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On 19 February 2009 TMZ.com posted a photograph of R&B pop star Rihanna showing facial injuries caused by R&B pop star Chris Brown's assault.¹ Arguably, when media circulated this image and descriptions of the assault as well as vilified Rihanna for (presumably) reconciling with Brown, they repeated and amplified the violence done to her.² I briefly develop this argument here; however, my primary goal is to read the photograph as resistant: I choose to see Rihanna's closed eyes as a refusal to engage both the audience and various narratives about her. To develop this argument I address three perspectives—media studies, antiracist feminist studies, and victim/survivor—to suggest that reading Rihanna as critically silent participates in feminist opposition to both physical and mediated violence against women.³

Some might argue this photograph illustrates new media driving old media toward the media blitz Rihanna's closed eyes resist. After all, TMZ posted the photo online, after which more traditional press and television outlets recirculated and discussed the image, incorporating it into coverage of the arrest, progression toward trial, and ultimate plea bargain as well as Rihanna and Brown's relationship (possible reconciliation, then separation) and careers (cancelled appearances; Brown's lost [Wrigley's gum] and Rihanna's retained [Cover Girl cosmetics] advertising contracts).

In this case, however, new media did not drive old media: the press had already published numerous reports of Brown's arrest and, less than twenty-four hours after the event, had declared Rihanna was the woman Brown assaulted.⁴ Thus, the publication and discussion of this photograph are, in fact, examples of media convergence, predicated on the circulation of information, images, and narratives across new and old media (Jenkins). Putting it somewhat reductively, as *Entertainment Weekly* admit-

ted when reporting that TMZ posted the photograph, Time Warner owns both TMZ and *Entertainment Weekly* (Vozick-Levinson). That *Entertainment Weekly* made a point of not reprinting the photograph and thereby seemed to respect Rihanna's privacy, in explicit counterpoint to TMZ's relentless pursuit of the "facts," illustrates how media culture can contain contradictory perspectives in pursuit of polysemy (and therefore multiple markets) and perpetual debate (and therefore multiple sales) (McChesney). That this took place within a single

Figure 1. The police photo of Rihanna's beaten face (TMZ, 2009).

company in this case only makes more transparent the structure of media culture more generally. In this context I read Rihanna's closed eyes as a refusal to cooperate with media as usual, as in, "I know this photograph of me will become public, but I will not be present when it does so."

Not that who we see in the photograph is irrelevant. From an antiracist feminist perspective, a picture of a woman of color (here, a mixed race, transnational celebrity from Barbados) assaulted by a man of color (here, an African American celebrity from Virginia) is all too common. As I argue elsewhere, graphic images of violence against women of color are typical in U.S. media, whereas explicit *on-screen* violence against white women is unusual. This racialized context means this photograph may appear mundane, producing a potential "Oh, it's not so bad!" response (e.g., thehollywoodgossip.com/gallery/battered-rihanna-police-photo/). From this perspective one could critique TMZ and subsequent media outlets for publishing the photograph not because it reveals the woman's identity but rather because it contributes to the long-standing visual normalization of violence against women of color.

In fact, as committed as I am to the argument, now ingrained in law, that the victim/survivor's identity be concealed until (and only if) she chooses to reveal it (Matlock), in this celebrity case it was impossible to protect Rihanna's identity. Hence, feminist or not, it is a straw argument to suggest publishing the photograph violated Rihanna's privacy. Yet commentators made this argument repeatedly (e.g., *Showbiz Tonight*, 20 Feb. 2009; Belenkaya), whereas I did not find a single analysis of *racialized* violence or discussion of the history of systematic and institutionalized violence against women of color, including images and narratives such as in this case.⁵ Instead, media circulated both the photograph and details from Rihanna's affidavit. While commentators expressed shock, that shock worked—along with the graphic representations—to intensify the (image of) violence done to a woman of color. In short, this photograph is a reminder of the cavalier way U.S. popular culture treats violence against women of color. Might Rihanna have closed her eyes in order not to see this mediated, racialized violence—again?

From a victim/survivor perspective, not only does Rihanna refuse to look at the mediated and racialized violence, but she also refuses to engage the audience's gaze: she is absent.⁶ I embrace this oxymoron: Rihanna's closed eyes produce privacy despite the fact that (celebrity)

anonymity is impossible. In fact, in addition to closing her eyes, she never confirmed she was the victim of the assault, she never commented on the photograph, and her Web site (Rihannanow.com) does not mention the case. Notably, in this vein Rihanna never commented on the supposed reconciliation. Nevertheless, media anticipated (e.g., Bartolomeo), reported, and even fabricated reconciliation and then proceeded both to produce and to discuss a "backlash" against Rihanna.⁷ For example, heightening the violence done to Rihanna and seemingly unaware of the literal physical violence (toward images of Rihanna and toward their own children), CNN reported several times on parents who "ripped" down their daughters' Rihanna pictures and "broke" and "threw away" their Rihanna CDs.⁸ Overall, the coverage argued that, while "we all know" women often return to abusers, Rihanna was a terrible role model for doing so (see, e.g., *Fox on the Record with Greta Van Susteren*, 5 Mar. 2009; *Today Show*, 9 Mar. 2009; Tucker) and would face career repercussions (thus far she has not lost any ad campaign contracts; see, e.g., *Good Morning America*, 2 Mar. 2009; Jones).

As time wore on, however, it became clear that either Rihanna and Brown had not reconciled or the reconciliation was brief. The public discussion, however, did not address the fact that Rihanna had the strength to leave Brown, did not laud her for, in fact, setting a *good* example for girls and women who might also be struggling to leave an abusive partner. For example, while Oprah spoke directly to Rihanna on live TV, encouraging her to leave Brown (see youtube.com/watch?v=oGISCWdfqao), she did not also publicly praise Rihanna when she did so.⁹ Thus, while the coverage self-presents as feminist, as having zero tolerance for domestic violence (e.g., *Showbiz Tonight*, 13 Feb. 2009), as wanting to present strong women role models who refuse to accept violence, in fact, the coverage is invested in Rihanna as victim (not survivor), as beaten and weak, as unable to leave the relationship. In short, coverage suggested journalists/pundits were to feminism as Rihanna was to victimization. In this context I read Rihanna's silence as deeply resistant, as a way to produce privacy in the face of even discourse that took a feminist perspective, purporting to "understand" her experience but nevertheless insisting on her victimization.

Given the economic, gendered, and racialized structure of celebrity and media culture, when Brown was arrested it was inevitable that both literal and metaphoric violence had been and would be done to Rihanna. While they are

not the only form of resistance I could imagine, Rihanna's closed eyes and continuing silence refuse to participate in media culture's reproduction of violence against women of color and investment in women's victimization, refuse to participate in a media culture that both paradoxically requires celebrity participation and ironically claims feminism for itself.¹⁰

Notes

1. Media coverage, the LAPD (which launched an internal investigation of the photo's release; see aolcdn.com/tmz_documents/021909_lapd_statement_1.pdf), and Brown's lawyer (who unsuccessfully argued for access to the police investigation) treat the image as authentic, taken by police as evidence. Brown pleaded guilty on 22 June 2009 in a plea bargain reported to include 5 years probation, 180 days (1,400 hours) of "community labor," "52 weeks of domestic violence counseling," and an order of protection requiring Brown to remain at least 50 yards away from Rihanna (10 yards at "music industry events") (Dillon and Hutchinson). His formal sentencing took place on 25 August 2009 (Duke).

2. CNN was still showing the photo more than three months after it was first posted (*Showbiz Tonight*, 28 May 2009).

3. I draw in part on Darlene Clark Hine's work to theorize silence as resistance, and I insist on the resistant potential of silence in part in response to media calls for Rihanna to speak (e.g., Lisa Bloom, host of *In Session*, on *Showbiz Tonight*, 4 Apr. 2009: "I think her absence sent a terrible message").

4. According to Newsbank, the AP mentioned Rihanna in relation to Brown's arrest on 8 February 2009. A number of local papers picked up this AP article.

5. When commentators did bring up race, they generally defined black men as abusive without providing any balance or analysis. For example, they compared Brown to Mike Tyson, Ike Turner, and O. J. Simpson rather than, for example, to Vanilla Ice or Eminem, and they suggested Rihanna should be a strong role model for African American girls in particular.

6. I realize, of course, it is likely the police photographer asked Rihanna to close her eyes. My point here is not to consider circumstances of production, or to argue for intent, or to pursue the "real" Rihanna "behind" the celebrity but rather to offer a critical interpretation of the photograph.

7. Media coverage assumed reconciliation when Rihanna and Brown were photographed together at the airport after reportedly spending a weekend together (Anthony; Blas). Both the *Chicago Sun-Times* and CNN reported Rihanna and Brown would work together on "Project Mea Culpa." CNN continued to discuss the imaginary project even after Brown publicly denied it existed (e.g., *Showbiz Tonight*, 9 Mar. 2009).

8. While they claim multiple parents did this, they actually take the story from a single call to their hotline in which one man describes taking these actions (*Showbiz Tonight*, 9 Mar. 2009, 10 Mar. 2009).

9. Similarly, when Rihanna—without comment—did not remain in the relationship, coverage decreased dramatically.

10. For instance, if her eyes had been open, staring directly at the viewer, I can imagine offering a reading of a confrontational resistance that demands the audience's awareness of an individual's suffering and strength.

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