BOOTY CALLS, RAGE, AND RACIALIZED/SEXUALIZED SUBJECTS:
TMZ’S COVERAGE OF RIHANNA AND CHRIS BROWN

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Internet-based celebrity gossip blog site, TMZ, is a growing cultural force. Employing critical rhetorical analytics, the author examines the TMZ coverage of Chris Brown’s assault on his then-girlfriend, Rihanna. This project explicates TMZ’s enthymematic invocation of dominant cultural ideologies surrounding race, sex, and domestic violence. Chapter 1 demonstrates the theoretical importance of both celebrities and gossip blogs, signaling the ideological importance of each. Chapter 2 critiques TMZ’s reliance on historic myths regarding sex and race in their reporting on this case. Chapter 3 analyzes TMZ’s humorous and affective strategies that bolster broader investments in colorblind ideologies. Chapter 4 concludes by examining the interplay of formal rhetorical elements that inform the project’s findings. This research reveals that TMZ utilizes affective, enthymematic strategies that camouflage broader racist and sexist ideological impulses that perpetuate domestic violence myths.
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CHAPTER 1

CELEBRITY AND THE GOSSIP BLOGOSPHERE

Many Americans have heard at least one version of the events of February 8, 2009. That night, singer Christopher Brown was arrested for making felony criminal threats in connection with allegations that he had beaten his girlfriend, fellow recording artist Robin Rihanna Fenty (henceforth, Rihanna). Although it is impossible to know the actual events that occurred in the car on that fateful night, Detective De Shon Andrews offers the official account in a sworn affidavit.\(^1\) The report states that Brown received a text message from a woman “who Brown had a previous sexual relationship with,” thus upsetting Rihanna.\(^2\) According to the report, the fight escalated and Rihanna sustained numerous contusions and lacerations, including defensive bite injuries when Brown used his mouth to deflect her hand raised in an attempt to inflict damage to his eyes. The report includes little dialogue, save a few verbal threats by Brown and a faked phone call by Rihanna requesting that her assistant call the police. I include this not because I believe it represents an entirely objective account of the events; rather, it represents the closest account we have to what actually happened—written by someone who was directly involved in the arrest, spoke to both parties, and would face a penalty of perjury for lying.\(^3\)

In the hours and days that followed, news outlets as diverse as the United Kingdom’s The Guardian and the New York Daily News reported versions of this story.\(^4\) Television and internet


\(^2\) Ibid., 4.

\(^3\) For a more detailed analysis of some of the ways that legal remedies and the legal system often fail to objectively frame domestic violence (particularly to the detriment of minority men and women), see Adele M. Morrison, “Deconstructing the Image Repertoire of Women of Color: Changing the Domestic Violence (Dis)Course: Moving from White Victim to Multi-Cultural Survivor,” UC Davis Law Review 39 (2006): Lexis Nexis Academic Universe.

\(^4\) George Rush, Laura Schreffler, and Oren Yaniv, “Chris Brown Arrested in Battery Investigation, Victim Suspected to be Girlfriend Rihanna,” The New York Daily News, February 8, 2009,
outlets, as well as print magazines differed wildly on the details, but the message was clear: something scandalous had happened, Chris Brown was to blame, and everyone was waiting to see what Rihanna would do next. Although Chris Brown and Rihanna were already famous, their niche success as pop music media darlings blossomed into something else entirely. Brown and Rihanna were no longer culturally fascinating for their art, but for who they were as subjects, what their social location meant for the significance of the evening in question, and the mysteries that surrounded their relationship. Conventional news outlets like The Guardian (which regularly reports on a diverse range of topics), however, could not hold a metaphorical candle to gossip-oriented websites which ran a barrage of stories on every move of Brown and Rihanna. Although each iteration of the story had its own implications for the ways that domestic violence and race are discussed in media, one in particular distinguished itself as having the clear monopoly on Brown and Rihanna related details: a relatively new cultural juggernauts, propelled by a mixture of corporate strategy and mass appeal, TMZ.

TMZ, an abbreviation for Thirty Mile Zone (referencing Hollywood), is the premiere gossip blog and multimedia celebrity news empire. Updated continuously with up-to-the-minute news on every move of the rich, famous, and infamous, TMZ employs a vast army of nameless writers and photographers to ensure that information flow stays live, day and night. As a result, TMZ publishes everything from short news articles to cheeky gimmick pieces such as “Who Would You Rather?” (comparing the physical attractiveness of two celebrities and soliciting votes), and all-access daily video, updated several times a day. To say that TMZ has been well received by its target audience (young, Internet-savvy Americans interested in celebrities) is an understatement. Checking for news updates on TMZ has become a common and

welcome intrusion into the daily routines of countless readers. A visit to the site itself points to a huge and loyal readership. As of April 2011, TMZ’s YouTube channel alone boasted 1,635 videos (continuously cycled), and the top-rated articles averaged around 300 comments each. Assuming the vast majority of readers are much more casual than those who comment or subscribe, TMZ is nothing short of a cultural force. In fact, in what is the foundational scholarly engagement of TMZ, Anne Helen Petersen points to strong support for the conclusion that TMZ is the “top celebrity gossip website:” TMZ gained 10.9 million unique users and 206 million pages views in January of 2008 alone, produced a television spin-off with excellent ratings, and a partnership with social networking site MySpace. As of June 12, 2011, TMZ receives 5.3 million visits a day, including 61.34 visits per second and 161.2 million visits per month. These statistics, although jarring, speak for themselves: TMZ may be a passing fad, but it will not be passing any time soon.

To say that such a widespread habit is merely an entertaining diversion, however, misses the rhetorical function of gossip blogs as persuasive artifacts that draw upon known cultural truths while engaging the audience in re-generating and re-negotiating culture. Each event TMZ covers creates an exigency to which the audience is invited to respond, to participate in forming the narrative. Nowhere is the unique function of TMZ more apparent than in its analysis of socially charged events. In the past few years, TMZ has reported on high-profile public events

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including actress Lindsay Lohan’s house arrest, Charlie Sheen’s public addiction issues, and Mel Gibson’s public rejection from the cast of the film *The Hangover, Part 2*. Although the celebrity lifestyle leaves TMZ with no shortage of scandal upon which to report, TMZ’s engagement with the events of February 8th, 2009 represent a powerful and unique cultural moment, with implications for our understandings of race, domestic violence, and the rules of cultural engagement governing discussions of racialized and sexualized subjects. In order to understand the full weight of TMZ’s coverage of Chris Brown’s attack on Rihanna, it is necessary to grasp the character of TMZ’s coverage from the outset.

TMZ’s uptake of Brown’s attack on Rihanna distinguished itself from other media coverage by being near real-time and always dubiously factual. TMZ delved quickly (and perhaps blindly) into the confusing, conflicting reports regarding their absence. When the couple was late to arrive at the Grammy Awards ceremony where they were slated to perform, TMZ wasted no time. At 8:00 p.m. Eastern Time, before Brown had even been released on bail, TMZ reported that Brown, then 19, had been arrested for making criminal threats against an unknown victim. The coverage spiraled outward from there. Although what happened on February 8 is but one “incident” in a vast stream of events that TMZ covers in a day, let alone a year, this event has vast implications for our cultural interpretations of race and domestic violence because it continuously frames the couple’s relationship as inevitably violent. TMZ’s archives boast hundreds of stories about this couple’s tumultuous relationship, many complete with images and

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video. Perhaps more importantly, the intersection of race and gender mythology that forms the backdrop of Brown and Rihanna’s relationship gives this story a particular importance to cultural critics interested in the way these myths maintain themselves. As such, the coverage provides a powerful backdrop against which to understand the rhetorical strategies that TMZ uses to bolster cultural myths at the nexus of gender and race.10 Furthermore, an examination of TMZ’s reporting on this event can shed light on the ways in which novel media formats evince a world-disclosing function unique to its location at the intersection of the World Wide Web, the blogosphere, and the celebrity gossip apparatus.11

TMZ’s Brown and Rihanna coverage is not just representative of the site’s structure and tone, but is indicative of the affective, enthymematic strategies that allow for the discussion of race and domestic violence in a conflicted political atmosphere. This climate is one in conflict: While this space ostensibly denies racism, it continually promotes racist ideologies just below the surface and it similarly condemns domestic violence while still notably failing many men and women.12 Understanding said climate, TMZ’s process can be most productively termed a strategic one, situated within a complex history of usage, the rhetorical strategies TMZ employs can be seen as just the latest in the evolution of racialized domestic violence narratives. TMZ’s rhetorical mechanisms are important to analyze in this context because celebrity coverage,

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12 For more information on the ways in which racism is concealed by the colorblind racial project, see David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 1993) 47. This aspect of racial colorblindness is more completely explained in chapter 3. For more detail on the failings of domestic violence advocacy groups in a racial context, see bell hooks, *Talking Back: Talking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, South End Press, 1989), 138. This aspect is more completely explained in chapter 2.
typically understood as merely an entertaining diversion, frequently displaces public critique. Criticism becomes less viable because TMZ positions itself in the arena of humorous commentary on “trivial” subject matter. In TMZ’s coverage, Brown and Rihanna are positioned rhetorically as problematic subjects, two black bodies involved in a narrative of intimate partner violence that diverges in some notable ways from the generic conventions of typical domestic abuse stories. The gossip matrix, situated as it is in maintaining cultural myths through the use of celebrity avatars, must interpellate Brown and Rihanna as symbols in a moment of rupture wherein this narrative is challenged and then re-situated.

In this chapter, I have several tasks before I can delve into the analysis of race, domestic violence and affect (chapters 2 and 3 respectively). First, it is necessary to interrogate the ways in which celebrity theory provides a backdrop to the coverage itself. Brown and Rihanna’s fame is a critical variable not just because it helps them to garner attention on the public stage, but also because celebrities are important to the production of cultures and values. When people discuss celebrity, they are doing more than exchanging pleasantries (although this may be a dimension); they are solidifying old beliefs and, perhaps, suggesting new ones. In the instance of Rihanna and Brown, they are more than just individuals embroiled in controversy; they are also symbols that gain unique meaning as two “faces” in a developing cultural configuration of domestic violence.13 Second, the intersection of gossip news and the web is a critical point of inquiry because celebrity gossip complicates scholarly notions of blogs as a transformative social apparatus. TMZ and its ilk masquerade as bottom-up, uncut, uncensored news with a user face when they are in effect as corporate as all other news sources. This hidden character solidifies

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the importance of unmasking TMZ’s coverage for what it is: a transmission apparatus for cultural myths concerning domestic battery and race.

In this chapter, I provide analysis of the social and cultural function of celebrity. I also attempt to explain the reasons why this fascination is often made manifest in moments of crisis that threaten to reveal the true character of said celebrities beneath their idealized public images. This analysis would not be complete without a turn to gossip magazine culture and the ways in which gossip media suggests particular meanings to the public. I then couple the interrogation of gossip magazines with inquiry into the function and public image of blogs in order to investigate how TMZ is a hybrid, stylized media outlet with some characteristics of both a gossip magazine and a blog. By interrogating TMZ as an amalgam of formats, I suggest that these elements behave synergistically to make TMZ a unique rhetorical force that cannot be fully apprehended by theorizing either separately.

The Greatest Show on Earth: Celebrity!

In order to more fully understand why gossip blogs generally and TMZ in particular are so salient in building and sustaining cultural cues, it is necessary to understand the changing landscape of celebrity theory in the disciplines of communication and cultural studies. As a concept, celebrity is much older than its academic study, but it has significant implications for media and circulation theories. As Glenn D. Smith notes, the Industrial Revolution came with technological advancements (such as the printing press) that helped to bring specific personalities to the masses for consumption.14 The tie to industrial capitalism has several notable aspects. First, in what is one of the most important works on celebrity in modern society, Richard

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Dyer’s *Stars* interrogates the ways in which audiences forge a connection to a given celebrity through a process of desiring to know that celebrity’s essence by gleaning insight into her/his personal life. Dyer explains,

> Because stars have an existence in the world independent of their screen/fiction appearances, it is possible to believe (with for instance ideas about close-up revealing the soul, etc.) that as people they are more real than characters in stories. This means they serve to disguise the fact that they are just as much produced images, constructed personalities as “characters” are.\(^{15}\)

Although fans desire to know about stars’ authentic essences, we can only ever know the star as a social construct. Moreover, this constructed nature is consumed and replicated, often in service of capitalist ideology (to sell a product, a lifestyle, etc.). Dyer’s theory of stardom is an excellent starting point, but does not apply neatly to the situation of Brown and Rihanna who are not traditional film stars.\(^{16}\)

This concept of stardom has become de-centered and expanded upon in other ways.\(^{17}\) For example, Liesbet van Zoonen argues productively that *celebrity* can be understood in opposition to *fame* as a gendered concept; *fame* implies notoriety and *celebrity* connotes that which is visible, to be looked at.\(^{18}\) The distinction can be understood as an expansion not only of the lexicon for understanding celebrity, but of the dangers of understanding Brown and Rihanna as simply notable people. Their fame, unlike someone like a politician or a scientist, is constituted


\(^{16}\) For a more detailed discussion of the limitations of Dyer’s conception of the star as filmic, see Su Holmes, ““Off-Guard, Unkempt, Unready”? Deconstructing Contemporary Celebrity in *Heat* Magazine.” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 19, no. 1 (2005): 22, doi:10.1080/103043105200336270. It is also important to recognize that Rihanna and Chris Brown are operating in a racially charged context, a context that Dyer did not fully anticipate when writing *Stars*.


\(^{18}\) van Zoonen, “The Personal, the Political and the Popular,” 291.
primarily by their visibility, inviting a particular gaze that may, as van Zoonen suggests, feminize them and denote their lack of power in their media portrayals. Gezim Alpion also suggests viewing celebrity as an alternatively structuralist or subjectivist phenomenon, with the subjectivist perspective that views celebrity as innate contrasting with the structuralist perspective that sees celebrity as manufactured by powerful forces shaping ideology, which as a result, constitutes a cultural debt the celebrity must continually repay to those who made them famous. Both of these perspectives suggest that fame, notoriety, and celebrity are never neutral concepts and that engagement with these concepts merits serious consideration.

Similar to Dyer’s conception of the star, other fame theorists posit that the trajectory of celebrity representation in media is becoming somewhat narrowly conceptualized in terms of intimacy and authenticity. The fascination with the “authentic” self of a famous person is made manifest in the evolving coverage of celebrity lifestyles. As Andrew Tolson notes, the rhetorical appeal by celebrities that they are being their most authentic “selves” is an “acknowledged public relations practice” wherein celebrities “are experimenting with various forms of personal disclosure” in order to forge connections with the audience. This “real person” that the celebrity presumably reveals is a commodity that is used to ensure audiences that celebrities are “like them” and thus worth identifying with and supporting. Jo Littler argues that the public’s fascination, as articulated in celebrity gossip, perpetuates the illusion that celebrities are, in fact,  

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20 Tolson, “Being Yourself,” 400. This also has implications for race scholarship. Authenticity is often discussed in rhetoric as one of the mechanisms by which white celebrities gain credibility by self-disclosing aspects of their background (e.g. class position) that allow them to infiltrate black cultural communities, such as hip hop music. For an interrogation of this concept, see Eric King Watts, “Border Patrolling and ‘Passing’ in Eminem’s 8 Mile,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 22, no. 3 (2005): doi:10.1080/07393180500201686. See also, Liam Grealy, “Negotiating Cultural Authenticity in Hip-Hop: Mimicry, Whiteness and Eminem,” *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies* 22, no. 6 (2008): 851-865, doi:10.1080/10304310802464821; Kembrew McLeod, “Authenticity Within Hip-Hop and Other Cultures Threatened with Assimilation,” *Journal of Communication* 49, no. 4 (1999): doi:10.1111/j.1460-2466.1999.tb02821
just like us. Littler expands upon the notion of authenticity by arguing that authenticity rhetoric goes beyond what celebrities self-consciously produce or report in promotional materials, but rather is located in all celebrity-focused media. Littler enumerates three tropes related to celebrity disclosure: intimacy (wherein a celebrity’s private life is showcased), authenticity (that celebrities’ “true selves” are roughly congruent to their public images), and “keeping it real” (that celebrities are entirely unchanged by fame). These tropes are important to understanding gossip news because the majority of the coverage revolves around these rhetorical tropes in some fashion. Littler argues that the public’s fascination, as articulated in celebrity gossip, perpetuates the illusion that celebrities are, in fact, just like us. It is important to understand authenticity’s operation in order to further apprehend the nature of TMZ’s racist and sexist indicts of Rihanna and Brown. The aura of authenticity cultivated in tandem and tension by gossip media and celebrity access gives credibility to the notion that every gross caricature of Rihanna and Brown represents their authentic selves, insulating TMZ from charges of journalistic bias. It is necessary to avoid the current myopic conception of celebrity authenticity as something that serves an ideological function. It can be more productively understood as a veneer that naturalizes connections between highly stylized TMZ reporting and fact.

Parasitic dependence on authentic celebrity narratives also gives rise to a sort of evolving schadenfreude in which the public now demands stories of “fallen” stars; celebrities who have been embarrassed publically by some sort of moral or social failing on a spectrum from cellulite thighs and fashion faux pas to drug abuse and crime. Su Holmes argues that we crave to see stars

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21 Jo Littler, "Making Fame Ordinary: Intimacy, Reflexivity, and 'Keeping It Real'," *Mediactive: ideas/knowledge/culture*, no. 2 (2004): 8 and 10, SagePUB. As a result, this sense of identification persuasively implies that the myth of class mobility in the United States can and should be re-centered.

22 For more analysis of the ideological function of concealment, see Barthes, *Mythologies*. 
“not up on a pedestal.”23 Valerie Gorin and Anni Dubied argue that these failings are easily consumable because they can take the form of a modern morality play. They argue, “Meltdowns are a good example of the reaffirmation of the merits of temperance and dangers of overconsumption and errant ways.”24 While part of the overall trend in cultural studies seems to highlight the ways in which consumption of celebrities in various states of distress can be generalized to certain truths that are situated more broadly, in this thesis I argue that there is more at work here. The fall of the celebrity is more than just a moment of rupture that calls for a culturally specific explanation (upholding as it does dominant beliefs); the role of case studies in examining the strategies by which this is accomplished is lacking in novel media and gossip blog scholarship. Prior work in communication has not addressed some of the unique strategies that TMZ uses to accomplish the ideological work of framing celebrity turmoil in a novel forum.25 Celebrities perform points of contention, most interesting in moments of distress because of the nature of scandal as a substantiating force vis-à-vis authenticity (making celebrities seem human in their failings); but attention is warranted to developing a taxonomy of the rhetorical strategies used to solidify the cultural importance of these shortfalls.26 Also, although schadenfreude can explains some of the appeal of stories such as Rihanna and Brown’s, it does not account well for the suggestive undertones, what is being said, and their implications for race and sex in U.S.

25 Scholars have attempted to explain the appeal and possible importance of gossip blogs in creating and maintaining culture, but they fall short of providing an adequate taxonomy of the strategies that make this operative. See for example Rebecca Feasey, “Reading Heat,” 693, and David West Brown, “Paris Hilton, Brenda Frazier, Blogs, and he Proliferation of Celebu-,” American Speech 83, no. 3 (2008): 322, EBSCOHost Communication and Mass Media Complete.
26 Littler, “Making Fame Ordinary,” 8-10.
public culture. In the next section, I will explain the ways in which these tropes are utilized and presented in gossip blogs and what their social functions are. The meaning of coverage, the enjoyment it produces in its audience, and the cultural relevance of each are important to understand why TMZ has gained traction in youth culture and why it continues to be a fascinating rhetorical artifact. TMZ’s popularity is uniquely cultural.

Celebrity Gossip: Rubber-Necking Writ Large

An understanding of what celebrity gossip is likely to cover hardly fully illustrates the implications of the existence of gossip publications such a TMZ without an analysis of the appeal of celebrity news magazines. First, it is necessary to understand that celebrity gossip has become more than a mere curiosity; it is a mechanism by which fame is created and sustained. Although it was not always the case, celebrities depend symbiotically on gossip publications to cement their fame, even as the same publications depend on celebrities for content. In short, it would be impossible to be a modern celebrity and never grace the pages of a gossip weekly.27 That said, the degree to which celebrities can successfully guard their privacy trades off with the production of the caricatures and cultural myths that surround them. In this way, celebrities can be said to negotiate the potential trade-offs that result from lack of exposure in a calculus that increasingly favors their submission to judgment by the masses.28 Also, one must be sensitive to the ways in which celebrity gossip weeklies walk a delicate line between fact and fiction, while readers intently suspend disbelief in order to participate in readership and discussion, thus giving these publications the function of creating and modifying culture.29 Here it is important to turn

27 Alpion, “Mother Teresa’s Celebrity.”
momentarily to Maurice Charland who explains that language and rhetoric “can reposition or rearticulate subjects by performing ideological work on the texts in which social actors are inscribed,” effectively constituting subjects through rhetoric. Through this lens, it is possible to understand that gossip magazines certainly take part in this process by buttressing the ideological underpinnings of society through “cautionary” tales about so-called “fallen” stars who failed to conform to an established narrative.

Initially, it is important to note that print gossip magazines in print have a hand in generating culture even without a digital interface. Rebecca Feasey argues, in her examination of the appeal of British gossip magazine *heat*, that gossip magazines create connections between friends who use them as conversation fodder and relate to one another by weighing in on the anecdotes provided. These topics are particularly ripe for compelling judgment in readers not only because of their social function, but because “celebrity coverage [is] a safe and seemingly harmless way into wider discussions about sexuality, morality, and social roles.” The safety and distance emerge because, even as we desire to know the private lives of stars, we are more comfortable discussing a celebrity’s trials and tribulations than our own. In so doing, we engage in a process of caricature by which nuances of any given situation are ironed away to promote


31 For a more detailed explanation of the forms and functions of ideology, see Louis Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy. For an account of the way ideology is naturalized in text and image see Barthes, Mythologies and also Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978). This understanding of ideology is in tension with other communication scholars who remain wedded to a Marxian understanding of ideology such as Dana Cloud, “The Matrix and Critical Theory’s Desertion of the Real,” Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies 3, no. 4 (2006): 329-354. By ideology, I mean the fictive and yet naturalized (by a process of concealment) cultural truths that are at times used to solidify the power of an elite.


33 Feasey, “Reading heat,” 693.
ease of moral judgment. Joshua Gamson argues that the judgment process can force people into
gendered categories such as Madonna or whore, and that these moral stories, particularly the
foundational ones, can form templates for future stories of the same nature.\textsuperscript{34} Notably, due to the
uniqueness of the Rihanna/Brown story, Gamson and Feasey’s conclusions indicate that the
coverage of the story has the potential to set the precedent for the generic conventions of future
similar stories. That is, the Brown and Rihanna narrative in gossip magazines is in a way the
necessary prerequisite for the founding of a template of sorts, one that can be applied to any
celebrity domestic abuse narrative involving two minority participants. For this reason and others
still to be explained, understanding the racial and gender politics at play in TMZ’s coverage is
imperative.\textsuperscript{35}

Other celebrity gossip theorists, such as Molly McCartha and Elena C. Strauman, note
that the generalizability of similar stories takes on a distinctly \textit{narrative} form. Conceptualizing
gossip magazines through a narrative lens has given rise to genres of the type theorized above;
for example, stories of drug abuse often contain references to long-suffering family members and
stories of marital infidelity often contain references to the impeccable moral character of the
faithful husband or wife.\textsuperscript{36} The Rihanna and Brown narrative, drawing on past frameworks for
interpreting domestic abuse and forming as it does a future template for potential gossip blogging
about black-on-black domestic violence, has its own conventions, which will be examined in

\textsuperscript{34} This also demonstrates the breadth of literature discussing the gendered aspect of gossip magazines at the
expense of an intersectional approach that includes race.

\textsuperscript{35} Joshua Gamson, “Jessica Hahn, Media Whore: Sex Scandals and Female Publicity.” \textit{Critical Studies in
Media Communication} 18, no. 2 (2001): 157-173. For a further discussion of the ways in which gossip magazines
implicate and bolster “American” values, see also Smith, “Love as Redemption,” 223.

\textsuperscript{36} Molly McCartha and Elena C. Strauman, “Fallen Stars and Strategic Redemption: A Narrative Analysis
of the National Enquirer,” \textit{Florida Communication Journal} 37, no. 2 (2009): 71-82. In order to better understand
some of the foundations of McCartha and Strauman’s work with narrative, see Walter R. Fisher, \textit{Human
Communication As Narration: Toward a Philosophy of Reason, Value and Action} (Columbia: University of South
more detail in chapter 2. An understanding of these dimensions is necessary to grasp the unique implications of the Brown and Rihanna story, and this narrative’s ability to cement prior ideological notions of the inevitability of violence in black relationships, the resilience of black women, and the danger of black men.

That these chronicles are, as Holmes argues, often bolstered by an ironic, self-aware tone that pretends to perform a degree of reflexivity (for example, remarking about how cliché celebrity drug abuse stories are becoming and how blasé Hollywood is these days), hardly matters.37 Littler explains that this performance of awareness paradoxically fails to de-fang the cultural myths that are bolstered in gossip blogs, arguing:

Reading *heat* provides one outlet in which by reading it you can register your criticism, your cynical awareness and your knowledge of how the celebrity system works, even if, unfortunately, its neoliberal postmodern reflexivity does channel such potential back to the realm of inequalities rather than to the redistribution of some of its concentrations of power.38

Thus, as an example, readers may be aware that the rags-to-riches fantasy is socially constructed insofar as they might note how ubiquitous it is and how its usage has become a calculated public relations move.39 That being said, such cognizance is rarely put toward the ends of resisting this myth and its consequences. In this way, the narrative becomes directionless and does little to promote criticism of the system that produces unequal social and economic conditions that are. These conditions are, for many, impossible to escape while maintaining that the solution to all of these problems is hard work. For Rihanna and Brown, the stakes here are high because, as a black man and woman, they are under particular scrutiny for transgressing the social boundary

38 Littler, “Keeping it Real,” 23.
between rich (often associated with white) and poor (associated with black).\textsuperscript{40} In fact, the “funny, self-aware” tone is often over-sold as transformative by the blogs themselves. By way of expansion, I argue in chapter 3 that this seemingly subversive, self-congratulatory tone insulates a particularly insidious form of racism in a domestic violence context that finds its expression through the use of humor.\textsuperscript{41}

In order to understand the points where coverage goes beyond fact while, at the same time concealing its editorializing moments, my analysis in chapters 2 and 3 focus primarily on what Gorin and Dubied call “meta-discourse,”\textsuperscript{42} moments where gossip magazines insert jokes, opinions, and references to how information was obtained which have only an extraneous relationship to the story itself.\textsuperscript{42} These rhetorical moves are of special concern to this project because of their naturalizing function (mixing opinion with fact to give the impression that commentary is truth) and also because they invite a specific judgment of otherwise extraneous information (photos of Chris Brown on a jet ski, for instance, is anchored by the criticism that he is not taking criminal charges seriously).\textsuperscript{43}

TMZ has many of the characteristics of a gossip magazine, but TMZ is not a gossip magazine, per se. One does not need to buy an issue of TMZ or wait for subsequent issues on a

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 121.

\textsuperscript{41} For a deeper interrogation of the problematic conflation of domestic violence with economic poverty, see Mia Consalvo, “Hegemony, Domestic Violence, and Cops,” \textit{Journal of Popular Film & Television} 26, no. 2 (1998): EBSCOhost Communication and Mass Media Complete.

\textsuperscript{42} Gorin and Dubied, “Desirable People,” 613.

\textsuperscript{43} It is of course beyond the purview of this thesis to provide a detailed exegesis of the scholarly debates concerning the relationship between text and image, text and story, etc. For the purposes of this argument, one needs only to understand that gossip blog meta-discourse promotes a particular understanding of events that would otherwise lack such a particular, fixed narrative. The strategies by which this strategy of meta-discursivity conceals itself through a rhetorical sleight of hand are fleshed out in much more detail in chapter 2. For more analysis of how images can be anchored by text, see Cara A. Finnegan, \textit{Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs} (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Scholarly Press, 2003); Robert Hariman and John Louis Lucaites, \textit{No Caption Needed: Iconic Photographs, Public Culture, and Liberal Democracy}, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); W.J. Thomas Mitchell, \textit{What Do Pictures Want: The Lives and Loves of Images} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” \textit{October} 39, (1986): 3-64, JSTOR.
weekly basis. These distinguishing features not only make TMZ more accessible, but also classify it as a gossip blog. Blogs have a unique set of cultural and political effectivities, which must be explored in detail in order to understand how TMZ naturalizes its ideological dominance. Blogs have been associated in scholarly and even colloquial circles with a radically democratized “anti-media,” and TMZ trades on this image to give the illusion that its content is politically progressive when it is in reality reactionary with regard to race and domestic violence. I will now discuss the origin and deployment of the “anti-media” myth and the ways in which TMZ has a somewhat uncomfortable and insidious relationship with this scholarship. I will then suggest that TMZ is its own distinct entity, with implications for blog scholarship, star theory, media studies, feminist criticism, race scholarship, rhetoric, and cultural studies.

Millions of Hits a Day: Blog Culture Meets Gossip Culture

It would be a crass understatement to imply that the intersection of gossip culture and the internet is an important one; that said, the impact of the Internet on gossip magazines and celebrity culture has been woefully overlooked by scholars of blogs and even celebrity fansites. In order to understand the changing character of gossip as it moves into digital space, it is

44 It is important to note that daily gossip magazines do exist, but the vast majority of American gossip magazines are “weeklies.” Also, even daily magazines lag behind the Web because they have to go through the process of submission, printing, etc.

45 Petersen argues that this real-time function was actually integral to TMZ’s success, and that TMZ gained popularity for being the premiere outlet for the Mel Gibson drunk-driving story a few years ago. Petersen, “Smut Goes Corporate,” 62.

necessary to understand how blog culture has developed and posited itself as a democratic
answer to corporate news culture. It is important to note that this democratic characterization
may or may not be an accurate assessment as many gossip blogs, including TMZ, have corporate
sponsors and close ties to major news media conglomerates, which are guarded from public
scrutiny.47 This concealment is a calculated move, and perhaps one that would not be nearly so
persuasive if it did not trade on burgeoning understandings of blogs, which I will detail now.48

Blogs are novel forms of news. The shiny newness, the veneer of transformative potential
is still intact with the blogosphere, very much unlike other former bottom-up news dissemination
sources, such as zines.49 Blogs have been the subject of communication scholarship more
broadly since 2008.50 In the most general sense, Yasmin Ibrahim discusses the potential for blogs
to democratize public memory, effectively putting the archive of human experience within the
hands of users who situate knowledge in its cultural context. When newsworthy (broadly
defined) events occur, they are filtered through a vast matrix of user-generated content where
their cultural importance is both ascribed and assessed with reference to other events. Blogs,
Ibrahim argues, create a unique discursive interpellation wherein “the emphasis is not solely on
the validity or the authenticity of the data, but the cultural conventions that aid people in
constructing a sense of social reality or deviance and therapeutic devices that offer the possibility
for human communion and connection.”51 Blogs can free human memory from the established
narrative dictated by “legitimate” news outlets and encourage interpretation via a broader

48 Here again, it is useful to turn to Barthes explanation of myth and the way in which ideological
apparatuses often conceal themselves.
49 For an optimistic assessment of the potential of blogs to subvert ideology and some discourse about how
they are novel as news outlets, see Linda Jean Kenix, “Blogs as Alternative,” Journal of Computer-Mediated
50 Starting with Ibrahim, “People's Archive,” 72.
51 Ibid., 72.
cultural context. As Cara A. Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang note, circulation in general employs a kind of *iconoclasm* in which the public of the blogosphere strips images and discourses of meanings and co-creates their own new meanings through a co-constitutive process that draws on cultural reality.\(^{52}\)

Blogs, then, arguably have a more intimate and intrinsic relationship with the production of cultural knowledge than other news sources and serve as the direct archive through which events are made significant. Donald J. Kopchan expands upon the idea that blogs are breaking the monopoly on information by arguing, “Traditional media is no longer fully in charge of information flow,” and in breaking this monopoly the blogosphere allows information dissemination to a much larger audience than ever before.\(^{53}\) By likening bloggers to anonymous pamphleteers of past eras, Kopchan suggests that blogging creates fissures in dominant ideologies by introducing alternative viewpoints. In sum, bloggers serve as “combatant[s] against the monopoly of information available to society.”\(^{54}\) Thus, the controversial character of blogs, like their allegedly democratic nature, is intrinsic to their identity. Their raw character and insistence on the whole story absent censorship is critical to an understanding of blogs’ communitarian appeal. It is notable that Kopchan, while invested in the fact that blogs generate a response in their audience, is not interested in the character of the response so much as the blog as an artifact. The blog for Kopchan is a noble form in and of itself that promotes engagement, even if that engagement is recognized by most to perpetuate problematic ends. Craig Saper, however, points out that the sheer number of blogs creates the danger of over-saturation. As such,

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\(^{52}\) Cara A. Finnegan and Jiyeon Kang, “‘Sighting’ the Public: Iconoclasm and Public Sphere Theory,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 4, (2004), 395-6, doi:10.1080/0033563042000302153. See also, Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric.”


\(^{54}\) Ibid.
the individual, presented with too much information to synthesize, merely reads now only to forget later.55 Although the conclusions made by Saper are perhaps beyond the purview of this analysis, one must analyze the way in which gossip blogs like TMZ make themselves salient in the broader matrix of endless and largely forgettable content. I argue that their salience is attributable largely to their content; people love to read about celebrities to discover their essence, as detailed previously.

Blogs with a celebrity focus, then, form a sub-category of the blogosphere with an additional layer of theoretical importance. As Charles Soukup notes, the desire to get as close as possible to celebrities is new and unique on the Internet; celebrities are more available to us (or at least appear to be) than ever before and the Internet gives fans a sense of community and belonging.56 Moreover, the digital environment breaks what can be understood as a monopoly of meaning of celebrity texts; users can argue with one another about what a movie, an outfit choice, a family photo, or any celebrity artifact actually means or ought to mean, thus promoting greater identification with their celebrity idols.57 Although gossip blogs already fulfill this function by promoting discussion of celebrities and their habits among imagined communities, there is a unique sense of connecting to distant people over the Internet that celebrity blogging promotes.58 Notably, Soukup’s analysis is limited primarily to fansites that are generated by fans for other fans. While fansites often have an adoring tone, they differ sharply from gossip blogs, which take on the ironic tone of schaedenfreude often exhibited by print celebrity gossip magazines.


57 Soukup, “Hitching a Ride,” 332.

58 For a detailed analysis of how communities are constituted and how even fictive connections (such as the nation-state) are maintained, see Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities (London: Verso, 1983).
Gossip blogs purposely situate themselves within self-consciously contemporary events, recalling past speech acts and situating them within a new, often sarcastic (although playful) context. David West Brown, in his study of linguistic formations in the blogosphere, argues that blogs, specifically celebrity gossip blogs such as TMZ, create and riff on the vernacular to produce a new kind of footnoted speech (such as the merger of celebrity and debutante to form the gossip blog “term of art,” celebutante). The novel linguistic forms that emerge then supply in-groups that are oriented around celebrity with shorthanded speech. The community is created here in much the same way as a fansite creates an in-group, but the conventions of the gossip magazine produce unique discursive strategies that produce judgment and ideology. These discursive constructs become commodified and are circulated upward into broader public culture.\textsuperscript{59} TMZ, Brown notes, has a particular kind of uptake and cross-platform appeal, which ensures the site’s ubiquity. Such visibility confers a particular type of legitimacy that separates it from other online, user-generated content (and may strip the bottom-up potential, if not the veneer).\textsuperscript{60} Thus, while TMZ is a part of the democratized, participatory culture movement in name, the association is an uncomfortable one.

The artificiality of this association between TMZ and participatory content results from the conflation of gossip blogs with bottom-up progressive blogs. This conflation is important because blogs have a unique subject matter, one that, as has been previously explained in some detail, does not lend itself remarkably well to speech against dominant ideology. Moreover, even as celebrity and gossip blogs take on a particular self-aware character as “the new “anti-media,”” they exhibit a simultaneous fascination and disgust with the proliferation of celebrity culture. TMZ nonetheless has a dependence on the existence of said culture and as such would be wholly

\textsuperscript{59} Brown, “Paris Hilton,” 322.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid.
unable to dismantle it in any meaningful sense. Gossip blogs not only fill the void and cultural need to put the undeserving celebrity in his or her place and express the disaffected rage of those who have not yet “made it,” they allow the time-honored tradition of judging celebrities who change for the “worse.” Thus, celebrity blogs, their edginess, and their “snark” is a result of wanting to highlight the socially constructed “undeserving celebrity,” famous only for being famous. The “playful” and ironic yet punitive tone serves to locate these celebrities in culture as problematic subjects by insulting and publically shaming them. This tone is a distinguishing feature of gossip and its intersection with blogs belies a particular disciplinary function of the gossip blogosphere.

TMZ is a unique hybrid of all of blogs and gossip magazines situated somewhat uncomfortably at the nexus of populist, user-generated content, the corporate gossip machine, and the disaffected, disciplinary gossip blogger. As Anne Helen Petersen notes, TMZ “combines the immediacy of the blog, the technology of new media, and the content of a tabloid” to form something else entirely. TMZ is distinct for a number of reasons. Chief among them is the fact that TMZ has seemingly won the veritable culture war over which gossip blog will be the premiere source for up-to-date information. TMZ, coming from a long tradition of snarky gossip columnists, gains widespread appeal by propagating the notion that it is the sole purveyor of information about the true character of ostensibly glamorous Hollywood: one rife with scandal, intrigue, and smut.

I now turn to my methodological underpinnings in order to explain my approach to TMZ’s

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61 Grigoriadis, “Everybody Sucks,” online.
62 Ibid.
63 Petersen “Smut Goes Corporate,” 63.
64 Ibid., 63.
65 Ibid., 65-6.
coverage of Rihanna and Chris Brown. My critical approach to this thesis is ecumenical, drawing from critical rhetorical, rhetorical, new media, feminist criticism, and cultural studies. Specifically though, I focus on the various ways in which the enthymeme emerges and functions to promote ideology by rhetorically invoking gender and race stereotypes in the mind of the audience. The enthymematic analysis forms the lynchpin of the taxonomies I provide to interrogate the interplay between author, audience, and culture, and to suggest an explanation for TMZ’s persuasive character.

Method

In analyzing TMZ, I used the following strategy. I conducted three content searches, one for “Rihanna,” one for “Chris Brown,” and then one that simply combed all TMZ articles during the 7-month period following February 8, 2009. I chose a 7-month period because the saturation of news began to waver significantly after this point. Second, I analyzed each article for content in the form of text and also images and videos. Finally, I reviewed the “See Also” feature of each relevant article in order to understand the connections between articles on a blog in unique format, as these connections may point to consistent threads between stories. After this data was aggregated, I simply separated it based on the most salient strategies and conducted the analysis herein.

The analysis provided in this thesis was informed by an understanding of, first, rhetorical studies, with an eye toward the audience-based, enthymematic function of much of the coverage.\(^6^6\) In analyzing TMZ’s coverage, I looked for the assumptions the authors made about

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what the audience should know and what the audience would need to know in order for TMZ’s subtle statements about race and domestic violence to be intelligible to them. I also examined the affective dimension of TMZ’s coverage by paying particular attention to what affective response TMZ was trying to evoke by joking about serious issues such as domestic violence. I paid particular attention to the degree to which emotions foreclosed the possibility to critically analyze the ideological work that was concealed through affect.67 In so doing, I advance an argument that the affective, enthymematic nature of TMZ’s coverage enacts a process of ideological concealment while re-entrenching sexist and racist ideas about black bodies and domestic violence.

The strategies discussed in chapters 2 and 3 are all enthymematic in nature. The enthymematic strategy here is a critical formal element that utilizes the user-generated interface of the blog (one that is allegedly so transformative) to compel a response under the veneer of a community that genuinely cares what the public thinks. In all of the cases discussed in this thesis, the enthymeme is powerfully persuasive. My criticism relies on the classical enthymeme. The enthymeme is derived from a three-part syllogism that breaks a deductive argument into three manageable pieces. One example of TMZ’s coverage re-stated as a simple categorical syllogism is: Rihanna is a woman in an abusive relationship, Women in abusive relationships should always leave, Rihanna should leave her abuser). If one takes this syllogism and exempts a premise, the audience is persuaded that the conclusion is partially their own and not TMZ’s. In


67 Again, to understand ideological concealment, see Barthes, Mythologies. For an understanding of the affective responses compelled by pop culture, see Lawrence Grossberg, We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 79-82. See also, Lawrence Grossberg, Gregory J. Seigworth, and Melissa Gregg, “Affect’s Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual,” in The Affect Theory Reader, Edited By Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).
this instance, TMZ supplies that Rihanna is in an abusive relationship and has failed to leave her abuser and the audience, operating on the dominant ideology, fill in that women in abusive relationships should always leave). Here, the enthymeme accomplishes more than just constructing a point of agreement wherein the audience is persuaded by filling in the blank; the ideological nature of the content matters. Here is a value judgment, one that brings stereotypes about black men and women in domestic abuse situations to the front of the listener’s mind. This ensures that the stereotypes are consistently reproduced, recalled, and re-negotiated, maintaining their relevance. All of the strategies discussed herein call upon the audience to recall and operate from stereotypes in some way, including the first strategy that relies on the public’s understanding of black women as resilient to violence.

I now turn to a preview of sorts of the project ahead. This chapter begins an interrogation that will be augmented and expanded with nods to feminist theory, media criticism, race theory, and critical rhetorical theory. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, I advance the method above to draw attention to the continuing relevance of stereotypes and their promotion in new media formats and genres. This extension relies on not only the enthymeme itself but also on other major ideological players that rely on the enthymeme in order to augment their powerful persuasive appeal vis-à-vis the audience.

Thesis Overview

It should seem clear that I am unlikely to advance an argument venerating TMZ as a new cultural juggernaut brimming with the potential to engage and destroy all of the problematic constructions bolstered via celebrity culture. I do little to conceal my skepticism that TMZ represents an intriguing departure from ideologically driven celebrity culture, but it is different
from past celebrity media through its association with the Internet. To begin, TMZ’s insistence that it is a blog, that it is anti-corporate, and that it disavows censorship is important for understanding the ideological functions of TMZ’s coverage. TMZ gives a veneer of bottom-up, socially progressive reformism that allows it to appeal to a younger, edgier, more self-reflexive audience. This concealment has several implications. First, it allows these users who grew up with the Internet and who are inclined to scorn antiquated news sources the unique ability to conflate their consumption of a slick, youth-oriented interface with progressive politics. This positioning gives license to laugh at the jokes, even if they are problematic at best and downright racist or sexist at worst. TMZ offers audiences an intoxicating feeling of belonging to a group of insiders. This in-group is oriented around being trendy and up-to-the-minute but not around producing a serious critical response in conjunction with the affective dimension of consuming pop culture. Further, this strategy of disavowing corporate ties pretends to a certain kind of objectivity, concealing the editorial and meta-discourse functions. Unlike celebrity weeklies that are somewhat more upfront about their profit motive and corporate sponsors, TMZ is understood as “real” and “hard-hitting,” publicizing how close they bring the audience to the news and how little they filter content.68 This perception disables critical instincts that have become so honed in response to gossip weeklies.

Second, TMZ, unlike many gossip magazines that are published weekly or even monthly (or even TV news) is updated constantly. TMZ has no commercials to interrupt continuous consumption, and the site encourages its readers to spend an inordinate amount of time clicking through short vignettes. To keep users clicking, each article contains links to at least three “related stories” and provides news in small, easily consumable chunks that can be digested a bit

at a time or in one long gossip bender. TMZ, consciously or not, does much to make their content as pleasant and accessible as possible.

Perhaps more importantly, TMZ conspicuously lacks many of the features that provide blogs with the potential for subversiveness and transformative potential. Setting aside for a moment its corporate ties, TMZ is dissimilar from other gossip blogs in that user feedback is mostly extraneous to the experience. Unlike fansites, which foster community through discussion and engagement, TMZ is not out to discuss events with its audience. The “comments” feature is mostly extraneous in that, unlike other gossip blogs such as Gawker, Jezebel, and Perez Hilton whose authors directly engage with their audience, TMZ is authored anonymously and does not participate in its own comments sections. The debates that occur on other sites where authors debate with readers (and readers engage with other readers) about the news they have published and either defend or modify their content are conspicuously absent. If they do occur, they are only between readers and are a footnote to the news content itself.

In light of TMZ, I would contend that current scholarship on blogs and celebrity fansites have taken on too much of an uncritically positive slant, one which privileges form (the blog format itself) over content. This is not to reduce the arguments in the field to a radical pronouncement that all blogs break the monopoly on information in a uniformly positive way, but the veneration of form over content comes close to over-determining a form as positive and may in fact enable questionable content on TMZ to escape mostly unscathed in the academic excitement surrounding novel media. This thesis examines how form and content intersect on TMZ to produce uncritical acceptance of old stereotypes via a new format. The analysis of

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69 These connections are interesting in and of themselves, including the penchant for linking stories about Chris Brown to stories about other black men accused of violence. Admittedly, this could be the result of an algorithm that monitors which articles appeal to particular readers, but it does point to a cultural connection between black people and crime. See TMZ Staff, “2 Live Screwed,” TMZ (blog) February 17, 2009, http://www.tmz.com/2009/02/17/2-live-crew-luther-campbell-arrested/.
subsequent chapters is multi-pronged, with a past, present, and future focus.

In chapter 2, I look to the past in order to understand how TMZ’s coverage enthymematically recalls dominant myths about black bodies. This mythology, which has its origins in slavery, conflated skin color with hypersexuality and violence in order to solidify white masters’ domination over black slaves.\(^{70}\) I take these myths into account first, to explain how enthymematic form forces the audience to recall stereotypes, thus perpetuating these stereotypes. Second, understanding the intersectional nature of gender and race in a domestic violence context is critical to demonstrate the ways in which potentially well-meaning domestic violence scholarship has advanced the cause of abuse prevention and responsiveness at the expense of black men and women.\(^{71}\) Finally, I suggest that TMZ relies on the following enthymematic strategies: victim-related strategies emphasizing Rihanna’s resilience and ambivalence to violence, disciplinary-invitational strategies inviting the audience to weigh in on Brown or Rihanna’s deviations from the domestic violence master narrative, strategies that stress the inevitability of violence in black relationships, and perpetrator-related strategies that highlight Brown’s remorselessness and further capacity for violence (especially in connection to other black men). Taken together, these strategies promote stereotypes by way of invocation.

In chapter 3, I look to the present in order to understand how a colorblind racial project, maintained primarily through humor, has dominated contemporary race discourse at the expense of real race-conscious discussions about racism’s operative function in modern society. In this

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chapter, I point to the infiltration of colorblind rhetoric as a mechanism for denying an intersectional approach to domestic violence activism. I call for an application of colorblindness studies to humor theory as a way to problematize the optimistic scholarly climate with regard to humor and discuss humor’s potential to maintain racist and sexist attitudes while deflecting criticism. Again, I turn to a set of enthymematic strategies that TMZ uses to accomplish this task: the verbal pun (which subtly hails existing violent stereotypes), the punishing strategy (which attempts to discipline Rihanna or Brown by way of questioning their behavior as out of sync with the established victim and perpetrator narratives), the over-playing strategy (which seeks to humorously maintain that the domestic violence event reveals something fundamental about the nature of Brown and Rihanna as [black] menaces to society). This final strategy is often abetted by TMZ seeking out other mainstream humor outlets and aggregates their over-the-top attempts at Brown and Rihanna humor while maintaining that these sources are acting in “bad taste.”

Finally, I attempt to propose an academic call to arms against valorizing blogs and humor at the expense of a reasoned analysis of their content (micro-formal elements). In chapter 4, I posit a strategy which engages macro- and micro-formal elements, arguing that macro-formal elements have been given precedence over micro-formal elements and in so doing have allowed the public to excuse racist and sexist content on TMZ. Here, I propose that rhetoricians pay renewed attention to the content of blogs like TMZ (micro-formal elements) using the taxonomies from chapters 2 and 3 in order to enact a process of critique which more fully arrests erroneous and harmful stereotypes as redeployed and strengthened via TMZ.

Thus, the project may be productively framed by this knowledge: TMZ is a unique kind of blog and gossip publication. TMZ’s combination of democratically-oriented blog elements and celebrity gossip’s ideological functions make it a unique object of study. The topic of celebrity
bolsters the idea that Brown and Rihanna, regardless of their actual characteristics, should be conflated with what happened to them and judged according to the information the audience has and is eager to consume. If we accept that the audience is compelled to judge Rihanna and Brown by TMZ and only dimly aware that their choices in judgment are constrained, we can now move to the analysis of the stereotypes and strategies that work as raw materials for TMZ. These raw materials coalesce to promote the continued existence of stereotypes while making criticism of said stereotypes elusive. The disabled critical impulse is a continuous thread of the thesis, as the solutions suggested emerge as an entreaty to further criticism.
CHAPTER 2

RACIALIZED AND SEXUALIZED SUBJECTS

Rihanna and Brown’s fame certainly matters because it explains why their story was published on TMZ and also partially explains some of the ideological functions of the story itself. Understanding that Rihanna and Brown are stars and that their stardom has ideological import, however, serves only to solidify the notion that ideological work is being perpetuated by TMZ. To more fully apprehend the array of ideological statements evinced by TMZ’s coverage of Brown and Rihanna’s story and its impact, it is necessary to analyze how raced and gendered constructions permeate TMZ’s coverage. In order to understand why this story is so tied to race and gender notions, I can most productively begin by simply asking a question: Why this event, with these people, reported so recently? At the risk of being reductive but also perhaps as clear as possible, I refer to a colloquialism so old as to be nearly un-attributable: When a dog bites a man, this is never news. It happens every day. When a man bites a dog that is news. This story of Chris Brown’s attack on Rihanna is news because it deviates partially from the ordinary and established, and as a result we are intrigued. We want to know why this person diverged from the established white-victim/black-perpetrator narrative, how the script could have been flipped, and what the implications might be for our lives. Brown’s attack of Rihanna on February 8, 2009 fits neatly into neither category. TMZ’s coverage promotes a notion of inevitability, the idea that the events could not have been any other way, and that Brown would have beaten Rihanna eventually regardless of context. TMZ also, however, publically castigates Rihanna and Brown for their “wrongdoings,” implying that they have done something unique and aberrant. To stir further controversy, TMZ’s nameless staff writers continually insist on how scandalous this

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cases. The scandalous aspect of the story goes beyond the shock of a famous couple embroiled in domestic violence. This story seems novel in TMZ’s coverage in a way that points to other forces at work that cannot be fully arrested through knowledge about the public’s desire for news about celebrities in trouble.  

What, then, accounts for the novelty of this story? And how is it frustratingly familiar? Although triangulating the vast nexus of interlocking, intersectional eccentricities of this case is prohibitive, there are certain heightened qualities of TMZ’s coverage that provoke inquiry. If one comes to understand the high stakes for the politics of identity, power, and affect inherent in popular culture, the specific politics of identity at play in this event become relevant. As Lawrence Grossberg notes, “People are engaged in popular culture because, in some way and form, [popular culture is] entertaining … Of course, such relationships may also produce ideological effects … but these are almost never the source of the relationship.” That is, popular culture appeals to people because it is fun; but, while people may first seek out the cultural outlet of gossip blogs for the entertainment value, they are also consuming a potent side of cultural ideologies.

TMZ’s coverage of Brown’s attack on Rihanna produces an ideological effect on the audience that is particular to Brown and Rihanna’s case for several reasons. First, the cultural


74 Lawrence Grossberg, We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture (New York: Routledge, 1992), 74. For a more detailed discussion of the importance of studying popular culture, see Stuart Hall, Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies (New York: Routledge, 1996) and also Simon During, The Cultural Studies Reader (New york: routledge, 1997).
baggage of Brown and Rihanna’s identity categories and what these categories bring to bear on the events in question becomes highly relevant. It is something of a public secret that Chris Brown and Rihanna signify so much more than failed relationships, the trauma of fame, and the possible pitfalls of failing to live an established narrative of domestic violence victimization and recovery. The following analysis shows that Brown and Rihanna’s race and gender become suddenly relevant as absent referents of TMZ’s coverage. These aspects of their identity are instead hinted at, such that the audience recalls them, and then put in service of advancing a racist and sexist social agendas (by compelling judgments of black people as violent subjects, etc.).

The referral to Rihanna and Brown’s race and gender occurs because news uptake of domestic violence avails itself of these categories. This concern emerges because the social stereotypes of black men and women are based in a long-held dominant belief that violence in black relationships is inevitable and normal. These myths are informed by a vast milieu of social events and cultural understandings that were generated long before Rihanna and Brown stepped into the car that fateful night. This sort of rhetoric of inevitability is particularly insidious because it is juxtaposed with seemingly well-meaning domestic violence prevention advocacy (which can most productively understood in this context as the broader matrix of prevention efforts ranging from feminist interventions to news outlets that inform and educate the public about domestic violence). It is difficult to argue that the public should not be made aware of

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75 For more information about the absent referent, see Richard A. Rogers, “Beasts, Burgers, and Hummers: Meat and the Crisis of Masculinity in Contemporary Television Advertisements,” Environmental Communication 2, no. 3 (2008): 18, doi:10.1080/17524030802390250. Discussing the absent referent of nature in advertisements for meat, he describes the absent referent in this way: “Nature is present in each of these advertisements, but it is reduced metonymically to a concrete manifestation of a “natural” (primitive, hegemonic) masculinity: the eating of meat. This reduction and de facto erasure of nature itself (i.e., animals, ecosystems, etc). allows hegemonic masculinity to symbolically and materially draw energy from nature (meat) while simultaneously backgrounding or erasing nature, and therefore any dependence on it.”
domestic violence through any means necessary. By hastening against certain domestic violence discourses of awareness, one must battle the accusation of throwing out the metaphorical baby with the bath water.

It seems that there is some interest in keeping the secret that domestic violence prevention advocacy has long (perhaps unintentionally) kept black men and women’s intra-racial experience of relationship violence out of the news. This concealment is understandable for a few reasons, one being that some advocacy is widely assumed to be better than no advocacy at all. Another justification is that progress is generally understood as teleological (i.e., that the world is generally moving in the direction of solving problems instead of starting more).

The media’s silence on the failures of abuse prevention advocates, however, is stubbornly longstanding for these reasons. These discourses remained comfortably below the surface and may have continued to ruminate, until of course a rhetorical exigency presented itself. Lloyd Bitzer famously describes the rhetorical situation, responding to an exigence in this way:

Rhetorical situation may be defined as a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence.\textsuperscript{76}

Brown’s beating of Rihanna is one such moment in which an exigency emerged and rhetorical resources were marshaled to ensure the tension was handled. I expand upon Bitzer’s rhetorical situation to argue that, in this case, the rhetorical exigency is that Brown and Rihanna’s story presents a challenge to the notion that white women are the typical victims of domestic violence and black relationship violence is not worth reporting. Thus, discourses which support notions of

white stereotypical victimhood and the natural character of black relationship violence again to
the surface on TMZ and attempt to heal the rift by reconstructing these stereotypes’ relevance.

The story of Brown and Rihanna on TMZ marks a moment of rupture from the
established narrative of domestic violence victims and perpetrators and constitutes a threat to
established racial and sexual myths. Examining TMZ’s coverage of this event requires a base of
knowledge about the history of domestic violence narratives and black subjects and the case’s
implications for race and gender. One of these implications is displayed in the ways in which
TMZ navigates the tension between maintaining the inevitability of this event while
simultaneously insisting that it should be news (a contradiction never explored in the coverage).
In a way, this story could not have been any other story, but its uniqueness is a result of the
audience’s acute awareness of a set of cultural ideas that silently inform vast swaths of the public.
In short, the shock aspect of this story is largely attributable to its existence as a news artifact. By
publishing a detailed account of the events of February 8, by concerning itself with Brown and
Rihanna as subjects embroiled in domestic violence, TMZ is enacting a double-pronged process.
They report the event as scandal, but they at times maintain its very ordinariness through the use
of rhetorical prodding; or, in other words TMZ employs a constant qualification of any reference
to the event as news through continued naturalization of black bodies and violence.

The “how” this is accomplished is a bit more difficult to explain. The process of
maintaining stereotypes about race and domestic abuse would be difficult to rigorously enact in a
social climate where being a racist or abuser is not generally acceptable. As a result, TMZ
nowhere publishes anything that openly confesses to its decided ambivalence about the entire
ordeal experienced by Rihanna and Brown. There is no article where TMZ admits to
begrudgingly covering the story simply because Rihanna and Brown are celebrities. The
mechanism by which cultural myths are recalled and telegraphed is simply a referral to a vast matrix of stereotypes of which the audience is cognizant, but to which they are simultaneously anaesthetized. TMZ’s coverage prods readers, awakens a dim understanding informed by year after year of existing within a society that passively consumes stereotypes while simultaneously distancing ourselves from their origins in our dark racial and sexual past. In this chapter, I seek to accomplish several goals. First, I seek to enumerate the various historical trajectories of racial and sexual stereotypes in order to flesh out the latent oppression they embody, to re-establish the stereotypes’ artificiality and the ways in which they no longer shock the audience (but certainly should). Second, I turn directly to TMZ’s coverage in order to concretely locate these myths in practice. Third and finally, I seek to raise questions concerning the very slipperiness of these strategies in preparation for a deeper analysis of why and how they persist in an environment where we expect them to be absent (again, due to the social consequences of vocal racism or sexism). This chapter argues that the enthymematic strategies used by TMZ naturalize racist and sexist ideologies by rhetorically constituting violent black subjects and concealing their lack of objectivity.

Even Theatrically Clutching Your Purse Won’t Save You Now: The Myth of Black Violence

It is an ugly and profoundly uncomfortable truth that American society has always considered black bodies to be violent bodies intrinsically, by nature. Quantitative sociological studies suggest “there is a widespread belief that black people…are far more prone to violence than white people.”77 There are, of course, tangible and devastating effects of this belief, including the possibility that young black men and women will internalize this role and create a

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self-fulfilling prophecy wherein youths believe society’s proclamation that they are intrinsically violent. The impact also includes the staggering numerical disparity of blacks versus whites convicted of violent crimes by a judicial system comprised of people who are more likely to find them guilty due to false associations with the color of their skin. Still, the reason for the emergence of this harmful stereotype is continuously obfuscated.78 Why do we think black men and women are violent? Although the “black experience” and the “white experience” in modern America differ significantly, and these differences may at times be said to partially account for violence (generalized low socioeconomic status may constrain an individual’s options, for example), a closer look reveals that the current understandings of the cause of increased violence in the black community are proximate rather than rooted. In order to more fully interrogate these myths regarding race, gender, and domestic violence, we need to understand their long and sordid history.

Skin colors as a determinant of identity raises the question of why skin colors are considered determinative at all (and not, say, height). Black as a color has always been contextualized in opposition to white as lesser and violent. Greg Dickinson and Karrin Vasby Anderson explain that as far back as Plato, philosophers have associated darkness and blackness with violence and “pleasures of the flesh,” consistently in a struggle with whiteness, which is associated with mental acuity, but not bodily strength.79 When the two forces met, it was described as “a truly Olympian battle,” in which blackness needed to be defeated in order for the soul to become pure and ascend to heaven.80 Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer expands this notion by arguing that the mythical association between the color black and violence has been translated

78 Ibid., 486.
from the abstract concept of “blackness” (as noted by Dickinson and Anderson) to the conflation of black people and violence. In particular, Enck-Wanzer posits that “rage” as a theme has “a history of significance” in which black men (and also women) are discursively positioned as enraged bodies, given naturally to aggression because of their primitive character.\(^8\) Thus, black men and women are constructed as physically strong but not intelligent enough to channel their rage (and thus impulsive and dangerous) whereas whites are constructed as physically inferior to black people but naturally intelligent enough to be inherently, almost transcendentally peaceful.\(^2\)

Discursively framing black below white, wherever it began, was reoriented during slavery in service of making the oppression of black men and women palatable to an allegedly scrupulous white Christian audience. Linda Ammons explains how these notions were put in service of dehumanizing black people in response to the cognitive dissonance produced when juxtaposing Christianity with slavery. Black men and women could not be understood as pure, cerebral people because the violence committed against them would then be intolerable or at the very least difficult to reconcile.\(^3\) Thus, black men and women were conceptualized as beasts, not very different from other work animals, violent and primitive and in need of their intelligent white masters to ensure their domestication.

In this same vein, and perhaps as an extrapolation upon this theme, black men have been dehumanized in specific ways owing to the constructed threat to white genetic dominance. Historically, black men were conceived as a physical threat to white women for similar reasons;


to ensure that white privilege and white families were not threatened by the infiltration of black genes. The discourse of black masculinity as threat had two implications. First, black male threat discourse solidified the idea that white women faced dangers from black men both sexually and just physically in general. White women who might have been otherwise curious about and interested in black men as intimate partners were conditioned culturally to believe they would engage with them at their own peril. The construction of black male threat has a destructive and persistent implication, constituting white masculinity as noble and protective in opposition to non-white masculinity as dangerous. The stereotype persisted and found new relevance through later minstrel shows in which the purposeful darkening of a performer’s skin began to signify lacking intelligence at the most charitable and sexual impropriety at worst; the black body has become a rhetorical artifact, a text that signifies threat, hypersexuality, and violence. The black male body in particular has been incarnated and reincarnated as such from early eugenics campaigns to the photos of famous artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe to modern movies since Birth of a Nation.

The second implication of this discourse of black masculinity was the belief in black sexual violence and primitive character was instrumental in discounting black women from inhabiting the ideal victim identity. “Victims” were understood uncritically as white women,

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whereas black women were belittled as the naturalized companions to violent black men. Black women were understood as ambivalent to violence and also physically strong enough to withstand said violence. Adele Morrison explains that black men and women were discursively constructed as “black animal[s]” who “like to fight” in relationships through the years as a natural progression of this perverse mythology. The impact in domestic violence jurisprudence will be discussed in some detail later in the chapter, but the devastating psychological impact of this myth on black women cannot be overstated. As Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant argues, black women often internalize the idea that they should be stronger than other women and thus fail to seek legal remedies for violent or oppressive situations, neglecting their own needs for the “benefit” of their larger social circle. As connected to TMZ’s coverage, the discourse of rage surrounding both Rihanna and Brown engages this cultural formation by melding all of these deeply embedded historical myths into a single, fused idea: black bodies are dark and thus dangerous, beastlike, and incapable of human emotions or higher thought. By extension, black relationships are inherently violent.

Jezebel and the Beast: Black Bodies and Hypersexuality

It would be too optimistic to intimate that black men and women are only stereotyped in one way and for one reason. Unfortunately, oppression is never quite so singular, so easily apprehended. Black men and women fall victim to various representations that telegraph their


danger and violence by virtue of their skin color, but these representations also intermingle with
other oppressive stereotypes in a synergistic, symbiotic process wherein one stereotype becomes
entangled with another to produce something uniquely confining and violent. The animalistic,
black beast has traditionally been conceptualized as more than just generally physically imposing
and dangerous, but also dangerously sexual.\textsuperscript{90} Certainly, it is possible to conceive of violent
subjects who are simply violent without being sexually threatening. Thus, another layer of
representational mythology intermingles with the mythological association of black bodies and
violence by superimposing the cultural image of the hypersexual black body.\textsuperscript{91} These myths must
be alternatively interrogated in order to understand its importance in governing the intersection at
which representational violence against black bodies becomes particularly relevant to domestic
violence advocacy.

In Patricia Hill Collins’ foundational text on the cultural myths about blackness and
sexuality, she examines the origin and articulation of a variety of myths that govern the cultural
imagination of black sexuality.\textsuperscript{92} Collins explains that, much as myths about black violence were
generated, myths about black sexuality emerged as a delineating rhetorical sleight of hand in
order to maintain color lines between slaves and owners. The black male threat to white women

\textsuperscript{90} The sexual character of black male violence is best explained as in Jackson, \textit{Scripting}, 112. See also,
Patricia Hill Collins, \textit{Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism} (New York: Routledge,
2004), 27.

\textsuperscript{91} Again, turn to Barthes to understand how naturalized connections are produced through visual and
textual association. If we take Jackson’s notion of the black body as a text, that text has been read through a
Barthesian mythological lens that explains what is going on as ideological work and not simply conflation.

\textsuperscript{92} Here I use the term articulation somewhat more colloquially, but it can be productively understood
through Kevin DeLuca’s analysis. He states, “Articulating elements into a discourse can be understood as both
attempts to fix meaning within the field of discursivity and attempts to fix the context, ‘an attempt to dominate
the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre.’” In Kevin DeLuca, “Articulation
Communication and Mass Media Complete. In this context, myths about black masculinity, hypersexuality, and
violence have been articulated to form the center of a discourse that structures the understanding of black subjects.
See also, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, \textit{Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic
Politics} (New York: Verso, 1985) for the original context of the reference at the end of the DeLuca quotation.
was not just a violent threat but also a *sexually* violent threat. A dim and burgeoning interest in eugenics bolstered the belief that genetic purity was desirable and that even a small amount of “black blood” would create all types of undesirable effects on mixed-race offspring.\(^9^3\) Thus, it was necessary to understand the black male as violent, insatiable sexual beast in order to “warn” white women who might otherwise be intrigued by these “exotic specimens”; quite directly, white women were cautioned that interacting with black men could cause them to be raped or killed. Black women were, as a result, portrayed as the only suitable mates for such beast-like men, portrayed as sexual temptresses, capable of satisfying black men’s endless, unbounded sexual advances.\(^9^4\)

Augmenting Collins’ conclusions, Gail Dines explains how these images have been redeployed in pornography, stating, “From the image of the Black woman as Jezebel to the black man as savage, the mainstream white representations of blacks have coded black sexuality as deviant, excessive, and a threat to the white social order.”\(^9^5\) Black women, like black men, are conceived of as tempting white men with their sexual appetites in a manner that white women, chaste and pure, simply do not. Michael Eric Dyson elaborates the ways in which these narratives have their roots in white sexual exploitation of black slaves via rape and involuntary breeding, arguing,

Black women were victims of the erotic whims of white men who bedded them as they pleased. Black men, too, were sexually vulnerable. White culture harnessed the black penis to fertilize black wombs and to fortify white rule. But if black women were a

\(^9^3\) A detailed analysis of the eugenics movement is perhaps beyond the purview of this analysis, but for an examination of the ways in which anti-miscegenation laws redeploy the “one drop rule” through rhetoric, see Nadine Ehlers. “Hidden in Plain Sight: Defying Juridical Racialization in Rhinelander v. Rhinelander,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 1, no. 4 (2004): doi:10.1080/1479142042000270458.


\(^9^5\) Dines, “King Kong,” 454.
thrill—typecast as the erotic equals of their insatiable men—black men were a threat. Black men’s legendary prowess made white men jealous.96

The implication of the myths describes here by Dyson is that black relationships are conceived of as functional, as valuable for creating more slaves to work on plantations, but not as emotional or equal. Black bodies, here again made textual, are rhetorically positioned as over-the-top sexually, with protruding curves and large sexual organs that were functional but also animalistic.97

To be quite sure, these myths were all functional. They maintained and justified divisions and practices that were integral to the social practice of slave keeping. There was a social exigency, a dire need to maintain the race (the species, as it was), to reiterate and naturalize myths of violence such that their dubious and false origins became absent. As both Dines and Dyson indicate, although these myths began as a manifestation of white anxiety at the potential economic and cultural threat posed by black men and women, they have become more or less stripped of this connotation overtly and have gained a particular kind of legitimacy in their appeal to pre-discursivity. The appeal to pre-discursivity, an act of concealment of the artificiality of the stereotype based on the insistence that it was in no way constituted through language, anaesthetizes a sort of critical response in the audience.98

In contemporary society, myths associating black men and women with violence and hypersexuality are often re-articulated through media. In her study of several movies that address various aspects of black social life, including black relationships, hooks examines how media


97 It is worth noting that the stereotype of black bodies as overtly sexual and physically protruding have their roots in the exhibition of Sarah Bartmann, “The Hottentot Venus,” who was used as a sideshow attraction to demonstrate the “dangerous curves” of the black form. See Priscilla Netto, “We Have a Hottentot History to Consider: The Black Female Sex Symbol from Josephine to Tina to Kim,” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, New Orleans, Louisiana, May 27-31, 2004).

98 For more information about how appeals to pre-discursivity naturalize connections between arbitrary characteristics, see Judith Butler, Bodies that Matter (New York: Routledge, 1993).
representations of black men and women in relationships continuously re-articulate and naturalize these constructions by excluding counter-narratives. Specifically, hooks argues that mainstream movie audiences are still rarely presented with images of humanizing, ethical, and healthy sexual relationships between black men and women.99 Instead, the character of black relationships is defined in media as inherently sexually violent and rape of black women is naturalized as a “kinky” sexual practice enjoyed by both partners. Rape is not contextualized as a crime, but rather as a necessary evil limiting the unbounded sexuality of black women and expressing the insatiable appetites of black men.100 Even more charitable readings that cast doubt on the idea that rape is presented as objectively enjoyable concede that black men and women are represented as animals who do not know any better.101 As such, something more than confirmation bias is at work. Non-black audiences are rarely presented with a counter-narrative in mainstream media and as a result, may have difficulty conceiving of black relationships outside of the myopic violent representation. In the same way as it is difficult to conceptualize something that one has never seen, audiences are never challenged to critically engage film representations and, thus, often do not.

An intersectional approach is critical to understanding how cultural myths about black sexuality function and why they are so difficult to apprehend. Racism is not the only operative factor, nor is sexism; but rather, a sexism that is particular to nonwhite men and women, one that combines notions of gender with linked notions of race. As Kimberle’ Crenshaw notes, black subjects face a multivariate process of subjugation from these stereotypes because their

99 bell hooks, Reel to Real: race, sex, and class at the movies (New York: Routledge, 1996), 56.
100 Ibid., 56.
lives are marked not only by sexism, but also equally by racism and, at times, classism.\textsuperscript{102} The intersectional perspective, as explained by Amanda Burgess-Proctor, is that of “feminists who operate from the perspective of multiracial feminism” and advocate for an intersectional approach \ldots The intersectional approach recognizes that race, class, gender, sexuality, and other locations of inequality are dynamic, historically grounded, socially constructed power relationships that simultaneously operate at both the micro-structural and macro-structural levels.\textsuperscript{103}

Historically minded scholars must understand the ways in which various power relations solidify one another. In this instance, slavery worked with other historical narratives to produce an amalgam of oppression based on race and gender. Moreover, we must be continuously cognizant of all of these interlocking identity categories in order to have productive solutions to social problems or risk failing to provide solutions to these problems. In short, over-determining racism or sexism as a single root cause is counter-productive.\textsuperscript{104}

The lack of a broader attention to intersectionality has deleterious consequences for domestic violence activism. I now turn to an analysis of domestic violence awareness activism as a site where intersectional approaches have been discounted in favor of more singular approaches based on gender. Single-variable gender approaches fail many victims because they cannot adequately address the sexism which raced men and women experience differently. For example, Rihanna and Brown are demonized by TMZ not simply as women and men, or even as black people, but as black women and men. The distinction is important, as white women who


\textsuperscript{103} Amanda Burgess-Proctor, “Intersections of Race, Class, Gender, and Crime: Future Directions for Feminist Criminology,” \textit{Feminist Criminology} 1, no. 27 (2006): 37, doi:10.1177/1557085105282899. See also, Patricia Hill Collins, “It's All In the Family Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation,” \textit{Hypatia} 13, no. 3 (1998): 62-82, JSTOR. To be sure, there are intersections beyond just race and gender at play in constructing the naturalized hegemonic subject. Many of these authors also account for class, sexual orientation, etc. which are each important determinants of oppression and should not be under-stated as such.

are victims of intimate partner violence do have to combat the cultural stereotype that women are sometimes hysterical and in need of (physical) correction.

Domestic Violence and Concessions: How Activists Unwittingly Collude with Racists

The foundation of domestic violence prevention activism abdicating an intersectional stance is based in the history of domestic violence awareness. Although it would seem that a discourse so focused on raising awareness about the negative consequences of victim-blaming would form a powerful counter-narrative to such destructive master narratives, singular focuses on sexism keep an important part of the master narrative intact. Although this chapter is not meant to indict domestic violence prevention activism (and in fact acknowledges that consciousness-raising has helped countless men and women escape from relationship violence), it is necessary to turn with a reflexive lens on the origins and problematic constructions that have constrained domestic violence activists as this activism has informed broader cultural perspectives on this social problem. The perspectives supported by domestic violence activists have come to inform (and even guide) other public accounts of domestic violence, Culturally, we need to understand the shortfalls of even an admirable project in order to draft a more inclusive and constructive approach to quelling abuse; this approach must address adequately the lived experience of all identities in order to succeed in the face of damaging cultural mythologies.

The lack of an intersectional approach to critiquing gender violence is understandable, if not excusable in that social victories are often hard-won and concessions must be obtained strategically.\textsuperscript{105} That is, activists must often choose between sustaining one dominant discourse

\textsuperscript{105} For a more detailed discussion of the reasons to adopt a strategically essentialist stance for the furtherance of activist goals, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s interview in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Sarah Harasym, \textit{The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues} (New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.
in order to gain relevancy in attacking another. One of the most basic and pervasive reasons that strategic essentialism goes too far (the “victory at all costs” attitude) can be found through an examination of the starting point of domestic violence activism (a myopic conception of patriarchy). In order to understand how domestic violence activists have maintained a primary focus on sexism (at the expense of racism, classism, heterosexism, etc.), one must grapple with the history of domestic violence activism.

Initially note that it was not long ago that domestic violence was rarely discussed in the public sphere. Far from being considered a crime, intimate partner violence was considered the norm (at least in heterosexual relationships), if not a necessary technique for husbands to discipline their wives. As Elizabeth M. Schneider notes, English Common Law historically sanctioned battering. This canon, based on a mixture of Christianity and folk wisdom, gave husbands wide latitude in promoting “domestic harmony” by any means necessary as the appointed head of a household. Since violence was viewed as necessary to master their wives’ dissent, it was a protected act.  

Although this practice correctly seems callous by contemporary standards, historical conceptions of femininity bolstered the expectation that violence was critical to tranquility in the home. As hooks argues, women were considered to be fundamentally unintelligent and emotionally fragile (hysterical even), so violence was seen as something done, essentially, “for their own good.” This conception of gendered identities not only silenced domestic violence victims, but also bolstered the idea that speaking out against violence was to be labeled unruly and unfeminine. Adele M. Morrison observes that this dismissal meant that violence was seldom discussed and was often relegated to a private problem with little legal

107 bell hooks, Reel to Real, 56.
remedy or recourse. The cultural stakes for maintaining domestic violence as a private crime were high; bringing domestic abuse out in the open had the potential to create resistance that threatened established hierarchies. The character of this resistance had multiple potentialities and still does, but an examination of the trajectory as it occurred is critical to understand the missteps that continually perpetuate themselves through a myopic understanding of patriarchy as the only relevant nexus of oppression.

Domestic violence prevention activists have made great strides in debunking some of the problematic notions of femininity and gendered power differentials over time; slowly, men and women began to break the silence of intimate partner violence. As a result, legal remedies emerged to combat the legal system’s silence on the question of domestic violence. Despite these gains, however, the limited focus of modern activists has often failed to address many of the discursive formations that contributed to the acceptance of intimate violence in the first place. Kay Picart notes, most extant legal remedies were won via the construction of a rational male subject and thus fail to speak to the lived experiences of women. In order to remain intelligible in a patriarchal society, domestic violence discourses were encoded in a legal system that was thoroughly gendered, thus buttressing gender stereotypes in the name of preventing future violence. In the same way, domestic violence laws that fail to adequately appreciate unique racial mythologies of society and how they affect the legal system, cannot provide the fullest justice to black men and women.

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109 Schneider, Battered Women, 23.
Moreover, the increasing visibility conferred on rape and domestic violence in mediated culture does more than notably omit black victims, but also displaces that which is not represented. The displacement of black bodies increases problematic constructions of violence. As Sarah Projansky discusses in her book, Watching Rape, rape has been depicted in popular culture both as a method of disciplining “improper” women and as something that never happens to men.\textsuperscript{111} While rape and domestic abuse are not necessarily the same offense, the two discourses have much overlap. As such, the ideal victim image (a white female, violently attacked by someone she did not know under circumstances that made it impossible to fight back) emerged as a consequence of greater social representation and even anti-violence advocacy. Notably, this same process produced the ideal victim as white, which I will analyze in more detail momentarily. As new activism failed to account for the ways in which conceptions of black sexuality and violence might implicate perceptions of innocence and guilt in domestic violence prosecutions involving black men and women, black subjects were often included in activist discourses to their detriment. Thus, legal remedies remain and will continue to remain lacking until they take seriously the challenge of speaking to the lived experiences of perpetrators and victims already thought largely to be suspect. Marian Meyers augments the argument that intersectionality is a missing piece of domestic abuse prevention by explaining how, particularly in the media, the intersectional matrix of race and gender oppression works to normalize domestic violence done by and to black men and women, giving the impression that the black community is primarily comprised of “low-class criminals” with “violent tendencies.”\textsuperscript{112}


The problematic constructions of black men and women as violent and sexual were, at best, rarely addressed by those who sought to increase the visibility of domestic violence as a problem and at worst bolstered in service of accomplishing activist goals. For example, toward gendered ends, hooks discusses how this imagery translates into fear and misinformation even within the activist sphere, how displacement of black subjects is more purposeful than a simple failure to account for racism but a site of production of racist discourses. hooks gives the example of “well-meaning” rape prevention counseling, wherein

white women discussing rape cautioned … female … hitchhikers to avoid accepting rides from black men, implicating that they were more likely to rape. … Studies show that white women are more likely to be raped by men of the same racial group … the tendency to harshly critique black male sexism in ways that suggest it is the most harmful expression of patriarchal power … surfaces.113

The myth of black male violence expressed in this activist material allows for a cultural expiation of guilt over our failings related to domestic violence in a process of scapegoating, where black men become the sacrificial subjects upon which white people may project their fears and insulate themselves from the charge that they have not done enough to prevent abuse.114 This is an important move because it shows a specific way in which the non-intersectional discourse of domestic violence makes violence difficult to tackle in any widespread fashion; there is a cultural stake in distorting the facts.115 Toward this end, as T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting points out, visibility politics have historically been informed by improper or problematic representations increase the cultural viability of said representations. By way of further example, black men accused of sexual violence (e.g., Tupac, Mystikal, Mike Tyson) become cultural

113 bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 68.
115 This is especially dangerous because distorted perceptions lead men and women to overestimate the domestic violence threat from black men and women and underestimate the threat of white men and women.
exemplars of domestic violence upon which society “can exorcise … demons over date rape.”

In effect, a fuller interrogation of the genesis of the myth that black men are natural rapists and abusers is impossible because its rhetoric remains couched in the sacrosanct politics of ending violence against (helpless, stereotypical, white, female) victims that was committed by (strong, dangerous, black, male) perpetrators.

As Dyson cautions, the rhetorical strategy of associating violence with black men is perilous for domestic violence activism as a whole despite the guilt or innocence of particular individuals:

Let’s face it. Beating women is a manly sport in America. It is not a widely reviled practice. … (It is helpful to remind ourselves that for years many white stars…have beat their wives, too. But without a history of stereotypes to support white male beastliness, the wife-beating issue failed to catch on among the cause célèbre set).117

To extend Dyson’s conclusion, activism (and, in turn, visibility of the problem) has become disproportionately oriented toward disciplining black men and ignoring the particular hurdles encountered by black women. Moreover, domestic violence activism as such does not provide us with the tools for challenging the racist and sexist vision of violence as the province of certain men at the expense of others. As with domestic violence activism’s origins, effective solutions can come only by first unmasking the insidious ways in which sources purporting to expose domestic violence and draw attention to its causes may harmfully re-inscribe racial and gendered stereotypes. It is necessary, then, to turn to an analysis of the ways that TMZ’s coverage is operating within, and in fact generating, this rhetorical sleight of hand. TMZ reflects the myopic notion that publicizing domestic violence is an end in and of itself and that some publicity is


always better than none. It is important to note that I do not mean to conflate the aims of domestic violence activists with those of TMZ. Rather, I situate TMZ’s coverage of Brown and Rihanna in this broader activist background by way of suggesting that the problems in the activist nexus are linked closely to problematic (if possibly well-intentioned) news that fails to account for nuance, puts onerous expectations on the victims, and fails to understand the social forces that contribute to intimate partner abuse by displacing the blame on specific people.¹¹⁸

How to Succeed in Racism and Sexism without Really Trying

TMZ’s coverage rhetorically invokes myths about black rage as intrinsic and generative of violence under the guise of publicizing a domestic violence event as a teachable moment for young men and women; the audience is ostensibly invited to condemn Rihanna for staying with Brown (at least in the immediate aftermath) and revile Brown for his alleged remorselessness. Although it is difficult to find fault with a publication decrying intimate partner violence, TMZ’s coverage has been slanted in several important ways that betray a latent racism as discussed earlier in this chapter. The sensibility which allows the perpetuation of this racism, which is at once dimly apparent to the reader and yet sternly disguised, is pervasive and relies upon several important strategies: victim-related strategies emphasizing Rihanna’s resilience and ambivalence to violence, disciplinary-invitational strategies inviting the audience to weigh in on Brown or Rihanna’s deviations from domestic violence master narratives, strategies that stress the inevitability of violence in black relationships, and perpetrator-related strategies that highlight Brown’s remorselessness and further capacity for violence (especially in connection to other black men). Although there is some overlap, to be sure, it is necessary to delve into these

strategies and their myriad implications for creating and sustaining racist and sexist myths about domestic violence. As I discussed in chapter 1, these strategies are all enthymematic in nature. They force the audience to recall an absent premise in order to apprehend the message of TMZ’s coverage. Here, TMZ uses a loosely syllogistic form in order to effectively bait the audience into thinking stereotypes. By placing the idea back in the forefront of the audience’s mind, the stereotype is kept alive and in fact reinvigorated by the repetition evinced by TMZ which refuses to retreat from the use of cultural myths discussed above.

One of the most unsettling early strategies in TMZ’s coverage was to question Rihanna’s victim status by emphasizing her physical resilience and ambivalence.119 This strategy plays on the notion that black women are not naurally feminine, but rather equally violent and too strong to victimize.120 Among the narratives that do engage the “strong black woman” myth are numerous reports concerning Rihanna’s alleged reluctance to testify against Chris Brown in court. On March 1, 2009, TMZ cautions that Rihanna may have had a “change of heart” and would potentially testify that “she never believed [Brown] meant” to threaten her life.121

Although this article (and several similar articles) suggest that Rihanna’s failure to testify would not necessarily impede a conviction, an interesting rhetorical trick occurs. By constructing Rihanna in opposition to the “factual” evidence reported by TMZ, the site rhetorically positions her as an impediment to justice, colluding with her abuser even as TMZ struggles valiantly to ensure the exposure of the truth.122 Even an article quoting her attorney who claims that she is

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119 Think here of Morrison’s conclusions in Multicultural Survivor that black women are often diminished as “animals” that enjoy violence. The ambivalence rhetoric evokes this discourse and applies it to Rihanna.

120 See K. Sue Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond (New York: Routledge, 1993).


122 TMZ Staff, Will Brown Be Charged, March 1, 2009, and also TMZ Staff, “Rihanna: Chris’ Beatings Kept Getting Worse,” TMZ (blog), March 5, 2009, http://www.tmz.com/2009/03/05/rihanna-chris-beatings-kept-
being cooperative with the investigation highlights that, given the high probability that she will “clam up,” photo evidence alone may have to be enough to convict.\textsuperscript{123} Moreover, another article quotes her lawyer who tells the press that she would be pleased "if [the case] were over quickly," much like Brown would.\textsuperscript{124} Although this sentiment is certainly not strange for a woman going through a painful public ordeal, TMZ interprets it to mean that she will push for Brown to receive a plea bargain (the title of the article being “Rihanna Wants a Deal, Too”).\textsuperscript{125} Here again note the use of a categorical syllogism to enthymematically compel judgment. TMZ supplies the following premises: Abused women should behave properly in order to qualify as victims, Rihanna is an abused woman refusing to behave as such (partial syllogism). The audience then fills in the conclusion that Rihanna is not a proper victim.

The anxiety surrounding Rihanna’s alleged recalcitrance toward testifying has several implications. First, it suggests that she is less than truthful and that her allegations may never have been serious in the first place (note the use of “change of heart,” as though Rihanna is in the business of making last minute decisions regarding whether or not her abuse is important). This image bolsters the idea that black women are temptresses and liars looking to entrap men in their

\textsuperscript{123} TMZ Staff, “Down With the DA,” 2009.


\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
charades. Second, if TMZ is not implying that Rihanna is being duplicitous, they are insinuating that she is too unintelligent to understand the gravity of the situation for herself and for society, which lends credibility to the myth of black mental inferiority. TMZ leads readers to believe that Rihanna is intent on allowing violent men to go without justice, potentially to abuse other (white) women in the future. By promoting the idea that justice will win out even in the face of an ambivalent woman who fails to grasp that violence was done and was wrong, TMZ glosses over the nuances of a highly conflicted situation such as domestic violence where victims are navigating a complex web of emotions that complicate the seemingly logical notion that they should just extricate themselves from the situation (as though to do so would be easy and not require the end of a relationship). By painting Rihanna’s conflict in dichotomous terms (with justice or against it), it is impossible for readers to understand the painful process of leaving an abuser. That is, Rihanna is never portrayed as a woman who loved a man who harmed her; she is not presented as a victim is navigating the complex array of emotions that accompany loving someone while hating what he did. She is displayed largely as an impediment to justice, emotionless and unfeeling. Although this discourse of freedom is problematic in general, it is

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126 The image of Rihanna as a liar evokes the amoral stereotype that black women will do bad things with bad results (i.e., a plea bargain for Brown). See Dyson, “In O.J.’s Shadow,” 168; Collins, Black Sexual Politics, 27; Dines, King Kong, 452.

127 This is best understood by looking to Dickinson and Anderson’s history of blackness being associated with unintelligence and bodily as the counterpoint of whiteness. Dickinson and Anderson, “Fallen,” 282.

128 This may admittedly seem like a bit of a stretch based on the article, but the fear surrounding Chris Brown escaping punishment seems to have much to do with cultural myths about black men being dangerous (and that danger being primarily a concern for white women) as in Dines, King Kong, 452.


130 While TMZ does not actively portray Rihanna as callous, the coverage lacks anything with which to humanize her. Also, in TMZ Staff, “Rihanna – Chris Brown Jokes are Funny,” TMZ (blog), May 5, 2009, http://www.tmz.com/2009/05/05/rihanna-chris-brown-jokes-are-funny/, she is portrayed as able to laugh at Brown and, by extension, the incident. Even the omission, however, can be considered an act of commission along the lines of hooks, Reel to Real, 56 where she discusses how black people are never portrayed in a well-rounded sense that accounts for internal conflict and emotion.
doubly problematic at the intersection of race and gender.131 To be sure, the assumption that Rihanna is free to testify is bolstered by the idea that black women are stronger and thus freer to leave an abusive situation than a fragile white woman.

This first strategy repeats itself ad nauseum in TMZ’s coverage of this case. Rihanna’s emotions are never discussed, nor is she ever portrayed as a human being so much as a body able to withstand abuse (harkening to the black body as a text which naturalizes myths about black females as tough and primitive). Rihanna is continuously described primarily in terms of her injuries and the severity of those injuries. This description was objective, detached, and anthropological, similar to how one would describe a piece of meat. As if the published photos were not enough, TMZ callously describes Rihanna as “beaten “to a pulp,” beaten “to a bloody pulp,” “bruised and bloodied,” as having “contusions on the face, swollen eyes, cut lip, bloody nose, bite marks on fingers and arm,” “battered and bruised,” and more.132 TMZ even goes out of its way to hype her injuries by emphasizing that the photographs published simply do not do them justice, saying that in reality “they are far more gruesome, the bruises and swelling far more pronounced.”133 This is a destructive move, particularly in juxtaposition with how Rihanna is never described as emotionally distraught. She is presented here as many black women have

131 Hirschmann, Domestic Violence, 126-151. Also note this article’s extended conclusion that implying that women in domestic abuse situations always have the freedom to easily extricate themselves is not only incorrect but infantilizes women while downplaying the serious psychological and economic consequences of abuse.


been through time: a body and nothing more, a dehumanized thing to abuse, an object.\textsuperscript{134} Just as slave owners who raped black women viewed them as their property, Rihanna is described in a detached fashion here again.

Further, TMZ makes incessant jabs implying that, despite her physical trauma, Rihanna is recovering nicely and is not only ambivalent, but also thriving. She is constantly taken to task for initially remaining with Brown, and TMZ emphasizes how happy she seems to be with him in the aftermath of the attack.\textsuperscript{135} Moreover, TMZ reporters are not above joking with Rihanna about the “cause” of the attack and, when she nervously laughed, they published the following headline: “Rihanna—Chris Brown Jokes are Funny,” as if to imply that she enjoyed the assault and found it humorous, even though nothing in her verbal response would indicate as much. They also highlight her subsequent relationships, implying that she moved on quickly to have sex with other men. Los Angeles Lakers’ player Andrew Bynum is quoted in an interview about whether or not he’s “hittin’ it,” and another article implies that Brown and rapper Drake have shared more than just a few solos at a concert (thus implying that Rihanna is promiscuous).\textsuperscript{136} TMZ even goes so far as to imply Rihanna is sexually interested in the Prime Minister of her native Barbados.\textsuperscript{137} All of this gives the impression that Rihanna enjoys violence and sex with multiple partners, and even that the tragedy is just a fun “kink” in the social/sexual black

\textsuperscript{134} It is instructive to Netto in order to understand why fascination with the black female body as a spectacle harkens to destructive historical myths that emerged with Sarah Bartmann and continue to be re-articulated on the bodies of other black women. Rihanna’s photos are submitted for observation because of their gruesomeness, and this gaze is inherently dehumanizing for the reasons Netto discusses. See see Netto, “Hottentot History,” 2.


relational matrix. Here again, the myth of the proper victim (solemn, chaste) is invoked via an incomplete syllogism and the audience is again compelled to pass judgment.

This has several implications. First, it emphasizes the hierarchical relation of the body and the mind. TMZ’s incessant referral to Rihanna’s “beaten” body ensures that the age-old body/mind dichotomy is reinforced with the “mind” decidedly losing out. Describing her injuries in detail highlights the embodied, animalistic qualities attributed to black women who, despite abuse can always be counted on to “take a punch.” Moreover, the sexual indicts feed the destructive “black Jezebel” stereotype that black women’s promiscuity somehow makes them willing targets for violence at the hands of black men. Perhaps more destructively, it implies that she may use her sexuality to entice men to violence. More importantly, TMZ implies that violence is a natural consequence for a woman who fails to fully grasp the importance of chastity. This is especially important in domestic violence narratives where women have so often been taken to task for their sexual “exploits” driving men to destruction.

The second overarching disciplinary strategy operates by inviting the audience to weigh in on the ways in which Brown and Rihanna’s narrative fails to fit within the established ideas of domestic violence. In all of these articles, readers are asked to participate in a poll (results of which are published on the website in juxtaposition to photos of Brown and Rihanna) asking if the behavior of Rihanna and Brown is appropriate for two people mired in allegations of

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138 See hooks, Reel to Real, 56. hooks discusses the representation of violence as an inevitable condition of black romantic relationships as problematic. TMZ’s coverage hardly allows a divergent narrative and edifies one that gives credibility to the inevitability hypothesis.

139 Again, return to Dickinson and Anderson, “Fallen,” 282 and Dyer, White, which both discuss strategies by which black and white are dichotomized in ways that suggest the mental inferiority of black people.

140 Morrison, “Multicultural Survivor,” Online.

domestic abuse. In each of these polls, the article serves to pre-determine the responses by framing the question so as to suggest more correct answers. It is important to understand the ideological impact of TMZ literally asking readers to beyond passive consumption of gossip about Rihanna and Brown to further engage in a co-creative process wherein they shun their shortcomings. Dominant ideologies depend on some level on the audience accepting and engaging with myths. By accepting that Brown and Rihanna are appropriate to judge and by encountering coverage that makes a judgment seem natural (even if the audience would have never come to this conclusion on its own), the audience is both enacting ideology and having ideology enacted upon them. In either case, ideological notions about race and gender continue unabated and unexamined in the minds of the audience.142

The first article that demonstrates this strategy, entitled, “Rihanna and Chris Brown—Back Together,” focused on the alleged continuation of the relationship between Rihanna and Brown immediately after the attack. The article first invites readers to judgment by opening with the not particularly subtle “What is she thinking?”143 The article then describes how Brown and Rihanna, seemingly unfazed by the events of the previous days were “hanging out at one of Diddy’s homes.”144 TMZ then asks the readers if this is a bad idea, and 87% (out of 264,790) agree that it is. It is notable that this article mentions that Brown and Rihanna are staying with Diddy, a fellow black artist who is demonized by association with Brown and Rihanna, particularly because he is willing to shelter Rihanna and her assailant. This article seems to suggest that Brown and Rihanna fail to grasp the gravity of abuse and that they are continuing unabated and unexamined in the minds of the audience.

142 See Barthes, Mythologies.
144 Ibid.
their relationship as though nothing out of the ordinary has happened (thus implying that violence in their relationship is ordinary for them or for their friends).145

Another article, “Chris and Rihanna: Back to Where it Started,” describes how Brown and Rihanna traveled “back [to] the city where she was beaten to a bloody pulp just weeks ago” together. This article highlights Brown’s remorselessness and is accompanied by a poll entitled simply “Run, Rihanna, Run: Yes, No.” 87% said “yes” out of 107,834 respondents.146 The suggestion that she “run” is belies a paternalistic understanding of domestic violence, especially given that it perpetuates a flawed notion. The notion that Rihanna’s failure to immediately leave her abuser expresses something about her character, has been discussed before, but is worth crystallizing here. As Hirschmann argues, “Both positive and negative liberty responses seem inadequate to address domestic violence. Negative liberty downplays the complexity…of the barriers to women’s freedom, and positive liberty runs the danger of second-guessing women’s desires.”147 Negative liberty is the freedom from outside barriers and positive liberty is the freedom to choose for oneself even absent those barriers. Here, as elsewhere, Rihanna is publically taken to task with several results. First, the nuances of a complex problem are erased and an assumption of negative liberty is cemented (the idea that all non-visible impediments to Rihanna leaving Brown such as economic unity, family ties, social groups simply do not exist.

145 Again, underscores the normality of abuse in black relationships. See Meyers, “Gender, Race, Class,” 65 to understand how first, black people are collectively associated with social disorder (that connection here via Diddy’s link to Rihanna and Brown) and how black people in positions of relative privilege can be recast as low-class and deviant in the media for actions that fail to uphold what whites would consider to be appropriate victim/perpetrator roles. Meyers, “Gender, Race, Class,” 105-6. See also Dickinson and Anderson, Fallen, 282.


Also, positive liberty is invoked, infantilizing Rihanna and implying that she could not possibly understand what is best in this situation.148

Perhaps the most egregious of TMZ’s articles reports that Chris Brown and Rihanna are back in the studio together, using their “heightened emotions” in the aftermath of the attack in order to “translate powerfully into the music.”149 The article further reports, “Both Rihanna and Chris agreed [to the duet] and snuck in a couple of ‘late night’ sessions that we're told were ‘very, very emotional ... the feeling in the room was pure love.' Clearly, love hurts.” This article is accompanied by another poll, asking if the duet is “disgusting” or “sweet.” Unsurprisingly, 89% voted “disgusting.”150 Of note, TMZ later issued a retraction of this particular story and this retraction comes at the hands of “Brown’s people” who are out to debunk rumors about Brown (and, as TMZ implies, perhaps too self-interested to be believed).151 That the duet never materialized is almost a non-sequiter to the coverage itself. Setting aside for a moment the fact that not nearly all of the TMZ followers who read the initial article would see the retraction, TMZ remains interested in inviting a disciplinary response from the public based on unfounded rumors about Rihanna and Brown. The audience can no sooner “un-see” the article than they can disabuse themselves of an ideological notion that was never understood as constructed. Take the following syllogism: Heightened emotions and love for one another are uncharacteristic and inappropriate of domestic violence victims and perpetrators (major premise), Rihanna and Chris

148 This is not to imply that domestic violence survivors should not be empowered to leave abusers but rather that the notion of agency that pervades domestic violence discourse fails to fully appreciate the complex network of barriers women face. A lack of nuance here is arguably just as bad as failing to urge women to leave because it does not speak to their lived experience and, thus, does not present what appears to be a viable, sensitive option.


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Brown are embroiled in domestic violence (minor premise), Chris Brown and Rihanna are insufficient to victim and perpetrator roles (audience supplied). Here, the enthymeme manifests as judgment and the invitation to use the enthymematic knowledge actively, by judging is significant. TMZ takes the opportunity to test the strength of this micro-formal element through the poll, and the results suggest it is powerful indeed.

The intimation that the couple needs our advice not only infantilizes them (implying that they cannot make their own decisions without the help of a nationwide audience) but also invites us to feel empowered to judge them. Thus, such articles participate in the process of presenting an event, suggesting the impropriety of their response, and engaging the audience in judgment. TMZ forwards the notion that Brown and Rihanna are inured to violence, ambivalent, uncaring, and predisposed to seek shelter within the black community (a community that will then enable further violence). Additionally, by providing limited information and allowing the audience to gloss over all the shades of grey, TMZ provides “clarity” which invites easy judgment. Interestingly, the disciplinary response is invited, compelled, and framed, giving the illusion that the audience is acting on their own volition and coming to their own conclusions while TMZ is clearly pre-determining what those conclusions should be. Again, this strategy relies on the audience to supply the conclusion (as in telling Rihanna to “run”). This can be understood productively as enthymematic even as the framing requires no vocalization from the audience.

Although the first two strategies have implications for viewing violence in black relationships as likely, the third inevitability strategy enhances the public’s connection between race and violence and suggests race as a determinant of violence. TMZ intimates that legal

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152 For a detailed discussion of how infantilizing subjects functions to arrest and control them, see Lauren Berlant, *The Queen of America Goes to Washington City: Essays on Sex and Citizenship* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).
sources have weighed in and that “Rihanna's own aggressiveness takes it out of the felony category,” going so far as to state (as though it were fact) that “Rihanna was the first one to strike—slapping and striking Brown ‘numerous times’ while he was driving.” Although TMZ concedes that Brown was relatively unharmed and that this might bolster the case against him, the site’s willingness to publish the words of anonymous sources speculating on what happened in a car that contained only two people (neither of whom had made public statements about the incident) that insist that Rihanna was the aggressor is troublesome to say the least. This approach to describing the assault plays into the idea that the duo’s relationship was volatile from the start (thus intrinsically and naturally). Further, in describing Rihanna was an aggressor (the primary aggressor at that) could be considered a mitigating factor. This construction of Rihanna harkens to the idea that black women goad aggressive black men to physical violence because they themselves are violent and neither the man nor the woman could act otherwise if they tried. This image, tied to the aforementioned “black Jezebel,” the sexual temptress (generally of white men), is that of the black Sapphire. Sapphire is another constructed image of a resilient black woman, but a particular one. K. Sue Jewell describes the black Sapphire in the following way,

When the Sapphire image is portrayed it is the African American male who represents the point of contention, in an ongoing verbal dual between Sapphire and the African American male. Her sheer existence is predicated upon the presence of the corrupt African American male whose lack of integrity, and use of cunning and trickery provides her with an opportunity to emasculate him through her use of verbal put-downs.

Rihanna’s aggressiveness (notably mentioned nowhere in the affidavit) is contextualized as a natural characteristic of black women who are emasculating by nature. TMZ also seems to posit that the natural overreaction of Rihanna-as-Sapphire went beyond her ability to control it, and


154 Here again return to Jewell, Mammy to Miss America, 45.
thus she sparks a violent feud between herself and Brown. The Sapphire image also implicates our understanding of Brown as a black male whose “antics” inevitably ignited Rihanna’s ire. In this case, the Sapphire image partially exonerates both Brown and Rihanna and shifts the blame to “blackness” which could be said to account for the argument.

Moreover, TMZ published statements that Brown made in the lead-up to the attack that he and Rihanna worked hard to walk away from fights and to “laugh [them] off.” TMZ insists that Brown should “take his own advice.”155 It is telling that TMZ sought out Brown’s statements about how he was working on maintaining the stability in his relationship and juxtaposed them with his failure to do so, insinuating that he was not only lying to the public, but also to himself. The juxtaposition has several implications. It evokes the idea that black men and women constantly face relationship turmoil, that they fail to manage peacefully, and that they are not themselves cognizant of the ways that violence is manifest. Much like the rumors that slaves could not be civilized even if their owners were to try to educate their slaves (because they lacked the mental acuity), this article argues that even if Brown was talking the proverbial talk, he was not walking the walk and that this would continue. Along similar lines, TMZ covered a basketball game that both Rihanna and Brown attended with the cheeky line, “fortunately there was a length of the court in between them!”156 This quotation serves to cover any nuance to the attack itself and rhetorically constitutes Rihanna and Brown as loose cannons, willing to attack each other at any moment, and incapable of containing their emotions. This article once again suggests the bidirectional nature of Brown and Rihanna’s violence, discounting the clean


delineation between a perpetrator and a victim, and suggesting instead that the two attacked each other and would again if given the chance.

There are even more blatant instances of essentially attributing the violent episode to various inevitable variables that are rooted in destructive cultural myths. Principally, TMZ has published articles indicating that deviant sexual practices may have incited Brown and Rihanna to violence. The prevailing theory on TMZ to explain why Rihanna and Brown fought is the “text message” theory. In this explanation, Rihanna intercepted a cell phone text message from Brown’s manager Tina Davis who reportedly had a sexual relationship with him when he was underage.157 In similar articles that espouse the same theory, Rihanna is indicted for having a similarly “adulterous” relationship with another rap artist, fueling a climate of mutual suspicion and distrust.158 There is a relative lack of empathy for Brown if it is true that a woman twice his age victimized him (statutory rape).159 Here also is the assumption that another black woman would do such a thing to him.160 Finally, the allegations that Rihanna and Brown were unfaithful naturalize black sexual deviance as an obvious cause of violence in black relationships. This tactic strips the relationship of context or nuance, placing it on an inevitable trajectory of violence. The question becomes not if, but when. TMZ’s insistence on the black community as promiscuous, as contributing not only to violence in their own relationships but also callously provoking it in others, removes notions of choice and replaces them with predetermined

157 Admittedly, this theory is reflected in the affidavit, but there are no details of the text message itself or whom it was from. TMZ Staff, “Mysterious Woman in Brown/Rihanna Case Revealed,” TMZ (blog) March 10, 2009, http://www.tmz.com/2009/03/10/chris-brown-rihanna-mystery-woman-text-message/.


159 Here we have the image of the “thug” young black man, using many women and expressing no emotional attachment in sexual situations. The insistence that statutory rape of a young black man by a woman in a position of power is acceptable and carries no emotional baggage for the man has a fixed meaning in discourse about black subjects and solidifies notions of black sexual deviance. See, Jackson, Scripting, 112.

160 Again, evokes the black Jezebel, see Meyers, “Gender, Race, Class,” and Jewell, Mammy to Miss America.
stereotypes. The naturalized connection can again be understood as a function of racist and sexist ideology in TMZ’s coverage, perhaps best described by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies*.\(^{161}\) The enthymeme here operates via the following incomplete syllogism: Rihanna and Brown are black men and women who are portrayed as hypersexual, Hypersexuality contributes to their propensity for violence. The major premise is missing (that black men and women’s alleged hypersexuality contributes inevitably to their propensity for violence), but the audience can easily fill it in, creating an association between blackness, hypersexuality and violence. This enthymematic form centers the myth that blackness is associated with hypersexuality (and, by extension, violence) in the mind of the audience, bringing it to the forefront and perpetuating its continuing existence.

Just as worrying is the next (fourth) strategy, characterized by TMZ’s continued insistence on Brown’s remorselessness and the ways in which he is constructed as a menace to society (which is often generalized to other black men). TMZ published a picture of a women’s sports team with Brown while claiming (if sarcastically) that the very act of standing near Brown was perhaps dangerous. In the article, titled “Brave Women Risk Photo With Chris Brown,”\(^{162}\) TMZ mocks the photo with the following caption, “Using the highly effective ‘strength in numbers’ method, the brave women of the University of Mary Washington basketball team set their fears aside and forced a few smiles for this pic with alleged woman beater Chris Brown.” Similarly, TMZ published an article featuring Brown posing with one of his fan’s babies, stating “Chris Brown posed for pictures with a baby in Los Angeles on Monday. The baby’s parents

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\(^{161}\) Barthes, *Mythologies*.

clearly don't have access to the Internet, read the newspaper, or own a television. The implication here is clear even if the tone is mostly snarky: Brown is a loaded gun, dangerous to all (infantilized) women and children, and always ready with a punch. This is an important move in that it rhetorically hails the idea that white women and children (the pinnacle of innocence in society) face particular danger from Brown who may hurt them if they so much as touch him. The pristine image of white motherhood and womanhood, blameless and perfect in juxtaposition with black male animality cannot be overstated in significance because white womanhood and family purity created these myths. That they are still evoked in relation to the redeployment of myths about black male violence suggests that they persist. The persistence is key because it indicates that these myths have not become unmoored to their origins (hence now becoming meaningless or bizarre). The authors here again employ the enthymeme to evoke the premise that Brown is a black man who threatens white women and children (categorically hinting that his blackness may be said to account for this). The syllogism looks something like this: TMZ supplies that Brown is a black male (via photograph) and that he is dangerous to white women and children (the conclusion). The audience is left to fill in the major premise, that black men are dangerous to white women and children. This major premise relies on a cultural background mired in these myths, and the articles taken together solidify that this notion is operative in TMZ, buttressed through an enthymematic interaction with the audience.


164 For more information about the process of hailing as a way to construct and talk about identity, see Butler, Bodies that Matter and also Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Thornhill Publishing, 1980), 163. Althusser described hailing as a process of discursively summoning an individual into a subject position. Here, the hail interpellates Brown into a cultural matrix as a problematic, violent black male subject. See also Maurice Charland, “Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Quebecois,” Quarterly Journal of Speech 73 (1987): 147, EBSCO EBSCOhost Communication and Mass Media Complete for a description of rhetorically constituted subjects; here constitutive rhetoric can function also like a hail. The hail itself is possible because of the existing cultural mythology of black male violence and incompetence, Jackson, Scripting, 85.
As other articles suggest, TMZ is not pleased that Brown has the audacity to continue his life in a fairly normal fashion even in light of the allegations of violence, hinting that he is in fact animalistic and emotionless, given to violence and incapable of empathy. In an article titled “Chris Brown Rebounds,” TMZ says, “Chris Brown isn’t letting a couple of felony charges get in the way of his game.”\textsuperscript{165} In coverage of his court appearance, TMZ describes Brown as “remain[ing] emotionless.”\textsuperscript{166} Chris Brown is described often as shamelessly “walk[ing] around as though he had nothing to hide” while Rihanna is “covering up”\textsuperscript{167} and as showing his “uncovered face.”\textsuperscript{168} He was also described as “hardly the worse for wear” when he was arrested.\textsuperscript{169} This again redeployes the myth of black men as unsympathetic villains with strong bodies who are capable of violence and emotionally disconnected from the impact of that violence. Jackson expands this notion by arguing that black male violence and resilience also emerges from stereotypes about “ghetto living,” held by white audiences who assume that black people prefer to live in violent conditions because of their resilience to violence, not because social racism constrains their options.\textsuperscript{170} This stereotype of black violence and violent conditions forms the major premise (supplied by the audience) of the following syllogism: Black people are inured to violence and thus prefer dangerous conditions, Brown is a black man, Chris Brown displays few outward signs of emotional distress in conjunction with his violent outburst. Here

\textsuperscript{165} TMZ Staff, Chris Brown Rebounds,” online.


\textsuperscript{167} TMZ Staff, “Back to Where it Started,” online.

\textsuperscript{168} TMZ Staff, “Hits the Water,” online.


\textsuperscript{170} Jackson, Scripting, 125.
again, blackness as a category forms the operating minor premise and thus aberrant behavior is enthymematically attributed to skin color.

These statements do not remain confined to just Brown, but are often generalized to other black men by TMZ. The coverage emphasized that Brown’s lawyer has represented fellow artist Snoop Dogg in “multiple court cases throughout the years.” Thus, TMZ implies that black men who are famous frequently have need for lawyers to defend them when they naturally become violent. If that is too subtle, TMZ comes out and says “Alleged woman beaters gotta stick together—and Suge Knight is staying Team Brown when it comes to Chris' altercation.” It belies a racist ideology that TMZ sought out Suge Knight, a black man accused of similar crimes, and not the numerous white men who have committed acts of domestic violence, but they did not stop there. TMZ also interviewed another famous black man, Kenan Thompson of Saturday Night Live fame. TMZ features a quote where he roughly condones Brown’s actions, saying it would be great for Saturday Night Live’s ratings to feature Brown and Rihanna and that he understands Brown’s motivations because he “know[s] how women can get when you get a text message from another female” (the alleged cause of the incident). Those interviews, combined with the propensity to link stories about Brown to other stories about violent black men sends a clear message: Brown’s behavior is generalizable not just to abusers, but to black men in general. Thus, Brown’s blackness can account for Brown’s violence.

Conclusion

TMZ’s coverage naturalizes several racist and sexist myths about Brown and Rihanna as

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171 TMZ Staff, “No Plea Yet,” online.
they relate to gendered violence. First, TMZ intimates that violence in the couple’s relationship is an inevitable condition of their intra-racial pairing. The site does so by highlighting the couple’s so-called “deviant” sexual practices, their resilience to violence, and by suggesting that they are menaces to society. This casts suspicion on both Rihanna and Brown and de-fangs a compassionate response to a nuanced situation. Moreover, nuances are glossed over at every turn in such a way that discounts Brown and Rihanna from living out a dominant domestic violence narrative as prescribed by current domestic violence activists. Rihanna is portrayed as one-dimensional and confused, intent on letting a dangerous man roam the streets and Brown as a remorseless sociopath intent on taking advantage of his freedom to victimize white women and children.\textsuperscript{173} By reducing Brown and Rihanna to caricatures of themselves, stereotypes are naturalized and then generalized to other black men and women. The gossip machine’s endpoint, then, is to interpellate subjects into a cultural matrix that is always already informed by racism.\textsuperscript{174} More to the point, the audience is interpellated by the invitation, the enthymematic appeal to judge Brown and Rihanna by doing the ideological work of recalling and repositioning stereotypes to maintain their relevance at this point of rhetorical exigency. This, combined with the slick, smart, bottom-up veneer of the gossip blog conceals the ideological function as a progressive impulse to shame bad men and ensure they are brought to justice.

Furthermore, although the rhetorical strategies enumerated at the beginning of this chapter tend to overlap, it is important to understand the various methodological impulses that allow a similar message to be telegraphed to an audience via stylized repetition. It is necessary to examine each instance of TMZ rhetorically referring to these cultural myths in order to

\textsuperscript{173} See Jewell, \textit{Mammy to Miss America}, 45 and Jackson, \textit{Scripting}, 77.

\textsuperscript{174} For an explanation of how subjects are interpellated into ideology by strategies such as compelling them to vote on Brown and Rihanna’s choices, see the usage and explanation of the term \textit{interpellation} in Louis Althusser, \textit{Lenin and Philosophy}, 53.
understand the role of repetition in TMZ’s coverage. The repetitive nature of the coverage, hinting at these myths consistently across seven months of coverage is important. Although each of these instances on its own would be enough to justify scholarly attention, the repetition function naturalizes the connection between Brown, Rihanna, relationship violence, and by extension, other unfortunate and false myths about black bodies. Repetition is not only persuasive but also, and secondly, it is anaesthetizing. It is difficult to maintain a level of vigilance to a repeated mischaracterization of events, and as a result the audience is disarmed. One or two articles might provoke inquiry, but a collection of articles suggests that the idea is not an outlier, but a social truth. It becomes difficult to see the artificiality at work in each and every one, especially given how subtle the connection is.

Thus, at this point we can understand several aspects of TMZ that can be ideologically powerful. First, the enthymeme compels the audience to a particular judgment while concealing the prodding it took to get the audience to come to that conclusion. Second, TMZ hides this ideological impulse behind the noble cause of publicizing domestic violence in the allegedly progressive format of the blog. Finally, the dim awareness that most audiences have of stereotypes concerning black men and women and domestic abuse is powerfully repeated because most modern audiences understand these stereotypes as pre-discursive, even as their origins still exert powerful sway over the way these concepts are deployed.

The enthymematic function discussed in this chapter, however, has a nuance, which further compels particular responses through the use of an affective strategy based on humor. In chapter 3, I discuss how the use of humor uniquely complicates a critical response to TMZ’s

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175 See Perelman, Realm of Rhetoric, 37 for a discussion of how repetition uniquely enables enthymematic form.

176 Think here again of Butler’s Bodies That Matter discussion of the appeal to pre-discursivity.
coverage even in light of such egregious examples as have been discussed herein. Humor, situated as it is with an affective response to an allegedly frivolous enterprise like popular culture, dampens criticism while using emotion to do ideological work in maintaining stereotypes about black men and women. In this chapter, I hope to synthesize and augment my criticism of scholarly optimism about blogs to include indicts of current scholarly optimism about humor’s potential to change the world. I will argue that TMZ trades on the currency of humor in order to engage in a further concealment of the ideological function of its articles. Finally, I seek to enumerate various strategies by which humor allows the production and maintenance of problematic racial stereotypes regarding domestic abuse.
CHAPTER 3

IT’S FUNNY BECAUSE IT’S RACIST

Domestic violence and racism are not funny. Think, for a moment, about the uncontroversial nature of the previous sentence. It seems obvious that in this day and age, one would be hard pressed to find an individual who would vehemently disagree with this sentiment, save the fringes of society. This is an age of apparent racial sensitivity. It is also an age where domestic violence activism, although far from perfect, has at least progressed to the point where Americans can generally agree that when something qualifies as domestic violence, it is no laughing matter. This seems self-evidently, uncritically true. Why, then, did TMZ waste no time in publishing a quotation from a police officer describing a beaten and bloodied Rihanna as looking like “An MMA fighter”?177 Aside from the brutal realism of the quotation, it is decidedly hyperbolic and ridiculous, certainly too light-hearted a description of a woman who had been beaten by someone she loved. Why also did TMZ publish an article entitled, “Chris Brown: You Dirty Mall Rat,” detailing a shopping trip where Brown browsed shirts with the caption, “If Chris is found guilty of beating Rihanna, he could get a set of orange pants to match that shirt”?178

The comments do more than hint at potential racist and sexist stereotypes discussed in the previous chapter. They wink and nudge and cackle, encouraging the audience to stop taking it all so seriously, to gawk and, perhaps shockingly, to laugh. This is more than a little off-putting, given the subject matter; or is it? As Lawrence Grossberg notes, popular culture functions on a plane of affect wherein people engage with popular culture artifacts via a complex interplay of

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body and emotion. Happiness is one of these emotions, and the ties between positive affect and consuming popular culture cannot be overstated. That said, all popular culture is certainly not associated with positive affect; some people feel saddened or frightened or ennobled by cultural artifacts, and it would be reasonable, if naïve, to assume that the emotional response is always appropriate because no one wants to feel that their response is aberrant. How, then, does TMZ entice its readers, many of whom would ostensibly agree that they take domestic violence seriously and are not racist, to laugh at racist stereotypes about domestic violence?

Here again we can turn to the enthymeme as a heuristic through which to productively understand this process. The affective function, like the predetermination function discussed in the polling strategy in chapter 2, predetermines a particular response while pretending to a certain objectivity and user-friendly interface. The audience, aware of stereotypes surrounding domestic violence and race, responds to the call of a racist or sexist joke by “filling in” the caricatures and laughing (because popular culture is expected to be about enjoyment). This affective dimension gains specificity as an ideological technology because emotions are often at least partially involuntary responses, even if the result of an emotional attachment is ideologically constructed. The subtlety of the enthymematic form allows racism to boil just

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179 Lawrence Grossberg, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 79-82. See also, Lawrence Grossberg, Gregory J. Seigworth, and Melissa Gregg, “Affect’s Future: Rediscovering the Virtual in the Actual,” in *The Affect Theory Reader*, Edited By Gregory J. Seigworth, and Melissa Gregg (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010) for a discussion of the ways in which affect has been excluded as a dimension of analysis in Western culture and how this exclusion props up patriarchal, racist systems of thought.

below the cultural surface, to take up residence in the minds of audience members and conceal itself as neutral knowledge. This process is assisted and co-created by the racial reality of present-day America. Contemporary racial politics eschew discussions of race even as race remains un-interrogated as an absent referent.181 By absent referent, I mean that racism is never evoked explicitly, but forms a backdrop where it becomes something of a public secret that must be employed in novel ways. The jokes told by TMZ rely on still-present social racism for their affective appeal, while simultaneously insulating themselves from criticism. Though the process of shielding criticism is likely quite complex, it is made possible by the social veil of colorblindness. In the following chapter, I explain how TMZ’s rhetoric employs an enthymematic, affective strategy (assisted by colorblindness) to redeploy and regenerate myths about race and gender violence.

In order to understand the process of regeneration described above, I seek to accomplish several tasks. First, it is necessary to understand the social impact of the colorblind racial project. Colorblindness has effectively taken over American racial discourse and narrowed the avenues by which racism can be discussed, thus making humor one of the last bastions of “socially acceptable” racist speech. Humor itself is also worthy of extended inquiry, as humorous discourse has several ideological functions that assist in the production of racist speech even independent of colorblindness. Humor often hides behind platitudes such as “I’m only joking,” making it difficult to levy criticism without running the risk of being labeled humorless or worse, ignorant of the socially transformative elements of satire (often over-stated by humor

scholars). Further, this chapter seeks to suggest that the cultural progressive element has over-theorized the value of humor’s form while under-theorizing the content. Finally, I re-join my analysis of the enthymeme to suggest several more rhetorical strategies by which racism is incessantly re-articulated and maintained.

The Advent and Implications of Colorblindness

It is important to note that TMZ articles are not rife with outright references to stereotypes about Brown and Rihanna’s gender or race, and in fact even some of the clearest examples remain remarkably subtle. The fact that TMZ never makes explicit racial indicts or overt polemical attacks matters little if one is aware of the colorblind racial project as a muting factor in public racial speech. Although no formal studies exist to confirm that TMZ’s followers generally think of themselves as racially “tolerant,” it seems reasonable to suggest that most TMZ readers do not consider themselves racist given the website’s targeted audience. In fact, like many Americans, TMZ’s audience likely considers racism to be a fading artifact of a bygone era. As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Tyrone A. Forman note, the general public’s (of which TMZ readers are a part, if not an entirely representative sample) “Prejudiced attitudes … clash with research that suggests that racial attitudes have improved dramatically in the USA.” Bonilla-Silva and Forman confirm this disconnect by comparing “conventional research strategies” such

182 For an analysis of how charges of humorlessness allow racist speech to enter more mainstream media outlets, see Michael Billig, “Humour and Hatred: The Racist Jokes of the Ku Klux Klan,” *Discourse & Society* 12, no. 3 (2001): 269, doi:10.1177/0957926501012003001. Admittedly, Billig is talking about hate groups, but I will argue that some of the same social factors that enable hate websites can be deployed in less obvious contexts, such as TMZ. Billig also does an excellent job of enumerating the over-exuberance of theorists who embrace humor, cited below.

183 TMZ’s target audience can most productively be understood as young, upwardly mobile, and interested in popular culture.

as surveys with in-person interviews, highlighting the ways in which Americans are likely to espouse tolerant ideas which seem at odds, to say the least, with their actual stated beliefs about racial minorities. Moreover, I will suggest that this new, more insidious and difficult to detect form of racism lends itself best to humor because humor, like the colorblind racial project, fails to take racism seriously and de-fangs the critical impulse that racism demands.

In order to explain this cognitive dissonance, it is important to understand the genesis and implications of the relatively recent move toward a “colorblind” ethic with respect to race. Colorblindness, which Carrie Crenshaw defines as the belief (espoused primarily by white Americans) “that we live in a multicultural society in which racism is diminishing every day, despite studies too numerous to list that document the ongoing existence of racism,” and that “rejection of race consciousness will eliminate racism,” is certainly not a new phenomenon, but is incredibly complex and ever-changing. David Theo Goldberg attributes the birth of colorblindness to a complex interplay between “institutional regulations, directions, and pedagogic models,” based in such social histories as apartheid in South Africa and Jim Crow laws in the United States. This rhetorical trickery, which Goldberg so eloquently describes as “the arrogant white alchemy of racelessness” emerged as civil rights and race consciousness began to chip away, ever so slowly, at white privilege. Race consciousness presented a challenge to whiteness precisely because it was effective at mobilizing groups to oppose the oppressive regime of white cultural hegemony. As Nikhil Pal Singh argues, race conscious

185 Bonilla-Silva and Forman, “Not a Racist,” 52.
struggles for equality were met with resistance from the white community even as they began to resonate globally.190

Presented with an exigency (the discrediting of white privilege as the sole arbiter of appropriate social relations), whiteness struck out against the very race consciousness that had formed a steadfast bulwark against social inequality. Rather than celebrating the transformative potential of racial coalitions in promoting social justice, the proponents of the colorblind racial project called instead for an “Abstracted commitment to formal equality,” which they billed as “the teleological narrative of modernization and racial progress.”191 Americans came to believe that they had progressed beyond race because they needed to believe it to address the threat. Howard Omi and Michael Winant explain a concrete example of this process, discussing how progressive politics became re-oriented around a “universal” logic that produced the maximum benefit for the majority while systematically ignoring minorities,

The “new Democrats” sought a way out of this pessimistic scenario by simultaneously advocating universal reforms and blunting the wedge issue of race. The call for more jobs, better education, and increased social investment was especially well-suited for the benefits it offered to suburban, middle-class, white voters who had been battered—though not on the scale of inner city residents—by recession.192

As a result, criticisms of racial injustices were, in effect, de-fanged and decried on the basis that they had as their starting point the notion that people of different races are (at least considered to be) different. Roopali Mukherjee describes a similar process, arguing that, “The destabilizing potential of racialized critique … was consequently de-fanged, and a raceless universe …

discursively delineated to call out the deviance of race-based social justice.”

Programs promoting racial minorities in order to offset still-relevant societal disadvantages (such as affirmative action) were discounted on the basis that, by acknowledging that race is still a powerful variable in structuring social relations, they were antithetical to the idea that everyone is “equal.”

Equality in this social project is a neutral concept with a fixed meaning, but that idea needs to be problematized somewhat. As Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites argue, equality as a concept is more or less an empty on its own but that is given rhetorical importance in the public sphere by a variety of race relations backdrops (this being only the most recent).

This discursive shift has several implications. First, colorblindness represents “the ultimate victory of states of whiteness purged of their guilt and self-doubt” by guaranteeing that one can deflect any accusation of racism by insisting that the accuser is racist for seeing race at all. Second, and perhaps by extension, it constitutes “a refusal to address, let alone redress, deeply etched historical inequities.” Thus, colorblind rhetoric re-centers whiteness as an ideal while robbing social justice advocates of the vocabulary for challenging it. In the case of TMZ, users are invited to participate on racism but are able to do so because of the ways in which society has given license. TMZ is the latest in a line of innovative media that deploy racism, but

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195 Celeste Michelle Condit and John Louis Lucaites, Crafting Equality: America’s Anglo-African Word (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993). See also Singh, Black is a Country, 214, where he discusses W.E.B. DuBois’s faith in the concept of equality while maintaining the current incarnation of equality failed to account for a world still marked by race.

196 Goldberg, The Racial State, 201.

197 Ibid., 201.
it is also one of the most important because of its close ties to youth culture, marketing its racist and sexist message as edgy, ironic wit. This ironic tone, however, only masquerades as transformative. As Lisa Gring-Pemble and Martha Solomon Watson argue, irony has serious limits as a transformative strategy and may tend towards the polemical and reactionary when deployed in such a way as to celebrate its own transformative nature while neglecting to produce serious change. In the next section, I will examine the limitations of humor more generally in order to explain why TMZ is not a productive use of humor but rather perhaps uses humor to conceal its most reactionary impulses.

I May Be Colorblind, But I Know a Good Joke When I See One

Colorblindness as a social project caustically combines with the tone and format of TMZ in such a way that suggests that current scholarship really cannot adequately speak to TMZ as a unique format. First, comedy is intractable and slippery, the final frontier for a variety of outmoded ideas. Jokes in and of themselves excuse a wide variety of untoward behavior because comedy is insulated from criticisms as applied to other rhetorical genres. This insulation occurs because, simply put, people like to laugh and dislike feeling uncomfortable about an affective response. As Michael Billig notes, scholars of humor feel this very same impulse and, as such, are tempted to “take a celebratory stance, praising the human capacity for laughter” which effectively abdicates the responsibility of scholars to fully interrogate the ways in which comedic form can become implicated in prejudice and intolerance. Thus, it is important to


199 The term “joke” is used self-consciously in this thesis to express the intent of producing positive affect in the audience, not the fact that they are objectively funny (or should be considered as such).

200 Billig, “Humour and Hatred,” 269.
understand the ways in which current scholarship on comedy has under-theorized the role of colorblindness by edifying humor that evinces social intolerance. Finally, TMZ’s coverage is situated at a peculiar nexus of actual news, parody, and caricature. Even those who would celebrate the transformative potential of comedy lack the vocabulary for understanding the complex nature of TMZ’s “humor,” because TMZ is neither mock news, parody, irony, nor puns; rather, TMZ contains elements of irony, occasionally re-posts parody, and uses puns to make statements about reality (all under the banner of real, hard-hitting news). The interplay of these elements also must be understood in context of the content, which is comprised of micro-formal elements that are also ideologically important and help produce meaning.

In order to understand the shortfalls of current practice, it is important to grasp the nascent imbalance between valorizing and protecting humor within communication and critical/cultural studies. Setting aside for a moment the fact that people simply like to laugh, laughter is about more than enjoyment. Anyone who has ever been on the outside of an “inside” joke or subjected to a long story that culminated in a weak “You had to be there,” knows that humor is about belonging and can help groups situate and solidify their in-group identity. As Simon Critchley notes, “Humour is local and … context specific … difficult to translate, perhaps impossible.”\textsuperscript{201} Further, Critchley argues that “Humor is a form of cultural insider-knowledge, and might, indeed, be said to function like a linguistic defense mechanism. Its ostensive untranslatability endows native speakers with a palpable sense of their cultural distinctiveness or even superiority.”\textsuperscript{202} In this way, humor is not just about belonging and feeling a part of

\textsuperscript{201} SCritchley, \textit{On Humour}, 67.

something, but it has implications for ideology (namely, buttressing it). Humor tends to build caricatures of the out-group, functioning as a defense mechanism that ensures the in-group of their superiority. This feeling of belonging is, of course, a double-sided coin and as such, humor can be understood as a potent technology of power that can be used for both progressive and regressive politics. Many contemporary debates on humor concern the rules of engagement that govern what can be considered transformative at best and harmless at worst and what may push the limits of good taste, particularly in public culture. These rules reflect more than the potential of a macro-formal element such as a comic frame and perhaps over-determine the impact of framing without a keen eye to content and micro-formal elements.

The ability to create shared understanding and forge connections is, of course, a potential reason to embrace humor as a method for enjoyably upending dominant ideologies. As Paul Achter rightly notes, comedy can repair rifts in society forged by traumatic events, such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Achter, like others writing on comedy and media, uses Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque (humor as a transformative, parodic force within the confines of domination) to explore the ways in which parody news sites like The Onion were able to employ “grotesque realism, with an emphasis on ... profanity, scatological themes, and

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other allusions to the body [in order to] bring down to earth the terrorists.”\textsuperscript{206} His explanation suggests the jokes printed in \textit{The Onion} help the audience to process a difficult situation and in so doing help them to understand the ways in which the established narrative was flawed. Achter argues that through parody, the audience may come to understand the ways in which the initial coverage was ridiculous and, perhaps, by extension, violent (carrying with it racist notions about the Muslim religion and people, for instance).\textsuperscript{207} Robert Hariman, like Achter, also uses Bakhtin’s concept of the carnivalesque to explain how humor is a potent tool for subverting dominant ideology. Hariman argues that parody proceeds through doubling. Doubling occurs when a concept or person is reflected (made into an image) that can be manipulated playfully to expose previously obfuscated hypocrisies or flaws.\textsuperscript{208} Unlike Achter, however, Hariman more fully acknowledges the potential for humor to be used to deleterious ends like furthering racist and sexist myths. Hariman’s position is more problematic than Achter’s with regard to overstating the benefits. He argues that humor, like other genres, can be used as either an agent of progressive change or of violence. He further argues that the “inevitability” of violent humor necessitates that we take the “good” with the “bad,” if we want to “take humor seriously.”\textsuperscript{209} The idea that in order to fully theorize humor, one must “be prepared to step outside the norms of


\textsuperscript{207} Achter, “Unfunny Times,” 295.


\textsuperscript{209} Hariman, “Political Parody,” 247.
deliberation, civility, and good taste,” is one I believe is dangerous if redeploited in service of sites such as TMZ. 210 Humor is interesting, but a rush to preserve all kinds of humor in order to study the transformative effects of some humor is counter-productive. 211 Although arguably racist humor may fall outside of Hariman’s analysis, “good taste” is arbitrary, and a more nuanced approach that specifically distances itself from such humor is critical, at least in TMZ’s case, to fully interrogate the micro-formal elements that interrupt humor’s transformative effect.

Although some scholarly attention has been paid to the potential negative consequences of celebrating the humorous form at the expense of the content, as Matt Sienkiewicz and Nick Marx note, these criticisms have failed to apprehend adequately the academic importance of definitively resolving this debate. Sienkiewicz and Marx sought to engage the racially insensitive humor on South Park and by comedians such as Sarah Silverman. These jokes, they suggest, certainly have the potential to offend but may not do so in context. 212 South Park can be understood as “discursively integrated media” that, although offensive in a vacuum, can become biting social commentary against racism in the appropriate social context. They argue that South Park uses an intertextual strategy to mock the racism inherent in other forms of media (e.g., parody of The Passion of the Christ or deploying anti-Semitic remarks in order to show the ridiculousness of anti-Semitism). This is a seductive conclusion: that racist jokes can be told in

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210 Ibid., 247


context as a form of meta-criticism. Even Sienkiewicz and Marx concede, however, that “no matter how deeply one delves into this text, the viewer is likely to come away with a mixed message, including one that potentially reinforces anti-Semitic agendas and action.” Even potentially transformative humor that advances a criticism of society’s negative stereotypes by casting those who believe those stereotypes in a negative light must use destructive stereotypes to make the point that stereotypes are incorrect and damaging. As such, the strong potential that some people will not “get” the joke and interpret only the stereotype is under-stated in Sienkewicz and Marx’s analysis. Additionally, even those who understand that they are supposed to be laughing at the stereotype itself can still indulge in racist humor under the guise of being enlightened about race. It is also important to acknowledge that people who laugh at the stereotype in any context are laughing because they are cognizant of said stereotype and are challenged to recall and maintain it in order to “get” the joke.

In contemporary society, individuals face serious social consequences for being labeled a racist. For this reason, educated, progressive audiences feel obligated to account for why racist jokes make them laugh. Pretending that racist humor is “subversive” is the easiest, most progressive-friendly way of accomplishing the goal. Donald Crafton notes that caricatures engage in a seductively “subversive” process wherein the “artist and the viewer are in complicity, exposing themselves to some social risk.” Although this is not much different from Critchley’s conclusions about humor reinforcing superiority, Crafton’s specific language is revealing. The act of caricature, of “making fun” of someone else, is so entertaining because it is so rude,

213 Ibid., 13. For another discussion of the ways in which supposedly subversive racial humor at time colludes with normative notions of citizens which justify racism in the long run, see Michael L. Ross and Lorraine York, “‘First, They're Foreigners': The Daily Show with Jon Stewart and the Limits of Dissident Laughter,” Canadian Review of American Studies 37, no. 3 (2007): 351, EBSCOhost.

naughty, and forbidden. Laughing behind someone’s back (literally or figuratively) feels subversive because it bucks the social norm that we should always be polite to one another. It would seem, then, that there exists a danger that one would mis-identify these subversive feelings as transformative because subversion can be understood as a techne that can transform society into a more tolerant place. The bidirectional nature of subversion is rarely colloquially accounted for.

Just as humor can give the impression of subverting norms, it can paradoxically give the impression of doing nothing at all because it is does important ideological work.215 That racism can disguise itself as neutrality or anti-racism is an ideological process inherently; ideology for Althusser and Barthes especially functions by continuously concealing its production.216 As Danielle Mitchell argues, humor can suggest, “that the audience should not take seriously” a narrative with clear ideological functions by misdirection and by appearing “to be anything but serious.”217 This can be accomplished using the same strategies as colorblind rhetoric uses to deny racist leanings. Both strategies, colorblindness and humor insist on the apolitical and “fun” nature of the micro-formal content. Mitchell further notes that humorous commentary with racist or sexist undertones can masquerade as progressive and sensitive by insisting on its “apolitical rhetorical stance.”218 This may seem like a contradiction in terms, but the overlay of humor as progressive is imprinted even on apolitical humor and therein lies the problem: humor as a


216 See Louis Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy, and Barthes, Mythologies.


macro-level formal device may be over-determined as progressive regardless of what it is actually saying (the micro-level formal devices). In this way, the same doubling technique is possible; humor that is political and advances notions such as white superiority and heternormativity can hint subtly and playfully at this kind of discourse while insisting that all those who would criticize those undertones “can’t take a joke.” As Billig points out, racist jokes operate according to a “dual strategy” wherein the public face of the humor is benign but pointing always to something more sinister and serious.\(^{219}\) In his study of Klu Klux Klan websites, he argues that emphasizing the “joking” nature of the text diffuses criticism even as the “jokes” refuse to remain frivolous and become quite serious. For example, diagrams insinuating that black men and women are evolutionarily inferior point to a racist take on evolution that would be unintelligible (and not funny) without the understanding that some consider black people to be less than human. Donald Crafton argues that “fun is never neutral ideological turf” and that “a closer inspection always highlights fundamental relationships about economic power and social control.”\(^{220}\) That is, no matter how one is enjoying him/herself, the neglected, deeper issues are omnipresent and under-theorized.\(^{221}\)

Along similar lines, Ji Soon Park, Nadine G. Gabbadon, and Ariel R. Chernin note, the comedic genre uniquely disables critical responses, making these seemingly transparent strategies all the more viable:

Comedy as a genre essentially extends the alleged harmlessness of interpersonal jokes, which allows controversial content … to be considered acceptable…. The nature of the genre and the comedic performance dictate that audiences should not take stereotypes seriously because they are intentionally humorous and that taking offense to stereotypic

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\(^{219}\) Billig, “Humour and Hatred,” 271.

\(^{220}\) Crafton, “Termite Terrace,” 227.

\(^{221}\) Ibid., 204.
representations simply signals a misreading of the filmmakers’ intent … comedy affirms the dominant ideological positions because it diffuses viewers’ critical interpretations.\textsuperscript{222}

Thus, comedy insulates racist, sexist, and heteronormative messages from criticism in one of two ways: by pretending to have a subversive or transformative impulse or by pretending to have no impulse at all.

How, then, do critics of humorous representations with stereotypical and violent undertones proceed? First, as Eric King Watts and Mark P. Orbe write, it may be useful to begin by simply asking the question: what is so funny?\textsuperscript{223} It is much more difficult to pretend to abide by universal, colorblind ideals when faced with this question. Jokes about, for example, purple people scuba diving are bizarre because they are unintelligible. They are impossible to understand because we have no cultural matrix through which to read such humor. Jokes about black women being hypersexual, however, are intelligible because the audience knows the cultural history behind the stereotype. Forcing those who would tell and/or laugh at such jokes to come to terms with the ‘why’ is important because it brings to light the strangely invisible racial character of the joke. Although the denial strategy remains viable, the critical impulse to ask “why” can help to un-cloak the joke. For example, a “joke” about Chris Brown posing a danger to white women might get a laugh from an audience. It seems likely, however, that the same audience, when challenged to explain what about black men threatening white women is funny or, more to the point, what about domestic violence is funny, may begin to tangibly experience the cognitive dissonance awakens their critical impulse that ideological work has possibly deadened. This is because it only takes a second to laugh at a joke and critical impulses take

\textsuperscript{222} Park, Gabbadon and Ariel R. Chernin, “Rush Hour 2,” 160.

longer. It is our task to ensure that one does not short-circuit the other by being vigilant.

This question of “what is so funny?” is an important one to answer because racist and sexist humor is enjoying an unprecedented heyday.\textsuperscript{224} Media outlets (such as films) remove the personal connection and accountability from joke telling, which may embolden us to indulge in humor that would be suspect in a direct interpersonal context.\textsuperscript{225} Moreover, the disavowal strategies for deflecting criticism and stressing the “universality” of racial humor have encouraged white, majority audiences to commodify and consume otherness for the allegedly edgy humor, edifying negative stereotypes and ensuring they remain uninterrogated.\textsuperscript{226} Also, even as comedy liberates us from the loaded demand of reason (as per Hariman) it also removes the need for logical, reasoned inquiry as a bulwark against ideological propaganda because the message is “merely a joke.”\textsuperscript{227} Here, the dominant ideology can survive unquestioned.

My indict of humor as transformative is not meant to deny that humor is a multivariate process with potential in either direction (i.e., resisting domination versus buttressing it), nor is it meant to imply that society should never laugh (as that would be a dull existence). Again, over-theorizing the value of humor’s form while under-theorizing the content allows dangerous ideologies to continue unabated through humor. Perhaps the proliferation of trendy, smart humor outlets such as \textit{The Onion} or \textit{The Daily Show} have lent credibility to the idea that the people willing to laugh at the status quo are almost universally disaffected liberals with a keen ear for social criticism and an acute awareness of what the implications of all jokes are, despite their content. This congratulatory stance has been over-sold in contemporary society and even in

\textsuperscript{224} Sienkewicz and Marx, “Cutout World,” 6.
\textsuperscript{226} Watts and Orbe, “Spectacular Consumption,” 3.
\textsuperscript{227} Billig, “Humour and Hatred,” 278.
humor scholarship (from inside and outside of communication studies), to the point where some apologists have emerged to defend offensive humor as some kind of intertextual indict of racism.228

Defenders of humor would be of no consequences if their conclusions remained limited to the specific context that they are intended to analyze. The seductive nature of their conclusions, however, makes them salient. There exists a distinct possibility that the alignment of humor with subversion may be reproduced in defense of TMZ’s coverage unless a clear scholarly distinction is made. I now turn to the text itself to show how TMZ specifically conceals its ideological function of sustaining racism and sexism through humor, what impact this ideological function has for future redeployment of race and domestic violence scholarship, and what strategies TMZ uses to perpetuate broader cultural investments in racism and sexism. In this section of the chapter, I seek to at least partially reveal some of the obfuscators that make it difficult to take TMZ to task for their redeployment of harmful cultural myths. By providing a taxonomy of humor strategies, I hope to provide a useful toolbox for discussing specific impact.

“Chris Brown Won’t Hit Books”: Violent Puns and Colorblind Dismissals

TMZ’s coverage engages in wink-and-elbow humor at every turn, but a careful analysis points to several types of humor, each with their own particular effects. First, the verbal pun creates a remarkably subtle hail of existing violent stereotypes, always stopping just short of committing to outright racism (thus allowing the deflection strategy). Second, the punishing strategy attempts to discipline Rihanna or Brown by way of questioning their behavior as out of sync from the established victim and perpetrator narratives. This strategy seeks to highlight the

Rihanna-Brown story’s points of divergence from established perfect-victim and perfect-perpetrator narratives while jokingly hinting (never outright saying) that race is the cause. Third, the over-playing and magnification strategy seeks to maintain humorously that the domestic violence event reveals something fundamental about the nature of Brown and Rihanna as black menaces to society. Finally, this strategy seeks out other mainstream humor outlets and aggregates their over-the-top attempts at Brown and Rihanna humor while maintaining that these sources are acting in “bad taste.” This final form, perhaps the most insidious, is akin to repeating a racist joke for the stated purpose of decrying racism while concurrently reproducing the same stereotypes for a cheap laugh.

The first strategy, puns, is at once outwardly subtle, but also difficult to miss if one applies a critical eye.229 As Barthes argues, ideology can disguise itself by way of an alibi, something that the author can point to when charged with ideological manipulation. Barthes’ explains the alibi with the use of this analogy: strip shows are not really about art but have “the alibi of art,” which they can hide behind when accused of obscenity.230 The concept of alibi can be applied here as one meaning or a pun can serve as an alibi for the other. Generally, the pun is characterized by a continuous and self-conscious use of violent language in connection with even the most mundane and banal acts Brown engaged in after the incident. In an article titled “Chris Brown Won’t Hit Books at Norfolk State,” TMZ says, “Despite his affinity for combat, Chris Brown won’t be a Spartan anytime soon—as in the kind who attend Norfolk State University…..

229 For foundational discussion of puns as a communicative device in the face of accusations that puns are “low” humor, see Ernest Hartsock, “In Defense of Punning,” American Speech 4, no. 3 (1929): 224-227, EBSCOhost Communication and Mass Media Complete. This is an important read for perspective on punning, but the optimistic view of puns here is more about the larger form of puns and not about puns with racist content as the ones cited herein.

230 Barthes, Mythologies, 85.
Too bad … dude has a lot to learn." By removing the article from the colloquialism “hit the books,” the association with Brown and violent imagery and language becomes impossible to ignore. Moreover, the use of terms like “combat” heightens the association, making the enthymematic potential even greater. This story puts Brown’s alleged violent nature in direct opposition to his intelligence and propensity for learning, which harkens again to the dichotomous understanding of black versus white as analogous to physical versus cerebral. The one-to-one trade-off that TMZ is referencing is constituted entirely through punning language. The pun is unique in concealing ideology because it actually means two things at once, so any charge of racism or sexism is continuously displaced (again through the alibi).

The use of puns to telegraph a message does not end there. Synonyms for “hit” and the word “hit” itself repeated in several other instances of TMZ’s coverage. In another article, Brown is described as “hitting the town after his court appearance for allegedly beating Rihanna to a pulp,” and not letting “a few felony charges stop him.” In still another, “Chris Brown Hits the Water Again,” Brown is described as “smacking waves around,” a clear allusion to his attacks against Rihanna. Another article describing the same trip to the beach says Brown


233 A colorblind analysis can be productively applied here in order to understand how the blame of racism could be easily displaced on a critic of TMZ for seeing race in an innocent phrase such as “hit books.” See Goldberg, *Racial State*, 227.


appeared on the jet ski to be “recreating the wind up leading to the punch that left Rihanna bloodied and bruised.” The article puns “Chris Brown Strikes the Pose.” In this instance, again, the colloquialism “strike a pose” is replaced with a definite article, hinting to the reader that something is amiss, then subtly suggesting a violent association to the seemingly “innocent” verbal choice. A reader who encounters the phrase “strike a pose” may or may not pick up a violent association with the word “strike,” but here the association is made because “strike the pose” is not typically used. Finally, in an article titled “Chris Brown Watched Cleveland Get Beat,” a story about Brown watching a basketball game with fellow artist Usher ends inexplicably with the following statement: “Fun fact #2—Chris Brown was charged with felony assault for allegedly beating up his girlfriend Rihanna after attending a pre-Grammy party.”

Although one could of course take issue with the verbal choice “fun fact,” because domestic violence is in no way “fun,” the juxtaposition of “fun fact” with a repetition of violent verbs reinforces the notion that Brown is one-dimensionally violent while downplaying the impact his violence had on Rihanna. This linguistic association with violence creates an unbreakable association with Brown and inherently violent tendencies. This association follows Billig’s dual

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237 Emphasis added.


structure of a joke, giving rise to a serious backdrop while deflecting the accusation that it is no longer funny once it is serious.\textsuperscript{240}

The implication here is perhaps even more troubling: although these rhetorical choices seemingly direct the audience toward a humorous association between dual-use verbs such as “hit,” “strike,” and “beat,” these associations are never made entirely plain. The anonymous authors never outwardly acknowledge that the jokes derive their affective appeal from the shared cultural knowledge that Brown is a violent abuser of women \textit{and} a black man. This impacts both racial and domestic violence discourses. Initially, these puns follow the classic call-and-response character of racial humor in which the individual telling the joke hints at a racial epithet and the audience, aware of the stereotype, laughs at the joke by mentally filling in the blank.\textsuperscript{241} The joke about books being the only thing Chris Brown is not willing to “hit” says nothing outwardly about black men being violent and unintelligent nor does it have to say that domestic violence is in any way funny in a black relationship context.\textsuperscript{242} The audience, aware of these cultural associations, is goaded into making these connections on their own and laugh at them accordingly.

Additionally, puns allow for the deflection that is so critical to colorblind racism. The sources of the jokes can always hide behind the claim that they were not being racist when they told the joke because they “do not see color;” rather, the subtlety of the joke itself allows a reversal in which the joke-teller is able to insinuate that seeing racial undertones in the joke makes the audience racist (i.e., “I did not mean the joke that way because I do not see color; you

\textsuperscript{240} Billig, “Humour and Hatred,” 278.

\textsuperscript{241} Here again, see Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca, \textit{The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation} (South Bend, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969).

\textsuperscript{242} Note here that the notion that domestic violence is funny in any context should alarm all domestic violence activists, regardless of their intersectional approach. Also, this should complicate defenses of TMZ insisting that their “publicizing” domestic violence is socially progressive.
must be racist for seeing the racial dimension of the joke and thus, seeing color.”). This is a rhetorical trick worth unpacking momentarily. Certainly, anyone telling a joke offers up said joke because they assume it will be funny and will produce the appropriate affective response. Affect is not random but is rather conditioned by shared cultural truths. Thus, to tell a joke like the ones that turn on cultural understanding of Brown being violent and unintelligent, the joke-teller must assume that the audience knows who Chris Brown is and a few critical pieces of information about him (black, male, accused criminal). The teller could not credibly deflect the notion that they were telling a racist joke in a society where race consciousness was also viable. The rhetorical strategy of insisting that racism is not the reason why the joke is funny, however, is only buttressed by a society that claims to be gloriously post-race. With this strategy in mind, it is possible that the joke teller does not always intend to be outwardly racist, but their cognizance of the stereotype is never interrogated. For this reason, it is necessary to unpack the uncritically positive joke-telling experience by applying analysis to exactly what it is the joke teller and audience are laughing about and foregrounding those conclusions. Here again, the notion of the alibi is productive. Colorblindness can be said to be a kind of ideological alibi per Barthes because it allows the continuous disavowal that the joke teller does not see color. This strategy is perhaps the clearest example of the function of an alibi because puns have two literal meanings, but other jokes participate in this discourse as well.

The second humor strategy employed by TMZ, punishing, has many of the same characteristics of punning in terms of the way it enacts a communicative process on its audience.

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246 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 76.
(possible deflection, call-and-response), but toward the ends of punishing Rihanna and Brown for their failure to be culturally perfect victim or perfect perpetrator. This strategy seeks to highlight Brown’s remorselessness and Rihanna’s ambivalence to violence, disqualifying them from the neatly dichotomous victim/perpetrator ideology that orients domestic violence discourse (and is described in much more detail in chapter 2). These jokes have two forms, one indicts Rihanna and one indicts of Brown. Despite the dual indict (of Rihanna and of Brown), this strategy has but a singular function: it assuages uncomfortable feelings the audience may experience at participating in more racial humor. The strategy works by insinuating that these scruples are misplaced because Brown and Rihanna are naturally violent and do not mind the audience’s laughter.

First, the punishing strategy used by TMZ “humorously” indicts Rihanna. The authors do it often and insidiously, but the consistent message is that she was unharmed (at least emotionally) by Brown and may have even enjoyed the physical violence. In the article, “Rihanna Gets Banged Up,” her “fender bender” TMZ reports on a recent “fender bender” and subtly connects Rihanna’s resilience to injury in a car crash with her altercation with Brown. TMZ does this by saying “This time though, Chris Brown had nothin' to do with it—Rihanna was involved in a fender bender … She didn't look pissed about the accident—and was smiling.” The term “banged up,” a colloquialism that can be used for absorbing a violent attack, for being locked up in prison (evoking images of guilt), or even with a sexual connotation

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247 While it would seem that many of these jokes do lend credibility to the notion that Brown is a “perfect perpetrator” as described in chapter 2 (black, male, remorseless), this needs to be understood in the context of Rihanna as a black woman. His choice to attack a black woman upsets the typical “black threat” narrative and produces a dissonant effect where there is ideological interest in maintaining how dangerous he is while simultaneously maintaining that Rihanna was unhurt. A closer analysis reveals that this makes little sense, but it hardly matters because no interrogation is compelled.

is used here. The implication is that Rihanna enjoys violence and that since it is such a natural condition (and she is such an unsympathetic victim), laughter is appropriate.249 This again evokes the image that women, especially black women, enjoy violence and thrive in violent environments, thus abdicating any responsibility of society to protect them and increasing the “validity” of the destructive stereotype of “strong black women” as capable and culturally expected to absorb violence stoically.250

As discussed in chapter 2, TMZ published videos of Rihanna being subjected to ridiculous and “humorous” questions about Brown during her commute and laughing nervously under the headline “Rihanna—Chris Brown Jokes Are Funny.”251 This article is important to an analysis of humor because of the specific way the article seems to give license to laugh at Rihanna as a victim of abuse under the pretense that she does not mind. Note that nowhere in the article is Rihanna interviewed, nor is there any dialogue, but the title of the article is worded such that the audience is almost led to believe that Rihanna said that jokes about Brown are funny. This editorial function, in what Gorin and Dubied termed meta-discourse (discussed in chapter 1 as the opinion-based or seemingly irrelevant discourse used by gossip magazines), is doing ideological work by misdirecting the audience to believe that an interview was conducted and then telegraphing the conclusions of said interview.252 More to the point, the idea that Rihanna finds her situation humorous is important for fully understanding the use of humor in this context.

249 Here, return to the images of the black Sapphire as a devious instigator of conflict, K. Sue Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond, (New York: Routledge, 1993).45.


252 Gorin and Dubied, “Desirable People,” 613.
Attributing bumbling ambivalence to Rihanna seems to suggest that even less appropriate jokes are acceptable; if Rihanna allegedly finds her situation funny, so should we.

TMZ similarly punishes Brown through this second punishing strategy. Just as TMZ uses humor to diminish sympathy for Rihanna as a victim of abuse, TMZ also continually uses humor to insist on Brown’s remorselessness, to paint him as a one-dimensional perpetrator. As in the articles above, TMZ applies a sarcastic tone in order to display their disapproval of Brown continuing on with normal activities after the attack. These jokes hint that he is in fact animalistic and emotionless, given to violence and incapable of empathy. In an article titled “Chris Brown Rebounds,” TMZ says, “Chris Brown isn’t letting a couple of felony charges get in the way of his game.” The use of “game” here evokes literally as a game of basketball and as a tongue-in-cheek reference to “game” or the ability to pick up women, thus creating an association between Brown and relationship violence. Jackson describes the image of the black thug as one that depends on the notion that black men are continuously engaged with multiple women as sexual dynamos with no morals; this image is consumed by audiences in the form of the “black minstrel brute,” dehumanizing black men and women. By extension, then, the punishing strategy also suggests that Brown is a predator and may be dangerous to women in the future who are not immune to his “masculine wiles.”

The invocation of the “thug” stereotype is also apparent elsewhere in TMZ’s reporting. In coverage of Brown’s court appearance, TMZ describes him as “remain[ing] emotionless.” Elsewhere, Brown is described often as shamelessly “walk[ing around] as though he had nothing

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253 Here again, we see the emotionless “thug,” as per Jackson, Scripting, 112.


255 Ibid., 118.

to hide” (while Rihanna is “covering up”) and as showing his “uncovered face.”257 He was also described as “hardly the worse for wear” when he was arrested.258 These snarky, sarcastic remarks do more than give the audience license to judge Brown as a remorseless, violent beast; they invite us to do so. These statements would not be intelligible without judging Brown. The sarcasm and skepticism of a statement such as “walking around as though he had nothing to hide” implies that he should indeed hide and that we should feel compelled to feel the same about him. This same rhetoric forces the audience to ask themselves if a game of basketball is appropriate behavior for a recently accused felon and to determine, without much prodding, that it is not and that Brown must typify something improper, out of the bounds of the narrative white audiences seek to re-establish. This strategy contains many of the elements of the pun but less explicitly. The invocation of Brown as an emotionless abuser can be deflected as criticisms of a specific incident of violence even as they expand the indict beyond the story itself and into his everyday activities. I now turn to a final strategy, one which foregrounds less subtle attacks while simultaneously disavowing the racist associations they entail.

The third strategy, overplaying, seeks to humorously insinuate that Brown in particular is a menace to society and that he should be ostracized. As mentioned in chapter 2, TMZ published a picture of a women’s sports team posing with Brown while joking that standing near Brown might be dangerous. In the article, titled “Brave Women Risk Photo With Chris Brown, TMZ mocks the photo with the following caption, “Using the highly effective ‘strength in numbers’ method, the brave women of the University of Mary Washington basketball team set their fears

257 TMZ Staff, Back to Where it Started, online, TMZ Staff, Hits the Water, online.

aside and forced a few smiles for this pic with alleged woman beater Chris Brown."259 Also discussed in chapter 2, TMZ published an article featuring Brown posing with one of his fan’s babies, stating “Chris Brown posed for pictures with a baby in Los Angeles on Monday. The baby’s parents clearly don't have access to the Internet, read the newspaper, or own a television.”260 The message here is clear even if the tone is “playful”: Brown is a loose cannon, dangerous to all women and children, and always ready with a punch.

Stripping Brown’s violence from context is an important move because if he is a monster across the board, then any uniqueness and nuance to the situation with Rihanna is lost and it becomes inevitable. This lack of nuance is dangerous because, as Mia Consalvo notes, “The reversion to the idea that … underlying sickness trumped every other cause gave complex issues that demanded attention short shrift.”261 Consalvo’s conclusion is worth expanding in this context: prevention efforts suffer when activists rush to decry a single cause at the expense of others because they are thus unable to address those others. This is an especially loaded indict when it comes to Brown because, by virtue of his success as a performer, the function of discrediting him from breaking into “civilized” society re-sensationalizes black masculinity and edifies existing stereotypes about black men.262 Humor as applied to these instances is revealing.

259 TMZ Staff, “Brave Women Risk Photo with Chris Brown,” TMZ (blog), April 1, 2009, http://www.tmz.com/2009/04/01/chris-brown-women-basketball-virginia/. It is also necessary to understand the way the use of the word alleged works to soften the accusations of abuse and strip culpability; in this case, it functions as a way to naturalize connections between Brown and violence and Rihanna and resilience to violence. This is especially interesting because TMZ published photos which serve as “proof” that Rihanna was beaten.


262 This is especially troubling because culture has a tendency to discipline the masculinity of famous black men on a spectrum which allows no room to be anything save a monstrous spectacle or a de-fanged middle class black man. See Timothy J. Brown, “Allan Iverson as America's Most Wanted: Black Masculinity as a Cultural Site of Struggle,” Journal of Intercultural Communication Research 34, no. 1 (2005): 65. See also research on scapegoating as a way to deflect public responsibility for tragedy, Brian L. Ott and Eric Aoki, “The Politics of
Although I earlier explained in some detail the ideological importance of stereotypes, that ideology is best solidified through humor and can be made visible through an analysis, again, of why the joke is funny. Jokes are “funniest” when they are culturally intelligible. They are most intelligible when the audience makes Brown a caricature of himself who looks much like the highly-racialized stereotype of the black man in search of white women to abuse.263 This caricature seems to support Crafton’s negative characterization of caricature far more than Hariman’s notion of parodic doubling. This is because, in this instance even if Brown is being “doubled” to point out a hypocrisy or character flaw through play (per Hariman), that doubling reinforces negative stereotypes about black men and cajoles the audience to take sadistic pleasure in Brown’s public shaming.264

Poignantly, this third strategy seems almost self-consciously racist but is intractably able to maintain distance from that charge. Although TMZ’s headlines often self-consciously decry the content, the following two examples were selected for republication by TMZ.265 The distancing impulse is mere lip service when juxtaposed with the actual content as published. In their article titled “That Ain’t Right,” TMZ published a poster featuring miniaturized, cartoon caricatures of Brown and Rihanna, pictured in a boxing ring with boxing gloves and exaggerated, animalistic features (huge muscles, protruding jaws, large brow ridges).266 Returning again for a

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264 In Hariman, “Political Parody,” 255, Hariman celebrates ridicule as a way to expose power relations, but this parody seems to do nothing of the sort. See Crafton, “Termite Terrace,” 204, for an explanation of how mean-spirited parody does ideological work in solidifying the identity or the parodied as disciplined and undesirable.

265 Context matters as well; TMZ is not known for a social justice slant.

moment to Crafton’s analysis, this form of caricature, based as it is on numerous racist ideas about black people being animals, telegraphs a particular ideology: that black people should be allowed to duel to the death as any other animals.267 In this piece, there is no need to treat black people ethnically or at all. The fact that the title proclaims that the image “Ain’t Right” hardly matters because, as Sienkewicz and Marx concede, even so-called intertextual indicts of stereotypes (although TMZ may not even rise to this level) depend for their consumption on knowledge of the stereotype and can be misread easily.268 This is especially true in this case. The poster calls on the audience to picture Brown and Rihanna as violent black beasts engaged in a fair fight.269

A similar article featured a link to a video of comedian Lisa Lampanelli at a roast for fellow comedian, Larry the Cable Guy, making ugly, horrifying jokes about Brown and Rihanna, such as, “‘Git ’r done is to rednecks what free chicken and white bitches is to blacks. But come on Larry, haven’t you milked this git ’r done nonsense a little too much? You’ve beaten that concept so much it’s now dating Chris Brown.”270 These jokes reference the violent mythology surrounding black men and women overtly: that white people and black people fundamentally differ, that black men are sexually fascinated with white women, that white women are by extension better than black women, that women that like to be beaten willingly choose to date abusers. Many of these concepts have been enumerated as destructive in chapter 2, so I will not belabor that analysis here. I will simply remark that, like the “That Ain’t Right” poster,

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267 Crafton, “Termite Terrace,” 204.
269 Note how this joke trades on the cultural “knowledge” that black women are strong enough to protect themselves physically.
Lampanelli’s video allows the public to indulge in momentary acts of racism and sexism by acknowledging their prejudices “all in good fun.”

This third and final strategy is the epitome of the ironic, post-racial narrative that surrounds most racist humor. In a society where Americans have convinced themselves that they are not racist anymore, sharing these jokes under the banner “Can you believe these people would tell such jokes?” is akin to repeating a joke after some sort of banal disqualifying platitude such as “I’m not racist, but.” The audience assures itself that it is laughing at the fact that so many ignorant people still make racist jokes in our post-race society when these jokes are, in fact, only intelligible to those who still fail to take seriously the full import of a painful racial past. Again, if no one were really racist, the joke would not be funny because we have no cultural premises for filling in the enthymematic blank. Perhaps this is a good way to think the distinction: a joke about something truly horrifying is never funny. For example, there is a dearth of humor about serious topics such as genocide or child pornography. The reason these jokes are not funny and the tellers are publically castigated is that it is impossible to laugh at how bigoted a joke is and in so doing prove that it is bigoted. Real horrified responses are mutually exclusive with laughter, and any conflation is a cop-out, an excuse to laugh at something that is not funny at all while failing to interrogate racism and the societal excuses for gender violence. This rhetorical strategy is assisted by some of the over-determined formal elements that I will discuss in chapter 4: the valorization of blogs, humor, and irony at the expense of a clear understanding of micro-formal content will be extrapolated further.

Conclusion

Although this chapter provides evidence of what can only be described as a sad state of
affairs in American celebrity blog culture and possibly society at large, it does offer several important conclusions. First, hopefully this chapter arms readers and theorists with a bulwark against allegedly post-racial theories insofar as they valorize the telling of racist jokes as some kind of transformative satire.\textsuperscript{271} The affective dimension of a pop culture juggernaut such as TMZ must be interrogated in order to understand its importance at creating and maintaining racist and sexist ideologies.\textsuperscript{272} Pop culture as a subject matter, combines with humor (which is insulated from criticism by the allegedly post-race character of society) to conceal the ideological work being done by TMZ. Affect assists the enthymematic function of TMZ hailing destructive stereotypes by short-circuiting the self-critical machinery necessary to fix what is broken.\textsuperscript{273} This knowledge alone is necessary to formulate a critical response; knowing the mechanisms by which racist ideology is disseminated by TMZ is more than a first step but also a second step, a template for expanding this research.

Another important theoretical takeaway is that the following seems clear: without a greater understanding of the function of colorblindness in society, no racially-motivated humor, no matter how self-consciously deployed, can be productively understood as a mirror for society’s short fallings in discussing race or domestic abuse. Nor should this kind of humor be tolerated because it “indicts” racism or sexism. No caricatures can be transformative of racism or sexism until audiences are forced to take a critical position and answer the difficult questions about why racism or sexism is funny in these contexts. What, we must ask, culturally informs


\textsuperscript{272} Grossberg, Seigworth, and Gregg, “Affect’s Future,” has some important conclusions about the under-theorized nature of affect in Western society. Re-theorizing affect in terms of the enthymeme is important here.

\textsuperscript{273} See Park, Gabbadon and Chernin, “\textit{Rush Hour 2},” 160 for a discussion of how the joy of laughter makes the project of criticism seem inconvenient and unnecessary.
our humor? The critical project must be accomplished without recourse to recuperative readings of racist or sexist jokes as intertextual indicts of “other people.” The task at hand is to realize that laughing at a racist or sexist joke always belies some level of racist or sexist sensibility. This conclusion is not to suggest that censorship should rule the day but rather that affective responses are always worth interrogating, no matter how frivolous they may seem. Also, the alibi must be stripped such that racist and sexist humorists have no recourse for what they are saying other than the content itself.

Although it is not the purpose of this chapter to provide a remedy for the situation of gossip bloggers making light of serious issues, using the serious issues discussed herein as a stand-in for actual edgy social commentary must end. The first step in ending this unfortunate state of affairs is certainly awareness. Particularly in the context of the colorblind racial project, awareness is often slippery and difficult to come by. This chapter should serve as a stern reminder that those who would facilitate cultural awareness of racism must be armed with the knowledge that their activism will often be dismissed as racist in and of itself. The imperative, then, is to ask the difficult questions that disarm the rhetorical reversal that so characterizes colorblind racist rhetoric. Tellers of oppressive humor must be challenged to explain why their jokes are humorous, while activists should highlight the deflection strategy for what it is: the failure to take responsibility for that oppression. That said, this essay is not a myopic encouragement to simply point out racism wherever one may see it, but also an encouragement to dialogue. It seems reasonable that colorblindness as a social project is producing a generation that shies away from any discussion of race. Calling racism what it is may only be a first step in fostering discussions about why, when, and how words fail in the face of social injustice and so many are loathe to take responsibility.
CHAPTER 4
THE SHIFT IN NEWS

Chris Brown’s attack on Robin Rihanna Fenty on February 8, 2009 has ideological implications for race and gender stereotypes, the cultural relevancy of those stereotypes, and the strategies through which those discourses continue to be naturalized in a society that purports to be particularly enlightened about domestic violence and race. I have discussed the reasons why TMZ is the premiere exemplar of a novel format, the gossip blog, which combines the user interface and format of a blog and the subject matter of a gossip magazine. This thesis has attempted to grapple with TMZ because, as chapter 1 argues, the site is a cultural force with ideological effects. Perhaps TMZ will only become more culturally relevant or perhaps it will fade away as a passing fad. If the stunning numbers displayed in chapter 1 are any indication, however, it is hardly an overstatement to assume that TMZ will maintain measurable cultural relevance for the foreseeable future.  

The reasons for my estimation go beyond the numbers: first, TMZ is entertainment about entertainment and thus TMZ is and ought to be fun to read (it is important not to underestimate that point). People read it because they enjoy it, not because they have to read it to make intelligent conversation in a job interview or to remain informed about major world events. People also read it because it is so accessible, providing a vast array of easily digestible content to readers and demanding little in the way of a critical response.  

Second, TMZ is hip and young, which is clear even to a casual observer. It has a modern, slick interface and a


275 Again, note that TMZ authors do not engage with the site’s comments sections, and it often pre-figures a particular response through the strategies discussed in chapters 2 and 3.
contemporary aesthetic that screams “youth culture.” Third, TMZ covers celebrities, who are ideologically significant people whom most perceive as entertaining diversions—as characters whose real lives happen primarily for our entertainment. The connection felt with celebrities nevertheless occurs at a safe distance: the audience wants to know their authentic selves but is also most comfortable recounting their failures. We want to see them do something “juicy.” It has a light-hearted, ironically distant tone that suffuses its coverage with an “edgy” slant, providing its readers with a comfortable distance from serious events.

That TMZ will continue to be relevant certainly bolsters the importance of my task in this thesis, but the ideological work TMZ has already done is incredibly important and I would argue worthy of study on its own. TMZ In this thesis, I have set out to prove the following: TMZ’s use of affective and enthymematic strategies in their coverage of Chris Brown and Rihanna constitute micro-formal elements which reinvigorate racist and sexist ideology while concealing ideological investments behind the macro-formal elements of humor and blogging. In so doing, I have attempted several critical tasks. First, I have addressed the ideological dimensions of our fascination with celebrity. Drawing from the foundational work of Richard Dyer, I began a conversation of the ways in which our interest in the rich and famous conceals the struggle for ideological dominance in a cultural matrix where values need be continuously re-negotiated.


lives and society at large. This ideological function conceals itself as frivolous fun in gossip magazines and, when combined with the form of a blog, a double concealment function is apparent, as blogs have become understood as transformative and bottom-up media. TMZ, however, is not a conventional blog with a traditional interface. As such, I began to demonstrate that TMZ is a special case and the micro-formal elements (i.e., its content) can and should be understood as determinative as the macro-formal elements (i.e., the form of a blog).

In chapter 2, I took this notion of TMZ as a special case and examined the age-old ideologies that informed its coverage of Chris Brown and Rihanna. By explaining how black masculinity and femininity have become bound up in notions of violence and sexual violence, I explained how domestic violence prevention activism comes from a place of bias with regard to race, how audiences possess latent racist ideologies, and how the lack of interrogation of both the failings of domestic violence activism and the function of racist ideology allows TMZ to continuously re-articulate both. I also suggested that the enthymeme is a productive way to...


understand the deductive arguments TMZ makes, recalling the stereotypes in the mind of the audience and bringing them to the forefront. The relative success, effectiveness, and efficiency of this enthymematic process is a significant conclusion. My analysis suggests that racist and sexist ideologies persist below the surface of modern discourse in a novel format and that lack of attention to this enthymematic micro-formal element hinders productive critical engagement. In effect, the enthymeme allows racist and sexist stereotypes to percolate in the minds of the audience while remaining unspoken and unexamined. Exempting premises or conclusions is a potent tactic because it continually allows the alibi to function by allowing the disavowal that the mental fill-in was intended by the author.

In chapter 3, I accounted for how the enthymeme can become an affective technology of power linked to humorous commentary on pop culture. An involuntary response, laughter makes critical engagement doubly difficult. When combined with a broader cultural move toward a colorblind racial project, the unique ideological concealment function of affect makes humor one of the final avenues for racism and sexism to gain traction. In a society where it is a serious social faux pas to be considered a racist or sexist, it is no longer taboo to tell racist or sexist jokes.


In this chapter, I cautioned against understanding racist or sexist as some kind of intertextual social commentary by arguing that these jokes are only funny if someone is cognizant of the stereotype upon which they rely.\textsuperscript{285} The taxonomy provided in chapter 3 is a productive way to understand the interplay of macro- and micro-formal elements, how they promote dominant ideology in their interplay, and why macro-formal elements such as humor and blogs cannot and should not be isolated from the micro-formal elements such as puns which can provide an alibi for the continuous reproduction of oppressive stereotypes.\textsuperscript{286}

To be sure, there is still much that could be said about TMZ’s coverage of Chris Brown and Rihanna. Given the previous chapter, there are but a few tasks still left before me, and I will turn to these tasks now. First, I must account for the changing landscape of news media and what this means for the future of news sources like TMZ (and TMZ itself). Second, I examine what I have termed “the curious curse of optimism” that plagues allegedly post-racial and progressively tolerant societies such as the contemporary American society. This post-racial character makes criticism like the one advanced herein more difficult, and I would be remiss to leave this analysis without paying a debt to the scholars that have begun the difficult work of problematizing this concept and calling for a critical eye. This optimism, augmented by the optimism that surrounds blogs and humor (discussed in chapters 1 and 3 respectively) combined to form a potent, opaque ideological wall that conceals the very destructive nature of TMZ maintaining myths that dehumanize black men and women while continuously maintaining the relevancy of those myths.


\textsuperscript{286} Again, see Roland Barthes, \textit{Mythologies}, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 85.
to a modern audience. Finally, I examine the unique opportunities and challenges associated with said macro-formal elements in order to more fully more expand upon the necessity and potential of criticism as a bulwark against deleterious ideological forces.

The Rise of Mock News

Mock news is emerging to augment conventional news sources such as CNN, MSNBC, FOX, and more. An increasing number of young people get their news from mock news outlets. Some of the more popular mock news shows include The Daily Show (Comedy Central’s humorous report of daily political events) or The Colbert Report (also on Comedy Central) which features Stephen Colbert inhabiting a humorously overblown persona of a conservative pundit. Geoffrey Baym suggests that this shift toward mocking the major news outlets as a vehicle for disseminating actual news marks a fun and quintessentially postmodern discursive moment, stating that The Colbert Report is

enabled by the wider turn toward discursive integration: the emergence of a media environment defined by the collapse of … distinctions among once-differentiated genres, social practices, and discursive fields. In this environment, politics and popular culture, information and entertainment, laughter and argument, the real and the surreal have


288 Jody Baumgartner and Johnathan S. Morris, “The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth,” American Politics Research 34, no. 3 (2006): 344, doi:10.1177/1532673X05280074 gives a quantitative analysis of the ways in which mock news outlets force uncritical acceptance of the views of their hosts, produce political alienation of young people, and fail to support engagement with “hard news” outlets. They also argue, on page 362, “Stewart’s style of humor paints the complexities of politics as a function of the absurdity and incompetence of political elites, thus leading viewers to blame any lack of understanding not on themselves but on those who run the system.” See also, Richard Davis and Diana Owen, New Media and American Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Davis and Owen also supports the notion of a trade-off between hard and soft news.

become deeply inseparable, fluidly interlaced in differing discursive blends on a nightly basis.\textsuperscript{290}

Perhaps the distinction between news and entertainment is falling away to reveal an integrated behemoth that is so distinctly postmodern that it must invariably be worth celebrating, and perhaps it is, at least in this instance. Certainly, using humor as a palatable form to give audiences a sense of their democratic responsibility is difficult to argue with. W. Lance Bennett expands this notion by arguing that political culture has become profoundly cynical and hypocritical, and that savvy young men and women, being acutely attuned to this shifting landscape, feel increasingly alienated from politics as a result. By way of solution, he valorizes \textit{The Daily Show}'s ironic and cynical distance from politics, positing, “Adopting a protective stance of cynicism becomes a means of decoding the reality around [young people.]”\textsuperscript{291}

Taking the association between cynical distance and young people into account, Bennett’s conclusions suggest that this very distance, far from continuous with other media, may be more productively understood as dependent on and yet separate from media; it functions as a form of media criticism. Sandra L. Borden and Chad Tew explain, “Stewart and Colbert do not inhabit the role of journalists but, rather, adopt the performances of journalists to draw attention to lapses in journalistic integrity.”\textsuperscript{292} For Borden and Tew, mock news is really a new genre of news criticism where watchdogs such as Stephen Colbert and John Stewart point toward the moral lapses of the big news system and, in turn, fuel skepticism of hegemonic powers.

\textsuperscript{290} Baym, “Representation and the Politics of Play, 373.


The notion that mock news functions as biting progressive criticism, rhetorical or otherwise, is an appealing one because it is always flattering to think that we are perhaps more savvy at understanding the layers of meaning implicit in irony. However, it seems somewhat tautological to argue that young people who forego major news outlets and decide to get their news from mock news outlets are really so acutely aware of the staged, blasé, and downright fictitious elements of network news. In the same way that it would be impossible for a non-French speaking individual to provide a succinct criticism of *Moliere* when provided only with the French text, this argument seems specious, if not drastically optimistic. Mock news programs are providing audiences with ironic perspective, what can be termed most accurately as a perspective on perspective; but, without the referent, what reflexivity is possible? Why do we think it is possible? The problem of a continual passivity, a retreat from criticism, manifests itself in many similar ways with TMZ: cynical, ironic humor has been conflated with smart, productive politics. The question of TMZ’s progressive potential has been addressed at length in this thesis, but the pitfalls and possibilities of an overly optimistic read of TMZ’s coverage deserve a final gloss, with an eye toward the necessity of reversing these trends now that we have a clearer picture of what they are. Mock news, like TMZ, gives the audience little more than empty progressive insight while manifesting a distrust of network news. This distrust solidifies TMZ’s monopoly on information in pop culture and potentially discredits counter-arguments.

**The Curious Curse of Optimism**

In order to arrest this optimism and reverse its blunting effect on criticism, we must finally identify plainly and develop the implications of the optimism. At this point, I have demonstrated that racism persists in American society. The ideological underpinnings of racism
have not been purged from the discourse of domestic abuse but rather sanitized such that they are cited but never fully, necessitating an enthymemetic theory of audience as enumerated in chapter 2.293 Somehow, in a difficult time, a time with two foreign wars raging, a still-flagging economy, and a disastrous political climate, we all became optimistic about race.294 At first glance, it seems like a victory that admitting to racism these days holds positive and tangible social consequences, especially in the public sphere. That said, racism has been concealed under a veil of equality. This veil, termed colorblindness is discussed in some detail in chapter 3. Colorblindness, the belief that acknowledging race is tantamount to racism, is too dichotomous to acknowledge that sometimes mentioning race is necessary to combat racism and still other times not mentioning race is critical to maintaining racism.295 The oversimplified nature of colorblindness may constitute some of its appeal, reducing a complex issue to the simple dictum “never talk about race” is easier than untangling the knotted, messy reality of race relations in America. As Kent A. Ono puts it, “Postracism often promises that those consuming it will take a magical and nostalgic trip back to places like the good old early 1950s, when race relations were just really not so


In this way, the call for simplicity highlights the “inconvenient” nature of activism against racism and sets it aside in favor of ignorance, paralyzing change.

As Teun A. Van Dijk notes, “one of the crucial properties of contemporary racism is its denial.” This is an interesting conundrum and perhaps points to a need to further study vehement denials of racism. But the word “denial” seems too constraining to accomplish the task for which I have set out. We simply never bother to deny racism anymore, but instead engage in a different, more insidious disavowal: we celebrate how far we have come from our ostensibly racist past to our potentially progressive future. This celebration alone constitutes the ultimate denial and suffuses modern society with an arrogant sense of conquering racism once and for all—a dangerous proposition, but perhaps worse when mixed with the perilous valorization of mock media and blogs. The enthymeme assists in the process of disavowal by providing an alibi for those accused of disavowal; the absented premise or conclusion is silent and thus can be denied on command even as it exerts ideological force.

It should seem more baffling than funny when TMZ makes racist allusions and features racist comic routines about Rihanna and Chris Brown. It should seem even more strange that TMZ does this and expects laughs. The way texts like these are framed by TMZ does not, however, arouse suspicion. I have already explained the ideological concealment of TMZ in some detail in chapters 2 and 3. I have discussed the use of the enthymeme as a mechanism for transmitting racism and augmented that basic understanding with a theory of the intersection of affect with enthymematic form. These processes are ideologically imbued and difficult to see clearly, but something more accounts for the obfuscation. Perhaps the valorization of mock

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296 Ono, “Postracism,” 227.


298 Here again, think of Barthes, Althusser, and Eagleton.
media with its slick and smart veneer has something to do with the efficacy of concealment. As Simon Critchley said, everybody wants to be part of the in-group, to laugh at the racist jokes because everybody else is laughing while maintaining (like everybody else) that they are laughing at how stupid and racist other people are.²⁹⁹ It is an effective rhetorical trick, but it can be attributed to more than naïveté about the functioning of colorblindness and society.

Combined with a colorblind aesthetic overlay that continuously de-fangs much of the current cultural criticism about media racism by dismissing such criticism as racist (because it recognizes race as a meaningful social category), many scholars have rushed to valorize blogging and humor, and to dismiss the nuances that alter the progressive character of each to be more reactionary than not.³⁰⁰ In our excitement to analyze the macro-level form of blogs, we rushed to understand how these blogs could function as user-generated mouthpieces that allowed bottom-up co-creation of culture along non-dominant lines. Perhaps scholars, interested in the potential of new media, became somewhat apologetic for what these blogs were saying while simultaneously celebrating how it was being said. Partly for this reason, some of the micro-formal elements, the taxonomies discussed in chapters 2 and 3 show how TMZ is currently a blog with limited transformative potential. The interplay between progressive potential at the source and the reification of cultural racism and sexism in the tiny interstices has not been


adequately theorized.\textsuperscript{301} TMZ has micro-formal elements that foster the co-creation or redeployment of dominant ideologies via the enthymeme. Micro-formal elements, such as enthymeme, bring dominant ideological notions about race and sex to the front of the audience’s mind even as the audience maintains an active interest in keeping these ideologies hidden so as not to seem bigoted. The process of bringing ideology to the forefront (while concealing the ideological function) re-inscribes these ideologies and naturalizes them in a way that prevents adequate criticism.\textsuperscript{302} This thesis is an attempt to caution against the unquestioning acceptance of the things TMZ publishes and to provide a critical eye for analyzing this coverage and other novel news sources.

Like the drastic optimism at the potential of the blogosphere, the recent outpouring of faith in humor has buttressed this curious curse of optimism; scholars often rush to celebrate every joke, even those that rely on flawed and negative stereotypes for their affective potential, as a timely cultural criticism. In part, these optimistic conclusions result from the over-determination of humorous form as inherently transformative. The same hyper-optimism also draws from a cultural conflation of irony with cultural criticism. To contextualize this further, scholars like Helene Shugart suggest that in postmodern society, irony is an excellent tool for creating distance from established narratives and fostering multiple perspectives.\textsuperscript{303} To her credit, she does supply a taxonomy that distinguishes subversion from traditional irony, but again her focus on ironic form is colored by the fact that she selects only texts with micro-formal elements


\textsuperscript{302} Barthes, \textit{Mythologies}, 85.

that are progressive in spirit. Shugart’s analysis is thus somewhat incomplete in that TMZ is an outlier. The celebration of irony as potentially subversive has its place, but we must be careful not to under-state the political risks of ironic form by incompletely analyzing the negative aspects of raising questions that may have biased answers which reaffirm dominant ideology. If the ironic questions raised have pre-determined answers that recall black subjects as given to intimate partner violence, the ironic form itself is unlikely to make the text progressive simply because it engages more than a singular perspective. It is also important to consider that, in order for irony to function, the audience must be aware of the stereotype and accept it (on some level) as reality. The reversal, then, is not accomplished by irony alone. The reversal occurs when the micro-formal content couples with irony in order to point toward a more progressive conclusion.

There is a serious, if under-stated impact to the problem of celebrating ironic form without qualification. First, the optimistic take misjudges the ability of irony as a master trope. This is not to say that irony is fully lacking in potential, but, as Robert Terrill notes in his analysis of Frederick Douglass, “Irony’s visuality is its promise and its danger because, as it invites us toward complex vistas, it also constitutes us as passive spectators. Because it is non-linear, irony cannot set its audience on a trajectory toward moral judgment and action.” Per Terrill’s conclusion, irony can give an audience perspective, as TMZ surely does. As discussed in chapter 1, TMZ’s audience understands some of the artificiality of celebrity and is made cognizant of some stereotypes, perhaps even invited to make judgment, but the character of those judgments are not as free as one might imagine, especially given the ways in which TMZ points to one correct judgment of Rihanna and Brown. Although questions of the propriety of Brown and Rihanna’s actions may surface, they are also answered by other micro-formal elements that

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bring the audience out of utter passivity. Thus, irony on its own does nothing, but other microformal elements that are present in conjunction with irony do a great deal of ideological work.

The playful, edgy tone simply situates and grounds the content that, as chapters 2 and 3 explain, recreate stereotypes. Irony is a tool that creates sometimes-critical distance, but it points to nothing in particular without a reparative action that utilizes other master tropes. As Kathryn M. Olson and Clark D. Olson argue, either perspective (that irony is transformative or that it does nothing at all) risks drastically under-theorizing the audience; readers who approach an ironic text from a skeptical social location versus an optimistic one may come away with different understandings. Although the audience position is never fixed (one single reader may have multiple interpretations in a single reading), the backdrop of colorblindness suggests that they would be unlikely to emerge from an engagement with TMZ with a scathing critique of just how racist and sexist TMZ’s engagement with Rihanna and Brown really is. Thus, the conclusion here is an elaboration of my earlier criticism of ironic form: that the form itself does nothing and perhaps the pendulum has swung too far in the direction of understanding irony as productive, threatening an encompassing picture of irony’s multiple potentialities. This thesis has thus far illuminated the micro-formal elements and strategies that TMZ uses to effectively neutralize irony’s potential to create distance while reinforcing the dangers of making the audience spectators to racist ideology.

One of the most significant conclusions of this thesis is that scholars of blogging and humor need to stop celebrating and start taking a more critical eye toward the oppressive


ideological import of both humor and blogs (this can be best explained as augmenting their analysis, not as a full negation). Such critique can proceed from the standpoint of looking beyond the macro-formal elements to the smaller devices that tweak or disconnect potentially transformative forms. We can begin by simply cautioning against the valorization of one particular form, but we cannot stop there. While I am not necessarily advocating a (re)turn to close textual analysis, I am suggesting at least a commitment to closer reading of rhetorical form as part of any critical project focused on blogs.307 One could begin by asking what the function of each sentence is in terms of what it means to readers in the current cultural context of racism masquerading as anti-racism and domestic violence advocacies that conceal large oversights beneath a veneer of feminist consciousness.308 Perhaps this may be most productively understood as an intervening actor between two points. TMZ’s humorous tone, its location in the blogosphere, and its “edgy” exterior (point A) set us on what is perhaps a trajectory toward progressive politics (point B), but micro-formal element such as the enthymeme intervene to direct TMZ’s readers elsewhere. These micro-formal elements take the path and twist it backwards, away from point b, such that the audience ends up somewhere else entirely: reinforcing social racism and passively consuming content that conflates the tools for challenging racism with those that do nothing at all.

Thus, if we can conclude that TMZ plays largely on a climate of optimism to distance itself from its most reactionary implied statements, what does this obfuscation mean for race and domestic violence awareness going forward? First, TMZ conflates publicizing domestic violence...
with solving the problem, thus making a reflexive lens more difficult to attain and urging the audience to draw incomplete conclusions about who abuses, why, and how to prevent it.\textsuperscript{309}

Second, allowing racism to remain hidden promotes a similar function. Positive affect denies the possibility of reasoned critique, which is always already limited by a society that equates criticism of racism with racism itself. The concept of equality which encroaches on race consciousness needs to be interrogated in TMZ if it is to be interrogated at all because of the importance of TMZ in maintaining and sustaining youth culture.\textsuperscript{310}

Implications: Every Tool is A Weapon

To begin, it is necessary to understand the implications of TMZ’s social distortion for domestic violence prevention advocacy. Domestic violence rhetoric in media is increasingly centered on singular, spectacular events and not on producing awareness that generates productive politics.\textsuperscript{311} Moreover, the intersectional approach to domestic violence, one that fully appreciates and understands the ways in which racial politics complicate a binary notion of sexism has not yet been fully realized by domestic violence prevention advocates. In other words, the notion that that all men and women experience patriarchal oppression in the same ways and that that oppression operates solely on their performance of gender. This is important for at least two reasons. First, I mean to suggest that conventional media narratives of domestic abuse have


encroached on TMZ’s coverage of Brown attacking Rihanna such that productive understandings of women’s freedom and the specific social location of black women are lacking even as domestic violence is (if hollowly) denounced. Second, the brokenness of the media with regard to domestic abuse can only be fixed by beginning to understand why and how domestic violence is still poorly understood by the general public such that advocacy remains primarily one-dimensional (failing to account for context, blaming the victim, etc.).

In this context, humorous form is not subversive if the audience lacks understanding of why concepts such as unqualified agency to leave an abuser are problematic and thus lack a vocabulary to criticize domestic violence rhetoric. The idea that black women specifically are problematic subjects in domestic abuse narratives is compounded by TMZ reinforcing the notion that Rihanna is ambivalent to her abuse and physically resilient in a way that white women cannot be. The sexual politics imposed by TMZ—the continual discussion of Rihanna’s alleged hypersexual exploits—points to a reactionary stance toward domestic violence narratives. Finally, the continuous discussion of her failure to leave her abuse props up notions of freedom that infantilize women and blame them for their abuse. Just as Kimberly Maxwell, et al. note, the specificity of a given story of domestic violence often eclipses the potential for social commentary to arise from that story. The limits of any one particular story for producing activism may account for some, but not all of the problem. As important as it is to understand why the news is not printing activist articles that promote a sensitive, nuanced understanding of abuse, it is also important to understand why they are printing limited, spectacle-driven reports that often fail to achieve the minimum standard for nuance. Cultural critics need to renew their

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313 K. Sue Jewell, From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond (New York: Routledge, 1993).
314 Maxwell, Huxford, Borum and Hornik, “Covering Domestic Violence,” 258
vigilance in continuously challenging domestic violence myths that harm all men and women by pointing out every instance of their use, even in the most unlikely places such as gossip blogs.

As a potential (re)turn to that activist vigilance, this thesis hopes to begin the critical process by harnessing some of the lost transformative potential implicit in the fact that the news did publish a story about a black woman in trouble at the hands of a black man. It is not so very long ago that it would have been groundbreaking for mass media to choose to represent domestic violence between a black man and woman at all. Abuse, especially abuse concerning black subjects, is something hardly discussed productively in mass media for all of the reasons discussed in chapter 2 (white people’s inability to identify effectively with Rihanna as a victim, etc.). That TMZ got their coverage so drastically wrong by relying on destructive ideologies about violence is an unmistakeable tragedy. This abdication of responsibility, however, should serve as a call against future media coverage of the same ilk. Scholars must understand how TMZ can seemingly maintain that domestic violence is bad and should be publicized while perpetuating harmful stereotypes that produce ineffective activism and representational violence. This thesis seeks to begin a discussion that is in many ways a return to bringing domestic violence out of the darkness, showing the ways in which formal elements masquerade as progressive while directing audiences away from transforming flawed racial and sexual politics.\(^{315}\) In short: just because domestic violence is no longer a crime shrouded in darkness hardly means that abuse is being addressed properly in the light. I have faith that activist gains can build on one another; and although I stop short of assuming that a teleological march toward progress is inevitable, there are the serious gains produced by domestic violence scholarship that can hopefully be propelled forward by the analysis of this project.

Second, it is necessary to understand the implications for race. Race scholars have reached an understanding of colorblindness in society and the ways in which it insulates racist discourse from criticism.\textsuperscript{316} This thesis certainly agrees with those conclusions, but seeks to answer a further question: what are some of the ways racism maintains itself when the simple invocation of race is a liability? In this instance, the most effective strategy is the intersection of humor, affect, and the move toward colorblindness. Racism has been stripped of its theoretical and social gravity by the ideology of colorblindness, which has imposed a false telos toward liberal multiculturalism.\textsuperscript{317} The racism that bubbles beneath the surface of American society undoubtedly needs a release valve, and the ironic distance of TMZ—repeating racial myths while maintaining, on some level, that the audience should laugh—provides a proverbial “safe space” for being racist. Just as various deflection strategies work to insulate racists from criticism (i.e., the ever-popular “I’m not a racist, but”), the disavowal that one is only joking serves the same purpose. The strategies that TMZ has cemented are as simple as they are insidious: to make racism fun, to harness the affective potential of humor to disconnect a critical response, and to hide behind the social cues that make anyone who objects seem like a scold. This is dangerous in the sense that antiracism, already fledgling in the wake of a movement towards false equality, is painted as humorless while racism is maintained through “fun.” Perhaps worse, this alleged fun has the slick overlay of ironic tone and cultural criticism that many theorists celebrate. The racial and domestic violence myths employed by TMZ are important to analyze for all of these reasons, but also because Rihanna and Chris Brown have not disappeared, and the story of Brown’s attack

\textsuperscript{316} Ono, “Postracism,” 227 and others such as Bonilla-Silva, \textit{Linguistics of Colorblind Racism}, 49; Goldberg, \textit{Racist Culture}, 47; Crenshaw, “Colorblind Rhetoric,” 243; Omi and Winant, \textit{Racial Formation}, 150; Singh, \textit{Black is a Country}.

\textsuperscript{317} See, specifically, Goldberg, \textit{The Racial State}; See also Mukherjee, \textit{The Racial Order of Things}, 220.
on Rihanna has had a ripple effect wherein subsequent publicity surrounding either must continuously address the coverage started by places such as TMZ.

Rihanna and Chris Brown are both still famous, and their celebrity status has kept them continuously in the news. Their situation is one that we as scholars can and should continue to grapple with. That said, the tragic events of February 8, 2009, have set off a chain reaction and many of the same strategies used in TMZ have trickled into other media settings.\textsuperscript{318} For example, Rihanna is on the cover of July 2011’s \textit{Cosmopolitan} women’s magazine, which promises to reveal her “deepest feelings.” Regardless of what the article says (which is material for another project entirely), the fact stands that Rihanna and Brown still culturally fascinate us as celebrities and even more so because of their tragic past. As scholars, using their story as a starting point is both a challenge (in that pop culture is widely considered the opposite of serious) and an opportunity (almost everybody is familiar with TMZ’s coverage of this incident on some level). Understanding the latent racism and sexism that permeates society is easiest when a specific event points to the strategies that give it a voice.

As a whole, I have attempted to explain why, in a society that allegedly eschews racism and punishes domestic violence, even the most egregious examples on TMZ have failed to raise the ire of media consumers. The reasons for passivity are complicated, but they boil down to a simple statement worth repeating: TMZ's use of affective and enthymematic strategies in their coverage of Chris Brown and Rihanna constitute micro-formal elements which reinvigorate racist and sexist ideology while concealing said ideology behind the macro-formal elements of humor and blogging. I have unpacked this statement in great detail over the course of my thesis, but on some level the conclusion is even simpler than that. TMZ uses rhetorical strategies that

\textsuperscript{318} Cosmopolitan Staff, Cover, July 2011.
rely on the audience recalling myths about black men and women (accomplished via the enthymeme). These myths have artificial origins which are long faded from view but whose implications are still clear to audience members. For example, the idea that black men and women are “animals” is based in slave owning and trading and many audience members fail to recount that fact even as they retain the residual understanding that black bodies are primitive. The strategies that TMZ uses have been exhaustively sorted and labeled in this thesis, and I will not belabor those taxonomies here, but I will note what they have in common: they are enthymematic ideological processes which use a combination of cultural optimism, affect, and the alibi to continuously retreat even as they coax the audience to a particular response. The incomplete syllogisms compels completion even as the completion can be continuously disavowed if allowed to escape a critical eye as the one described herein.

I am certainly not the first to note that the problem of ideology is vexing because of its concealment function. I do not hesitate, however, to call first for vigilance on the part of scholars to resist overselling the potential of any singular formal element and to instead understand them synergistically (e.g., the character of a blog can be radically changed by the micro-formal inclusion of a pun that recalls a particular ideology). This is a necessary first step in rooting out ideological sleight of hand wherever it may arise in discourse. Second, I hope to maintain a scholarly interest in domestic violence activism and race as articulated through popular culture by contextualizing the importance of a shifting media landscape. The future of culture is youth culture, and the future of youth culture is written and directed in part by new media moguls like

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320 For more on concealment, see Althusser, Lenin and Philosophy; Barthes, Mythologies, 85; Eagleton, Ideology.
TMZ. We fail to grapple with stories like this one and outlets like these at our significant peril. Chris Brown and Rihanna’s story is an important case study of the still-relevant functions of ideology and the scholarly importance of engaging said story and others like it with a critical eye. I have no encompassing solution for the intractability of ideology in general, but the vigilant, complex analysis herein takes the task of critically engaging the micro-formal elements that maintain racist and sexist ideologies seriously. This continuous push to unmask ideology compels ideological forces like these to account for themselves, to answer the difficult questions of what is so funny or what about this instance of ironic distance is transformative that effectively rupture the spell they cast on the audience and point toward divergent narratives. These divergent narratives have great potential to push American society forward, a single step on the teleological trajectory that has thus far remained largely a cultural fiction.
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