

Film Review

Review of *Zola* (Janicza Bravo, 2020)

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Zola is a comedy-drama film directed by Janicza Bravo and starring Taylour Paige and Riley Keough, based on a “mostly true” 148-tweet long thread by A’Ziah “Zola” King that went viral in October 2015.¹ The story follows the titular character, a waitress and an exotic dancer named Zola, on a road trip to Florida to dance at a strip club with a new friend and sex worker, Stefani.

In many ways, King’s tweets constituted one of the first, and certainly the most dramatic, demonstration of Twitter’s capacity to offer a compelling, serialized narrative. The original tweets were posted before Twitter had even implemented its capability for “threading” linking tweets together so that they could be read in a serial format, in chronological order. Twitter followers began “tuning in live” to follow the story as King posted each week. New followers who noticed King’s tweets going viral had to scroll far back enough on her timeline to read the tweets in reverse order from the beginning. Soon, users compiled the tweets in their correct order and distributed them as .jpgs for those who hadn’t been following along in real time. The next month, David Kushner of *Rolling Stone* published a feature fleshing out King’s tale, which had circulated via the dramatic hashtag #TheStory.

While King was initially tweeting the story on the microblogging platform, which limits each tweet to 140 characters, Kushner says King was “riffing on the reactions of her followers who were responding in real time.”² Even as the story was emerging, Twitter fans discussed their dream casts for a film adaptation of the story. Not only did the story go viral, it sustained a

1. Janicza Bravo, dir., *Zola* (New York: A24: 2020).

2. David Kushner, “The Story Behind the Greatest Stripper Saga Ever Tweeted,” *Rolling Stone*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/zola-tells-all-the-real-story-behind-the-greatest-stripper-saga-ever-tweeted-73048/>.

remarkable level of investment by its devotees, which Bravo counts herself among, telling NPR she wanted to direct the film adaptation from the moment she read it.

The film premiered in January 2020 at the Sundance Film Festival, a largely white space despite its conscious attempts to lift up filmmakers of diverse backgrounds and a revered taste-making institution in US film. After its festival premiere, *Zola's* theatrical release was delayed until summer 2021. As distributors were scrambling to find a business model for premiering movies during the dismal theater box office numbers during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was released via video-on-demand (VOD) a mere three weeks after its theatrical release.

Produced by the independent company Killer Films, and financed and distributed by A24, the project started with a screenplay written by Andrew Neel and Mike Roberts for James Franco to direct but eventually landed in the hands of writer-director Janicza Bravo, and she brought on playwright Jeremy O. Harris, whose *Slave Play* broke the record for most Tony nominations after its Broadway premiere in 2019, as her cowriter. There was little precedent for optioning the rights for a Twitter thread. Still, King was given an executive producer credit on the film and consulted closely with Bravo throughout the writing process.

Bravo's first short film *Eat* (2011) was acquired by VICE Media, and her second, *Gregory Go Boom* (2013), notably premiered during YouTube Comedy Week before screening at the Sundance Film Festival. In these films, Bravo focused on the emptiness and absurdity of her white protagonists, explaining to *OkayPlayer*, "I tend to be a lone black person in a lot of white space. I am constantly navigating white space and feeling like a bit of a foreigner, an alien, or I'm always in the minority and I guess what I wanted to be engaging with or in a conversation with was how I saw whiteness. How I saw white people together."³ In *Zola*, she works with her first black female

3. "Lemon' Director Janicza Bravo on Navigating the Industry as Woman of Color [Interview]," *Okayplayer*, August 18, 2017, <https://www.okayplayer.com/culture/janicza-bravo-lemon-director-brett-gelman-interview.html>.

protagonist but still approaches whiteness in her work with the same critical eye, “I would say that one of my themes is an anthropological relationship to whiteness. . . . Something I am really attracted to in my own work is treating white as visible rather than invisible.”⁴

Bravo acknowledged that the script that existed when she was brought onto the project, written by two white men, felt “very masculine.” She brought on queer, black playwright Harris to rewrite the script with her. The result is a story about sex work, sex trafficking, and race that upends both the male gaze and the white gaze. The *Rolling Stone* article on which it is based summarizes King’s tweet thread in this way: “It reads like *Spring Breakers* meets *Pulp Fiction*, as told by Nicki Minaj.”⁵ Bravo’s film indeed shares stylistic similarities with Harmony Korine’s 2013 *Spring Breakers*. It is set in Florida and conveys a sense of place with an aesthetic of hyperreal, neon grittiness. Alluding to the importance of the medium’s relationship to the content, cinematographer Ari Wegner told Kodak’s blog the decision to shoot on 16-millimeter film came from Bravo and Egner’s love for “how film records skin tones, and this is a film that in many ways is about skin and bodies.”⁶ Wegner and Bravo pulled inspiration from wide-ranging references such as William Eggleston’s photography and Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, and the result is sumptuous and stylish.

Instead of shying away from the way phones and social media dominate everyday life, Bravo leans into it. Bravo and Harris consciously capitalized on the first-person narration, peppering the film with actual tweets from the original thread, delivered directly to camera and punctuated with the Twitter whistle notification sound. The iPhone lock-screen clock appears throughout the film. The interjections simultaneously refocus viewers on the fact that this story is based on a true one, honoring A’Ziah King’s

4. Jourdain Searles, “Janicza Bravo Loved ‘Zola’ When It First Hit Twitter. Here’s How She Brought It to the Big Screen [Interview],” *Okayplayer*, July 9, 2021, <https://www.okayplayer.com/culture/zola-movie-janicza-bravo-interview.html>.

5. Kushner, “The Story Behind.”

6. “How DP Ari Wenger ACS Used Kodak 16mm to Create a Wild and Colorful . . .” *Kodak*, October 28, 2021. <https://www.kodak.com/en/motion/blog-post/zola>.

first-person point of view, and reminding the viewer of the mediated nature of the story. It is a filmic retelling of a retelling, where the audience is repeatedly reminded of the artifice of the spectacle in a Brechtian *Verfremdung* (distancing) or alienation effect.

With its fidelity to King's original narration of events, the screenplay by Harris and Bravo and the film itself stays firmly grounded in Zola's experience as a black woman but also takes time to invite its white audience in. On the first page of the screenplay, after referencing the women putting gel on their baby hairs, an asterisk explains to the reader that "baby hairs are the wispy hairs that grow along the hairline." The screenplay and the film take time to define terms and situate the scenes culturally for those not in the know. Later, once Zola has commenced her "hoe trip" with Stefani, her foolishly devoted boyfriend, Derrek, and her "roommate," known only as X, the cracks begin to show. When X takes them to a dingy motel, Stefani tells Zola that X takes care of her. Zola pauses to explain to the audience (again a direct quote from King's original tweets) that "'taking care of me' in stripper language means that was her pimp." These asides, acknowledging that at least some of the audience will be viewing this film from outside the culture it represents, invites them in but also serves to alienate, reminding white viewers that they are outsiders, tourists in this particular segment of society.

The tension between Zola (Paige) and her new friend Stefani, played by Riley Keough, is present from the first shot. The film opens with Zola and Stefani getting ready in the mirror, their gestures mirroring each other. Immediately Zola breaks the fourth wall with the first line, the very same line that opened King's original Twitter thread: "You wanna hear the story of how me and this bitch here fell out?" From the first frames, Stefani and Zola are framed as foils, placed in visual opposition with each other, the narrative tension derived primarily from this initial question of not whether but *how* they will fall out. Shortly after Stefani asks Zola to "go somewhere with her," they are again found face to face in a literal hall of mirrors.

The theme is underlined further as the new friends bond over their shared experiences with duplicitous and jealous "frenemies." Zola states, "Same bitch

that wanna smile in your face be the same bitch that wanna come for you later.” The air of playful, sisterly solidarity they share as femmes and sex workers is shown as precarious from the start. As Bravo told *Salon*, “I think it’s a cautionary tale about making friends with white people, actually.”⁷

Bravo’s direction and Paige and Keough’s performances turn the mirror back on white viewers, and the laughs generated by Keough’s performance as Stefani are particularly complicated in an era of ever-increasing digital blackface on platforms like TikTok. Stefani is, as Bravo put it to *Rolling Stone*, “a sort-of minstrel character,”⁸ and as the story progresses, she becomes increasingly grotesque. The screenplay introduces Stefani as “white, shifty-eyed and ratchet.” In *Double Negative*, Raquel J. Gates writes, “In common parlance, ‘ratchet’ connotes behavior that is crude, socially unacceptable, and, more often than not, associated with lower-class black vernacular culture.”⁹ Once their road trip to Florida to dance at what Stefani promises will be a particularly lucrative club commences, Stefani’s charm starts to wear thin. Zola’s unamused, deadpan expression in the face of Stefani’s appropriation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) signals the critical distance Bravo encourages viewers to take. Paige’s face ripples with disgust, disbelief, and exhaustion. White viewers are offered the opportunity not just to see themselves but to see how they are seen. Keough’s satirical performance garnered significant praise, and her own biography adds yet another layer of complication to her character’s appropriation of black mannerisms and vocabulary: Keough is the granddaughter of Elvis Presley. The tension between Stefani’s appropriation of black culture and her ready reliance on white victimhood, added to her culpability in Zola’s endangerment and sexual exploitation, neatly and compellingly make white viewers complicit in any identification with her character.

7. “Zola” Director on Making a Stripper and Sex Movie That Looks and Feels ‘Consensual,’” *Salon*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.salon.com/2021/06/29/zola-janizca-bravo/>.

8. Kushner, “The Story Behind.”

9. Raquel J. Gates, *Double Negative: The Black Image and Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018).

The reality of racism continually asserts itself in their sex work. After arriving in Florida, Zola's first dance at the club is interrupted by a skinny white man who tucks a dollar into her panties while telling her, "You look a lot like Whoopi Goldberg." When their night at the strip club yields disappointing results, X informs them he set them up on Backpage, a website where "you buy and sell sex." Zola tries to leave, and X threatens her, reminding her he knows where she lives. Once X has left, Zola informs Stefani she will not be sleeping with anyone, and when Zola greets a customer at the door, he stares at her blankly, resentfully spitting out, "I ordered a white chick." Even after Stefani has deceived and attempted to exploit her, Zola encourages Stefani to ask for better compensation than X is offering her. "Pussy is worth thousands, bitch," she implores as she helps Stefani increase her prices and take new photographs for her ad.

When Zola confronts Stefani about the deceptive pretense of the trip, Stefani denies any responsibility for entrapping Zola in this sex trafficking scheme, invoking her own victimhood as she claims she's scared of X, too, and is doing "everything for my baby." Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling describe the kind of rhetorical strategies that Stefani's character embodies: "White victimhood, 'well-meaningness' and cluelessness, as well as discourses of disgust and patronage directed at black women—in a way that operates to both reproduce and conceal white privilege."¹⁰ Bravo not only upends the white gaze in her filmmaking but the male gaze as well, confronting the audience with a montage of customers arriving and touching Stefani, and then a succession of flaccid penises of various shapes and sizes and grotesque orgasmic facial expressions. Notably, Bravo made a conscious choice not to include any full female nudity in the film, instead sourcing actors from a local nudist colony to comprise the montage of penises.

10. Dreama G. Moon and Michelle A. Holling, "White Supremacy in Heels': (White) Feminism, White Supremacy, and Discursive Violence," *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 17, no. 2 (2020): 253–60, <http://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2020.1770819>.

Nowhere is Stefani's identification with whiteness more clear, and clearly satirized, than in the dream-like sequence inserting Stefani's rebuttal of Zola's version of events. After arriving at a house for group sex, which Zola again refuses to participate in, Stefani is on her knees, surrounded by men in matching boxers, when she breaks the fourth wall to defend herself against Zola's narrative authority. Underscored by lullaby-like music, Stefani, now dressed in a prim and professional pink skirt suit with her hair tied back properly, addresses the camera as she denies Zola's account of the trip. The text itself is drawn from the Reddit post by the woman Stefani's character is based on, disputing King's version of events. Stefani denies ever prostituting herself, claiming instead that Zola sold sex for money. The sequence is heightened and absurd—Keough's performance, the baby-pink costuming, and the dramatic irony of her claims, offered after we have seen so much duplicity and exploitation from Stefani, is stark. Here, the filmmakers seem to say, "See, the satire of white people writes itself."

As Zola and Stefani walk down the hallway toward their final out-call appointment, X's voice notes that this client wanted "two bitches." Zola encourages Stefani once again to stop working for X. Stefani ignores her, and when the door opens, a man Derrek met at the motel pulls Stefani into the room by force as Zola runs down the hall to safety, calling X for help. X arrives with a gun while Zola and Derrek panic downstairs.

Though it was Derrek's mistake that put the women in the danger, X chastises Zola for abandoning Stefani: "You're supposed to be looking out for her!" To which she replies, "Who's looking out for me?" In their attempt to retrieve Stefani, X, Zola, and Derrek are held in the room at gunpoint. We see Stefani's heeled foot sticking out of a closet, unsure if she is dead or not. While X and the man argue, a shot of Zola transforms into a swirling mass of light, reminiscent of an early computer screensaver accompanied with white noise. Her dissociation is broken when X offers Zola to the man in repayment. While the man sexually assaults Zola, X pulls a gun and creates a distraction long enough for them to escape with the guns and the unconscious Stefani. They escape to X's house, where Zola insists it is time for

her to leave. X promises to get her and Derrek tickets home. Upon realizing that Stefani will be staying with X, Derrek threatens suicide, jumping over the balcony of the modernist white-marble beach house.

Zola grapples with racism and sex trafficking from the point of view of a black femme sex worker, but rather than leaning into melodrama and moralizing, it preserves King's original authorial voice—flippant, confessional, intimate but with a degree of comedic distance. As King herself told Kusher for his original *Rolling Stone* article, "I made people who probably wouldn't want to hear a sex trafficking story want to be a part of it," she says, "because it was entertaining."¹¹

Despite a spine-tingling sense of suspense in the final sequence, Bravo insists the film is a comedy, "And in every great comedy you have your straight man, and you have your buffoons. Aziah wrote the story as the straight man. So that meant that everyone else was the buffoon." Indeed, Bravo pulls off a tremendous feat of tone with *Zola*, the tension of the culminating assault-at-gunpoint scenario closely followed by a sight-gag vomit moment that would fit in a conventional Apatow-style comedy. Still, throughout, the specter of racial violence looms in the background, from a confederate flag waving out the car window on their way to Florida to a scene of police violently arresting a man as the car ferries them from one appointment to the next.

If the original Twitter thread is, as the film's cowriter Jeremy O. Harris put it, "an epic poem," then the film flirts more with Brecht's epic theater.¹² The fourth wall is continually broken with Zola's narration and its accompanying Twitter whistle sound effect. We identify with Zola's "straight-man" narration and even empathize with the horrors she is subjected to (it should not be lost on the viewers that it is only Zola's subjection to sexual assault that allows them all to escape the group of men that have

11. Kushner, "The Story Behind."

12. Debanjali Bose, "'Zola' Writer Jeremy O. Harris Says the Movie's Abrupt Ending Mirrors the Dissolution of Zola and Stefani's Friendship," *Insider*, July 3, 2021. <https://www.insider.com/zola-abrupt-ending-mirrors-stefani-zola-friendship-ending-2021-6>.

taken Stefani hostage). The stylish aesthetic and buoyant dialogue make the otherwise dark material palatable. At the same time, the use of montage, interruption, and repetition in the editing continually remind the viewer of the constructed nature of the story, refusing immersion and identification and prompting analysis of the intersecting web of race, class, and gender in which the characters operate. The plot evolves episodically, and, in the end, we are denied any meaningful narrative closure. Harris has said that the film's abrupt ending intentionally mirrored the abrupt end to Zola and Stefani's friendship. After enacting the violence of trafficking and assault on Zola, in the final shot, as they drive Stefani's boyfriend, Derrek, to the hospital, Stefani leans from the front seat of the car, looking pleadingly at Zola, still in effect a hostage, and says, "Girl, you know I love you." The voice-over from the beginning returns: "You wanna hear a story about how me and this bitch here fell out? It's kind of long, but it's full of suspense." It is effectively jarring: we are not offered a moment of Zola's escape from her captors (only the knowledge that, to narrate the story, she must have), nor do we see Stefani or X meet any consequences—this white woman's betrayal of another black sex worker is papered over with the language of love and sisterhood while nothing meaningfully changes.

What could have easily been a cautionary tale, or "human interest" story about human trafficking, *Zola* delivers a stylish, visually stunning film that speaks the language of the social media generation, urging deeper thought about the power structures at play in such exploitation and the audience's own complicity in them. Stefani is perhaps so deep in denial of her own complicity and her own violence that she believes what she says. A classical, Aristotelian resolution of the story might have allowed the white feminist spectator to disidentify with the contradictions Stefani presents, getting to see her either learn her lesson or be punished accordingly. Instead, in that final moment, Zola's distant gaze and her silence allows the absurdity of Stefani's condition to rattle around in its own self-made container of justification, denial, and self-importance—and unsettles the viewer to examine their own.

