GAZING AT THE SPECTACLE OF RHETORICAL PLAY: MADONNA’S MUSIC VIDEOS REVEAL POSSIBILITES FOR FOSTERING AGENCY

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Lindsey Elizabeth Banister
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The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Project of Lindsey Elizabeth Banister:

Gazing at the Spectacle of Rhetorical Play: Madonna’s Music Videos Reveal Possibilities for Fostering Agency

Suzanne Bordelon, Chair
Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies

Glen McClish
Department of Rhetoric and Writing Studies

Valerie Renegar
School of Communication

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DEDICATION

To my mom who has always been my biggest fan and to my dad for always reminding me: “When something gets in your way, TURN!”
I know I’m not the best singer or dancer in the world. I know that. But I’m not interested in
that, either. I’m interested in pushing buttons.

-Madonna
ABSTRACT OF THE PROJECT

Gazing at the Spectacle of Rhetorical Play: Madonna’s Music Videos Reveal Possibilities for Fostering Agency

by

Lindsey Elizabeth Banister
Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Writing Studies
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Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards suggest that contradiction, as a rhetorical tool of strategic choice, provides women with the opportunity to cultivate agency in “Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism”. By examining various third wave feminist texts, Renegar and Sowards illuminate how contradictions function as useful rhetorical tools for negotiating the complicated world we live in and for developing agency in new ways. To posit contradictions as a strategic choice suggests that there are possibly new ways to evaluate how we rhetorically read and understand texts, and in the case of this study, a new way to examine the work Madonna is doing in her music videos.

Madonna—as an image—continually presents contradictory aspects in her music videos. The visual elements of male gaze and female spectacle are dominant characteristics of her videos and provide typical evidence of contradictions working to enhance Madonna’s agency. Contradiction allows for possibilities of self-determination, transcendence, and counter-imaginings that embody and foster a sense of agency through its various usages. Therefore, contradiction, in this sense, is conceptualized as performative and participatory and creates opportunities for a self-determination that enhances agency. Through her performances in videos such as “Material Girl,” “Express Yourself,” and “Justify My Love,” Madonna presents images that challenge male-female relationships through visual forms of sexual expression, and she invites her audience to participate in a new discourse that preaches female empowerment. However, behind this professed rhetoric of female empowerment lies the underlying motivation of female desirability, which links female sexual expression—as spectacle—to the appeal of the male gaze. And in appealing to the male gaze, the female spectacle turns into female exploitation. Therefore, by extending Renegar and Sowards’s theory of contradiction in third wave feminist texts to Madonna’s music videos, I contended that Madonna’s music videos simultaneously empower and undercut female liberation and in doing so demonstrate the functionality of contradiction.

Madonna’s use of contradiction—specifically in terms of how she plays with the rhetorical forms of gaze and spectacle to form her rhetoric of female empowerment and exploitation—magnifies a possible innovative process that allows women to claim agency in a manner that is unmarred by patriarchal dilution. This analysis, thus, not only augments research on Madonna, but it also suggests that we should reevaluate preconceived notions of rhetorical terms—such as contradiction. Most important, this analysis of contradiction in Madonna’s music videos indicates a need for further analysis of the functionality of
contradiction so that we can locate more ways for women, specifically, to better develop their positions and sense of agency within society.
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GAZING AT THE SPECTACLE OF RHETORICAL PLAY: MADONNA’S MUSIC VIDEOS REVEAL POSSIBILITIES FOR FOSTERING AGENCY

In the 1980s, pop icon Madonna championed a radical and seductive anthem: “if you want it right now/ make him show you how/ express what he’s got/ oh baby ready or not express yourself” (“Express Yourself”). While seeming to promote female empowerment, Madonna’s desire to continually challenge the boundaries of social acceptability—specifically through sexual expression—led her down a path of playing with representations of exploitation and exhibitionism. Due to her constant toying with social dichotomies, as displayed through the profuse visual images of her in the media, many have found Madonna to be a figure ripe for cultural analysis. Much of the research conducted on Madonna over the past two decades rooted in the postmodern, particularly in the areas of women’s; feminist; racial; religious; and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual studies.1 Georges-Claude Guilbert in *Madonna the Postmodern Myth* elucidates that “Madonnologists’ work” is commonly inscribed in the previously listed fields and “often sees itself as semiotic and psychoanalytic, and does not hesitate to proclaim itself postmodern” (2). Others have examined Madonna under the lens of postmodernism because of her political potential to be a new symbol for feminists,2 because she functions as a hallmark for postmodernism,3 and because she is infamous for collapsing social dichotomies.4 Clearly, Madonna texts have been thoroughly excavated in the postmodern sense, specifically in the areas enumerated above; however, there has been little, if any, postmodern extensions into the field of rhetoric.

To begin augmenting postmodern research on Madonna from a rhetorical perspective, it is necessary to understand what dominant rhetorical elements are utilized in her videos. In

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1 See Brown and Schulze; Frith; Guilbert, “The Virgin and the Vamp” and “The Mother and the Whore;” Henderson; hooks; Scott.
2 See Mandziuk.
3 See Schwichtenberg.
4 See Pribram.
her efforts to stay in the public eye as a pop icon, Madonna has continually reinvented herself in a manner that has led to many contradictions in the rhetoric of her videos—for example, “Like a Virgin,” in which she is both the virgin and whore. In “Contradiction as Agency: Self-Determination, Transcendence, and Counter-Imagination in Third Wave Feminism” Valerie R. Renegar and Stacey K. Sowards suggest that contradiction, as a rhetorical tool of strategic choice, provides women with the opportunity to cultivate agency. By examining various third wave feminist texts, Renegar and Sowards illuminate how contradictions function as “useful rhetorical tools for negotiating complex lives in a complicated world” and for developing agency “on their own terms … to explore new possibilities and options for everyday experiences…” (2). To posit contradiction as a strategic choice suggests that there are possibly new ways to evaluate how we rhetorically read and understand the work Madonna is doing in her music videos.5

Madonna—as an image—continually presents contradictory aspects in her music videos. The visual elements of male gaze and female spectacle are dominant characteristics of her videos and provide typical evidence of contradictions working to enhance Madonna’s agency. Because this study is an extension of Renegar and Sowards’s article, it is their definition of agency that I will also apply: “This definition of human agency includes routines, habits, future thoughts, and how actors negotiate the past and their vision for the future to shape their choices within present circumstances” (4). Operating from this definition, contradiction functions “as an exemplar of how its usages allow for possibilities of self-determination, transcendence, and counter-imaginations that embody and foster a sense of agency” (4). Therefore, contradiction, in this sense, is conceptualized as “performative and participatory” and creates opportunities for a self-determination that enhances agency (6). Through her performances in videos such as “Material Girl,” “Express Yourself,” and

5 The characterization of contradiction as a rhetorical strategy in this study is extremely close to the way in which paradox is used by many rhetorical scholars. In this sense, paradox is commonly understood as a contradiction that’s true. However, paradox is viewed as an acceptable tool to use in an argument. Often it is a way to introduce a problem in a context to be solved later. But contradiction, as explained by Renegar and Sowards, is commonly viewed as faulty logic or undercutting to an argument. Therefore, Renegar and Sowards strive to complicate how scholars view contradiction and this study is an extension of that goal. In addition, the reconceptualization of contradiction allows for the disruption of tradition societal norms and it is the act of reconceptualizing that is essential to this investigation. Because paradox, as tool, is accepted it cannot function to disrupt traditional norms as contradiction does.
“Justify My Love,” Madonna presents images that challenge male-female relationships through visual forms of sexual expression, and she invites her audience to participate in a new discourse that preaches female empowerment. However, behind this professed rhetoric of female empowerment lies the underlying motivation of female desirability, which links female sexual expression—as spectacle—to the appeal of the male gaze. And in appealing to the male gaze, the female spectacle turns into female exploitation. Therefore, by extending Renegar and Sowards’s concept of contradiction in third wave feminist texts to Madonna’s music videos, I contended that Madonna’s music videos simultaneously empower and undercut female liberation and in doing so demonstrate the functionality of contradiction. Madonna’s use of contradiction—specifically in terms of how she plays with the rhetorical forms of gaze and spectacle to form her rhetoric of female empowerment and exploitation—magnifies a possible innovative process that allows women to claim agency in a manner that is unmarred by patriarchal influences. This analysis, thus, not only augments research on Madonna, but it also suggests that we should reevaluate preconceived notions of rhetorical terms—such as contradiction. For example, Renegar and Sowards note that “contradiction, as an internally inconsistent or oppositional position, has long been considered a rhetorical strategy or theoretical position to avoid” (5). However, just as Renegar and Sowards reevaluated the rhetorical use of contradiction to reveal that “contradiction is a deliberate strategy that includes interplays of opposition” that create possibilities for a new ways of thinking about rhetoric, so must we begin to reexamine other rhetorical strategies for the new possibilities they can open up for rhetoric and for women (6). Most important, this analysis of contradiction in Madonna’s music videos indicates a need for further analysis of the functionality of contradiction so that we can locate more ways for women, specifically, to better develop their positions and sense of agency within society.

For such a cultivation of female agency to occur, women must be free of patriarchal constructs in society, which feminist Audre Lorde in “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s Houses” defines as the Master’s House. While Lorde’s argument specifically discusses language as the Master’s House and elements of language as the master’s tools, the relationship and conceptualization of the house and tools extend to other male constructs such as sexual expression. Lorde promotes women trying to make men’s constructs—the Master’s House—their own. Her argument suggests how women can
maneuver within the men’s construction to create their own space for power. Unfortunately, Lorde explains that women can never bring about genuine change because the tools they use to gain agency for themselves are owned by the construct and defined by men. However, Renegar and Sowards’s analysis of contradiction suggests a way that women can appropriate the master’s tools to escape the master’s house, and this type of exodus can be seen through the deployment of contradictions in Madonna’s music videos. To better understand how female agency arises out of contradiction, Renegar and Sowards look to Karlyn Campell’s concept of agency, which she explains, “emerges in performances that repeat with a difference, altering meaning” (9). Thus, Madonna’s performances of contradictions allow her to usurp the patriarchal fortifications—the male gaze and female spectacle—to egress the Master’s House and enter into a space that endorses female agency, unencumbered by the male construct.

To understand how Madonna claims the male gaze and female spectacle for her own uses, we must first understand how gaze and spectacle are traditionally defined by the male construct. Laura Mulvey’s article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” published in 1975, analyzes how film image “reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images” (6). Mulvey notes that ways of looking and the ways of existing as spectacle have traditionally been determined by the male gaze: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly” (9). According to Mulvey, in film images female sexuality is dependent upon the male gaze and defined by how the male gaze approves or rejects female sexual performances, thus “demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (6). Feminist scholar Catharine A. MacKinnon echoes the claim that men dictate the construct of expressed sexuality in her 1994 publication of “Sexuality.” MacKinnon explains that “a theory of sexuality…treats sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women” (258). Men hold power, therefore holding the ability to form social structures of society, and thus creating a forum for male and female sexual expression.

MacKinnon consequently argues that women are restricted to operating in and through the forum’s defined terms, meaning that “the interests of male sexuality construct
what sexuality as such means, including the standard way it is allowed and recognized to be felt and expressed and experienced” for both women and men (259). While Mulvey’s article predates MacKinnon’s book by almost twenty years and stems from cinematography, Mulvey’s investigation of sexual expression exemplifies MacKinnon’s argument as well as identifies elements that are also grounded in visual rhetoric. By analyzing the traditional notions of gaze and spectacle in terms of how they function in visual images, this analysis looks to visual rhetoric as a lens for viewing Madonna’s use of contradiction in her music videos. Therefore, after first elucidating how contradiction rhetorically functions, especially in correlation to Madonna, I then analyze the videos “Material Girl” released in 1985, followed by “Express Yourself” released in 1989, and finally “Justify My Love” released in 1990. These three videos reflect the diversity of Madonna’s video identities as well as the progression of her use of contradiction in her videos, particularly in the ways they address the opposition between her rhetoric of female empowerment and female exploitation.6

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6 Due to the research already conducted on Madonna in the areas of women’s; feminists; racial; religious; and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual studies as well as the space limitations of this analysis, I solely focus on gaze and spectacle in heterosexual terms.
THE FUNCTIONALITY OF CONTRADICTION IN THE PUBLIC IMAGE OF MADONNA

This investigation of Madonna’s music videos analyzes them as visual texts. In addition, this study does not examine Madonna the person, but Madonna the icon, particularly the contradictory image she continually presents in her videos. Madonna’s employment of contradiction seems to undermine the purpose of her music videos; however, Renegar and Sowards address how and why contradiction should not be viewed as diminishing agency:

The way in which contradiction, often viewed as a faulty argument, fosters agency invites a revaluation of women’s and other marginalized groups’ rhetorical practices. Rather than condemning the rhetorical practice of contradiction, instead it might be viewed as strategic and agential orientation that enables marginalized perspectives to find voice. (3)

By viewing the notion that contradiction is not only an acceptable, but also a useful rhetorical strategy that allows women to begin to move themselves out of patriarchal constructions to find a space to speak, we can begin to reassess performances of female sexual expression that have been historically labeled as exploitative, exhibitionistic or objectifying of women. In the case of Madonna, she was labeled in a 1985 April publication of the Village Voice “imperiously trampy—just walking down the street she seems X-rated” (Edelstein 56). However, her very “X-ratedness” suggests a site for examining contradictions because Madonna presents herself as a strong, self-possessed, independent woman; however, she routinely appeared in clothing or gave performances that highly objectified her sex.

In order to examine how contradictions function as a rhetorical tool in Madonna’s music videos, it is necessary to define the term and ways of comprehending its functionality as well as understanding the public image of Madonna that she first presented. Renegar and Sowards begin by presenting contradiction as “a rubric for moving in new directions for thinking, theorizing, acting, and negotiating tensions” (6). Essentially, contradiction in this sense is not only a revaluation of dichotomies and oppositions, but a revolutionary way of thinking and strategically acting. Continuing on with their interpretation of contradiction, they explain that “Contradiction is…a transcendent term that includes a myriad of other
strategies such as ambiguity, paradox, multiplicity, complexity, anti-orthodoxy, opposition, and inconsistency” (6). Madonna’s complex and ever-evolving image epitomizes these strategies of contradiction. For example, from her hair, to makeup, to her dress, Madonna used her image to challenge cultural norms of propriety and sexuality. More often than not, Madonna was seen strutting around in a bra, mini skirt, garters, a rosary, and stockings, which were completely at odds with the more conservative fashions of the 80s. As Renegar and Sowards explain, using images—i.e. bra, rosary necklace, and garters—in “new ways allows for complexities and contradictions in definition or understanding to emerge, and these contradictions, then, can be used to call the connotations of [images] into question or reveal hidden assumptions” (7). Thus, Madonna wore sexualized clothing that others traditionally wore in private or just covered, publically and openly to disrupt preconceived notions of appropriate female sexual expression. Renegar and Sowards draw on the work of Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische to explain how deploying this type of opposition “works much like a metaphor; ‘it takes elements of meaning apart in order to bring them back together again in new unexpected combinations’” (8). For Madonna the unexpected combination of her image with sexually connoted clothing proposed the argument that female sexuality was powerful and should be allowed to be expressed in loud, blatant, and even aggressive ways.

Lucy O’Brien, author of *Madonna: Like an Icon*, comments on Madonna’s image:

> To dress the way she did was a radical act in late 70s America. It wasn’t just the way that women were supposed to look…but the way women were supposed to behave. To gain male approval, women had to tone themselves down…If a woman was upfront, sexually assertive, and loud, she was marginalized as “weird” and seen as fair game for physical attack. (34-35)

Here, contradiction functioned much like a metaphor, as described by Renegar and Sowards. By challenging the accepted definition of “weird” placed on a woman of sexual prowess to force her into a space of marginalization through her controversial clothing, Madonna works to redefine how society views women who were “upfront, sexually assertive, and loud” (O’Brien 35). Madonna thus used her image to communicate that she was the representation of female power and a cultural force to be reckoned with. In addition, with second wave feminists preaching the rhetoric of female equality in both the professional and personal arenas, young women of the late 70s found themselves “at a cultural shifting point, when a binary world of black/white, male/female, good/bad, virgin/whore was beginning to break
down” (O’Brien 35). Consequently, Madonna entered the scene more than ready to embrace this cultural change and to be the embodiment of it. Thus, her uses of contradictions as a means to reshape cultural definitions of appropriate female sexual expression appeared constantly in her music videos and soon created new ways for “thinking, theorizing, acting, and negotiating tensions” of female agency (Renegar and Sowards 6).

According to Renegar and Sowards, once a person—in this case Madonna—utilizes contradiction to rupture societal norms of acceptability, his/her individual sense of agency can begin to develop. Madonna’s willingness to disrupt the cultural dichotomies, which then led to the origin of her was never more apparent than in her first major public display of her image in 1984 at MTV’s first-ever Video Music Awards. In *Sex Sells! The Media's Journey from Repression to Obsession*, Rodger Streitmatter describes witnessing Madonna appear on stage on top of a giant wedding cake, wearing “a knee-length white lace wedding dress—complete with a sexy corset and garter belt so she appeared to have transformed her underwear into outerwear” and begin to perform her controversial hit “Like a Virgin” (129). To compound the already dramatic image that she presented, Madonna soon began writhing on the ground and grinding against the stage in a clear representation of sexual intercourse, much to the surprise of audiences everywhere: “Observers later recall that ‘she worked the stage like a panther in heat,’ crawling seductively on the floor and flirting with the TV cameras that were transmitting her image to first international audience” (Streitmatter 129).

Madonna’s very public display of a very private act not only demonstrates the functionality of contradiction, but the performance also upset social norms in a way that gave birth to the beginnings of agency.

Renegar and Sowards once more refer to the work of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell to address her claim that “‘Agency emerges out of performances of actions that, when repeated, fix meaning through sedimentation. Agency equally emerges in performances that repeat with a difference, altering meaning’” (8-9). Thus, the repetitive use of contradiction, as seen in “Material Girl,” “Express Yourself,” and “Justify My Love,” allows agency to develop, especially as Madonna uses contradiction to redefine new forms of female sexual expression. These contradicting images allowed Madonna to strategically create a space for her own

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7 See Campbell 7.
agency and publically revealed ways for women to begin to foster their own agency through contradiction. Knowing that her performance was being televised internationally, Madonna strategically participated in the construction of her image that would fracture societal dichotomies. Renegar and Sowards address this type of move, explaining, “Contradictions also emerge when individuals actively participate in how they present and represent themselves” (11). Madonna used the contradictions represented in her appearance, such as the risqué tailoring versus the purity of a wedding dress or her performance style and the lyrics to the song such as gyrating against the stage to intimate promiscuity versus singing that she feels like an innocent, inexperienced virgin, allowed Madonna to embed the powerful message that she was trying to transmit to her viewers: having a contradictory nature enables women to have power, especially sexual power, which should be celebrated. Women would soon hold Madonna up as “a celebrant and conduit for female energy” because “with a glorious disregard for male approval, Madonna expressed urges that many of [females] felt compelled to hide: her obvious libido and lack of inhibition were powerful tools” that allowed her to convey the message that women can be both sexual and powerful; and one needs not undercut the other (O’Brien 89). With Madonna, music videos became performances, a spectacle of contradictory sexual images that were both empowering and exploitive.
GAZING AT THE SPECTACLES OF SEXUAL IMAGES IN MADONNA’S MUSIC VIDEOS

Madonna was the video artist “who created the idea that video could be a forum for provocation and exhibitionism,” write Craig Marks and Rob Tannenbaum in their 2011 publication of *I Want My MTV: The Uncensored Story of The Music Video Revolution* (189). Madonna deployed her videos to construct a new vocabulary of imagery through her use of contradiction that would then redefine female sexual behavior. A dominate technique that Madonna applied in her videos to disrupt societal norms was to present contradictory images of gaze and spectacle. To briefly return to Renegar and Sowards, they described contradiction as also functioning in terms of “ambiguity, paradox, multiplicity, complexity, anti-orthodoxy, opposition, and inconsistency” (6). Madonna’s employment of contradiction in these forms can be seen in the majority of her videos, particularly in the forms of multiplicity, anti-orthodoxy, and inconsistency. In *Manifesta* Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards describe these images of Madonna as “dozens of incarnations that followed for the material girl. The video identities: stripper, pregnant girl from the neighborhood, dominatrix, men’s-suit-wearing activist for female sexuality (*C’mon girls! Do you believe in love?*), and a kick-ass version of the vulnerable, victimized Marilyn Monroe” (131). These video identities, while multiple and complex and many times exploitative, show Madonna “sending a message, teaching by example: Be what you want to be, then be something else you want to be” (131). Madonna’s diverse identities in her videos interrupt traditional uses of gaze and spectacle. “Material Girl” and “Express Yourself” especially challenge how gaze and spectacle typically reflect the patriarchal limitations on society’s sanctioned forms of sexual expression. Due to the repetition of the rhetoric in both of these videos as well as the enhanced blatancy of the rhetoric, Madonna’s disruption permits her audience to begin contemplating new ways of thinking about and acting out gaze and spectacle, which then leads to a break from the patriarchal construct and fosters agency. However, “Justify My Love” breaks from this pattern of using gaze and spectacle in a contradictory manner. In this video, Madonna uses gaze and spectacle in very male-chauvinistic forms by willingly becoming an exhibition of sexual eroticism and objectification.
“Material Girl” or Multifaceted Girl?

One of Madonna’s most famous video identities is the image of herself as Marilyn Monroe in the video “Material Girl, which stages Madonna as Monroe from the 1953 film Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. By framing herself with the associations attached to one of America’s most famous, beloved, and tragic icons, Madonna borrows the ethos of Marilyn—a sex icon who typified the female spectacle. Marilyn’s fame was dictated and defined by the approval of the male gaze. However, Madonna also appropriates Marilyn’s soft—dependent upon males and the male gaze—sexual appeal and transforms it into an image of independence and boldness. The video opens with two men watching Madonna perform as Marilyn on a screen. One man gazes upon her with desire and promptly demands to meet her. The camera then cuts to the same man standing outside of Madonna’s dressing room. He gazes in on her and eavesdrops on her telling a friend over the phone, “Yea he gave me diamonds. He thinks he can impress me with expensive gifts.” The “he” she refers to is one of her many suitors who tries to win her over with presents. Here, Madonna is the subject of both shots, the female spectacle for a male audience. The scene then cuts to Madonna dressed exactly like Monroe, dancing between a group of gentlemen offering her money and jewels, while singing, “Cause the boy with the cold hard cash is always Mister Right.” She dances and stares at the camera, while the men watch her to the point of running into one another.

Next the scene changes to Madonna slamming out of a flashy red sports car where she angrily leaves behind a suitor intent on impressing her with his vehicle. The man from the opening scene of the video lingers to the side of this spectacle as he gazes upon her as she rejects another suitor. Then the camera once more shows Madonna again looking like Marilyn Monroe and accepting and taking the gifts and jewels from all of the men dancing around her, while rejecting them at the same time. Again, she sings to the camera while the men only gaze upon her. In this scene, the lone man gazes down upon her from a balcony up above the stage where she is dancing. In the final scene, the man walks into Madonna’s dressing room where she has changed into casual dress, and he hands her a simple bouquet of daisies. He then takes her outside and invites her for a ride in a beat up, old pick-up truck. The video closes with the fading lyrics “Living in a material world, material world/ Living in a material world” and Madonna and the man passionately kissing in his truck.
While this video is not overtly sexual, by dressing herself as Marilyn Monroe—one of the ultimate female sex icons in American history—Madonna sexualizes her video identity. Monroe’s fans were dominantly male while Madonna’s were female (Baumgardner and Richards 131). By likening herself to Monroe, Madonna borrows Monroe’s ethos and purposely makes herself into a spectacle of sexual expression. Thus, the men dancing around her, as well as the lone man who end up with her, all gaze upon her with desire, approving of the image that she presents. However, as the lone man gazes upon Madonna, the audiences also gazes upon her and witnesses Madonna rejecting men and their expensive gifts. These images directly contradict her lyrics that “the boy with the cold hard cash is always Mister Right.” Thus, the song reflects society’s assumptions about Mister Right, while Madonna’s video character follows different assumptions; thus, the contradiction between image and lyrics conveys a powerful message about female independence and desire; the contradiction between image and lyric creates a contradiction between the literal meaning of the song and the connotative meaning of the image in the video. For example, the lyrics imply that the culture is immersed in material gain and all a woman wants is a man who can provide material gifts and security. However, the images of her rejecting men who provide such gifts and security challenge the audience’s connotative understanding of the societal notion of what women should want from men and men from women.

When the video was released women were just beginning to rise to power in the work force and claim a spot for themselves as their own providers according to Julia T. Wood in *Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture*, published in 2011. She claims that to be feminine in the United States at this time meant that “women now have it all: They can have careers, marriage, and children. They can get jobs that were formerly closed and rise to the top levels of their professions” (136). Madonna’s rejection of the men and the money encourages women to obtain wealth and security on their own terms and encourages female independence. As Marilyn Monroe, Madonna first frames herself as a woman dependent upon men and their wealth. Marilyn—while not necessarily material by nature—was a woman constantly surrounded by wealthy and powerful suitors. Also Monroe, as a woman of the 1950s, was a representation of the prevailing rhetoric for women that preached women must find a man to provide for them. Thus, while projecting Monroe but rejecting Monroe’s cultural context, Madonna advocates female independence. In addition to this rhetoric of
empowerment, Madonna also chooses the man who offers her tenderness and sincerity, which are represented by the images of the flowers and truck. By choosing this type of man, Madonna encourages her female audience to confidently pursue the true desires of a woman: tenderness, real love, true affection, etc. The embedded message in “Material Girl” is a seductive one for women subscribing to the philosophy that women can and should pursue their own personal and professional desires.

In addition, contradiction functions between the male gaze upon Madonna and Madonna’s video identity. In “Material Girl” Madonna subscribes to the traditional definitions of gaze and spectacle, where the male gaze approves or rejects the female spectacle. In this video the men desire Madonna; they give her gifts to show her their approval. This reflects the notion that the “pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 9). However, the man who wins Madonna’s affections at the end of the video demonstrates the active male. He alone “truly” watches Madonna and by actively learning what type of men and gifts she does not like, he is eventually able to get her attention.

Furthermore, when he finally introduces himself to Madonna she no longer looks like Marilyn Monroe, thus shedding Monroe’s sexual ethos—and instead wears an all-white outfit with her famous “Boy Toy” belt. Here, Madonna ceases to function as the female spectacle for the male gaze. While it can be argued that Madonna no longer exists as the spectacle because a man has joined her to become the subject of the scene—and the traditional concept of spectacle only involves women—as well as the idea that a woman is not complete without a man, the rhetorical use of contradiction offers another way to read this image. While the man gazed upon her while she looked like Monroe, he only actively expressed his desire to Madonna when she was dressed casually and wearing the “Boy Toy” belt. The belt carries a connotation of a woman’s ability to keep a man as a toy, to have him around to be her play thing, such as the young men dancing around her, offering her expensive gifts which she accepted as she simultaneously rejected them. Thus, when the man offers Madonna flowers, he also offers her his acceptance of her and what she stands for. His acceptance of her image—belt included—contradicts society’s notion of how men and women should attract one another. Between the man’s approval of Madonna’s independence and Madonna’s
acceptance of the simple man with truck and flowers, she demonstrates how contradiction rhetorically functions to create a space that helps shape agency. A key point in the video is that it is ultimately Madonna who chooses and rejects men. She accepts only one man, but that is only because he adapted himself to her terms. Thus, “Material Girl” sends a provocative and disruptive message to society: women can be concurrently desirable and powerful.

**“Express Yourself” while Being Powerful and Sexy**

To transform her subtle rhetoric into a blatant message of female empowerment, Madonna released the music video “Express Yourself.” This 1989 video was a feminist call to arms for women to respect themselves and a text for Madonna to preach a revolutionary concept, “Second best is never enough/ You’ll do much better baby on your own.” The lyrics of this song echo the portrayal of Madonna’s independent woman rejecting suitors and gifts in “Material Girl.” Here Madonna advocates for women to put themselves and their desires first, and if a man causes them to sacrifice, then they are better off alone. The lone, single, and independent woman who is unwilling to give up her own professional and personal wants for a man was as radical as it was seductive for many women.

The video begins with shots of a dark industrial city, and then pans to show many shirtless, hunky, sweaty men working within a factory. The camera angle propels up as if to give the viewer the sense of riding an elevator to the top floor, the CEO’s floor of an executive building while still being able to watch the lowly working men. The scene then cuts to an elegantly clad Madonna, gazing out the window and surveying her kingdom of working men. When we first see Madonna in this high rise room, she sings, “You don’t need diamond rings or eighteen karat gold…What you need is a big strong hand to lift you to higher ground.” In this scene Madonna is clearly a woman of substantial and independent wealth and power. However, she wanders around the grand room alone. This image of class, luxury, and loneness simultaneously paired with the lyrics telling women what they do and do not need creates another powerful message: women do not need to hold out for the wealth and power of men because they can obtain it on their own; however, women should hold out for a true man, a man willing to give to a woman as women have traditionally been willing to give to men. Hence, Madonna encourages her female viewers to find a man who “will make
[them] feel like a queen on a throne.” The scene then cuts to Madonna dressed in a sexy corset erotically dancing around a bedroom. She coyly looks at the camera as she rhythmically gyrates her hips and thrusts out her breasts in an obvious imitation of sexual intercourse. As she performs these actions, she sings, “Satin sheets are very romantic/What happens when you’re not in bed.” Coupling these lyrics with sexual expressions, Madonna provokes her audience into thinking about love beyond the physical. Also, her sly look to the camera as she sings and pumps her hips, embeds the message: It is easy for a man to say he loves you when he is sleeping with you, but that doesn’t make his love genuine.

The video then cuts to Madonna standing on a platform that overlooks the men’s work yard. Here, she appears with her hair pulled back, in a high-powered, male executive business suit. She boldly dances on this platform, mimicking the dance moves of Michael Jackson, specifically the grabbing of her crotch. Within this sequence Madonna pulls open the jacket of her suit to reveal a very sexy and feminine bra. The sequence ends with Madonna once more grabbing her crotch and aiming her hand, in the shape of a gun, at the camera. In this scene Madonna plays with the attributes traditionally assigned to men. As the owner of this factory, Madonna is a business woman, but to have power and to be in business means you act—or dress—like a man. By wearing the suit, Madonna adopts the power of men. The continual grabbing of her genitalia echoes her appropriation of sexual power. To reinforce this act of appropriation for her viewers, Madonna bears her bra to the audience. This act reminds her viewers that even though she has the power and professional status of a man, she is still very much a sexy, feminine woman. The image of Madonna grabbing her crotch and simultaneously “shooting” at the camera allows her to shoot the traditional, patriarchal gender roles and sexual expression to pieces.

Madonna masterfully uses connotative imagery in this video to force the audience into hermetic shifts regarding sexual expression and power. For example, culturally, the audience recognizes the business suit as men’s attire. The suit is a symbol of a professional and typically high-powered man. However, not only is Madonna wearing the suit, but she also wears women’s lingerie underneath it. Women’s lingerie—an obvious a sign of femininity—it is also a symbol of sex, and the female power of seduction. By first wearing the suit, Madonna borrows the ethos assigned to the type of man that would be dressed in that fashion—empowered, wealthy, professional, and respected; then by exposing the lingerie
underneath the suit, Madonna projects her own sexuality and femininity. She thus couples power with feminine sexuality and appropriates both aspects to be elementally female. Renegar and Sowards identify this type of contradiction in their analysis of texts where “third wave feminists attempt to employ feminine and masculine stereotypes or images at the same time; wearing both traditional and nontraditional clothing together illustrates the desire to be simultaneously what society expects and does not expect” (12). Therefore, as Madonna’s audience moves between the denotative meanings of a man’s suit and women’s lingerie to the connotative meanings of sex and power, they begin to contemplate how power, sex, and love are traditionally allotted to men and women. Madonna’s performance of power and sexual expression gives authority to women’s rights for desire and respect both personally and professionally. Rooted in the images of this video is the message that a woman can be empowered and sexy at the same time and one does not, nor should not, negate the other. While the rhetoric of this video reiterates Madonna’s rhetoric in “Material Girl,” the repetition of the performed contradictions illuminate a means for enhancing agency. Renegar and Sowards emphasize that when performances of disruptive rhetoric are repeated, new meaning becomes fixed “through sedimentation,” thus permitting agency to emerge out of these performances (8).

Towards the end of the video several effects occur at once. Madonna’s eyes routinely flash across the screen or are the only focus of the shot. The video draws to a close with a naked Madonna curled up on a bed under a sheet as one of the working men comes striding into her room. He picks her up and begins to make love to her. Finally the video concludes with Madonna deliberately gazing over the couple and then out at the audience. Madonna’s eyes confronted the concept of the female spectacle for the male gaze, and she turns herself into a female gazer of men as she looks upon the men in the factory as well as the gazer of her own spectacle and she looks upon the man making love to her. Essentially, Madonna takes command of her own agency as a means to take control of how she wants to express female sexuality. The lyrics of the song call for women to stand up for their own wants, needs, and desires as a woman while turning men into the spectacle. For example, the video opens with half naked men who are immensely fit, attractive, and doing physical work that shows off their muscles in an almost erotic way. The video routinely cuts back to shots of the men working, and the love scene between Madonna and one of the workers is intermittently
spliced with shots of the other male workers brawling. With these sequences of shots, Madonna makes the viewer acutely aware that they are gazing on men, not on women, and gazing on Madonna making love. In *The Visual Cultural Reader*, editor Nicholas Mirzoeff comments on the effects of conscious gazing: “The gaze creates and recreates the identity of the gazer by at once making us aware of visual perception and also that others can see us” (391). The focus of the audience’s gaze is on the raw sexuality of these men and Madonna’s sexual trysts; she invites her viewer to enjoy the show as their muscles bunch and flex throughout the performance, and she finds love. Men traditionally are the gazers and more specifically gaze at women. However, in this video Madonna employs gaze in a rhetorically unorthodox way that allows her to once again disrupt patriarchal notions of gaze and spectacle. Thus, making men the focus of the performance calls viewers to consider their own identity and sense of power as they watch. Particularly the act of gazing in this video empowers women because conscious gazing provides them with power. Reevaluating awareness of gazing “allows [women] to think about the ways in which looking is a form of power and how that power can be gendered” (Mirzoeff 392). Madonna’s male viewers are not only startled and disturbed to find themselves watching males, but they also become much more cognizant of women’s claim to power as Madonna allows them to watch her sexual exploits.

However, Madonna’s male and female audiences are not the only gazers of the performance. Madonna herself is always watching; she is first shown gazing out over the working men and then gazing directly into the camera. In other sequences Madonna disassociates from the performing image of herself, and she gazes over her own performance. Finally, the video ends with Madonna’s eyes framing the top of the screen in an omniscient manner that enforces the idea that Madonna is the ruling gazer in this video as she looks out at the audience. By presenting herself as the definitive gazer of the spectacle, Madonna works to contradict “argument[s]…on whether the gaze is in itself male, objectifying and subordinating women” (Mirzoeff 391). Madonna reinvents the power of the gaze by first presenting a powerful image of her feminine self—Madonna watching out over the factory in an elegant gown—then by presenting an image of her empowered self—Madonna watching out over the men while dressed in a business suit and bra—and finally Madonna watching over her own sexual exploits. She assumes the power associated with the gaze and once more
communicates to her female audience that they can possess the same type of power and rights allocated to men. Her final look out to her viewers signals invitation. She invites them to identify with her as both a gazer and a spectacle. Woman can identify because they themselves are so often the object of a spectacle, while desiring the power to gaze. Men can identify because so often they are the gazer, yet disgruntled to be the object of the spectacle. With both genders experiencing a sense of disorientation from the shifting between the connotative meanings associated with the gaze and Madonna’s adoption of the gaze, Madonna can project her rhetoric of female power.

“JUSTIFY MY LOVE”: EXPLOITATION CONTRADICTS EMPOWERMENT

By the year 1990, Madonna’s fame was solidified. The nineties also spawned the era of power feminism, which denied the victimization or objectification of women unless women chose to categorize themselves as a victim or an object. The philosophy of power feminism of the 1990s—made popular by Naomi Wolf, author of The Beauty Myth—presages the way for Third Wave feminism. Wolf argues that women are not victims unless they choose to be. Promoting female power and taking control of her own objectification as a demonstration of that power, Madonna turned her rhetoric of empowerment into a rhetoric of exploitation. These inconsistencies and complexities in her rhetoric are once more evidence of contradiction strategically and rhetorically at work. Through their analysis, Renegar and Sowards explain that “contradiction offer[s] the possibility of exploring the simultaneous acceptance and resistance to images, media representation, and the empowerment and the objectification that may ensue” (13). Therefore, the rhetoric of “Justify My Love” might contradict the very rhetoric of empowerment that made Madonna popular in the first place; however, this type of contradiction presents a provocative element for analysis. Madonna’s multiplicity in video characters—particularly “Material Girl” and “Express Yourself”—allows her to disrupt traditional uses of gaze and spectacle that reflect the patriarchal limitations on society’s allowed forms of sexual expression. Such a disruption then permits her audience to begin contemplating new ways of thinking about and acting out gaze and spectacle, which then leads to a break from the patriarchal construct and fosters agency. However, “Justify My Love” breaks from this pattern of using gaze and spectacle in a contradictory manner. On the contrary, Madonna uses gaze and spectacle in the most
chauvinistic, traditional, and patriarchal ways possible by making herself into an exhibition of sexual eroticism and objectification. Asserting this characterization of Madonna is scholar Brian McNair in *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media, and the Democratization of Desire*:

> Madonna was just as clearly in charge of her own sexualized image. Madonna’s early 1990s work was from the outset protected from the accusation of sexism (if not sluttishness) by the unavoidable facts of her sex and her power. Whatever she was doing...she was doing it to herself, and could not plausibly be positioned as a victim. (67)

In doing so, Madonna not only purposely turns herself into a spectacle of objectification, but she also magnifies how the male gaze and female spectacle can be controlled by the spectacle instead of by the gazer. Therefore, while the rhetoric of “Justify My Love” contradicts the rhetoric of her other videos, the contradiction highlights a space for further disruption of the patriarchal construct of sexual expression as well as a space for enhancing agency.

The black and white video begins with a disoriented Madonna wandering down the hall of a hotel in a long black trench coat. She soon sinks to the floor against a wall to reveal that she is only wearing lingerie underneath. She then spreads her legs and begins to caress her entire body. At this point in the video, Madonna has made herself a spectacle of sexual expression. She alone is in the hallway, performing for the camera. Madonna never makes eye contact with the camera, and thus the audience is aware that they alone gaze upon this public display of Madonna’s sexual video identity. However, Madonna is joined by a man in the hallway, and as he approaches her, she spreads her legs to accept him. Madonna then slides her whole body up the man as she gazes up at him and sings, “So now what/ So now what?” In this segment, all gazes focus solely on Madonna. The man only looks at Madonna and the camera only focuses on Madonna. While the man does enter into the frame of the shot and shares the screen with her, Madonna is framed as the sexual focus for both the audience and the man; she is the spectacle of sex, lust, and eroticism at this moment. Her lack of gazing, as well as the sole focus of the gaze being on Madonna, highlights society’s established understanding of the male gaze, which approves or rejects female sexual performances, thus “demonstrating the way the unconscious of society has structured film form” (Mulvey 6). In addition, by singing the lyrics, “So now what,” Madonna looks to her male gazer for confirmation of her performance, asking if he is seduced by her and if he wants to take the seduction further. “So now what” also functions to seek the approval of the male gaze, and therefore, emphasizes the patriarchal concept of the male gaze.
As Madonna and the man begin to move down the hallway, while engrossed in a heavy lip lock, the scene becomes inter-spliced with various shots of sexual acts—a bare-breasted woman staring out at the camera, a half-naked man sitting on the edge of a bed with a woman between his legs, a woman adjusting her heaving breasts in a corset, and a man spanking a woman dressed in lingerie as she braces against a wall. Through the lens of the camera, the audience’s gaze slowly creeps around each door frame to briefly peer into each room and the audience becomes very aware that they are gazing—voyeuristically—in upon these explicit sexual images. With these inter-spliced shots, the male gaze slowly begins to morph into a voyeuristic gaze. Such a shift is quite significant, because voyeurism—in societal terms—is a sexual taboo that is the practice of obtaining sexual satisfaction by gazing at sexual acts, especially secretly. The shift from the traditional male gaze to a prohibited voyeuristic gaze is involuntary for the audience because voyeurism is a type of sexual expression that violates the patriarchal construct of sexual expression; placing the audience into a situation that forces voyeuristic participations suggests a possible way to contradict the male gaze using the traditional definition of male gaze.

The camera then moves from the hallway into a hotel bedroom where the audience sees Madonna sit on a bed and undress until she wears only a black-laced bra, panties, stockings, and garters. The camera angle focuses on Madonna from the perspective of the man who stands and watches while remaining in his clothes. The man functions as a surrogate for the audience as the audience’s gaze becomes the man’s gaze. Once more Madonna presents herself as a sexual spectacle performing according to the guidelines of the male construct of sexual expression by seeking the approval of the man before her. Showing his approval, the man soon steps out of his position as a surrogate gazer and joins Madonna on the bed. The scene then cuts to show a new, sexually ambiguous figure lying on top of Madonna as the man gazes upon them both. Next, disorienting images of intercourse begin to flash on the screen while she half sings half speaks “Wanting, needing, waiting/ For you to justify my love.” The camera switches between focusing on Madonna and zooming out to focus on the voyeurism that stems from Madonna’s sexual display. Here, the female spectacle and male voyeurism work in tandem; as the audience gazes on both Madonna’s sexual exploits on the bed and the man watching her, both elements assemble this sexual spectacle; the male gaze, in this moment, unites to become part of the female spectacle. In
Guy Debord explains how “The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images” (8). Therefore, the union that results out of voyeurism and spectacle in this scene represents how gaze and spectacle exist to reflect relations between people. This scene of social relation through sexual expression shows an acceptance and resistance of voyeurism—acceptance because the voyeuristic man approves of the female spectacle of Madonna and resistance because, for the audience, the female spectacle absorbs the male voyeurism as part of the spectacle, making it female. Once the voyeurism becomes part of the spectacle, then voyeurism as spectacle begins to seek approval from the representative of the patriarchal construct of sexual expression—the male gaze, which is enacted through the eyes of the audience. However, voyeurism exists as a social taboo that violates the patriarchal construct of sexual expression; as such the audience cannot approve of the sexual spectacle of Madonna and the voyeur, and the lack of approval maintains societal notions of gaze and spectacle.

Knowing that voyeurism is a taboo that violates societal standards of allowed sexual expression, Madonna uses the remaining scenes of her video to force the audience back into the position of unwilling voyeurs. Therefore, throughout the video shots of other individuals engaged in sexual acts are shown—an orgy, transsexual play, homosexual play, and sadism and masochism—that are then inter-spliced with Madonna’s own sexual performances. Between these scenes, we see Madonna on top of her lover half singing half talking words of seduction and approval: “Tell me your dreams/ Am I in them?/ Tell me your fears/ Are you scared?/ Tell me your stories/ I’m not afraid of who you are.” Unlike the previous shots, the audience shared the gaze with Madonna’s male lover; however once the male lover joins the spectacle as a voyeur, the audience is left alone to gaze upon these sexual performances. Thus, the camera angles shift to highlight the sensation that the audience secretly observes these spectacles, which then reinforces the sensation of acting as a voyeur.

What makes the many members of audience unwilling voyeurs is their knowledge that voyeurism is societal taboo and that voyeurs are typically shunned or marginalized. Despite their reluctance, the audience continues to gaze upon these images and their act of continual gazing supplies the contradiction that disrupts the accepted concept of male gaze and female spectacle. They supply the contradiction because they participate as voyeurs, even if unwilling to do so, which then results in discomfort. Their forced unease causes the
audience to analyze why they are uncomfortable in the first place, which then leads to a questioning of the construct that defines their discomfort as voyeuristic participation. Such an analysis functions to disrupt the patriarchal construct of accepted sexual expression, and once the disruption occurs, the audience can escape the construct and establish agency.

The emphasis on the fostering of this agency occurs in the scene in which Madonna makes direct eye contact with the camera and therefore with the audience. In one of the final scenes, two standing, sexually ambiguous figures pull away after kissing to reveal Madonna sitting on a bed between them. She gazes not at the figures, but at the camera in utter delight and mirth as she giggles into her hand. In this moment, Madonna acknowledges that she has always been aware of the audience’s gaze and her giggle—which seems out of place in the video and therefore stands out all the more—communicates that she has caught and trapped the audience in the act of voyeurism. Her awareness of the audience also communicates Madonna’s enhancing agency; she was always in control of the spectacle and the gaze because she initiated the spectacle by first objectifying herself and then controlled the gaze by forcing the audience into the position of voyeurs. The giggle illuminates the moment when the audience realizes that they have not only joined the spectacle by watching the video, but also that their participation contradicts the sexual construct they have always followed. Finally, the video concludes with Madonna fleeing the hotel room, smiling and laughing to herself in obvious satisfaction and mischief and the text “Poor is the man whose pleasures depend on the permission of another” flashes across the screen. This final image of text allows Madonna to communicate to her audience that approval should not come from the male gaze, but from acting outside of the female spectacle and male construct of sexual expression and doing what one wants. Thus, Madonna’s obvious sexual satisfaction at the end of the video is symbolic of her obtaining agency free of patriarchal elements.

Madonna exploits her sexual self to obtain the agency that she wants and “Justify My Love” becomes a siren’s song and encourages women to use their bodies, to use their ability to be sexually expressive as ways to contradict societal norms. The video encourages women to explore their desires while simultaneously turning themselves into sexual objects. While power is the result of exploitation, exploitation does not equate with empowerment. This dichotomy is a contradiction in and of itself and is reflected through the images and rhetorics of Madonna’s three videos; however, Renegar and Sowards explain that there is significance
to be found in the contradiction between empowerment and exploitation because women can “see past initial feminist or social objections to such popular artifacts [such as music videos that promote both empowerment and objectification] and appreciate the value or entertainments in both kinds of images” (13). The value comes from the ability to recognize how agency can emerge from the rhetorical use of contradiction as represented in mediated images in “Material Girl,” “Express Yourself,” and “Justify My Love.”
LET CONTRADICTION LEAD THE WAY:
CONCEPTUALIZING NEW POSSIBILITIES

While Madonna’s music videos ostensibly simultaneously empower and undercut women, her use of contradiction—specifically in terms of how she plays with gaze and spectacle—as a rhetorical tool magnifies a creative process that allows women to claim agency in a manner that is not appropriated by patriarchal tenets. Using contradiction as a rhetorical tool is a valuable asset for women as they negotiate what has historically been a man’s world. Renegar and Sowards’s reevaluation of the rhetorical use of contradiction unveiled the realization that “contradiction is a deliberate strategy that includes interplays of opposition” (6). Essentially, contradiction has been reconceptualized as an individual category. Extending Renegar and Sowards’s demonstrate of opportunities for fresh and unique ways of thinking about rhetoric through feminist texts, this examination portrays how visual texts can also provide new possibilities for thinking about rhetorical strategy and agency. Madonna’s presentation and representation of herself in her videos allowed her to rhetorically use contradiction as a rhetorical tool for creating a space that permitted her to highlight and disrupt the assumptions underlying the male construct of sexual expression as well as enhance her own agency.

Madonna was able to interpose the male construct of sexual expression through the use of contradiction by first embedding a message of female empower in “Material Girl” that was then boldly represented in “Express Yourself.” The repetition of her rhetoric and her performative contradictions deconstructed traditionally held views of sexual expression to reveal a new way of thinking about female sexual expression—women can be both powerful and sexy, and they do not need a man’s approval to be either. However, Madonna, in her constant desire to recreate herself, complicates this very message in “Justify My Love.” She is sexy, but her sexiness comes from her seeking approval through her performance for her lovers. The opposition between the rhetoric of empowerment communicated in the first two videos and the rhetoric of exploitation communicated in “Justify My Love” compounds the already complex functionality of contradiction; “Justify My Love” seems to undercut and even damage the arguments being made in “Material Girl” and “Express Yourself,” yet it
actually magnifies the process of contradiction strategically at work. By contradicting her rhetoric of empowerment as she deliberately over-exaggerates and plays into the traditional forms of gaze and spectacle in “Justify My Love,” Madonna “simultaneously resist[s] and engage[s]” patriarchal ideas (Renegar and Sowards 8). She engages them by being a spectacle of sexual expression, but she resists them by choosing to be the spectacle as well as transforming the male gaze in the voyeuristic gaze. Thus, Madonna shows her audience that she is comfortable with and aware of the contradiction she performs in and between her videos.

Just as Renegar and Sowards conclude that some “third wave feminists are comfortable with their seeming contradictions, which in turn encourage readers to discover and experiment with the various dimensions of themselves,” so do Madonna’s videos encourage her audience to creatively play with contradiction (8). The significance of such encouragement, specifically from a pop icon such as Madonna, is the diverse and broad audience of viewers who may be influenced to strategically use contradiction to freshly negotiate the world. Renegar and Sowards return to Campbell’s assertion that “the way in which these third wave feminists employ such contradictions in public forums…suggests that agency is both ‘cooperative and communal’” (8). This point is quite crucial in terms of this study, because Madonna’s music videos are not just created for a public forum, but they are widely viewed within the public forum. Such a viewing implies not only a vast amount of people individually may be encouraged to seek agency, but also a community of the marginalized may feel encouraged to use contradiction that then allows for the appropriation of patriarchal constructs. In addition, traditional rhetorical analyses have been conducted on written texts, but in this continually developing world of technology, more and more texts are becoming visually based. Madonna’s videos illuminate the importance of understanding how to read visual texts and more importantly, how to analysis visual texts. If contradictions in both the written and the visual are “useful rhetorical tools for negotiating complex lives in a complicated world,” then we must begin to examine contradictions in all types of texts in all types of fields to fully understand how contradiction locates more ways for people, especially the marginalized, to better develop their sense of agency and their voice in society (3).
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