

I Like the Way You Rhyme, Boy: Hip Hop Sensibility and Racial Trauma in Django Unchained

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Abstract

Welcome to week two of our February Forum on “Sonic Borders,” a collaboration with the IASPM-US blog in connection with this year’s IASPM-US conference on Liminality and Borderlands, held in Austin, Texas from February 28 to March 3, 2013.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Article, Black Studies, Hip Hop, Music, Popular Music Studies



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Welcome to week two of our February Forum on “Sonic Borders,” a collaboration with the [IASPM-US blog](#) in connection with this year’s [IASPM-US conference](#) on Liminality and Borderlands, held in Austin, Texas from February 28 to March 3, 2013. The “Sonic Borders” forum is a Virtual Roundtable cross-blog entity that will feature six *Sounding Out!* writers posting on Mondays through February 25, and four writers from [IASPM-US](#), posting on Wednesdays starting February 6th and ending February 27th. For an encore of week one of the forum, click [here](#). And now, put your hands together for Regina Bradley!—JSA

I’m most haunted by a scene in the film [Django Unchained](#) (2012) where a slave and former mandingo fighter is torn to bits by dogs offscreen. After seeing the dogs begin to maim the slave, the scene rapidly cuts away to former slave and bounty hunter Django’s expression (played by [Jamie Foxx](#)) while the man hollers in pain amidst the growl of dogs in the background. The scene’s grisliness was not situated within [Quentin Tarantino](#)’s signature visual violence, but in its sound.

Sound better relayed the violence imposed upon the man’s body, signifying the unavailability of literal or visual discourse to speak to the racial trauma black bodies continuously face.



“Django unchained, omaggio a Quentin Tarantino alla Cineteca di Bologna” by Flickr

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Tarantino's use of sound in this scene and the rest of the film capitalizes on an intriguing alternative to investigating racial trauma narratives in our current popular imagination. I know folks are tired of hearing about *Django Unchained*, but hear me out. Er, hear Quentin Tarantino out. No, I'm not talking about interviews or [dribble about how he was a slave in his last life or two](#) but rather the way he manipulates music to present a soundscape where revenge fantasies are okay. Unlike past sonic renderings of slavery like the [O'Jays' track "Ship Ahoy,"](#) *Django* retraces the slave narrative in a contemporary social-cultural moment. Tarantino's redrawing represents how [postracialism](#) provides a scapegoat for (a)historical representations of racial trauma and violence. I am most interested in the ways that the *Django Unchained* soundscape provides Tarantino a way to dabble in what historian and blogger [Jelani Cobb](#) calls "[racial ventriloquism](#)" by allowing him to present a sonically revisionist representation of the intersections of slave discourse, black manhood, and trauma.

If it is true that Jamie Foxx asserted that "[hip hop goes hand in hand with Quentin Tarantino](#)" then *Django* reflects a type of hip hop sensibility that is situated between hip hop's commodification as the most visible form of contemporary black culture and as the most accessible form of blackness and black expression. If I had to pinpoint it, I'd suggest Tarantino's inclusion of two rappers, [Tupac Shakur](#) and [Rick Ross](#), within *Django* is no doubt a nod toward a gangsta rap sensibility that Tarantino appropriates for his slave narrative/western. Shakur's song "Unchained" plays in the film's trailers; Ross's "100 Black Coffins" plays in the movie and its rolling credits. Sampling from Tupac Shakur's music as a member of the group [Outlawz](#) reflects the vengeful, if not nihilistic, undertones of gangsta rap that run parallel to the spaghetti western aesthetic that *Django* is primarily framed within. Not only is *Django* a badass and outlaw in the sense that he is a freed slave bounty hunter roaming the South in search of his woman, but Tupac's song contextualizes him as a *gangsta* badass outlaw bounty hunter who exists in the fringes of normative society. He is not the norm, but rather the exceptionally violent Negro that we as an audience root for. We *want* him to be violent. Violence is not only a fantasy but a *privilege* we want to give *Django* because of the violence inflicted upon him as a former slave.



<https://youtu.be/kCWY60hWJec>

“Unchained,” a mashup of James Brown’s “The Payback” and Tupac Shakur’s posthumous release “Untouchable,” sonically corresponds to these desires, using funk and the underlying association of violence in gangsta rap to provide a backdrop to cheer for Django’s violent revenge. The song utilizes sound bytes of Django and his bounty hunter partner/emancipator King Schultz (played by Christopher Waltz) interwoven with samples of “The Payback” in order to provide the context of why Django becomes unchained and displaced from the traditional impositions of violence seen in slave narratives.

A reflection of hip hop in terms of production – sampling and blending to create a unique new sound – “Unchained” also provides its listeners with a bridge between a (revisionist) slave narrative and contemporary racial violence. As the song opens, a prominent electric guitar strums to remind the listener of its western generic context but gives way to an emphatic crescendo of the horns that introduce “The Payback.” The loudness of the horns signifies the arrival of something great–Django’s arrival. The horns demand the listener’s attention. James Brown sings “sold me out, for chump change. . .told me that they, had it all arranged” sets up Django’s literal and sonic “emancipation,” correlating “sold me out” to being sold as a slave. A sound byte of King Schultz shooting Django’s overseer immediately follows Brown’s verse, bridging Brown’s verse of “time to get ready for the big payback” with Django’s freedom in the film. Django’s change in stature is sonically affirmed by an adamant and hype Shakur, rhetorically asking in loop “Am I wrong ‘cause I wanna get it on til I die?!” Shakur’s voice over the infamous horns of “Payback” and Brown’s signature scream relay the urgency of Django’s mission and past traumas, emphasizing not only black men’s capability but willingness to be violent when threatened.



"Django unchained, omaggio a Quentin Tarantino alla Cineteca di Bologna" by Flickr user Il Fatto Quotidiano under a Creative Commons 2.0 License

Another reading of this loop suggests the inherent need for black men to be violent, an essentialized (mis)conceptualization of contemporary black men within a gangsta rap aesthetic that parallels Tarantino's (re)vengeful intentions for Django Freeman. The call and response between Shakur and the sound byte of Foxx repeating "I love the way you die boy" loosely correlates and subverts the racial trauma that often provides the foundation for slavery discourse. Foxx's sample comes from a scene in the film where Django has just shot and killed his former overseer. The line is an inversion of when Django previously begged for mercy for his wife Broomhilda and the overseer sneered "I like the way you beg, boy." The triumphant rendering of Brown's horns and the loop of Shakur, when heard in conjunction with Foxx's sound byte, signify that Django has, indeed, got the big payoff. The sound bytes of Django's voice provides a challenge to the literal slave's voice while the music provides a backdrop for what a slave's revenge may *sound* like, subverting the racial trauma inflicted on slaves.

James Brown and Tupac Shakur reflect pivotal moments of black masculinity from soul and early renderings of commodified rap, but Rick Ross reflects a more contemporary moment of black masculinity and violence within hip hop as a multicultural space. It is significant that *Django* includes this moment of hip hop because it similarly frames the haziness of racial politics that contextualizes the film. Ross's "100 Black Coffins" showcases a gruff Rick Ross spitting bars about violent repercussions and avenging himself and slave women:



<https://youtu.be/7rHdyofwVlQ>

The track reflects a sonic representation of the American South as a site of racial trauma as seen in the American popular imagination. There is a minute and, if unaware of the film's homage, a quickly fleeting understanding of the black coffin as representative of the original Django's coffin that he carried around with him as a reminder of his traumatic experience and need for revenge. The sonic feel of this track is overtly masculine, consisting of Ross's signature grunt, a lone whistle, a wailing male chorus, and hard-hitting percussion. Ross's demands for black coffins, black pastors, and black bibles against a sonic backdrop of wails and an unsettling bell toll inflict a similarly violent Southern cultural soundscape.

Furthermore, the understanding of blackness as pathological due to the trauma blacks experience, frames Ross's narrative as parallel to Django's (if he were a rapper). I'm particularly struck by "100 Black Coffins" for two reasons: Rick Ross's beat (he never picks a lame one) and Ross' call and response with himself. Furthermore, the urgency and depth that Ross presents in his background ad libs is a haunting reflection of black (slave) men's inability to avenge and protect their families and themselves. Ross' solo call and response signifies a coping mechanism for the solitary existence many slaves faced when disconnected from loved ones. Ross seamlessly interchanges ahistorical images and hip hop memes against a sonic backdrop that reflects the use of sound as a usefully ahistorical space where a 'mash-up' of blacks' past and present can collide. Ross talking about slinging drugs from the block extends to blacks being sold on a slave block without a question of how the two correlate. This is undoubtedly problematic but, within the context of *Django* as a revenge fantasy film, is acceptable because it is part of the performance of a pseudo-slave narrative.



"12.25.12 – "Django Unchained""
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Idealistically, critically engaging *Django* as a sonic discourse could provide bridges to similarly violent – yet very real – representations of sonic violence in the popular imagination like [Trayvon Martin's 911 tapes](#) and the recent [murder of Jordan Davis](#). It is also important to point out the existence of nonmusical cues of silence and screaming presented by [Kerry Washington's](#) character, Broomhilda, and what they suggest about the treatment of (slave) women's narratives and agency in a sonic space, an issue that the two hip hop tracks do not broach. Overall, however, *Django* pushes the envelope sonically and visually in reference to sonic borders of blackness and the usefulness of the sound of racial trauma to contextualizing black masculinity, provoking a complicated question: in what ways does music blur contemporary and historical black discourses, creating a hazy representation of not only what blackness does, but what black pathology sounds like?

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