

Carnavalesque and Bifurcated Labels: Writing the Tale¹

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My analysis in this piece will focus on two texts as instances of breaking normative narratives. This paper explores the music video *What it Feels Like for a Girl* and the film *Freeway*. First, this inquiry aims to explore the music video, specifically the ways in which Madonna's body and the bodies of others are represented there within. I will consider how Madonna embodies ideals of the carnivalesque, by incorporating theories of the grotesque and the unruly. More specifically, this essay utilizes the theories as posited by Mary Russo in "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," and by Kathleen Rowe in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter*. Second, this analysis will explore the film *Freeway* and Reese Witherspoon's character, Vanessa. I will consider how Vanessa embodies both the victim and the survivor. Thus, this essay employs a theory on bifurcated terminology as posited by Tami Spry in "In the Absence of Word and Body: Hegemonic Implications of 'Victim' and 'Survivor' in Women's Narratives of Sexual Violence." In both instances, my analysis in this piece will incorporate feminist theory that depicts the female body as a subject. An integral part of this reading is the concept of the embodiment of the carnivalesque and dichotomous labels as subversive acts. Moreover, I will argue that the characters embodied by Madonna and Reese Witherspoon are subversive and work to restructure the normative tales of female subjectivity.

Carnavalesque: Grotesque on the Loose

Mary Russo discusses female grotesque in "Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory," and articulates the body as the site of female contamination and resistance. She suggests that the carnivalesque destabilizes binary categories and presents momentary expressions of transgression. Thus, a spectacle allows for the questioning of difference

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and reproduction or counterproduction of knowledge. In this piece I will take the idea as grotesque as a body that morphs and changes, a body that loses boundaries, and as the synthesis of old and young bodies. But, how is Madonna grotesque?

Perhaps in part, Madonna is grotesque because of her ability to morph and change. She plays, subverts, and recreates the “ideals” of conventional versions of womanhood, motherhood, virgin, and whore, and thus resists the dichotomizing categories allotted to women in western society. Russo writes, “The grotesque body is open, extended, protruding, [it is the] secreting body, the body of becoming, process and change” (219). As such, her body is not “natural,” because she is always becoming something or someone else. The old woman in *What it Feels Like for a Girl* is an integral part in understanding Madonna as grotesque. In this video, the only women who are featured are Madonna, the old woman, and a chubby waitress. Where popular culture might deem a woman of forty-four as old, next to an elderly woman, forty-four is quite young. In this context, Madonna becomes the youngest and the most beautiful. She is grotesque because she morphs and changes into what is popular in culture: youthful images.

Grotesque is also a loss of boundaries. A closer examination of the old woman reveals that she is absolutely dependent on Madonna. She cannot move her body, push up her glasses, stand by herself, or walk to another car. The older woman is the epitome of the patriarchal model of what a woman should be: she lacks agency, is dependent, and comes along for the ride. And the question the viewing audience may be asking is: why would Madonna want to hang out with someone old? Russo

offers a possible explanation: “For a woman, making a spectacle out of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries...yet anyone, any woman, could make a spectacle out of herself if she was not careful” (Russo 213). Madonna seems to purposely make a spectacle out of herself as she allies herself with the spectacle itself: the old woman and female old age. She seems to joke at the mockery of old age by caring for it. It is as though she’s saying this old body is you, not you in 70 years, but you right now. Thus, her message embraces age as the boundary that divides women but also severs that divide by taking it by the arm. And so, Madonna is grotesque because she

eradicates the boundaries between object and abject and herself and other. More specifically, Madonna is the spectacle.

Grotesque is a coupling or merging of youth and death, epitomized as the pregnant hag. In part, Madonna is loathed by ageist social perceptions in this video because the old woman and Madonna are blurred into one entity. Madonna is the “pussy cat;” the old woman is the “ol’ kunt.” Hence, simply they are versions of the same self. Rowe writes, “[The pregnant hag] is loaded with all the connotations of fear and loathing associated with the biological process of production and of ageing” (219). As such, the fear of aging is the fear of death. The last scene is an interesting example of the brutality in a video that is writhing with violence. One might ask: Does Madonna die? Does the older woman? On the contrary, I am wondering, does it matter? Madonna assists in the death of the old woman by euthanasia, MTV style. Cloaked in black, Madonna as death gives the old woman the time of her life and then helps her end it. Hailing Dickenson: “Because I could not stop for death/ He kindly stopped for me;/ The carriage held but just ourselves/ And Immortality” (Dickenson). Madonna is grotesque because she is aiding in the death ritual of someone who is considered useless in our culture. This act is subversive because Madonna stays in the car and joins her in the end. This further suggests that Madonna and the old woman are one and the same: the pregnant hag. Taking this into account, I do not think the death scene as insignificant. The “pregnant hag” crashes straight into and wraps the car around the phallic symbol of the light pole. More specifically, it is the live death-womb violently swallowing the phallus. It is this repulsion of the female reproduction and aging that makes women grotesque. Madonna is grotesque because she couples life with death and welds them together in one night of adventure that ends in a vicious destruction.

Unruly with Mouths Wide Open

Madonna is carnivalesque and grotesque because she couples life with death, loses boundaries, and morphs and changes. But is she unruly? In Russo’s essay, she suggests that women are unruly when they fail to control their mouth, either through consumption or exclamation, and when they claim cultural symbols of power. This next section of the paper will detail how Madonna in *What it Feels Like for a Girl*, embodies

Russo's unruly woman qualities. Accordingly, I argue Madonna eats too much and co-opts cultural emblems of power for her own advantage.

Madonna is unruly because she eats as she pleases. Through the entire second half of *What it Feels Like for a Girl*, Madonna crashes into cars, brakes up a hockey game, and steadily feeds her face. Madonna eats French fries, the fat, greasy essential of the fast food consumer market. Russo writes:

That the unruly woman eats too much and speaks too much is no coincidence; both involve failure to control the mouth... [it] is a more generalized version of that other, more ambivalently conceived female orifice, the vagina. Together they imply an intrinsic relation among female fatness, female garrulousness, and female sexuality. (37)

Moreover, in a society where women are expected to be thin and told by *Cosmo* to eat salads on first dates, Madonna is not following the rules imposed by a patriarchal and capitalistic culture. In this way, Madonna normalized her behavior as the voyeuristic pleasure of a woman's mouth engulfing what women are not "allowed" to eat, and thereby also mocking what women's mouths are "allowed" to eat. Thus, Madonna's gluttonous consumption is deemed an unruly act.

Unruly also means to claim cultural images of power; in this video it is violence. As mentioned, the media criticizes *What it Feels Like for a Girl's* violence. On the contrary, violence on MTV is not new. Think of, for example: *Jackass*. This MTV run show, and now movie, features predominantly male characters as the instigators of violence and destructible behavior as entertainment to illicit laughter from the audience. This said, violent power on MTV is a power that is predominantly, if not exclusively, reserved for men. Rowe writes that the "unruly woman's rebellion against her proper place not only inverts the hierarchical relation between the sexes but unsettles one of the most fundamental of social distinctions-that of male and female. The woman on top is neither where she belongs nor in any other legitimate position... The taboos placed on her suggest that her power arises ... from the need to enforce conformity to a particular set of beliefs in which gender is a critical linchpin" (43). Gender is critical here. Madonna claims the top position in this video by explicating that a woman can perpetrate and commit violence. This does not necessarily imply that women carry out violence in equal

numbers or in acts of equal severity as men, as research has shown that violence is indeed gendered. Rather, Madonna's use of violence in this video seems to mock violence and its social power itself. This is similar to another Madonna video, *Music*, and her performance as the pimp or sexual voyeur at a strip club. In *What it Feels Like for a Girl*, Madonna suggests that violence is yet another face she can claim—*Music* one day and stun-gun toting, Camero-driving, bad-ass-mother-fucker the next! Madonna is unruly because she claims the cultural symbol of power: violence.

Bifurcated Labels: Victimization Act I

This section of the paper will analyze *Freeway*, the “modern” *Little Red Ridinghood* adaptation, starring Brook Shields, Reese Witherspoon, and Keifer Sutherland. It aims to explore Reese Witherspoon's character, Vanessa, and the dissonance created when she embodies both victim and survivor. Tami Spry conjectures in “In the Absence of Word and Body: Hegemonic Implications of ‘Victim’ and ‘Survivor’ in Women's Narratives of Sexual Violence,” that patriarchal narrations focus and confine subjects' understanding of self only in relation to male centrality. This confining narrative does little to truly delineate the actual and diverse experiences of the individual women who experience rape or sexual assault. She writes, “Survivor/victim categories perpetuate and reify the powerful symbol of the powerless woman” (Spry 3). Thus, Vanessa as Little Red Riding hood becomes the powerless woman as she is “victimized” by various individuals, including the wolf (here: Keifer Sutherland's character, Bob Wolverton). Accordingly, I will argue that Vanessa is victimized by the guidance and the perception of others.

Vanessa assumes the identity of the victim because others guide her to believe she is a victim. For her to be a victim, she must accept that the androcentric view of sexual assault and violence is the correct perception in which to understand an experience. More specifically, “males” or those who hold the “phallus” possess the power to read cultural scripts. Spry suggests that the body/mind split in the Western or European framework renders the body feminized and illiterate. She writes, “What is revealed to [the victimized woman] and her culture is the sexually assaulted body as the site of illiteracy. Any claims made from this site are thus viewed as illiterate, easily dismissed or denied” (Spry 3). As

such, the opening scene is no coincidence. In the film sixteen-year-old Vanessa is shown attempting to read the sentence “A cat drinks milk” as her teacher helps with “me-ow” and “think s.” Her literal illiteracy necessitates direction to read a myriad of other texts, including her body, experiences, and self-perceptions. Juvenile therapist Bob Wolverton befriends Vanessa and encourages her to avoid keeping traumas “bottled up inside.” What Bob wants to know are the details of the sexual abuse by Vanessa’s stepfather and how they made her feel. Bob strongly encourages Vanessa to express her feelings about the molestations out loud. Thus, Bob as a vehicle for translation, influences Vanessa’s conceptualization of the sexual encounters and moves the focal point of inquiry to the stepfather’s power and her powerlessness. Sex, as a tool of victimization, is further centralized on the phallus or penis and principally what it did or could do to the victim. When Bob asks Vanessa if when her stepfather ejaculated into her mouth she felt like she had been transformed into a human urinal, Vanessa initially resists this understanding, but Bob forces her to say: “I felt like I had been transformed into a human urinal.” That is, Bob as a symbol of cultural power resituates Vanessa’s understanding of experiences and assists in reading her body as a victim. And so, Vanessa’s illiteracy is transmitted to her entire body that demands guidance and is thereby read as a victim by others.

Labeling can be done by the self or by others. Vanessa is also a victim because others in the diegesis of *Freeway* read her as a victim. Vanessa’s illiteracy fosters an opportunity for outside opinions to achieve and be maintained as valid interpretations of subjectivity. Spry writes, “When the body is erased or used as a symbol to silence itself, knowledge situated within the body is unavailable to the self, or if discovered, ridiculed as base or profane” (Spry 3). Knowledge must come from outside the body because the body, particularly the female body, is silenced through its cultural illiteracy. Specifically, Bob’s paternalistic manner helps Vanessa recognize how her stepfather began the sexual abuse. Bob says, “So you became the woman of the house.” Bob’s clarification and insight is followed by Vanessa’s nodding acknowledgement. “Yeah. Yeah,” she says. Moreover, Vanessa’s body becomes incomprehensible to her mind and the mind/body split is thus integrated on the individual level. That is, the body becomes foreign, confusing, and separate from the mind. Additionally, as Vanessa recounts and emphasizes her innocence, Bob guides her to think of herself as he sees her: a victim. He

says, “Make no mistake about it. You are the victim.” Bob colonizes Vanessa’s understanding of her experience by centralizing his interpretation as the correct and authoritative version of events. Thus, Vanessa is a victim because others perceive her as such.

Survivor Act II

Naming experience is one tool that feminists have suggested empowers and resituates narratives in women’s lives. Feminist movements like *V-Day*, *Take Back the Night*, *Abortion Speak Outs*, and *Consciousness Raising* cultivate moments of repositioning women as the survivors and *knowers* of their encounter. Spry suggests that the victim/survivor dichotomy negates the possibility for women to have self agency because their position is always in reference to the phallus. She writes: “[s]he is already and always held in relation to the phallus; she is victim to it or survivor of it,” (Spry 1). Like the victim, the survivor is a two-fold or positive-feedback system and always in relation to the transmitted knowledge of the phallus. The survivor must have perceived agency from others and she must believe she has agency; she must have one to have the other. I will argue that Vanessa is a survivor because the system of incarceration views Vanessa as having agency and she in turn comes to recognize this agency.

A survivor is one with perceived agency or ability to fight off the assailant, attacker, or phallus. Vanessa is perceived by the institutions of law, discipline and punishment as a survivor of not only sexual assault but also “the system.” Taking into account her upbringing (Vanessa’s mother and stepfather have been imprisoned repetitively) administrators of “the system” render Vanessa as an inevitable subject of an inherited conduit. Essentially, in this episteme it is the officials’ moral duty to intercede on behalf of the greater public and promote Vanessa’s permanent incarceration. At the age of sixteen, Vanessa has already been arrested and convicted eleven times: seven for shoplifting, three for arson, and once for soliciting. Accordingly, Spry proposes that the female body evokes the ideology that it is “always and already overpowered by the “phallus or the threat of the powerful (violent) phallus” (Spry 3). In order for the institutions of patriarchy to remain intact, representatives of the law must overpower the

female body and thereby reinstate the correct position of that body. Spry further articulates this:

...her survived or victimized body is evidence for the appropriateness of the predominant discursive acts used to describe her experience. The emblem of her overpowered body reifies the images created by the linguistic categories – evidence for the existence of patriarchy. (Spry 3)

As such, Vanessa's prior victimization and incarceration is used as "evidence" to support the claim that the young female body once abused was itself producing the abuse. It is her body that is always about to illicit and produce this assault. And more specifically, she is the imminent threat and is therefore responsible for all sexual and criminal advances she received. Hence, when the African American cop remarks, "just doing what came natural," on the soliciting arrest, he is insisting that her sexual criminality is the innate means by which she maneuvers, utilizes, and profits for herself in exchange for the losses of (read: male) others. Moreover, when the executive case worker in the juvenile detention center inscribes Vanessa as one with "anti-social personality disorder" and as a "sophisticated criminal," she further marks Vanessa as one who will always survive the almightily and powerful phallus (institutions) and never be broken by it (them). According to this sexist framework, she is incarcerated for the sexual and delinquent activity she never enacted, but which she is, by virtue of her female body, always about to enact. Thus, Vanessa is a survivor because others believe and read her subjectivity as one that enacts agency.

A survivor is also one who believes they possess agency. Vanessa had, as Spry articulates, "fought the phallus and won" (Spry 1). Vanessa is a survivor because in each instance she is confronted by the phallus, she disallows re-victimization to occur. When Bob attempts to sexually degrade and violate her, she physically attacks him and pulls out her gun. She renegotiates the situations and forbids Bob to take advantage of her. She says, "You want to get shot a whole bunch of times." And later, Vanessa continually reinstates her survivor status by demonstrating her ability to articulate what her agency did to Bob when he threatened to "do sex to my dead body." She says to Bob in the courtroom, "Look who got hit with the ugly stick.... I hope you think of me every time

you empty [your shit bag], mother fucker.” As noted before, Vanessa’s incarceration does not impede her ability to perform and assert her agency to those who attempt to deprive her of it. Further, inside the juvenile center she employs skills (here: a toothbrush knife) her parents taught her to escape. As an agent of her own goals (here: to get to grandma’s house), Vanessa subverts the various institutions that wish to contain her. And so, Vanessa is a survivor because she enacts her own agency.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have considered Madonna’s video *What it Feels Like for a Girl* and the character Vanessa in the film *Freeway*. Each analysis delineates instances of rupture in the phallogentric episteme and provides opportunities for extensive exploration. I will conclude with a brief articulation on how these instances help to write new tales that diverge from androcentric stories of femininity and female embodiment.

In this inquiry of *What it Feels Like for a Girl*, I have explored Russo and Rowe’s idea of the grotesque and unruly. This examination has illustrated how in this video Madonna quite intentionally embodies these ideals as expressed by Russo and Rowe. This said, I would like to take this theorizing one step farther. Russo suggests, “...carnival and the carnivalesque suggest a redeployment or counterproduction of culture, knowledge, and pleasure” (218). In this context, Madonna is producing an alternative to maleness and consumer culture by parodying the aspects of “women” that are repulsive and taking on the aspects of “men” that are valued. Hence, throughout the video Madonna redeploys and centralizes the grotesque and unruly woman as the “woman” to titillate the MTV guided male point of view, rather than traditional ideologies of femininity promulgated by the media. Accordingly, the ending is no surprise. This hag is laughing.

In the critique of *Freeway*, I have employed Spry’s theory on the bifurcated terms survivor and victim. This analysis has demonstrated how in this film, Vanessa embodies qualities of both victim and survivor and thus is neither and both. Spry suggests that for women to break from this dichotomy, they must begin to write from the body and create what she calls a “liberatory epistemology” (Spry 4). Her assertion is that women should tell and perform their stories in a Judith Butler manner of “performativity.” She writes

that the body “is not dislocated or erased from her thoughts; rather it is seen as a site where diverse and intimate truths are inscribed within, upon, and around it” (Spry 4). Vanessa must recognize that her body is a text that she can read and the illiteracy is only a fragmentation forced by patriarchal institutions. More specifically, it is in this moment of non-truth that Vanessa disregards authority because, as she indicates in the film, she “told the truth and truth is eternity.” As such, as Vanessa restarts her trek to grandma’s house, she beats men at their own game. She says: “I’m pissed off and the whole world owes me.” Her actions create continual instances of subversion and work to decompose patriarchal institutions of punishment and privileged male arenas of female sexualized objectification. And so, her behavior reconstructs a place that disallows the bifurcated labels victim and survivor.

What is remarkable in both of these texts is their ability to narrate possible instances of subversion in the androcentric story. In each text, women embody labels and identities that operate in patriarchal culture to alienate and deprive them of agency. Strikingly, when one seizes upon the grotesque and unruly, the survivor and victim, this system of female containment and naming ruptures. Hence, the phallogentric tale is eradicated and a new story is written. However, it is important to note the contextual place of these texts in popular culture. The Madonna video was aired only once and then banned from both MTV and VH1 due to its violent content. The film *Freeway* was slotted straight for cable, but after a Siskel and Ebert “two thumbs up,” did make a short circuit of theaters in some larger cities. Thus, both texts had a limited and time dependent audience viewing. Rather, these texts are a glitch in a system that permits only certain types of stories to be told. Accordingly, other stories can be told, but will not remain mainstreamed.

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