexual violence and sexual victimisation. As bell hooks (1992) states: 'Representations of black female bodies in contemporary popular culture rarely subvert or critique images of black female sexuality which were part of the cultural apparatus of 19th-century racism which still shape perceptions today'.

Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) named the interconnected layers of such concepts of oppression and their bearings on violence against women within her theory of 'intersectionality'. Crenshaw's theory is especially pertinent to a reading of Rihanna's navigation of her relationship with Brown because of added dimensions, including immigration, nationality, socio-economics, age and sexuality. How does she intersect with race, class, gender, location, sexuality, education and income, and to ultimately give voice to her own suffering or to struggle to have her voice heard? Similarly, Lorde (1984, 319)

declared: 'The future of our earth may depend upon the ability of all women to identify and develop new definitions of power and new patterns of relating across differences'. This article identifies and develops differences and commonalities amongst women of colour to increase the dialogue and turn up the volume up on their voices. These various theories and concepts underpin our discussion of how Rihanna navigated the incident and created herself and redefined her image, especially in relation to popular cultural apparatuses like the media.

## Discussion

There have been various stylised media constructions of Rihanna, and while we cannot examine all of those styles in this article, we draw on some key media reports and interviews after the assault. As discussed earlier and later, Rihanna was recast from the Black Cinderella or Black princess of pop/R& B to the victim and provocateur by the mainstream media who often spoke for her, about her, critiqued her silences and absences, as well as her hushing her voice and fading her presence.

Rihanna, who herself embodies a highly stylised androgyny, has voiced her relationship with Brown within these exaggerated, heterosexual, gendered romantic ideals of the 'Cinderella/Prince Charming complex'. For example, the Cinderella/Prince Charming complex may be best illustrated by the lyrics of Rihanna's song, 'Photographs' in which she describes a familiar, but subtle story of a young romance that ends in heartbreak and shattered dreams:

Here's a little story I've gotta tell, Bout this boy I know so well,  
Back in the day was cool and all, Fell in love, I fell in love,  
Thought he was the one for me, Other boys I could not see,  
And look what happened to our love, I'm like how could it be?

It should have been me and you, It could have been you and me,  
Boy you broke my heart and now I'm standing here,  
It should have been me and you, It could have been you and me,  
Now I look at all these photographs.

(Adams et al. 2009)

This urban ballad provides a simulacrum of her failed desire (to find her perfect other), the failed fulfilment of the fairy tale love story so deeply embedded in our cultural imagination. A reflection (the hook says 'all I've got are these photographs') of what was supposed to be 'true love', the mythical authenticity of heterosexuality. This break-up song, as a narrative of failed desire, replaces the love song, as a narrative of Cinderella/Prince Charming ideals. Rihanna's lyrics symbolise a disappointment endemic of the Cinderella complex in which women desire men to emotionally and financially support them, an expectation which can leave women disempowered (Dowling in Barnes 2009, 3). The Cinderella complex equates love within perfect unions and places unrealistic expectations on women and men to comply with fictional ideals and the rescuer fantasy—men as heroes and women as (their) femme fatales.

However, intimate relationships are rarely reflective of these fictional ideals. This is most concerning when women experience emotional, physical or sexual abuse from their

partner. This can be a very confusing time for women and very difficult to negotiate the conflicting messages that abusive partners give out. There are often societal pressures on women to leave a relationship at the first sign of violence. Yet, it is difficult and dangerous for women to leave an abusive partner (Danis and Bhandari 2010, 48). It is not unusual for women to return to a violent partner who often makes grand gestures for forgiveness and promises not to become violent again (Kenney 2011, 40–42). Reflective of these complexities, after the assault, Rihanna and Brown's relationship continued through a brief reunion. She sings about this time in 'Cold Case Love':

Chorus: Your love was breaking the law but I needed a witness, so wake me up when it's over it don't make any difference. Will it ever be solved or am I taking the fall? The truth was there all along tell me how did we miss it? We opened up a cold case love and it got the best of us. And now prints, pictures, and white outlines are all that's left at the scene of a crime of a cold case love.

Verse 2:

Should've investigated,  
but love blinded eyes couldn't see no.  
And then I tried to cage it,  
but your love ain't the kind that you can keep.  
Release me now 'cause I've did my time,  
of this cold case love.  
My heart's no longer cold and you gone find I've had enough.

Bridge:

We lost our way,  
took this too far,  
now I'll never find the pieces of my heart.  
We've lost enough,  
looking for a truth that was here all along.

Singing about feelings of emotional blindness, loss and truth, Rihanna compares this relationship to the remnants of a crime scene. Her intended Prince Charming is no longer her knight in shining armour, so she must resituate herself within a monolithic feminist discourse of recovery and redefinition, in which the woman simply leaves an abusive relationship.

However, these feminist discourses are idealistic and fragmented, and women of colour often have their voices silenced by the drowning echoes of neocolonial notions of belonging. Women's place, within feminist discourses of violence, is cemented in colonial ideals and assumptions about race, space and place (Smith 2005, 116–118). These discourses often fail to understand not only the struggle some women have to be seen and heard within the justice system, but also how the justice system has been a vehicle of racist violence (see Arnold and Ake 2013, 10–11, Coker 2008, 369–388, Richie 2006, 138–156 and). As Smith (2005, 126) explains: 'the mainstream anti-violence movement has relied on the apparatus of state violence (in the form of the criminal justice system) to address domestic and sexual violence without considering how the State itself is a primary perpetrator of violence'.

It is well documented that women from over-policed populations, typically non-Caucasian women, face insurmountable barriers to justice when they inhabit violent relationships (Cox, Young, and Bairnsfather-Scott 2009; Smith 2005). The trauma of enduring a partner's violence is wedged within wider nexuses of interracial violence from the state, from police, and from the public, which is further contextualised by intraracial violence and family violence. As Smith outlines in relation to native American populations (emphasis in the original, 2005, 126): 'The continuing effect of this human rights violation has been the internalisation of sexual and other forms of gender violence *within* native American communities'. But for women, the experience of violence is especially traumatic because of this conglomeration of violence within (the home, the family, and the community) and the inflections of colonial and neocolonial legitimised, sometimes lawful, acts of violence upon notions of the self. Indigenous women face similar spectrums of violence as Black women, as familiar also to women of colour/native women across the globe.

We find ourselves having to repeat and relearn the same old lessons over and over that our mothers did because we do not pass on what we have learned, or because we are unable to listen ... who would have believed that once again our daughters are allowing their bodies to be hampered and purgatoried. (Lorde 1995, 286)

While not all women's experiences are the same and not all woman of colour have the same experience, it is important to note the racialised barriers woman faces when negotiating the issues surrounding violence within an intimate relationship.

Rihanna, as a woman who is Black and who is Bahamian, chose to rewrite her narrative and how she is identified. When she references her childhood, she has the emotional capability to remember the good and the bad of growing up in a violent household in which her father allegedly abused alcohol and drugs. His contact with the family was sporadic, and her mother mostly raised Rihanna and her two brothers:

My home was definitely happy. My Mom and Dad went through a lot of domestic problems. I was always excited to see my Dad, but the day they decided definitely to break up was such a relief, which is weird, because kids usually have the opposite feeling. It was almost like the anger in the house was so much that I preferred it just to be me and my Mom. I still don't know how she did it. She always protected us – she would never let us know when we had problems. (Rihanna in Onstad 2010, 159)

Comments, such as these, challenge explicit and implicit perceptions of female provocation (for violence), as well as perceptions about the Black and Brown woman as helpless, prone to violent relationships and more responsible for trying to stop violence. Rihanna celebrates her mother's strength and independence. Her comments disrupt the hapless woman monoliths sometimes bandied around discourses of violence against women. Rihanna, herself, presents a complex, intriguing and admirable feminine identity. Her emotional maturity, as evidenced through her rejection of the media and public scripting of her as provocateur, is perhaps the by-product of her experiences of navigating an international corporate community dominated by older White males. Rihanna has also learnt how to fit into a world that was not her own, a world that privileges neocolonial ideals and customs. In an interview on the BBC's *Graham Norton Show* in 2010, Rihanna

discusses her Bajan ways and describes how she had to ‘tone down’ her speech in interviews with the white press because they could not ‘understand’ her, so that she had to mask her difference to increase her marketability. This concept was replicated in the interview when Rihanna had to define Bajan to the show’s host and her presumably non-Bajan and white audience.

While our identities are constantly shifting and ever-evolving, we are often pushed and pulled within broader narratives about female visibility and identity. These issues are evident when we consider how Rihanna had to traverse public dialogues about her identity, an identity (re)constructed before and after the assault. Rihanna’s rewriting of herself was noted in Black media outlets. As Onstad (2010, 154) explains:

Rihanna (the beautiful pop star created by record executives in a record-label boardroom) could only be a product, helpless and profitable—an innocent plucked from the beach of Barbados. The Incident doesn’t help, either, her horrific beating at the hands of her then-boyfriend, Chris Brown. Maybe- grossly and unfairly—she has been ascribed victimhood from that, too.

However, Rihanna’s nationality also created an underlying premise whereby issues of her cultural and geographical home, as well as her identity and self-definition, became even more complex for her within this physically and emotionally abusive relationship.

The politics of location brings forward a whole host of identifications and associations around concepts of place, placement, displacement; location, dislocation; memberment, dis-memberment; citizenship, alienness; boundaries, barriers, transportations; peripheries, cores and centers. It is about positionality in geographic, historic, social, economic, educational terms. It is about positionality in society based on class, gender, sexuality, age, income. It is also about relationality and the ways in which one is able to access, mediate or reposition oneself, or pass into other spaces given certain other circumstances. (Davies 1994, 153)

According to Audre Lorde, ‘much of Western European history conditions us to see human difference in simplistic opposition to each other: dominant/subordinate, good/bad, up/down, superior/inferior’ (1984, 114). Abuse is ‘exacerbated by racism and the pressures of powerlessness, [so] violence against black women and children often becomes a standard within our communities, one by which manliness can be measured. But these woman-hating acts are rarely discussed as crimes against Black woman’. Unfortunately, Chris Brown’s assault of Rihanna acts as recourse to the powerlessness that is ‘sapping strength from Black communities’ (Lorde 1984, 120) and women’s lives.

However, the more mainstream media was a slightly more harsh landscape for a young Black woman’s body. Rihanna gave an interview to the North American 20/20 current affairs programme in November 2009, during which she described the attack. Caucasian journalist, Diane Sawyer, interviewed her, making explicit references to Rihanna’s childhood in Barbados and her witnessing of domestic violence within her family. The interview focused on the incident, and Sawyer was aggressive in her questions. Somehow, she was culpable for the violence Brown committed, but there was also an implied collocation of violence with the relegated ‘Otherness’ of her Barbados nationality (i.e. poor and Black). Media discourses tried to position Rihanna within two dominant

narratives; the victim and the provocateur. Yet Rihanna asserted herself not as a victim, but as a woman who experienced gendered, heterosexual violence. She did so in such a way to distance herself from the attack, while still acknowledging her experiences. She demonstrated bravery and humanity and emotional maturity, yet acknowledging the confusing, traumatic and undesired aspects of their relationship to open up the space for us to consider violent relationships.

Brown was interviewed by, African-American journalist, Robin Roberts in December 2009, on the same programme. He made some fleeting admissions to the violent incident, but the interview largely set up a maternalistic relationship between Roberts and Brown. Brown's interview was quite playful, while Rihanna's interview was sombre and inquisitorial. Rather than assuming a position of female solidarity and condemning violence against women, the Rihanna interview has the sub-text of relegating some women as more prone to violence and more responsible for stopping it. This theme has been carried over within many media narratives and also Rihanna's own words that she should be a role model to young (Black) women by taking a stance against violence. Further, Brown admitted in his interview that his mother's ex-partner was violent, which was used to somewhat exculpate and explain away his own violent actions. At the time, Chris Brown was positioned (by himself and the broader enabling socio-legal discourses) as a victim and as vulnerable.

This case not only generated heated debate about his actions but also how she reacted to his violence (Enck and McDaniel 2012, 619–620; Fleetwood 2012, 420–421; Rothman et al. 2012, 735). There was intense criticism of her decision to remain in this abusive relationship after the documented attack and also when the pair resumed an intimate relationship in 2012–2013. Magazines printed photos of the pair together with commentary criticising her judgements. There were also harsh criticisms levelled at her by Brown's fans, including numerous female fans, with some even suggesting that she was somehow to blame for his violence (Rothman et al. 2012, 735; Fleetwood 2012, 735). These messages of provocation and victim-blaming continue, and Rihanna is heavily surveilled by the media. An example of this occurred when there were critiques of her decision to collaborate with Brown on her single *Birthday Cake* and his single *Turn up the Music*. After media releases about their collaboration, celebrity website TMZ posted an online article with the title 'Rihanna – I Reached Out to Chris Brown ... 'Cause He's Hot' (TMZ 2012). While the title of the article implies sexual or lustful desire, the content of the article affirms that Rihanna made a conscious business decision that she thought would be profitable. Rihanna continues to take the blame for Brown's violence, while other parties, including Brown and the media, are not seen as responsible, enabling or contributory to a broader culture of violence against women, especially Black and Brown women. For example, Brown performed at the 2012 Grammys. This incident may have been traumatic for Rihanna considering that it signifies the assault, yet there was very little if no criticism of the producers to allow him to perform or for his decision to perform. Moreover, commentators continually criticise Rihanna's personal decisions, rather than supporting her or guiding her, as well as continuing to tie her to Brown. For example, Rihanna has been denounced as an inappropriate role model for young women because of her decision to resume an intimate relationship with Brown (Jones 2013), yet there is no critique of Brown's decision to pursue the woman he so violently attacked. It is as if Rihanna herself is the agent of violence, if not the violence itself.

What was also interesting about this case was how the legal system not only intervened to prosecute Brown but also assumedly in the interests of Rihanna. As well as making the statement that as a young Black migrant woman from a low socio-economic country she could not make adequate decisions about her welfare, perhaps Brown was a target because of his race/ethnicity and as a symbol of young Black male culture. All the examples highlight the way that this incident was narrated by the media, especially the 20/20 interviews by Rihanna and Brown, to place much heavier criticism on Rihanna's actions than Brown's. As Ulen (2010, 63) explains:

We continue to victimize victims, especially when they are women, as it is part of our [American] culture that women have little value. This fear of backlash from peers and even adults silences many girls and privileges the boys who break the law every time they use violence to express power. One of the contributing factors that I am most concerned about is the objectification and sexualization of women and girls in the mass media and American culture, which normalizes violence, unhealthy relationships and abuse.

This quote highlights the depth of culpability women are thrust within for men's acts of violence, especially younger women, as well as Western popular cultural discourses and imagery which places young women within a paradoxical nexus of blame, responsibility, victimology and vulnerability. Essentially, young women are both at-risk and risky within this type of sexualisation thesis, while young women's voices are silenced or ignored. Part of the purpose of this article is to amplify these voices and ask how young women's experiences, narratives and reflections can help us understand and prevent the problem of men's violence, without making them responsible. This is something we can learn from Rihanna.

While Rihanna's intentions were questioned even after she publicly stated that 'this [the violent incident] happened to me, I did not do anything wrong' (ABC 2009). Yet as discussed above, Brown's actions were contextually placed within childhood incidents of him witnessing violent acts. As Millner (2010, 60) explains 'Black women and girls are the living dead. We're ignored because we're walking around and we have the audacity to survive the crime, the violence and turmoil'. Her statement reflects the many barriers that Black women face when they experience violence. She goes on to describe how gendered the responses to violence are within Black communities, and how these gendered responses further harm women and girls:

But if you look at all these problems we have, they all lead back to the fact that we are in insecure situations and we're all catching hell. The African American community surrounds black men, but the crisis of black women gets marginalized and dismissed altogether, and that does nothing more than hurt us all. (Miller 2010, 60)

We must consider the institutional and cultural racism that not only allows Black and Brown women's experiences of violence to be compounded but also consider gendered responses within Black communities and how younger women are further marginalised and silenced.

Brown, who pleaded guilty to one count of assault and one count of criminal threat in the Superior Court of California, received a plea deal of five years probation and an order to undergo domestic violence counselling. During the prosecution, the media and Brown spoke for Rihanna because while she became more visible in the public eye, she grew even more silent about the incidents of that night. While the world waited, watched and listened, she was objectified and victimised again as the notorious 'good girl gone bad', the Jezebel. If Rihanna is the marginalised Other, the subaltern woman, how will she rewrite and renegotiate her identity despite the given circumstances of her emotionally and physically violent past and present?

These incidents created arduous meanings about the intersections of ethnicity, culture and class for women who experience gendered violence in emotional relationships. This article attempts to consider these intersecting dimensions of inequality as they apply to the media constructions of Rihanna's experience of intimate partner violence. In doing so, we ask how can we (re)create meanings about space, place, race/ethnicity and violence? Rihanna states in an interview in *ELLE* magazine:

A year ago I was very confused. Because he was my best friend. All of a sudden, one night changed our whole lives—not only our friendship, but our lives. I wanted to wake up one day and just not have that pain anymore. I wanted to be with him again or get over him—it was either-or. I just didn't want to feel the pain, the confusion. I wanted to know what my answer was. All day and every day, I woke up and I just knew—I knew for sure, I felt it and I knew—there are so many things that show you—it clicked, it just really click. I fucking woke up [she snaps her fingers]. (Onstad 2010, 154)

Rihanna further states in *ELLE*:

I had already thought about the next album. I knew that I wanted, I already had a sound, and it was a fun message. The next album wasn't supposed to be something so personal, but different life experiences came up. And I felt that was a time that the world really wanted to hear what I had to say, I didn't talk for so long, people wanted to know what was on my mind. And also for me personally, that was my way to vent and escape. (Onstad 2010, 154)

Further describing her navigation of celebrity following the incident, Rihanna stated:

Every woman is made up of vulnerability and strength; no matter what race you are, no matter what you've been through in your life. Every woman has that strength that is undeniable, but we also have really big hearts. It's just us. You can't tamp down my desire. There's no victim here. (Onstad 2010, 159)

In this quote she demonstrates the complexity of desire and intimate relationships, something she has maintained whenever she speaks about her experience of Brown's violence. It is so critical that we listen to these words and allow these voices to speak, instead of accepting and promoting a monolithic, idealised and simplistic response for women that they must leave when a man is violent or threatens violence. It is never that simple, as Rihanna suggests in this reference to herself that she was not a victim and that

she relinquishes a power and a passion and that her loving heart oscillates as vulnerable and strong. Rihanna allows herself simultaneous emotions and feelings, constructing herself as complex and emotionally mature. When she states 'you can't tamp down my desire', she seemingly encourages a sense of sexuality that is loving, vulnerable, strong, but she may also be cleverly implicitly invoking her sexuality to deny victimisation and weakness, not vulnerability, but weakness.

In the video for *Rockstar 101*, Rihanna appears in several androgynous costumes, including a semi-drag impersonation of heavy metal guitarist, Slash, as she gyrates sexually with a guitar. She sings, '6 inch walker, Big shit talker, I never play the victim I'd rather be the stalker' (Rihanna, *Rockstar 101* lyrics). From the opening scenes of the video, her images seem to evoke or conjure something sinister with her couture fashion evolving from chains, spikes and black lipstick to devilish horns as he prowls in an animalistic manner in search of prey. She continued to push the bounds of her newfound identity with her video for the song 'Te Amos', which insinuates an explicit but sometimes ambiguous sexual encounter with another woman who happens to be French supermodel, Laetitia Cast. If Rihanna's music reflects any portions of her own reality, then perhaps *Rated R* can be read as a continuation of her previous albums, *Good Girl Gone Bad: Reloaded*. With such songs as, 'Hate That I Love You', 'Rehab', 'Take a Bow', 'Breakin Dishes' and 'Disturbia', she sets the tone for the beginnings of a troubled relationship. Her private persona began to conflict with the public personae. As she attempted to reconcile what appears to be two different worlds, the clash was more than her relationship could survive.

## Conclusion

Hopson (2009, 106–108) highlights how intimate and familial violence is often silent and hidden, but how celebrity narratives, such as that of Rihanna/Brown catches the public's attention. He suggests that media reports of these events allow us to generate more debate and increase awareness on this concerning issue. This is what we have endeavoured to do in this article. He also identifies the space for education aimed at reducing abusive relationship behaviours within formal settings, indicating that many young people experience abuse within a matrix of competing, complex messages about love/intimacy.

While both Rihanna and Brown admit to growing up in households in which they witnessed their mothers being abused by men, their prior experiences could not prevent their own personal tragedy. This fact alone begs a deeper analysis of the how the representative 'Other' in emotional relationships is further victimised by history, society and culture. Despite her success, she is still viewed as both a victim of her own sexual freedom and provocateur in relation to Chris Brown's acts of violence. Her mere public personae forced others to examine and then re-examine emotional relationships in which a female who is perceived as powerful can be rendered powerless by an abusive act. The objectives here are to explore the intersectionality of race, space, place and class as well as the interconnections of oppression and violence against Black and Brown women. All women, regardless of ethnicity, are at risk for sexual victimisation, including rape, sexual harassment and child sexual abuse. Black women are sometimes in even greater jeopardy, however. Of the scant research on intimate partner violence in Black communities, there are clear indicators that Black women experience higher incidents of minor and severe

violence than Caucasian women and are more likely to experience violence within intimate relationships (Aymer 2011, 353).

Indeed, women who try to leave a violent relationship are often stalked, harassed, threatened, manipulated into returning or even killed or severely assaulted. Can marginalised women renegotiate their identity after abuse or will they fall victim to one of the multiple scenarios: the woman dies, she kills the abuser, she breaks the cycle and recovers or the abusive relationship continues on and infects the next generation. Because both Rihanna and Brown are products of abusive households, they are continuing a vicious cycle of abuse not often discussed in Black and Brown cultures. Can a previously failed justice system as well as a failed community of the marginalised female Other protect and assist those who remain in this vicious cycle? Perhaps it has just intervened for Rihanna because of her celebrity, and she just happens to be the representative Other for abused and marginalised women. As the media surveillance of Rihanna continues, we can use her experience to increase discourse/s about all women as they experience male violence with increased sensitivity around culture, nationality, race and ethnicity. Relationships are complex, fluid and dynamic. In an ideal world, women would not experience violence in intimate relationships, but we need to help women navigate abuse and violence if they cannot or chose not to leave an intimate relationship. This article uses Rihanna's navigation of the media as a script for young Black and Brown women's wider understandings of social responses to intimate partner violence, to understand the gendered and racialised complexities of intimate relationships.

## NOTES

1. Celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey and Joan Rivers were reported to have told Rihanna that Chris Brown would assault her again (Kennedy 2009; Sieczkowski 2012).
2. *Good Girl Gone Bad* is the title of Rihanna's third studio album released in 2007.
3. *The People of California v Christopher Brown* (2009) Superior Court of the State of California for the County of Los Angeles, Rev 900–1/99 DA Case 29697506, Case Number BA353571.

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