Killing It

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Before any music plays, a black man is dead. There is little warning. No preamble. Emerging from a shadowy balcony, Rihanna—or, the character she is playing—looks down on a bustling street. In the music video for 2011's "Man Down," directed by Anthony Mandler, the exact year is unclear, muddy. What is important, following the tripartite idiom of rape-revenge cinema (one: rape, two: survival, three: revenge), is both that we are in the past and that the past has passed.[1] Rihanna raises a revolver and shoots a black man in his back. He doesn't see it coming. There is little warning. No preamble. Since this is a music video—a video we clicked on; somewhat discrete, that is, not embedded in a television show like music videos once were—we know that music is coming. At first all we hear is the bustle of a street—the dint of quotidian anxiety—and then suddenly, gunshots. Then silence. Then hushed waves. It is now, the viewer is told by way of a caption, yesterday morning. The beat drops. A blowhorn to release the tension. A sign from above is the sound of the ballet-tinkle that persists beneath the violence in the song's lyrics and visuals**.** Rihanna is on a bicycle, smiling. She's running through freshly laundered sheets with children, smiling. She's wearing white and sponsoring the coconut water brand Vita Coco, smiling. This #CarefreeRihannaGirl is contrasted with the Rihanna who lip-syncs, the all-knowing one who is definitely not smiling. Singing Rihanna—the one who moves her mouth to pretend like she's speaking, the one with the burden of speech—sits in a curtained room with streaks of light seeping in where they can. She sings.

I didn't mean to end his life, I know it wasn't right
I can't even sleep at night, can't get it off my mind
I need to get out of sight, 'fore I end up behind bars

Silent Rihanna continues to smile, not knowing what she will become: a man-killer. Still, we are presented with nods to violence of a different, socially exorbitant kind: hungry dogs, homosocial glances, red and blue bandanas, a glock barely out of the jeans where it usually resides.

Rihanna is singing on the beach now. Her struggle against the waves cuts against boys playing in the water. A music video's cut, a jumpy transition from one sequence to another is dense, supplements narrative content and works the imagination. Rihanna again. Then a slow-panning shot of the boys, each puffing up the

chests that index their masculinity in a gradual reveal. More senses that the violence to-come is already here.

Rum-pum-pum-pum, rum-pum-pum-pum, rum-pum-pum-pum
man down

All this time, the screen looks like a high-contrast Instagram filter, all reflected through Rihanna's red hair. Even the blues are red.

Rihanna goes to a particularly sweaty party; she grinds with the man she will later kill. A brief dance, then a no. A no. She shakes her head. This is a no among nos. In this one moment, it seems as if nos are said every day, and they are, even if they mean nothing to the one being addressed. She heads home. We know what happens next: she is followed and she is raped. She runs home, frantically searching drawers for a gun. Now, we are at the end which is also the beginning.

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Who is "she?"

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The etymology of the word "homicide" bears the mark of gender by inscribing the man-ness of the crime. "Homicide" comes from Latin homicīda ("man-slayer") and homicīdium ("manslaughter"). No need to break it down; the one slaughtered is a man. The gender of the one who kills is not specified but, in much of her visual *oeuvre*, Rihanna forms her as a woman anyway.

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There is no stable ground to fix "she."

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Directed by Rihanna and Megaforce, the 2015 music video for "Bitch Better Have My Money" lasts seven minutes and one second, stretching that last second in every direction. Four years after "Man Down," Rihanna's first onscreen murder, we begin in the same place: after killing a man.

She's in California this time. The birds are chirping and Rihanna is covered in blood. Moments later, Rihanna has some trouble lugging a massive suitcase around but the trick of capturing the white woman—a skinny blonde dressed in a white

pantsuit, her hair and clothes tripling her already apparent and blinding whiteness—is made to look easy.

The clothes are flashier this time. And there are snacks, convertibles, and a girl group. It's clear that white girl is just collateral, swung around like a toy. Rihanna smokes weed while they play a perverse game of dress up and force-feed her Ciroc vodka. Why, though? Soon, the flashbacks, the machinations of the problem. The white girl is a wife, the wife of Rihanna's strong-jawed accountant. Rihanna only has 420 dollars in her back account, which pisses her off, somewhat shockingly, because that's a perfect number. This part of the video is prone to make you smile.

One of the final shots, a vista of homes, trees and hills, is the other side of where we began. Covered in cash and blood, Rihanna sustains some space between naked and nude.[2] The sweetness of revenge's cathartics twinned with the comical relief of the middle of the video is forced to an abrupt end with a lush and dirty portrait of Rihanna awash with blood after killing her accountant with a knife. Here, the revenge narrative is thrown into crisis; nothing feels okay because nothing is.

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As Safiya Sinclair's 2016 book of poetry *Cannibal* (and much of Caribbean studies scholarship) explores, the English words "Caribbean" and "cannibal" are historically coupled. Though Jamaica-born Sinclair does not cite Barbados-born Rihanna in her gendering of Caliban, she might as well have. "I had known what it was to be nothing," Sinclair writes in a poem called "Autobiography." "Bore the shamed bloodletter of my sex / like a banishment; wore the bruisemark / of my father's hands to school in silence." In other words, the daughters in and of the Caribbean are often stamped as feisty and overbearing, as *too much and too fast*, and punished accordingly, Sinclair and Rihanna get after the affective underside of what it means to be a woman indexed by violence.

Sometime in the early twentieth century the noun "maneater" began, less and less, to signify cannibalism and, more and more, to refer to women who did not respect the sanctity of men. Women don't *kill* men, they *eat* them, just like the gendered constructing of "eating my feelings." After all, men kill women (and men too). Rihanna, which should mean "blessing" in *l'écriture feminine*, makes us think twice of the gender and race of the killer.

"Why did she do it?" transformed into "How did she do it?"

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More water, more smoke, more money. On screen, Florida (*Spring Breakers, Florida Project, Moonlight*) is thick. So is Rihanna, here, barefoot in her blue chiffon, but not as thick as the strippers on the pole. Not as thick as the guns, the motorcycles, the blunt, the masks.

The video "Needed Me," which was released, let's not forget, on 4/20 in 2016 can't decide what its message is. This is *ANTI*, after all. The first sounds are fluid: the slosh of a wave, a quick-and-quiet bird call, the wobble of the beat. Then Rihanna sings, "I was good on my own, that's the way it was."

The iconography of the strip club, its shine, is entangled with what Patricia Hill Collins called a controlling image (e.g. the Mammy or the Jezebel). The strip club, as a psychic space, is over-signified and yet under-theorized. That is to say, we think we know it, we think it's culturally legible because in popular culture, we are confronted with aesthetics that were stolen from the strip club. And yet the strip club is a horizon that cannot be grasped, only glimpsed.

Finally, somewhere in a back room, Rihanna comes face to face with the enemy. We know he is the enemy because he is a man and he's attempting to look Rihanna in her eyes. Rihanna stares back. The man throws bills at Rihanna but she doesn't flinch as they graze her face. She points her gun and shoots.

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Thick descriptions of the music videos where Rihanna kills men—"Man Down," "Bitch Better Have My Money," and "Needed Me" congeal as a triptych—doubles down on the virtuosity of "killing it," that slang for performing with intensity.[3] Killing it, that double entendre, that double bind. The title of this piece was inspired by Hentyle Yapp's discussion of Rosie Perez killing it for Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*: "Perez emphasizes the intensity of killing it, a limited mode of existence that allows one to get through difficulty. She endures dancing for eight hours; however, it is only through physical exhaustion that one can finally kill it. Killing it emerges from being pushed through exhaustion…Killing it, in particular, directs us to this shifting landscape that requires changes in rhythm, where killing it cannot be sustained."

"Killing it" is both never enough and always too much. "Killing it" is a site of escape in two related senses: performance and murder. Both end, though the cousins of performance and murder—performativity and death—continue. Both require intense energies, the realization that the practice of escape does not end, leaves you open to critique, legal sanction, emotional unrest. The video ends. Rihanna the celebrity provides the path to leaving the everyday behind, even as she threads her

everyday into the form of the music video. (In 2010, an *LA Times* music critic called "Man Down" a "warning shot" to Chris Brown. Another writer suggested that the accountant in "Bitch Better Have My Money," is based on a lawsuit Rihanna filed against her former accountant in 2012.) In other words, we cannot talk about Rihanna without talking about Rihanna.

All three videos are set in coastal locales—Portland, Jamaica; Miami, Florida; and Los Angeles, California—in which water, blood, and cashflow risk to overflow, threatening the bounded stability of sexual propriety and patrilineality. The apparatus of the music video allows for a kind of promiscuous citationality where we might also add examples from Rihanna's earlier career, like the mysterious chance-based killings of "Russian Roulette" or "Unfaithful," where she sings "I don't wanna be a murderer." These are what Avery Gordon might call ghostly matters, those unruly references that haunt the triptych I am constructing. Rihanna's music videos index a site of fantasy, a world where the vulnerable are able to enact retribution without punitive consequences, and envision a kind of unimaginable justice. Both "Needed Me" and "Bitch Better Have My Money" employ the physical iconography of capital circulation: cold hard cash, not the abstracted late capital tedium of credit cards, digital banking, and cryptocurrency. Similarly messy is the portrayal of bodily fluids—blood, sweat, tears, saliva, and the invocation of semen—which unveils a sexual politics of adorned disorder, a glorification of violence that can only be called glorious. Rihanna subverts both the archetypal figure of the *femme fatale* and her historically captive body—the black woman's body in pain—into the actress of violent domination. Black women's agency is a vision here, quite literally a visual terrain.

These videos present us with revenge we can tolerate: rih-venge. We tolerate it because Rihanna tolerates retributive justice for us. The womanly "us" here, though it matters, is hardly obvious. As much as Rihanna has some relatable qualities—a cute niece, a personal history of violence, posting memes in response to a romantic fight, weight fluctuation—she is also always worlds apart. That's what makes her Rih. No doubt if there is a "we," we want the presentation of Rihanna's revenge to provide a neatly (if bloodied) packaged response to the contemporary call of me, too. "Me too" provokes a "we" without the plural. It is well known that contemporary feminism, coded as white, does not think collectively but through the individual subject. There is a "we" there, there has to be, but it is implicit. Who will ask out loud just who "we" are? Who will yell: How many are we? Who counts?

Still, most of *us*, those of us not on screen, cannot be iconic in our response to sexual violence. But the everyday has a place in this spectacular narrative, even as it is confined to the social scripts that pulse through all life.

The men in the triptych I am constructing here don't speak—or if they do, we don't hear them. They are actors on a screen not agents. But men in real life often speak more—and more often speak when not asked.

In Rihanna's visual imaginary of undoing, "Rihvenge" might be a practice that is an approach to imagining reparatory justice that takes what is owed rather than waits for it. We could call the gun a phallic symbol or the events justice, but I wouldn't—not yet. More than speaking to contemporary demands for reparations, Rihanna stays true to the one cinematic idiom of the rape revenge narrative that matters: despite product placement, film direction by men, she takes herself seriously.

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"Needed Me" is the cherry on top of these videos where Rihanna kills a man. Directed by Harmony Korine (of *Kids*, *Gummo*, *Mister Lonely, Spring Breakers*), the video presents no crime. In "Man Down," the revenge plot is structured around sexual abuse. In "Bitch Better Have My Money," the revenge plot is financial. In "Needed Me," the one video that does not begin *in medias res*, the viewer is given no real narrative of revenge. The man is worth murdering anyway.

Endnotes

1. Angry white women make for "good and proper" cinematic language. Like the popular 1991 thriller *Sleeping with the Enemy* with Julia Roberts, rape-revenge cinema is often directed by white men and stars white women as victims of rape turned agential murderers. For more on rape-revenge as a cinematic trope, see: Claire Henry, *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; and Jacinda Read, *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape Revenge Cycle.* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000.
2. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger wrote about the difference: "Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display" (John Berger, *Ways of Seeing.* London: Penguin Books, 1972, 54).
3. See "Feeling Down(town Julie Brown): The Sense of Up and Expiring Relationality," *Journal of Visual Culture* vol. 17, no. 1 (2018): 3-21.