In 2010, U.S.-based musical artists Eminem and Rihanna released the hit music video, “Love the Way You Lie.” Enjoying international acclaim, the video was met with praise for addressing the problem of domestic abuse and criticism for seeming exploitative of female victims. Performing what Grossberg (2006) calls a conjunctural critique, we observe that this video operates within a U.S. context of publicity surrounding Eminem, Rihanna, and Chris Brown. Arguing that U.S. public culture is invested in cycles of abuse at the cultural level, we read “Love the Way You Lie” as replicating and reiterating this cyclical structure, indicating attitudes of cultural complicity regarding domestic violence that work to re-secure hegemonic masculinity at the expense of female victims of violence.

When acclaimed rap/hip-hop artists Eminem and Rihanna released the song and music video “Love the Way You Lie” in 2010, the public response was mixed: lauded by some for opening up a space in the public sphere for talking about and responding to the complexities of domestic violence; critiqued by others as an “irresponsible glorification” of intimate abuse that exploited victims (“Raises questions,” 2010). A lamentation on the anguish that accompanies a relationship turned violent, Eminem’s rap narrates one man’s romanticized journey of passion, love, distrust, anger, violence, shame, remorse, and vengeance. Meanwhile, Rihanna interjects with the chorus: “Just gonna’ stand there and watch me burn?/Well that’s alright because I like the way it hurts.”1 Music critics have praised Eminem’s lyrical performance as “authentic,” “dark,” and “introspective” and Rihanna’s refrain as “exquisitely melodic” and “chilling” (see, e.g., Menachem, 2010).

The song’s video, featuring actors Dominic Monaghan (of Lost and Lord of the Rings) and Megan Fox (from Transformers and Jennifer’s Body) depicts scenes that blend images of shoving and kissing alongside cheating, theft, and bar fights; the song ends with the couple’s house burning to the ground, the couple consumed in digitally rendered flames (Angstadt, Tanedo, & Kahn, 2010). This video is at once seductive,
yet exceptionally disconcerting because the visual images and narrative combine to serve as a stark reminder that while society at large purports to want to end violence between intimates on the interpersonal level, we continue to romanticize and excuse abusers on the cultural level.  

Ranked first on the U.S. “Hot 100” list for seven consecutive weeks (Mitchell, 2010), the song earned four Grammy nominations and the video received a Grammy nomination for best music video. Certainly, the popularity of this song and video is interwoven with cultural knowledge of the figures responsible for the song. Eminem carries a known reputation of spousal abuse against his now ex-wife, Kim Mathers, compounded by the violent and misogynist lyrics of earlier songs. As for Rihanna, her relationship with fellow pop/R&B artist Chris Brown gained sensational publicity in early 2009 when Brown assaulted Rihanna in a car en route to the Grammys. Given widespread public knowledge in the United States of the violent relationships inhabited by Eminem, Rihanna, and Chris Brown, it is generally assumed that “Love the Way You Lie” speaks to the experiences and identities of all three artists (see, e.g., Clark-Flory, 2010; Cummings, 2010; Hayden, 2010; Libby, 2010). All news articles, reviews, and blogs consulted on the video were quick to point to the ideological implications (good or bad) of depicting domestic abuse in a manner that seems so conflicted. As such, the intersection of the video’s portrayal of abuse with popular accounts of Brown’s assault of Rihanna provides a unique and powerful heuristic for dissecting broader cultural investments in the politics of domestic abuse in U.S. sociopolitical culture.

The manner in which the “Love the Way You Lie” video coalesces with mass media reports of Chris Brown and Rihanna paints an inchoate portrait of how we understand and respond publicly to domestic abuse in the United States. In order to investigate the complex ways cultural understandings of intimate violence comingle with popular discourses surrounding “Love the Way You Lie,” we conduct what Lawrence Grossberg (2006, 2010) terms a “conjunctural analysis.” According to Grossberg (2006), “A conjuncture is always a social formation” understood as “an articulation, accumulation, or condensation of contradictions” (p. 5). This methodological practice is a venture in articulation which becomes the “reconstruction of relations and contexts” that generate the social formations that comprise the video and surrounding discourses as a cultural conjuncture indicative of broader societal investments regarding domestic violence at the intersections of race, class, and gender (Grossberg, 2006, p. 5). This analysis is further informed by Brian Ott and Cameron Walter’s (2000) theorization of intertextuality, which can be understood as both an interpretive audience practice and a stylistic device consciously deployed by media producers. As such, we read the “Love the Way You Lie” video as an intentionally intertextual media product interlacing Eminem and Rihanna’s histories of abuse with popular cultural tropes of victims and aggressors; furthermore, we extend this intertextuality to the conjunctural moments that occur in U.S. public culture as a practice of reception and (re)circulation.

Our analysis entails a critique of the video, and by extension, societal responses to Chris Brown’s abuse of Rihanna, revealing a disturbing pattern of public reactions to
Rihanna’s status as abuse victim. As we argue in this essay, Rihanna comes to stand in for all victims of abuse, especially women of color, who are most often held accountable for their own abuse within a broader cycle of violence and who are doubly victimized for the sake of pardoning hegemonic masculinity from violent transgressions. Whereas we typically think of the “cycle of abuse” (Walker, 1980) as an interpersonal progression through the stages of a dysfunctional relationship—Tension-Explosion-Remorse-Honeymoon—we suggest that this cycle can be mapped onto our wider U.S. psyche to reveal its operation on a cultural level.6 Because U.S. public culture is invested in this cycle of abuse at the cultural level and not just an individual one, we read the video for “Love the Way You Lie” as replicating and reiterating this cyclical structure, indicating attitudes of cultural complicity regarding domestic violence. Beyond mere complicity, ubiquitous support of hegemonic masculinity as naturally violent condones and romanticizes intimate abuse, especially against particular bodies (i.e., lower class women and women of color), in a manner that refuses to hold accountable our own investments in cultural cycles of abuse. With all of this in mind, we develop this essay to address the following questions: What does this video reveal about broader cultural understandings of domestic violence as a systemic problem? How does this video negotiate tensions between race, class, and gender as they relate to intimate violence in the United States? Why does U.S. culture continue to support cycles of domestic violence, even as we seek to end abuse at the individual level? In exploring these questions, we ultimately contend that the interpersonal cycle of abuse depicted in the video is indicative and reiterative of the larger U.S. cultural investment in hegemonic masculinity as a mechanism of power and control.

We unfold this explication in three sections, which we call verses. In our first verse, we demonstrate how portrayals of white hegemonic masculinity as abject through a class “darkening” of Eminem work to recover white masculinity from the guilt of domestic abuse. Second, we read the video’s and public’s treatment of Rihanna, through the stereotypical archetypes of the Sapphire and strong Black woman, as scapegoating Black women for abuses they endure. In the final verse, we map the video and mass media accounts onto Chris Brown, tracing his loss of status in the public eye and his ultimate forgiveness via the flexibility of hegemonic masculinity within the cycle of abuse as it functions at the cultural level. Through this triangulation of social contexts and intertextual conjunctive moments, we contend that depictions of violence against Black women work to resecure hegemonic masculinity at the expense of female victims of domestic abuse.7 By highlighting the ways in which an overarching cultural construct of the abuse cycle is mapped onto interpersonal cycles of abuse, we hope to suggest an imperative for change that implicates all identities in U.S. public culture.

The video: “Love the Way You Lie”

Before delving into a conjunctural analysis of the figures involved with this song, we deviate briefly to identify the significance of studying hip-hop as a genre and to describe the music video, paying attention especially to how the cycle of abuse is
highlighted throughout the song’s verses. The importance of studying the genre of hip-hop has been well-rehearsed by a wide array of cultural critics (see, e.g., Dyson, 2007; Kitwana, 2003; Pough, 2004; Rose, 1994, 2008). As Alan Light (2004) contends, “rap is unarguably the most culturally significant style in pop, the genre that speaks most directly to and for its audience, full of complications, contradictions, and confusion” (p. 138). And, as a vehicle for conveying U.S. ideological investments, Michael Eric Dyson (2007) reminds us “that patriarchy and sexism and misogyny are tried-and-true American traditions from which hip hop derives its understanding of how men and women should behave and what roles they should play” (p. 22). For a generation of younger adults who often lack voice in the dominant political spheres, rap becomes one venue for negotiating some of life’s most significant tensions, especially with regard to issues of identity, ideology, and agency.

In turning to the video of “Love the Way You Lie,” just after Rihanna delivers the introductory chorus, Eminem stands in a golden field flooded with sunlight beaming around him, creating a halo that seems to envelop his body. Wearing the iconic white tank top commonly referred to as a “wife-beater,” he raps about his feelings of being mired in a tumultuous romantic relationship. The video flashes to Monaghan and Fox awakening in a bed. When Megan Fox wakes up, she sees written in marker on Monaghan’s hand the name “Cindy” along with a phone number. Humiliated and angered by the telltale sign of her partner’s infidelity, Fox immediately jumps out of bed, shoving Monaghan. As the scenes quickly escalate in violence, the video depicts Monaghan restraining Fox on the bed, and Fox spitting in his face, denigrating his masculinity. Eminem’s simultaneous rap lyrics illuminate the turbulence of the relationship: “The more I suffer/I suffocate and right before I’m about to drown, she resuscitates me/She fuckin’ hates me, and I love it.” The portrayals of Fox’s aggression against Monaghan and the insult signified in spitting works to threaten the “authenticity” of the White masculine identities represented by Monaghan and Eminem. The juxtaposition of visual insult with the lyrical expression of male distress positions both men as darkened White males, as abject—finding meaning and love only in whatever attention they can receive from female partners.

What follows is a montage of scenes that cut between a smoky bar where the couple presumably first met, a liquor store, and the couple’s couch, bedroom, and hallway. During this combination of scenes, the couple is also pictured sitting in lawn chairs on their rooftop overlooking a dingy area of town, a skyline cluttered by billboards with only one clearly readable: LIQUOR. While in the liquor store, Monaghan and Fox walk through the aisles and Monaghan shoplifts a bottle of vodka, quickly pilfering it from a shelf and hiding it in his jacket. The scene then flashes to Monaghan sitting, shirtless again, on the couch, rubbing his hands forcefully across his head and down his neck with his mouth agape as if screaming in an image of frustration; Eminem meanwhile raps about the pain the couple inflicts upon each other during a fight (“You push, pull each other’s hair, scratch, claw, bit ’em/Throw ’em down, pin ’em, so lost in the moments, when you’re in ’em”). The manner in which domestic abuse cycles throughout these scenes in the video
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is stark—Tension-Explosion-Remorse-Honeymoon—all phases of the cycle are interlaced and juxtaposed with each other as the figures of the video portray what Eminem and Rihanna narrate in the lyrics of this song.

During the third and final verse, the song once again rotates through the abuse cycle, becoming darker and more severe. During this set of lyrics, Fox wavers between leaving and staying. Monaghan punches and shatters the bathroom mirror, and examines refracted images of himself, Fox, and their fractured relationship in the glass. Eminem’s clichéd lyrics beg the woman to stay: “Baby, please come back, it wasn’t you, baby, it was me/Maybe our relationship isn’t as crazy as it seems/Maybe that’s what happens when a tornado meets a volcano / All I know is I love you too much to walk away though.” Such demonstrations of penitence are consistent amongst abusers in the Remorse phase, with threats of explosion lurking just beneath the surface. Eminem/Monaghan’s position of power within the dyad diminishes as Fox demonstrates intent to leave the house and abandon the relationship. The tempo continues in an increasingly frenzied fashion as the threats escalate and Monaghan enacts physical assaults as Eminem raps: “Next time? There won’t be no next time/I apologize, even though I know it’s lies/I’m tired of the games, I just want her back, I know I’m a liar/If she ever tries to fuckin’ leave again, I’m a tie her to the bed/And set this house on fire.”

Even though it is Eminem/Monaghan threatening to set the house on fire, while Rihanna sings “Just gonna’ stand there and watch me burn,” Fox is actually the one who holds the flame; by the end of Eminem’s last verse, the house is engulfed in flames, but a flashback to Fox sitting on the floor holding fire in her palms pans across the screen. Rihanna stands in front of the fiery house and continues to sing the chorus. Meanwhile, Monaghan stands inside the house, his skin on fire and Eminem’s arms begin to burn as he stands in the field. A montage concludes the video: Fox and Monaghan kissing slowly and mutually in front of the burning house; Rihanna crouching down with her face in her hands; Fox sitting on the bed with her body on fire staring imploringly at the ceiling; Rihanna gazing into the camera; fire overtaking a stuffed animal that Monaghan had given Fox as a peace offering; Eminem and Rihanna standing before the burnt-out shell of a house with their backs to the camera; and, as the echo of the last line resonates, the scene cycles back to the beginning with the two actors spooning in bed. The cycle begins anew, and no one has escaped.

**Verse 1: Recovering the White abject male**

Within communication studies, sometimes it seems like the only rapper anyone wants to engage critically is Eminem. Compared to studies of other hip-hop artists (Coleman & Cobb, 2007; Hatch, 2002; Lena, 2008; Moody, 2011; Morris, 2011; Utley, 2010), Eminem scholarship is a veritable cottage industry for people interested in studying whiteness (Dawkins, 2010; Fraley, 2009; Grealy, 2008; Hess, 2005; Rodman, 2006; Watts, 2005), masculinity (Airne, 2002/2003; Calhoun, 2005; King, 2009; Stadler, 2011), and oppositional discourses (Cesaratto, 2006; Sellnow & Brown, 2004). And for good reason; after all, Eminem is the most commercially successful contemporary
rapper of all time in the United States. With more than 32 million albums sold in the past 10 years, he was named Nielsen SoundScan’s artist of the decade (Eells & Seliger, 2010, p. 48). Furthermore, Eminem consistently receives critical acclaim, winning 12 Grammy awards in his career so far. Standing ever as a source of controversy and acclaim, Eminem is uniquely poised to provide a site that is rife with insights regarding cultural ideologies at the intersectional nexuses of race, gender, and class.

“Love the Way You Lie” was officially released as the second track of Eminem’s aptly titled *Recovery* (2010) album. At first glance, the titling of Eminem’s album is significant. Following his previous album *Relapse* (2009), “recovery” evokes an implicit intent to return to some primal state of health and well-being. One thing Eminem was working to recover may have been his public ethos as a rapper after a critically disappointing *Encore* album in 2004 (Rodman, 2006). However, given public knowledge of Eminem’s personal history of spousal abuse, the themes depicted in “Love the Way You Lie” invoke speculation that his recovery may be more complex than a recuperation of his persona as a rap artist. Whatever part of Eminem’s identity he was purporting to “recover”—whether ethical, psychological, or related to his popularity, credibility, or style—we argue that this video positioned Eminem to “recover” his public identity through an expression of Remorse in order to maintain a Honeymoon phase with the public. At the same time, “recovery” marks one dynamic by which portrayals of gender in “Love the Way You Lie” resecure masculinity from the culpability of domestic violence through specific depictions of the cycle of abuse. The music video, then, works to both recuperate Eminem’s identity as a rap artist and former abuser, and reiterate a cultural investment in that cycle of abuse.

Gilbert B. Rodman (2006) and Eric King Watts (2005) observe that a rapper’s commercial appeal is determined by the audience’s perception of that rapper’s “authenticity,” which is contingent upon representing a background of oppression or some form of marginalization (see also, Calhoun, 2005; Grealy, 2008; Hess, 2005; Rose, 1994; Thompson, 2005). Todd Boyd (1997), in his explication of the “nigga” persona as a mode of Black masculinity vis-à-vis rap music, describes the defining characteristic of this masculine identity to also be a class aesthetic, as opposed to what was once read simply as race (p. 31). Boyd (1997) notes that “niggaz” link their identities to coming from the ‘hood or ghetto, where the issue of class is a prominent aspect in defining cultural identity. By way of example, Watts (2005) argues that Eminem’s movie, *8 Mile*, accomplishes a paradoxical construction of Eminem’s identity as an authentic rapper by portraying him “as a discursively ‘dark’ (white) object, as ‘white trash,’ and as an American mythological white subject” (p. 189). The darkening of Eminem’s whiteness via raced-class as “white trash” allows Eminem to succeed as an authentic rapper from the ghetto, as contingently Black, while simultaneously maintaining the elevated status of mythic hegemonic whiteness. Although this positioning of Eminem as racially darkened affords him credibility as a White rapper, it also positions him in a mode of abject hegemonic masculinity.

Following Kristeva’s abject as that which “disrupts identity, system, [and] order,” Claire Sisco King (2009) describes abject hegemonic masculinity as a troubled
position of masculine identity that is afforded the ability to transgress and cross borders of subjectivity (p. 368; see also, Brayton, 2007). On the topic of Eminem specifically, King (2009) notes that he “not only disturbs norms of masculinity but also offers transfigurations of race and class that render his persona abject” (p. 381). Significantly, in the case of hegemonic masculinity, abjection is never totalizing. Rather, hegemonic abjection allows for masculinity to break and reconstitute itself to co-opt and appropriate other subject positions and maintain hegemonic privilege. In the case of Eminem, White masculinity becomes abject in its racial darkening through class as “white trash,” but affords Eminem the ability to transgress racial boundaries and claim “authenticity” as a rapper, like the Black masculine identity/ideal of the “nigga.” Not surprisingly, stylized representations of class work to produce the racially darkening effects for Eminem in the “Love the Way You Lie” video.11

Living in a house marked aesthetically as lower class, Eminem’s Monaghan wears no shirt, but sleeps in his pants, citing a stylized appearance of lower class sensibilities. The video’s deployment of this class aesthetic is indicative of the stylized meaning system out of which this narrative emerges.12 Eminem’s tank top and Monaghan’s shirtlessness serve to visibly “darken” their whiteness along the lines of “white-trash” class aesthetics.13 Linking Monaghan’s appearance to Eminem’s generates a consistent representation of the “white-trash” subject position. Thus, their co-representation of the “white-trash” aesthetic invites the audience to draw a certain connection and see Monaghan as vicariously representing Eminem in action while Eminem lyrically narrates the happenings of the on-screen couple’s relationship. At the same time, this lower class and racially “darkened” aesthetic positions the audience to interpret the problem of domestic abuse as relegated to racial minorities and the underclass, rather than as a social problem that operates as a strategy for hegemonic masculinity to maintain privilege and dominance.

Throughout the video, strong connections to alcohol again resignify lower class identification for Eminem/Monaghan, and implicit alcohol dependence positions the darkened (White) male as pathologized, highlighting the personal failings of his character as attributable to alcohol dependency (as if the real problem is that of alcohol abuse, not his choices to be violent). This positioning cites a widespread cultural expectation that alcohol causes domestic violence.14 But while research has observed behavioral correlations between alcoholism and domestic abuse, there has been no verifiable causal link (Fazzone, Kingsley, & Glover, 1997; O’Farrell, Fals-Stewart, Murphy, & Murphy, 2003). Although the depictions in the video that associate alcohol with domestic violence may beneficially draw attention to the dangers of substance abuse, these depictions also reinforce widespread cultural beliefs that domestic violence is primarily the purview of alcoholic (or otherwise deviant) men. At the same time, popular understandings of alcoholism position domestic violence as a disease, rather than a behavior for which one could be held accountable. To the degree that alcohol(ism) is associated with abuse, intimate violence is then naturalized as a pathology for which the abuser cannot be (or is not) held responsible, effectively providing an explanation for violent outbursts that may temporarily
trouble hegemonic masculinity, but not in a way that permanently destabilizes it. This attribution of illness places the abject male in a position primed for possible recovery, alongside the relationship positioned for reconciliation (Honeymoon).

By weaving back and forth between the scene of the confining space of their small home and the bright, open field in which Eminem stands, we observe an interesting cinematic technique. The halo effect of the sun behind Eminem becomes a blinding, yet illuminating daylight that signifies a certain kind of truthful publicity in contrast to the dark, private, and hidden space of abuse in the home. One reading of this effect is that Eminem stands ready and willing to bring everything out into the “open,” prepared to disclose the dire condition of domestic abuse in utmost clarity and sincerity; he seems remorseful for his past sins and ready to change his ways. What is depicted, in contrast, is Monaghan’s portrayal of the lower class man’s victimization, suffering from the social ills of fallen masculinity, from which he is positioned as ready to recover. Eminem’s gilded appearance of confessional truthfulness combined with Monaghan’s portrayal of abjection prepares the audience for their vicarious recovery—a recovery of (threatened) masculinity. Symbolized through reconciliation of the man with his partner, the subsequent act of recovery within a Honeymoon phase works to allegorically relieve hegemonic masculinity from the personal and social guilt of violence and abuse. Ultimately, as we next demonstrate, this shift to alleviate hegemonic masculinity from the trappings of guilt and abjection works most efficiently in tandem with the scapegoating of a raced and feminized antagonist.

Verse 2: The emasculating Sapphire

Cultural speculation surrounding Rihanna and Chris Brown’s relationship was prominent leading up to the release of “Love the Way You Lie.” In reading news and blog reports of the couple’s relationship, the Tension-Explosion-Remorse-Honeymoon cycle of abuse is readily apparent. Their publicized story of domestic abuse begins with Brown’s assault on Rihanna on 8 February 2009. In the events preceding the assault, Brown purportedly received a text message on his phone from a woman with whom he was once romantically involved. In subsequent reports, Rihanna stated that she thought she had caught Brown in a lie about cheating and pressed him with questions on the nature of the text message (Sandeen, 2009). According to Rihanna’s report to the sheriff, an argument then ensued between the two. The argument escalated into physical violence, which ended with Brown punching Rihanna and slamming her head into the window of the car, leaving Rihanna beaten and bloodied. The popular gossip blog site, TMZ, subsequently released pictures of Rihanna’s swollen and bruised face (TMZ Staff, 2009a). On 2 September 2009, Brown appeared on Larry King Live wearing a powder blue sweater and bowtie, flanked by his mother and attorney, and offered an apology to Rihanna and his fan base. Within this time period, the paparazzi also caught the couple rendezvousing in what appeared to be romantic weekend getaways.
The reportedly tumultuous relationship inhabited by Rihanna and Brown, punctuated by exceptional Explosion, Remorse, and reconciliation (Honeymoon) phases, captures the nature of the cycle of abuse described by antiviolence activists. At least two aspects of this cycle help enable a cultural scapegoating of Rihanna, made evident through a conjunctive reading of the “Love the Way You Lie” video and news/blog reports. First, Rihanna’s role as the nagging “Sapphire” (West, 1995) positioned her as “asking for” abuse by many publicized accounts; second, her apparent willingness to reunite with Brown later “proved” to much of the public that the abuse was never “as bad” as she might have at first insisted. Through both renderings, Rihanna is refused the position of “good victim,” and is absorbed into the recuperation of hegemonic masculinity more broadly.

First, despite the visual evidence of Rihanna’s injuries that circulated widely on the Internet, many fans and supporters of Brown cast doubt on Rihanna’s victim status by accusing her of instigating the fight (Forman, 2009). For example, a Boston Public Health Commission survey of teenagers found that 51% blamed Brown, while 46% said Rihanna was responsible for the altercation (Forman, 2009). Similarly, a survey commissioned by Girl Scouts of the USA and Buzz Marketing Group found that 45% of teen girls believed that Rihanna could have provoked Chris Brown and 33% blamed both Rihanna and Chris Brown for the violence. Additionally, in a Vibe magazine article entitled “Tainted Love,” Laura Checkoway (2009) included a variety of person-on-the-street reactions to Brown’s assault on Rihanna:

“[I] heard the bitch burned him!” one man exclaims, referring to rumors that Rihanna gave Brown herpes. “He’s gotta’ be feeling like an ass right about now,” his friend says. “She probably hit him first,” a heavyset woman speculates. “And now she probably just wishes she could have her boy back.” (p. 63; see also, Depaulo, 2010)

Such responses indicate at least some public acceptance of a narrative logic that blames Rihanna for provoking Brown’s assault. This was compounded by Rihanna’s own accounting of the night’s events. On 20/20, Rihanna explained to Diane Sawyer that the couple’s argument was sparked by a text message that another woman sent to Brown, stating, “I caught him in a lie and he wouldn’t tell the truth. I couldn’t take that . . .”

Though Brown’s purported refusal to “tell the truth” is relayed as part of the problem, as the story unfolds in Rihanna and Brown’s accounts and the circulating public commentary, Brown’s possible infidelity is interpreted as part and parcel to “how men behave.” The bigger transgression in this situation is viewed as Rihanna’s challenges to Brown’s masculinity, her (unfeminine) “nagging” and aggression. A grounding of the assault in Rihanna’s refusal to “drop it” (Brown’s lying) intersects with two interlocking gendered/racialized archetypes that can be articulated to accounts of the singer most conspicuously: the Sapphire and the strong Black woman. The Sapphire archetype was first personified by a character of the same name in the Amos ‘n’ Andy show in the 1940s and 1950s. Carolyn West (1995) describes the image of the Sapphire...
as a “hostile, nagging black woman” who emasculates the Black men around her with her angry and forceful manner (p. 296; see also, Craig-Henderson, 2011; Crenshaw, 1991). West (1995) notes that in popular hip-hop music and urban fiction, the Sapphire now performs with violence and aggression equal to her male peers.

According to K. Sue Jewell (2003), the Sapphire always exists in opposition to a Black male; the Sapphire and the Black male are constantly engaged in verbal altercation, with the Sapphire incessantly nagging the Black male, denigrating him with verbal put-downs, and exposing his lack of virtue (p. 45; see also, Lubiano, 1992). The Sapphire’s emasculation of the Black man positions her image as a caricature derived from another commonly circulated trope, the strong Black woman (Potter, 2008). Most typically connected to a history of African American women redefining what it means to be a “black woman” in America, this archetype celebrates survival, but also serves institutionalized racism dating back to slavery (see Gillespie, 1984; Morgan, 1999). Despite oppressive circumstances, the strong Black woman stereotypically “take[s] on a social script that acknowledges [her] primarily when [she] tolerate[s] the intolerable.… Strong black women ‘do it all’ and without complaint” (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2005, p. 106; see also, Wyatt, 2008).

Ultimately, these two interconnected archetypes position Black women as deviating from what Sharon Allard (1991) describes as the cultural stereotype of the “passive, weak, fearful, White middle class victim of domestic violence” (p. 194). This “ideal” expectation of what a “good victim” looks like holds great traction in the U.S. sociopolitical landscape, emerging in a wide range of cultural narratives ranging from film to legal discourse to the news (see, Davis, 1983; Madriz, 1997; McCaughey, 1997; Meyers, 1994, 1997). When a survivor of violence deviates from these expectations, her victimhood status can be challenged; because non-White women are more likely to be seen as inherently deviant, especially when cast through the prisms of the Sapphire and strong Black woman, the status of the “good victim” is rarely achievable. Put simply, “African American women often do not fit the stereotype of the ‘good victim’ because they are stereotyped as either very strong or inherently bad” (McCaughey, 1997, p. 194; see also, Allard, 1991; Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; Davis, 2006; Goodmark, 2012; Madriz, 1997; McCaughey, 1997; Meyers, 1994, 1997; Mukhopadhyay, 2008). The interplay of the Sapphire and strong black woman archetypes doubly precludes Black women from the “good victim” status in cases of domestic violence. First, they are blamed for provoking abuse and second, U.S. public culture presumes that they can protect themselves due to their naturally heightened strength against an emasculated partner.

In considering the various conjunctive moments circulating around Rihanna through the archetypes of the Sapphire and strong Black woman, we find these racialized tropes clearly at play in forming popular understandings of Brown’s assault of Rihanna. Accounts of Rihanna instigating the 2009 argument with Chris Brown, accusing him of lying, refusing to “drop it”, and hitting him first (Sandeen, 2009), all position Rihanna within the stereotype of the nagging, antagonistic Sapphire. Because the Sapphire is always depicted in opposition to a Black man whom she
berates for his lack of integrity, Brown can be interpellated as the emasculated Black man, weak in fortitude, nagged and antagonized by the (all too) forceful Sapphire. Concomitantly, Rihanna, as the strong Black woman, is expected to be tough enough to protect herself from any backlash that may come from an emasculated man pushed to his breaking point. These stereotypes are embodied in the portrayals of the actors in the music video, coupled with Rihanna’s publicized role in the song.

When read intertextually, the opening scene of the video is a clear symbolic parallel to the argument between Rihanna and Chris Brown that purportedly preceded the real-life assault. When the awakening Megan Fox notices the phone number written on Monaghan’s hand, the video mimics Rihanna’s interpretation of the text message received by Brown. In the video, Monaghan is sleeping peacefully when Fox first notices the inked number. She startles him awake from his slumber and hits him first; she refuses to just “drop it.” The same contextual darkening of Eminem and Monaghan’s whiteness through appearances of class applies to Fox as well; though racially light, she is darkened through her class positioning in the video and through an exoticized racial ambiguity articulated to Rihanna. When Fox begins to slap and shove Monaghan, the racially classed/darkened Fox invokes the mythic image of the antagonistic Sapphire. bell hooks (1996) describes a characterization of the Sapphire as “erupting into irrational states of anger and outrage that lead her to be mean and, at times, abusive” (p. 41). And while it might be entirely rational to react angrily to a cheating partner, this reading is not afforded to Rihanna/Fox. The fact that Fox initiates the violence detracts from a basic (if simplistic) understanding of Monaghan/Brown as the aggressor, inviting a cultural reading of Fox/Rihanna as blameworthy (at least partially) for the abuse that is to come. The correspondence between the video and the real-life case of Rihanna and Chris Brown is conjunctural, reinforcing cultural readings that it was Rihanna who provoked the fight with Brown (by accusing him of infidelity and by, according to Brown’s account, hitting him first). This parallel positions her not as a “good victim,” but as an instigator of violence at best, deserving of abuse at worst.

Eminem’s accompanying lyrics do not describe physical violence until he raps: “When it’s bad, it’s awful, I feel so ashamed/I snap, ‘Who’s that dude?’ I don’t even know his name/I laid hands on her, I never stoop so low again/I guess I don’t know my own strength.” Significantly, though Eminem’s rapping suggests violence committed by a man against a woman, the video portrays Monaghan reaching out to Fox, who, upon being touched on the shoulder, lashes out at Monaghan synchronous with Eminem’s utterance “I snap.” The “snapping” here articulates to at least two layers of meaning. On one hand, Eminem’s utterance of “I snap” becomes the narration of Fox, as it is she who “snaps” visually on screen at this moment; she appears hysterically angry and abusive against this visually remorseful man, reiterating the image of the culturally scapegoated Sapphire. Second, when Fox readies herself to hit Monaghan again, a gesture that would work to emasculate him further, it is he who “snaps” this time. Monaghan retaliates, pinning Fox against the wall as Eminem narrates “I laid hands on her.” Monaghan punches a hole in the wall next to Fox’s head at the
line “I guess I don’t know my own strength.” With this gesture, Eminem/Monaghan abdicates his responsibility for responding to Fox’s abusive instigation and nagging.

What is telling about the interplay between the lyrics and the video is the way Eminem’s rap of remorsefulness for being abusive becomes resignified as mutual scuffles between lovers wherein women (especially darkened women) initiate physical violence against men who try in a defeated fashion to exercise restraint. Again, the conjunctive parallel to Rihanna and Chris Brown would reinforce the cultural belief that Rihanna provoked Brown to violence with her nagging antagonism and violent outbursts. The conjunctural effect is that as the video depicts Monaghan missing Fox when he throws the punch, it denies that Brown ever assaulted Rihanna at all. What cycles through the video is a sort of gender-blindness that mirrors widespread U.S. cultural assumptions that domestic violence is an “equal opportunity” endeavor, a setting for mutual battery where men and women alike are equally violent and capable of inflicting equal harm. As such, the narrative of this video evacuates culpability from domestic violence (as a system of power and control) by which men benefit from broader networks of privilege and women suffer disproportionately due to gender/class/race differences. While Rihanna is vicariously denied the status of a “good victim” as a Black woman (in general) and an antagonistic Sapphire (in particular), Chris Brown is symbolically excused. Throughout, Monaghan/Brown is portrayed as an emasculated male, trying to save face, desperate to salvage a relationship through contrite apologies and attempts to lead his relationship back into the Honeymoon phase. While the video’s Monaghan may be read with some ambivalence given his lower class status and pathologized alcohol abuse, the intertextual reading of Brown vis-à-vis Rihanna has been much more forgiving.

During the real-life Honeymoon phases of Brown and Rihanna’s relationship cycle, Rihanna’s apparent willingness to “take Brown back,” according to many news and gossip outlets, placed Rihanna squarely in the position of guilt (Bartolomeo, 2009; Brown & Surdin, 2009; Jones, 2009; “Lessons,” 2009; TMZ Staff, 2009b, 2009c, 2009d). Says one USA Today article a few weeks after the assault: “Two shocking things have since happened. First, alleged photos of a bruised Rihanna were leaked to the media, horrifying even Brown’s defenders. Worse, Rihanna is back in the relationship, apparently having forgiven Brown” (“Lessons,” 2009, p. 10A). Worse than violations of Rihanna’s privacy, and (by extension) worse than the actual assaults against her in the first place, Rihanna committed the ultimate offense in this cycle by reconciling with her abusive partner. This cultural logic of victim-blaming (asking the loaded question, “Why didn’t she leave?”) is ubiquitous in discourses of domestic abuse and calls victims’ accusations into scrutiny. A victim-blaming narrative of this variety can be found in the “Love the Way You Lie” video as well.

The title and chorus of the song, “Love the Way You Lie,” anchored by Rihanna’s voice and image, can be articulated to her real-life accusations of Brown lying. Depictions of Fox’s antagonism against Monaghan, Rihanna’s implied deprecation of Brown as a liar in the song, reiterate Brown’s position as the denigrated Black man opposite the aggressive Sapphire. Notably, the “lie” in this song as a locus of meaning
is a shifting signifier. Given public skepticism of Rihanna’s “good victim” status, the “lie” here beckons public cynicism that Rihanna lied about (or at least exaggerated) the veracity of Brown’s assault. Rihanna’s credibility as a victim is damaged further by yet another parallel between the video and accounts of Rihanna and Brown. In the video, Fox feigns leaving and returns to Monaghan; as the narrative logic of the song suggests, this is not a one-time occurrence.

We should note, by showing a victim return to an abusive partner, the video offers some faithfulness to a reality of domestic violence—most victims will attempt to leave their abusive partners multiple times before permanently severing the intimate connection (Berry, 2000). However, when coupled with the presumptive positioning of Rihanna/Fox as the Sapphire and strong Black woman, any “logical” reasons she might have for not leaving Brown are encouraged to be disregarded. As one People magazine article said of her reunion with Brown, “Sympathy for Rihanna—among fans and within the music industry—was strong after the incident, but the reunion has led to something of a backlash” (Bartolomeo, 2009, p. 71). The article continues quoting an unnamed “music insider” as saying, “The tide has definitely turned against her since she’s gotten back with him” (Bartolomeo, 2009, p. 71). Ultimately, the article quotes a post on MTV.com, “Rihanna is supposed to be [a] strong woman,” reinforcing even further the power and ubiquity of this rhetorical archetype, while implying that her accounts of abuse are to be doubted (Bartolomeo, 2009, p. 71).

Within the cycle of abuse, Tension follows the Honeymoon phase as the cycle begins anew. We see this Tension develop on a cultural level after Rihanna returned to Chris Brown; popular discourse placed blame on Rihanna for returning to Brown following their reconciliation. The music video provides a traceable cycle of abuse correlating to Rihanna and Chris Brown’s relationship through the phases of Explosion, Remorse, and Honeymoon. But the larger cultural investment in this cycle becomes apparent as we see the abuse cycle play out in popular discourse on Rihanna and Brown’s relationship. While Rihanna is largely scapegoated for her role in the assault in the popular discourse, ramifications for Chris Brown’s public identity have been more complex, but still indicative of the same cultural investment in the cycle of abuse to privilege hegemonic masculinity.

**Verse 3: The race-man fallen**

Before assaulting Rihanna in February of 2009, Chris Brown’s reputation was that of a young, popular singer with a large fan base of teenage girls. Unlike Eminem, he was not typically viewed as a hardcore, misogynistic rap artist with a history of abuse. Rather, he was seen as well-behaved in the public eye. Having been described as “squeaky-clean” in People magazine, the media portrayed his assault of Rihanna as shockingly out of character (Leonard, 2009, p. 80; see also, Hoffman, 2009; Jones, 2009). Brown was, in practice, a well-assimilated Black man. Boyd (1997) describes this mode of Black male expression as the “race man”: an image of Black masculinity that serves as a role model for mainstreaming Blacks seeking to blend into middle
and upper class White cultural privilege (pp. 18–19). In the act of assimilation into the White mainstream, achieving success, and rising in class status, the race man is conferred “honorary whiteness.” Such was the case for Chris Brown. However, as Greg Dickinson and Karrin Vasby Anderson (2004) observe, honorary Whites may be “kicked out of the club” when they behave in ways that draw negative attention to their race and to all men (p. 278; see also Garner, 2007). This ever-present threat of falling serves to recenter patriarchal whiteness by othering the racialized transgressor.

When news spread of Chris Brown’s assault of Rihanna, Brown’s public identity came into crisis as his honorary whiteness was marred and his status as a good “race man,” setting an example for African Americans and being a positive role model, was called into question. Immediately after reports of the assault, two prominent U.S. companies dropped Brown from ad campaign endorsements (Got Milk? and Wrigley’s) (Jones, 2009). Compounding this loss of racial status (or nonracial status, as is the case with whiteness), in assaulting a woman, his access to hegemonic (invisible) masculinity was also jeopardized; overnight, his access to hegemonic (invisible) masculinity and his racialized status as a Black man became hyper-visible. Similar to Suzanne Enck-Wanzer’s (2009) analysis of news accounts of Black athletes accused of domestic abuse, reports of Brown’s assault of Rihanna shifted “blame from masculinity writ large to Black [men] more specifically [which] functions to distance the accountability for domestic violence away from (White) masculinity and, thus, maintains broader investments in masculinity and whiteness as interlocking systems of control” (p. 3). As discussed above, many framed Brown’s choice to assault Rihanna as a natural response to being pushed too far by the nagging Sapphire challenging his masculinity. Once exposed in public, Brown’s masculinity was no longer in a position of privilege afforded by the status of “race men.” Having been expelled from honorary whiteness, Brown’s Black masculinity was especially vulnerable to critique. However, unlike the images of Eminem and Monaghan, whose abject and darkened White masculinities could “recover” from positions of abjection through suffering and Remorse, Brown’s status had been stripped with no seemingly available recourse to the hegemonic norm.

Timothy Brown (2005) explicates Boyd’s (1997) description of the “nigga” identity as being primarily concerned with “articulating the voice and lifestyle of the truly disadvantaged” (p. 69). The prominence of the “nigga” in hip-hop, he claims, emphasizes class rather than race in authenticating black masculinity (see also, Young, 2007). Because of the class-disadvantaged requisite for claiming the “nigga” identity, Eminem is able to employ a narrative of life in the ghetto to claim lower class roots, and through his aesthetic and narrative darkening of whiteness, is able to constitute for himself an identity concomitant with the “nigga” (see also, Watts, 2005). This contrasts with Brown’s crisis of identity in which a young Black man “ascends” from blackness into honorary whiteness as a “race man,” only to fall from White honor into an emasculated Black identity. While Eminem was able to strategically move from a lower class whiteness into an authenticated mode of Black masculinity in the “nigga,” as a well-assimilated Black man, Brown was prevented from claiming
the “nigga” persona because “the nigga rejects the social acceptability of the race man” (Brown, 2005, p. 69). What we find, then, is that White masculinity may move freely into Black masculinity and back again (perhaps occupying both positions simultaneously) through the processes of class darkening, abjection, and recovery; Black masculinity appears limited to a single opportunity to attain White privilege which, if squandered, leaves the Black man in a position outside the hegemonic center. However, we argue here that the dynamics of racialized masculine identity represented in the music video of “Love the Way You Lie” have enabled Eminem to offer audiences a way of reading a newly reconstituted Black masculinity for Chris Brown through a darkened-White resignification of the “nigga.”

Acknowledging that Eminem’s/Monaghan’s darkened masculinities signify a lower class whiteness which, through the class-based authentication of the “nigga,” allows for the simultaneous representation of Black masculinity, we have an opportunity to revive not only White masculinity through portrayals of the recovering abject male, but also emasculated Black masculinity. This, combined with the portrayal of violence between Monaghan and Fox (which we have argued parallels the narrative of the altercation between Chris Brown and Rihanna leading up to his assault against her), allows Eminem/Monaghan to stand in for and represent an absent Chris Brown within the music video. In other words, with the understanding that Monaghan mirrors Eminem, and that Eminem’s darkened whiteness enables the representation of a Black subject position, we posit that depictions of Monaghan in the video simultaneously represent Black and White masculine subjectivities. This invites the audience to not only apply cultural knowledge of Eminem’s history of domestic violence to an understanding of the video, but it also invokes the absent subject who had recently been involved in a domestic violence case with Rihanna: Chris Brown.

As we have argued, portrayals of recovery work to alleviate hegemonic masculinity from the guilt of abuse. Just as Monaghan’s portrayal of victimization, suffering in abjection, and recovery from the pathology of abusiveness works to recuperate hegemonic masculinity, so too does this forgiveness extend to Brown as he is represented by Eminem/Monaghan. Even though Brown’s fallen status from a well-behaved “race man” prevents him from attaining an alternately authentic Black masculinity on his own in the aftermath of his assault on Rihanna, the lower class portrayals of Eminem/Monaghan in the video grant the audience one way of reading Brown within the lower class narrative of the “nigga.” Arguably, such an extension of the “nigga” persona to Brown would valorize the violent, lower class image of racialized masculinity as a desirable mode of identity. Indeed, for Brown, any masculinized mode of identity would be preferable to the emasculation he suffered at the downfall of his reputation (read in popular culture as caused by Rihanna). Our contention here is that the contradictory understandings of Brown as a fallen “race man” and violent abuser become negotiated in the music video through classed representations of the “nigga” persona that conjunctively parallel public knowledge of Brown’s assault of, and reportedly tumultuous relationship with, Rihanna. A heightened cultural desire for Brown’s Black masculinity to recover from
emasculature becomes evident in several conjunctural episodes of this social drama. When Brown apologized to Rihanna on *Larry King Live*, he was asked about his assault of Rihanna. Though Brown was generally evasive throughout the episode, Brown eventually expressed, “[W]e’re both young, nobody taught us how to love one another. No one taught us how to control our emotions, our anger.” Naturalizing his own Explosion as part and parcel to his innate emotionality, reaccessing his masculinity became part of an overarching strategy of reclaiming Brown’s image in the public eye.

Within a year of Brown’s assault of Rihanna, “the onetime teen heartthrob reintroduced himself as an edgier adult” (Jones, 2010, p. 11D). Later, on 22 March 2011, Brown appeared for an interview and performance on the wholesome *Good Morning America*. When host Robin Roberts solicited comments regarding Rihanna’s restraining order against him, Brown downplayed the significance of the event and later stormed out to his dressing room and smashed a window. Commentators on Brown’s outburst made note of him removing his shirt to reveal his now thoroughly tattooed arms (Saad, 2011). We would contend here that these performances of masculinity (and commentator notes about his performances) were consistent with Brown’s efforts to shape his appearance and public identity to coincide with the “nigga” persona, to begin performing the cultural Tension phase of domestic abuse, and to achieve recovery of a public ethos not unlike Eminem’s own endeavors to do so.

Indeed, his performances of masculinity have been well-received by a public apparently all too eager to forgive Brown for his transgressions, to place him back into some category of recuperated masculinity. For example, one ABCnews.com article notes, “America loves a comeback. If Brown apologizes for his actions, seeks help and perhaps even uses this episode for inspiration, he could set his career back on track” (Marikar, 2009). The article goes on to quote brand manager Marvet Britto, who calls Brown’s acts “foolish,” and finishes out the report with this remark: “He [Brown] should be given the opportunity to show remorse and sincerity. And now, *if indeed* Rihanna is the victim, domestic abuse may have two of the biggest advocates anyone could dream to have. Maybe he needs help. Maybe this will inspire his lyrics. Maybe this will end up being a blessing” (Marikar, 2009, emphasis added).

The many intersecting public performances worked to reclaim Brown’s position in the public eye, demonstrating once again the power and flexibility of hegemonic masculinity and the seductiveness of naturalizing male aggression. Says Mimi Valdes Ryan, former editor-in-chief for *Vibe* magazine, Brown’s fans “feel bad for him,” and claim, “It’s not his fault, he doesn’t know better. We need not judge him” (Hoffman, 2009, p. 1). This rush to disassociate Brown’s violent actions from agential choice is consistent with a broader U.S. culture that believes in the redemptive and romantic cycle of abuse, pausing in Remorse and Honeymoon stages, but cycling always back to Tension and Explosion.

**Concluding lyrical refrain**

In light of our argument that the music video scapegoats Black women as antagonistic provokers of domestic violence, it is worth noting that at the end of the video,
Monaghan, Eminem, and Fox are shown engulfed in flames, individually and in that order. While the images of Monaghan and Eminem on fire first seem to communicate the message that a man’s violence ultimately consumes him, the fact that Fox is also shown as burning, and with a bruised eye, positions each person as victimized. For Fox, the image of her burning may signify that she is consumed by her own antagonism, for “playing with fire.” Such a message again detracts from the abuser’s responsibility in domestic violence, as both the woman and the man are cast as victims. Yet the racialized codes forwarded in the video still deny women of color the position of the “good victim.” As the bodies of the men burn, they are consumed, their masculinities recovered in the baptismal fire. As the body of the woman burns, she is victimized twice over, sacrificed for the recuperation of hegemonic masculinity.

We should note, positioning Rihanna as “just as violent” as Chris Brown is not without its cultural and commercial allure. As the woman who “fights fire with fire,” or perhaps the phoenix rising from the flames, Rihanna was applauded by some for her gumption to fight back and fulfill that archetype of the strong Black woman. Indeed, the popularity of this video might indicate that the trope of the abused woman who actually fights back resonates with some in the U.S. public sphere. This image coincides with no shortage of other mediated images of abuse victims who retaliate ranging from songs such as Martina McBride’s “Independence Day” and the Dixie Chicks’ “Goodbye Earl” to movies like Enough, Sleeping With the Enemy, and the now iconic The Burning Bed. This narrative arc reinforces U.S. neoliberal investments in individualized problem solving and a strongly held belief that domestic violence is mutual violence and not, as feminists would suggest, a systemic cycle of power and control that elevates all men at the expense of all women.24

Furthermore, Rihanna’s efforts to be vocal in the area of domestic violence advocacy proved to be a tricky negotiation. Embroiled in the cycle of abuse as she was, when Rihanna spoke out about domestic abuse in public forums, she was frequently critiqued for attempting to “manipulate” her story of abuse as a sort of public relations stunt (see, e.g., Depaulo, 2010; Jones, 2009). For example, on the site Bossip.com, one detractor posted, “Rihanna had only done interviews about the incident b/c [sic] her album is coming out . . . she’s a joke and makes domestic violence a publicity thing to promote herself when there are real ppl [sic] who go through it and die from it.” Again, Rihanna’s status as victim is called into question while Brown’s status as perpetrator is not even worthy of comment.

Throughout this essay, we have sought to argue that the complex intersection of cultural knowledge of the real-life histories of the artists with the dynamics at work among portrayals of the racialized, gendered, and classed identities of the actors (and artists) in “Love the Way You Lie,” has given rise to an intertextual conjunctural moment in which the audience is invited to view Eminem and Chris Brown as mutually victimized by intimate violence. The effect of such a reading makes intelligible a mitigation of guilt for the masculine identities of both Eminem and Chris Brown for violent transgressions against women. The ideological ramification, by extension, follows that while we may discourage individual men from being
abusive, hegemonic masculinity on the cultural level may need domestic violence to maintain its privileged status.

One might aptly question our reading of this video as reinforcing hegemonic masculinity, citing that a chief aspect of hegemonic (heterosexual) masculinity is protecting and providing for women, fulfilling the “heroic” role in the master narrative of “being a man.” However, as R. W. Connell (2002) rightly notes, even within this narrative construct, “a controlled use of force, or the threat of force, has been widely accepted as part of men’s repertoire in dealing with women and children” (p. 94; see also Anderson & Umberson, 2001). When one’s masculinity is perceived as being threatened by a female counterpart, this transgression can be read as a threat to the structure of hegemonic masculinity. Hence, controlling behaviors toward one woman can be read as socially acceptable to maintain the hegemonic social order as whole.

In reflecting on the stakes involved in our cultural investment in the abuse cycle of Tension-Explosion-Remorse-Honeymoon, we must start by reiterating that this cycle is not simply an interpersonal one. Rather than seeing the abuse cycle merely as a private one between individual couples, this shift to understanding it as a systemic cycle forces us to acknowledge that domestic violence works as an efficient sequence of power and control between individuals because of the cultural complicity that supports hegemonic masculinity, whiteness, heteronormativity, and so forth (Gramsci, 1971). In the case of domestic violence, “Complicity refers to the way in which the majority of men gain from hegemonic masculinity since they benefit from what Connell terms the patriarchal dividend; the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (Scott-Samuel, Stanistreet, & Crawshaw, 2009, p. 289). This is not to suggest all men are personally invested in domestic violence; in fact, as Gadd (2002) acknowledges, “many men—individually and collectively—are complicit with masculinities that they do not personally aspire to” (p. 63). And, there are certainly countless male advocates working ardently in antiviolence efforts. Importantly though, Gadd (2002) goes on to observe, while “[t]his does not mean that most western men . . . openly condone violence against women and children, . . . it [also does not] deny that under certain (not infrequent) circumstances many men come to treat women—or at least particular groups of women—as legitimate targets of violence, abuse and humiliation” (p. 63).

This cycle of abuse is especially pernicious when mapped onto the broader cultural landscape because the cyclical loop does not allow any of us to “leave” the cycle before it repeats again and again. And so, rather than asking questions like, “Why doesn’t she leave?” we should be asking more productive questions like, “What would it take for a society to leave this pattern behind?” While answering this query is beyond the scope of our analysis here, we hope that by shifting the conversation to recognizing the choice as a collective one (and not just an individual one), we have contributed to ongoing efforts to move past victim-blaming and scapegoating toward demanding widespread accountability and change. Importantly, hegemonic masculinity is not naturally self-reproducing; rather, it must be policed by men and women alike. Thus,
change in culturally specific constructions of hegemonic masculinity must guide our advances in ending U.S. investments in the cultural cycles of abuse.

Coda

As a prime example of the continuing popular discourse surrounding Chris Brown’s assault of Rihanna and the cultural cycle of abuse indicated therein, we would like to offer a postscript commentary on a recent development in this pop-culture saga. As we reached the final revision of this article, Chris Brown performed twice at the 2012 Grammys before wildly enthusiastic audiences and standing ovations. Before the stage lights even cooled, Twitter was inundated with messages of support and adoration for Brown. Among these tweets was a trend of messages from (presumably) young women who affirmed: “I’d let Chris Brown Beat Me” (Stopera, 2012). With tweets like “Not gonna lie... I think I’d let Chris Brown beat me #sosexy #lovehim #awkwardtweet #dontevencare,” these messages went viral by the next day, circulating on Facebook and the Internet widely. In the midst of their dissemination, the website Buzzfeed publicized the tweets’ authors and invited the public to respond. Responses ranged from amusement, to support, to chiding, to threats of brutal violence and rape against the tweeters themselves. This range of cultural responses to the posters’ valorization of domestic abuse—from encouragement to perpetuation of gendered abuse—reinforces the need to continue this conversation.

To say that a particular form of masculinity is hegemonic means “that its exaltation stabilizes a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole. To be culturally exalted, the pattern of masculinity must have exemplars who are celebrated as heroes” (Connell, 1990, p. 83). In light of this analysis, we would contend that both Eminem and Chris Brown are celebrated as cultural heroes, excused (renowned even) for their transgressions against women. In all, this latest incantation of hegemonic masculinity, as buttressed through threats of violence and acts of complicity, remind us that admonition of domestic abuse on the cultural level is certainly not a given, and is something that we must continue to pursue.

Notes

1 All lyrics were transcribed from the song, “Love the Way You Lie,” as available from iTunes. See Grey, Hafermann, and Mathers (2010).
2 In line with other feminist scholars who research representations of gendered violence from a critical communication perspective, we insist that mediated depictions of gendered abuse have significant implications for our cultural understandings of and responses to domestic violence (see, e.g., Cuklanz, 1997, 2000; Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Enck-Wanzer, 2009; Meyers, 1994, 1997, 2004; Moorti, 2002; Projansky, 2001, 2010).
3 “Love the Way You Lie” was nominated for Grammy awards in four categories: Record of the Year, Song of the Year, Best Rap Collaboration, and Best Rap Song. Eminem’s Recovery album also won the Grammy for Best Rap Album of 2010.
4 Eminem was especially criticized for his songs “Kim” and “’97 Bonnie and Clyde” which aurally narrate him murdering and disposing of his ex-wife’s body.
The significance of thinking of conjunctural moments as articulations can be understood through Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s theorization in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985) and in Kevin Michael DeLuca’s (1999) extension of this concept wherein we are reminded that articulation involves calling forth elements and linking elements rhetorically. “The linking of elements into a temporary unity is not necessary, but rather is contingent and particular and is the result of a political and historical struggle” (DeLuca, 1999, p. 335). Thus, it is the job of the critic to identify the nodal points, the points of articulation and linkage, and make the argument for the type of political and historical struggle that she sees occurring at that conjunctural moment.

Lenore Walker (1980) initially conceptualized this “cycle of abuse” as an answer to the question: “Why does she stay?” This theory is linked to what Walker has termed “learned helplessness” which is a condition where victims remain in violent relationships, even knowing that they are being subjugated, due to a perceived absence of agency.

Our focus on domestic violence in a heterosexual context is not to deny the importance of studying same-sex domestic violence. However, given the heterosexual couplings of all individuals involved in this particular social drama, interrogating the implications for same-sex domestic abuse falls outside the purview of our analysis.

Certainly, this threat echoes the reality that many victims of intimate abuse realize—Victims are at most danger of serious injury or death when trying to sever ties with an abusive partner (Berry, 2000).

Notably, there exists a growing appreciation for exploring the performance of and participation in hip-hop culture as a confining and/or liberatory practice (Campbell, 2004; Delgado, 1998; Dimitriadis, 1999; McCune, 2008; Newman, 2005), investigating the circulation of rap within a set of raced and gendered discourses (Cummings & Roy, 2002; McLeod, 1999; Richardson, 2007; Watkins, 2001), addressing the implications of the music technologies (Nielson, 2010), and critically tracking hip-hop as a culture industry (Balaji, 2009; Myer & Kleck, 2007). With regard to hip-hop’s linkages to intimate relationships in particular, *Women & Language* hosted a special issue on the topic, “Hip Hop’s Language of Love,” in Spring 2009 (volume 32, number 2).

Nielsen Soundscan is the official method of tracking sales of music and music video products throughout the United States and Canada.

Stuart Ewen (1988) defines style as “a way that the human values, structures, and assumptions in a given society are aesthetically expressed and received” (p. 3). Style is important, argues Barry Brummett (2008), because style offers a way of understanding the world. Style has the capacity to influence others by providing a “complex system of actions, objects, and behaviors that is used to form messages that announce who we are, who we want to be, and who we want to be considered akin to” (Brummett, 2008, p. xi).

For a more exhaustive exposition on the identification of class aesthetics, see Bourdieu (1984).

For more about the “white trash” aesthetic as it relates to racialized identities, see, Bérubé & Bérubé (1997), McAlistier (2009), and Sweeney (2001).

It ought to be noted too that successful treatment for alcoholism does not necessarily “cure” abusive behaviors (Collins & Spencer, 1999).

Brown pleaded guilty to charges of felonious assault and criminal threats and was sentenced to five years of probation.
Sarah Projansky (2010) offers a compelling intersectional reading of TMZ’s circulation of these photos.

Though Rihanna identifies as being “mixed-race,” tracing her race to her Barbados roots, she is still popularly read in mainstream media texts as Black.

Notably, these two archetypes—the Sapphire and strong Black woman—have morphed into what West (1995) calls the “gangsta girl” image in hip-hop culture who is just as violent as her male peers (p. 296; see also, Stephens & Phillips 2003).

Notably, the term “snapping” is problematized by Marian Meyers (1997) who argues that this word functions to place domestic abuse in the category of “uncontrollable response” rather than premeditated or intentional actions (p. 61).

This reading fits well with numerous popular accounts of the couple’s past relationship as being marked by mutual physical violence (see, e.g., “history of violence,” 2009).

This is not to deny that mutual battery does occur in some relationships. However, it should be noted that often, what is called “mutual battery,” are actually cases where victims defend themselves physically against a more violent, imposing partner.

Hazel V. Carby (1998) forwards the argument that there is not just one singular “race man”; rather there are “race men.” Through her analysis of African American intellectuals, she demonstrates that “[w]hile contemporary black male intellectuals claim to challenge the hegemony of a racialized social formation, most fail to challenge the hegemony of their own assumptions about black masculinity” (p. 6).

In June 2010, Brown performed center stage at the BET awards tribute to Michael Jackson where he was named winner of BET’s Fandemonium award, an award determined by fan vote (Itzkoff, 2010, p. 3). In February 2011, Brown was the musical guest on Saturday Night Live. Even the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence declined the opportunity to speak to Entertainment Weekly about Brown’s return to mainstream fame on this occasion (Wete, 2011).

For a more complete explication of domestic violence from a feminist model of “power and control,” (see Duluth Abuse Intervention Programs, 2008).

References


