



The People vs. Megan Thee Stallion: Anti-fandom, Spreadable Misogynoir, and Faux Fandom

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Abstract

This essay explores the online response to the shooting incident involving hip-hop artist, Megan Thee Stallion and fellow rapper Tory Lanez. In this essay, the theories of spreadable misogyny, by Suzanne Scott, and anti-fandom, by Jonathan Gray, are employed to examine the ways in which Stallion's anti-fans engaged in spreadable misogynoir towards her, particularly in the aftermath of the shooting. The essay analyzes the dynamics of online fandom, the reframing of Stallion as a culprit rather than a victim, and the erasure of her identity as a Black woman. It discusses the ways in which memes and commentary on the situation by fans, anti-fans, and other celebrities were used to minimize the Stallion-Lanez shooting and the effect that had on Stallion, other Black female celebrities and other Black women. The essay also highlights the complex position Black women are placed in when seeking justice for themselves. Furthermore, it investigates the emergence of a faux fandom for Lanez built on demonizing Stallion. Through an examination of social media reactions, memes, and public discourse, this essay highlights the pervasive misogynoir faced by Stallion and Black women in and outside the music industry and the challenges they encounter in asserting their autonomy and seeking justice for the harm done to them by their male counterparts.

Keywords

Misogynoir, Megan Thee Stallion, anti-fandom, spreadable misogyny



Hip-hop artist Megan Thee Stallion (real name Megan Pete) rose to fame in 2018 following the release of her album *Tina Snow* (Walters, 2021). She became a mainstream success with the 2020 album *Good News*. Known for hugely successful tracks like "Hot Girl Summer" (2019) and "WAP" (2020), Stallion's musical persona is one that celebrates Black women's sexual autonomy and empowerment. However, her "sexually charged lyrics" (Rajah, 2022, p. 59) have received mixed responses from audiences. Not surprisingly, some hip-hop fans have taken to social media over the years to criticize Stallion's risqué lyrics even though they feature comparably sexual themes to many popular male rappers. Like other women artists breaking into the male-dominated hip-hop genre, Stallion has been subjected to criticism by hip-hop fans and social media users alike for not being able to rap "for real." The concepts of situational authenticity, by Geoff Harkness, and hero vs. celebrity, by Robert van Krieken, will be used to explain such criticisms. Despite these criticisms, Stallion continues to use her music and rap to "set an example for all ladies to embrace their confidence and sexuality" (Gillam, 2022, para. 2). While Stallion's sex-positive music for women has been an oft-cited "problem" for her online critics, a shooting incident in 2020 became a new focal point for online "haters" that seek to undermine Stallion's worth as a Black female hip-hop artist. In this essay, I employ the theories of spreadable misogyny by Suzanne Scott, and anti-fandom, by Jonathan Gray, to illustrate how the shooting of Meg Thee Stallion perpetuated the narrative that Black women's safety is of less concern than their male and/or white counterparts.

Stallion was shot in July of 2020, but it was not until December 2022 that Tory Lanez was found guilty of shooting Stallion (Begert et al., 2022). Lanez, like Stallion, is a hip-hop artist who gained increased popularity following his viral Instagram lives during the quarantine period of the COVID-19 pandemic (Leftridge, 2020). During the two-year period of the Stallion-Lanez case, the situation had been subject to much speculation on social media and in the news and popular culture. When news reports of the situation first came about, Stallion was not forthcoming about being shot, claiming to have injured her foot by stepping on glass (Begert et al., 2022). When she confirmed that she had actually been shot, many social media users speculated that she had lied to protect Lanez, who had been a suspect in social media discourse since news of the shooting first broke. Stallion eventually clarified that she had held back from disclosing her shooting as she feared she, or other people involved in the shooting may endure police brutality, stating, "I didn't want to see anybody die...I didn't want to die" (Begert et al.,

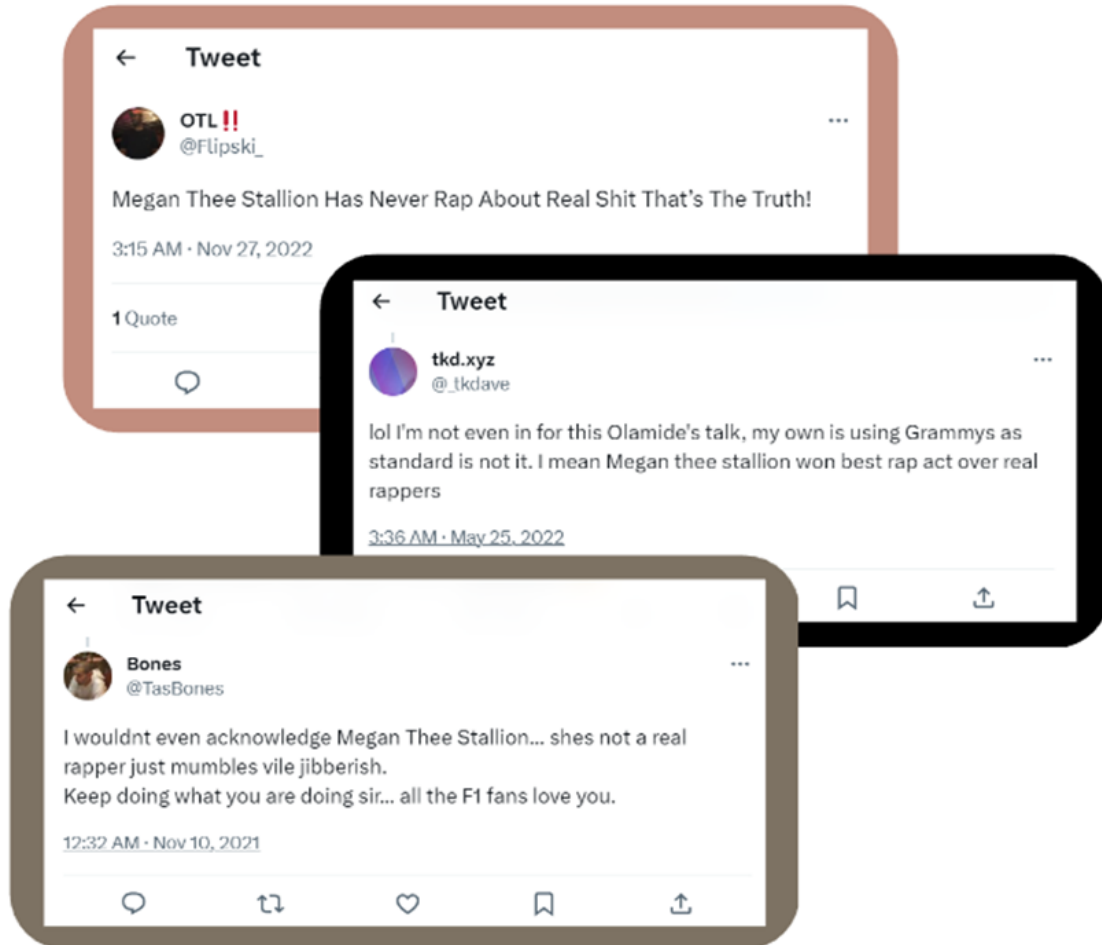
2022, para. 23). She also noted increased tensions between police and Black people in the wake of George Floyd's murder less than two months earlier, as well as wanting to avoid being tagged a "snitch" (Begert et al., 2022, para. 24) as reasons for not opening up sooner. Stallion attempted to keep things under wrap away from the internet and only named Lanez as her shooter in August 2020 after his team was "going to these blogs lying...dragging it" ("Megan Thee Stallion claims," 2020). Eventually, Stallion admitted to trying to protect Lanez ("Megan Thee Stallion claims," 2020). The entire ordeal between Stallion and Lanez is a clear example of the lengths Black women often go to protect other people – and specifically Black men – even at their own expense. Still, public response was divided, with some fans supporting Stallion while other commenters used this as an opportunity to further demonize her.

According to Gray (2003), an anti-fan is someone who "strongly dislike[s] a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (p. 70). This definition of anti-fan is well-suited for the hip-hop fans and social media users who have expressed their dislike of Stallion because of her skill and ability, or lack thereof in their opinions, when it comes to rapping. This strong dislike of Stallion by her anti-fans has resulted in what Scott terms spreadable misogyny, or in Stallion's case, misogynoir, which refers to the intersection of gender and race-based discrimination faced by Black women.

In her analysis of the "idiot nerd girl" and "fake geek girl" memes, Scott (2019) argues that male-dominated online fan communities have used misogyny to limit women fans' access to certain fandoms. She refers to this as "spreadable misogyny" – that is, sexist media messages that are deliberately spread and circulated by (male) fans who have "position[ed] themselves as antibodies" to attack or fight against women who are seen as viruses (Scott, 2019, p. 84). According to Scott, spreadable misogyny is seen in the "idiot nerd girl" and "fake geek girl" memes, which are employed by "fan boys" to "protect" their fandom by keeping women out. In these online fandoms, women are deemed to be unknowledgeable "interlopers" who only want to attract attention from fan boys (Scott, 2019, p. 93). Spreadable misogyny excludes other fans, that is, female fans, based on their gender. As such, this article builds on Scott's work on spreadable misogyny as well as Gray's work on anti-fandom to explore the ways in which Stallion's anti-fans engaged in spreadable misogynoir following her precarious shooting in 2020 up until Lanez's guilty verdict in 2022.

Figure 1

Screenshot of compiled tweets on Stallion by Twitter users



(Bones, 2021; OTL, 2022; Tkd.xyz, 2022).

As alluded to earlier, Stallion has had many anti-fans since the inception of her career, with many claiming she is not a "real rapper" as displayed in the tweets shown in Figure 1 (Bones, 2021; OTL, 2022; Tkd.xyz, 2022). The archetypal definition of a real or authentic rapper, as underscored by Harkness (2012), is "a black male from the urban core, who is non-commercial, underground, highly skilled, and true to himself" (p. 288). In his article, Harkness (2012) goes on to discuss the idea of situational authenticity as one that occurs when an

individual negotiates "realness" by highlighting some characteristics of said realness or authenticity and minimizing other characteristics (p. 288). The boundaries of situational authenticity in rap are drawn or negotiated by rappers and their audiences as a way to determine insiders and outsiders (Harkness, 2012). Based on this concept, the archetypal definition of a "real rapper" is likely what the Twitter users employ when disqualifying Stallion as one.

Following the shooting with Lanez and his consequent guilty verdict, many claimed that their dislike of Stallion was because she was bringing "a Black man down" (Draggur, 2022; Rvzxd, 2022). All of these examples and more can be found by searching "Megan Thee Stallion" alongside the words and phrases "trash," "real rap," "real rapper," and other similar words or phrases. In tweets such as the ones cited above, many hip-hop listeners express their displeasure with Stallion and her music. In accusing Stallion of attempting to tear a Black man down, these anti-fans put her in a complex position of either choosing to seek justice for the harm done to her or taking part in the downfall of a Black man by ruining his reputation and sending him to jail. This was an especially difficult situation for Stallion to have experienced given that the shooting had occurred just months after the murder of George Floyd and the consequent #BlackLivesMatter movement, which highlighted the oppression of Black people, and specifically Black men, at the hands of American police. This reframing of anti-fans' dislike of Stallion for being a traitor to her race and being on the side of the oppressor gave them a shield under which to hide while perpetuating spreadable misogynoir against her.

Aside from the opinions shared by social media users, what was also interesting to observe were the male hip-hop artists whose social media posts further fuelled Stallion's anti-fandom. Rapper, 50 Cent, for instance, posted a meme (Figure 2) that likened her situation to that of Jussie Smollett, an actor who lied about being a target and victim of racial and homophobic hate (Pop Crave, 2022). The rapper also made another meme post (Figure 3), making light of the situation when the shooting was first reported. In the meme, he references a scene from the movie *Boyz n the Hood*, where the character Ricky was shot. These memes posted by 50 Cent – and subsequently circulated by his online followers – exemplify spreadable misogynoir by showing how Black women's safety is not taken seriously by society. The use of memes to make light of such a critical situation, particularly by a fellow rapper in the music industry who had, ironically, built his public persona on having been shot, was appalling. It demonstrated the misogynoir that Stallion and many other Black women face where their safety

is not given the same level of concern as their male and/or white counterparts. Referring back to Scott's points, I argue that these memes that made fun of and accused Stallion of lying about her situation also served as additional evidence of anti-fans' dislike of Stallion and why she could not be considered a "real" artist in the Hip-Hop industry – which is notably male-dominated. These memes were a way for anti-fans to try to push Stallion and her majority-female fanbase out of Hip-Hop.

Figure 2

Screenshot of meme-tweet by rapper, 50 Cent



(Pop Crave, 2022).

Figure 3

Screenshot of meme posted by 50 Cent on Instagram



(Ivey, 2020)

Apart from minimizing Stallion's experiences and overall causing her distress, the reframing of the situation to antagonize Stallion bore a consequence of a "faux fandom" for Lanez that was built on demonizing a victim of assault. I use the term faux fandom because Lanez's celebrity expanded in the wake of his shooting Stallion. Lanez was "not a household name" before the shooting and his case involving Stallion (Begert et al., 2022). While a guilty verdict was likely not desired by Lanez, his popularity has increased since the ordeal. Following the shooting, Lanez's profile as a celebrity rose. In May 2020, prior to the shooting, Lanez was reported to have had 9.2 million followers on Instagram (Leftridge, 2020). However, Lanez gained almost 3 million followers on Instagram, with a current follower count of 11.9 million (Lanez, n.d.), even after the guilty verdict. He has also garnered support from fans and the entertainment industry, like Joe Budden (Begert et al., 2022). Evidently, being found guilty of shooting at a Black woman – even as a celebrity – is not enough for a (Black) male artist to lose support. For the most part, support for Lanez has not been due to fans' genuine appreciation of

his work as an artist. Instead, his fame is founded on notoriety – an inferior type of renown based on media discourse, rather than talent (Boorstin as quoted in van Krieken, 2018, p. 11). Lanez's newfound fame is also an illustration of van Krieken's (2018) argument that celebrity is ordinal and a sliding scale: Lanez has become more of a celebrity since reports of Stallion's shooting. Ultimately, the assault on Stallion granted Lanez a faux fandom predicated on misogynoir.

Building off of Scott's work, in addition to the "humorous" memes circulated by 50 Cent, spreadable misogynoir was also evident in other high-profile artists' social media comments that minimized Stallion's experience. Canadian-born rapper, Drake, alluded that Stallion had lied about getting shot in a song he released in 2022 titled *Circo Loco* (George, 2022). As well, Joe Budden a well-known podcaster (and former rapper), used The Joe Budden Podcast as a platform to discuss his perspective on the Stallion-Lanez shooting during the assault trial (George, 2022). Budden's remarks discredited Stallion, targeting her character in ad hominem attacks. He stated that he had witnessed Stallion do "horrible things" to people he knew and that "[y]ou can't just treat my friends...a certain way" (George, 2022; Meara, 2022). While Budden and 50 Cent did eventually issue public apologies, their decisions – as colleagues of both Stallion and Lanez – to minimize and trivialize Stallion's shooting while it was still a hot topic in media, (likely) knowing the appeal it would have to anti-fans, can be seen as a deliberate attempt to reframe Stallion as the culprit rather than the victim. The misogynoir evident in public discourse surrounding Lanez's shooting of Stallion reframed her as unbelievable, as harming a Black man and, thus, as complicit in white supremacy.

This reframing can be explained by van Krieken's (2018) idea of the hero versus celebrity and the concept of celebrity as ordinal. In his article, van Krieken (2018) describes the hero as someone who is authentic and has "deep" achievements, whereas a celebrity is synthetic, has "shallow" achievements, and is regarded as being "famous for being famous" (pp. 10-11). Additionally, van Krieken (2018) proposes that the framing of celebrity has an "ordinal quality rather than a nominal category" (p. 12). The ordinal quality of celebrity means that one is not either a celebrity or not, but rather "more or less of a celebrity" (van Krieken, 2018, p. 12). In this sense, celebrity is a sliding scale along which individuals move. These ideas of hero vs celebrity and the ordinality of celebrity are exemplified in Stallion's case. I argue that many anti-fans view of Stallion as "trash" or not a "real rapper" arise based on their view of Stallion as a celebrity and not a hero. In addition to that, Stallion's identity as a Black woman and her


position on the celebrity scale compared to other celebrities – including other Black women like Beyoncé and Rihanna, who are inarguably bigger celebrities or even heroes – affords anti-fans the opportunity to trivialize her shooting and reframe her from victim to culprit.

The reframing of Stallion as someone trying to "bring a Black man down" not only dismisses her experience as the victim of a shooting, but also erases her identity as a Black woman. In a now-deleted tweet reposted by another user, a social media user took to Twitter to say "[w]e really failed as a black community bc why we let the white law get involved in a drunk fight that coulda been talked out" (Natalie, 2022). As other Twitter users pointed out, this tweet and others like it harmfully reconstruct the situation and downplay the impacts it had for the real victim, Stallion. By calling the shooting a "drunk fight", Stallion's experiences are trivialized, and her accounts of the event are called into question. It also downplays what justice for Stallion should look like as something to be "talked out" between people instead of the trial with a guilty verdict. As aforementioned, it erases Stallion's Blackness and ostracizes her from the Black community as someone plotting against the downfall of the community by rightfully seeking justice against a guilty Black man.

Overall, it is clear that online anti-fandoms facilitated the spread of "misogynoir" in response to Lanez's assault on Stallion. This anti-fandom consequentially resulted in a faux fandom for Lanez – her shooter – which is also based on misogynoir. Stallion's identity as a Black woman, coupled with her confident sexuality, has been the contention of many people for a while. As such, the shooting gave anti-fans a mask under which to engage in spreadable misogynoir towards her. Moreover, the memes were harmful to not only Stallion (and her mental health) but also to all the Black women who witnessed other people joke about the harm that was done to someone just like them.

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