

Spring 2012

# Word Warriors: Investigating the Poetic Form Through a Case Study of Feminist Spoken Work Poetry

Amanda Kempfues  
*University of Colorado Boulder*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr\\_theses](https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses)

---

## Recommended Citation

Kempfues, Amanda, "Word Warriors: Investigating the Poetic Form Through a Case Study of Feminist Spoken Work Poetry" (2012).  
*Undergraduate Honors Theses*. 233.  
[https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr\\_theses/233](https://scholar.colorado.edu/honr_theses/233)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Honors Program at CU Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of CU Scholar. For more information, please contact [cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu](mailto:cuscholaradmin@colorado.edu).

**WORD WARRIORS: INVESTIGATING THE POETIC FORM THROUGH A CASE  
STUDY OF FEMINIST SPOKEN WORD POETRY**

Amanda Kempfues

University of Colorado, Communication Department

April 10, 2012

Committee Members:

Dr. Cindy White—Honors Council Representative

Dr. Gerard Hauser—Faculty Advisor

Dr. Joanne Belknap

## CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>The Exclusion of Women from Traditional Rhetoric</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>The Treatment of Poetry in Rhetorical Theory</b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b>Claims of Poetic Exceptionalism</b> .....	<b>11</b>
Introduction .....	11
Ego-Function .....	12
Facilitating Audience Engagement .....	13
Responding to Silence .....	14
Limitation to the Inquiry into Poetic Exceptionalism Thus Far .....	16
<b>Feminist Rhetoric</b> .....	<b>17</b>
<b>Word Warriors</b> .....	<b>18</b>
An introduction to the Text .....	18
A Feminist Text .....	19
A Spoken Word Text .....	20
<b>Analysis</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Comparative Thematic Analysis .....	22
The “Starting Point” or Rhetorical Situation .....	25
Resisting Negative Social Messages (about women) .....	26
Claiming a Voice .....	28
Recognizing Connections and Building a Collective Identity .....	32
Investing in the Continuing Feminist Struggle .....	33
Inclusivity .....	34
Word Warriors as Feminist Rhetoric .....	37
Knowing, Being, and Doing: A Rhetorical Perspective on Word Warriors .....	38
Knowing: Form and the Psychology of the Audience .....	38
Being: Ego-Function .....	43
Doing: Performativity .....	46
<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>47</b>
<b>Works Cited</b> .....	<b>51</b>

## **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my faculty advisor Jerry Hauser for teaching me pretty much everything I know about rhetoric. Your continued support and encouragement throughout the writing process was very helpful. Thanks for always being able to point me toward the right authors so that I could situate my at-first-fuzzy ideas within the field of rhetorical theory. It has been an honor to be one of your last students and I have really enjoyed working with you the past two years.

I would also like to thank my honors council representative Cindy White for guiding me through the whole process of thesis writing. Your clear lessons and precise feedback have really helped me grow into a better writer. Thanks for keeping me on track these past two semesters.

Finally, I would like to thank my outside committee member Joanne Belknap for taking the time out of her busy schedule to serve on my honors committee. I look forward to seeing you at my defense.

## Abstract

The rhetorical tradition's focus on the institutional public sphere often excludes poetry or relegates it to secondary status. On the opposite extreme, many poets and literary scholars claim that poetry has exceptional rhetorical abilities beyond what is possible through other rhetorical forms. This rhetorical project analyzes *Word Warriors: 35 Women in the Spoken Word Revolution* to investigate the rhetorical role of spoken word poetry in the contemporary feminist movement. The analysis begins with a thematic comparison to the feminist essay anthology *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Generation of Feminists*. This comparative analysis shows the similarities between the two anthologies and thus challenges a distinction between rhetoric and poetic. It also identifies the role of spoken word poetry within the feminist movement as particularly direct, active, and emotionally evocative. *Word Warriors'* poems demonstrate that spoken word poetry can induce social action and has all of the qualities necessary to be considered rhetorical. *Word Warriors* and the poetry in it, has a way of knowing, being, and doing, just like other rhetorical forms. This paper concludes by rejecting two extreme but persistent positions about poetry's uniqueness. I reject first the idea that poetry is unique for its lack of rhetorical ability. Second, I reject the idea that poetry is unique for rhetorical abilities that exceed other forms. At least in the form of feminist spoken word poetry, poetry is not powerless, mysterious, nor especially grand.

## Introduction

Poetry's bounds and abilities are a subject about which many scholars, artists, and audiences have strong and often extreme or prescriptive opinions. For example, poet, feminist, and editor of the spoken word anthology *Word Warriors: 35 Women in the Spoken Word Revolution*, Alex Olson reports the reactions of European men to her poetry performance. One man explained to her that, "Poetry belongs to the page. It should be universal and up for interpretation, not so confrontational and direct." Another agreed and advised her to "consider taking it down a notch and perhaps try "being a bit more subtle" because "subtlety really is the key to poetry" (Olson 167). Olson responded to these sentiments with another confrontational and direct poem titled *Subtle Sister*. The conclusion of her poem is as follows:

See, sometimes anger's subtle, stocked in metaphor  
 full of finesse and dressed in allure  
 yes, sometimes anger's subtle, less rage than sad  
 leaking slow through spigots you didn't know you had.  
 and sometimes it's just

fuck you.

fuck you.

you see, and to me,

That's poetry too. (171)

So what is this diverse and sometimes abrasive form called spoken word poetry? Can it be rhetorical? What is its role in contemporary feminism? This rhetorical analysis of the spoken word poetry collected in *Word Warriors: 35 Women in the Spoken Word Revolution* (Olson) supports the characterization of spoken word poetry as rhetorical and provides deeper insight into spoken word poetry as a rhetorical form, specifically as a means of performing feminism.

Olson, describes the women whose poems and autobiographical essays she features in the anthology as “spokeswomen for a new generation” (xv). *Word Warriors* showcases previously unpublished voices in both the feminist movement and spoken word movement. Feminist publications claiming to represent the diversity of the movement predominantly take the essay form. Male voices dominate the published sphere of spoken word poetry. *Word Warriors* is the first spoken word poetry anthology to contain women’s work as a majority (Olson xvi). This text is notable, therefore, in two ways: first, as a collection of feminist rhetoric taking the form of spoken word poetry; and second, as a spoken word poetry anthology representing women’s voices.

As such a unique text, *Word Warriors* is an exciting site from which to discuss a previously unexamined form of feminist rhetoric. Analysis of this text reveals how spoken word poetry performs feminism. One pursuit of feminist rhetorical criticism is the recovery of lost, ignored, or silenced women’s rhetoric. Feminist rhetoricians retrace the steps of male-dominated rhetorical work, retroactively adding women into rhetorical history. While there are surely many historical women rhetors deserving of still un-received academic attention, it is equally important to recognize the rhetorical contributions of contemporary women. Analysis of contemporary women’s voices provides valuable insight into emerging social realities by illuminating the experiences and innovations of those women.

A rhetorical analysis of women's spoken word poetry ensures that women's voices are included in the making of a more mature and complete history of rhetoric. Analysis of *Word Warriors* additionally contributes to the task of gender critique within feminist rhetorical studies. By challenging the traditional exclusion of poetry from the genre of rhetoric, this analysis goes beyond simply adding women's voices to a masculine tradition. Instead, it contributes to the reshaping of rhetorical theory. The recovery of women's rhetoric allows rhetoricians to extract new rhetorical theory from women's writing and speaking practices (Ryan 26). This rhetorical analysis of *Word Warriors* adds to our knowledge base of feminist rhetoric. The demonstration that a rhetorical lens can be legitimately applied to spoken word poetry supports the revision of traditional theoretical assumptions about the separateness of rhetoric and poetic.<sup>1</sup> Comparison between spoken word poetry and essays written in response to similar rhetorical situations additionally discredits extreme claims on the opposite end of the spectrum of opinions about poetry as rhetoric. This analysis does not support arguments that poetry can achieve rhetorical effects exceptionally beyond other rhetorical forms.

First, this paper describes women's historical exclusion from participation in communication acts traditionally defined as rhetorical. Second, it reviews the treatment of poetry in traditional rhetorical theory as well as claims about the qualities of poetry that make it exceptional in comparison to other forms. I break these claims into three categories, (1) the ego-function, (2) facilitating audience engagement, and (3) a special ability to break oppressive silences. I then point out the limitations of previous inquiries into poetry's exceptional character and explain how my own study takes a more skeptical and systematic approach. The final

---

<sup>1</sup> See Ryan, Kathleen J's *Recasting Recovery and Gender Critique as Inventive Arts: Constructing Edited Collections in Feminist Rhetorical Studies* for a discussion of how feminist rhetorical studies has thus far negotiated the tension between the approaches of recovery and gender critique.

section, before addressing *Word Warriors* more specifically, reviews two surveys of feminist rhetoric, neither of which include poetry as a rhetorical strategy and thereby illustrate the necessity of examining poetry as a means of feminist rhetorical action. I go on to provide an overview of *Word Warriors*, describing it in the contexts of feminism and the spoken word movement. I follow this overview with a more in-depth explanation of my analytic approach. I begin my analysis by comparing *Word Warriors* to an essay anthology that responds to a similar exigence to demonstrate the rhetorical qualities of spoken word poetry and discuss the role of spoken word poetry within feminism. The final section of my analysis explains the ways in which *Word Warriors* exhibits rhetorical knowing, being, and doing.

### **The Exclusion of Women from Traditional Rhetoric**

Aristotle famously defined rhetoric as “the available means of persuasion.” For women and other marginalized peoples the key word here is “available.” His less celebrated reinforcement of the notion that “Silence is a woman’s glory” (Aristotle bk. 1, pt. 13 par. 2) is evidence of rhetoric’s exclusionary history. The modes of discourse, such as political oratory, to which early rhetorical scholars paid attention, have historically been unavailable to women. As a result of this exclusion from the public sphere, women faced unique constraints and had to look elsewhere to find their own available means of persuasion.

Although today women frequently engage in the traditional means of persuasion that previously were inaccessible to them, feminist participation in the man-made rhetorical tradition is a case of trying to dismantle the master’s house with his own tools. In his essay, *A Question of Style*, A. T. Nuyen argues that feminists face a sort of catch-22, or “différend,” to adopt Jean-Francois Lyotard’s term. A différend is a situation in which an action contradicts itself. For

feminists, it seems logically impossible to complain about the silencing (or marginalization or trivialization) of women resulting from male domination. The ability to testify to silencing contradicts the existence of that injustice. In his essay, *One of the Things at Stake in Women's Struggles*, Lyotard claims that men dominate the theoretical sphere, thus preventing women from publicly addressing their own oppression in a way that will be respected. (Nuyen 71-73). Nuyen names the essay as a masculine form—thereby inaccessible to feminist writers, because to use it, one is trapped in the logical contradiction of the *différend* (75). Nuyen argues that the way to present that which is unrepresentable via theoretical discourse, is through alternative styles. He writes, “feminists can legitimately make use of poetry...anything other than the masculine genre of philosophical essay-writing...in other words, the feminist will have to be a postmodernist who...’searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable” (76-77). This argument suggests that the word warriors might be using the poetic form as a way to escape male theoretical domination.

The text itself supports the idea that its contents take the form of poetry as a result of this historical context of exclusion. Since women were historically denied the necessary education to participate in the written tradition, they created their own oral tradition through which women verbally passed along stories, poems, and recipes. Alix Olson frames all of *Word Warriors*’ poems as a continuation of this women’s oral tradition (xi). In her foreword to *Word Warriors*, Eve Ensler embraces the ways in which women’s own means of persuasion differ from dominant and privileged theoretical discourse. She describes the anthology as, “Girl words the way girls word, the way pussies poem, not all proper theoretical proving a point” (x). *Word Warriors* exists unapologetically outside of traditional rhetoric as men have defined it.

## The Treatment of Poetry in Rhetorical Theory

Given that for women, poetry may be an essential means of symbolic action, dismissal of poetry as a legitimate means of persuasion or object of rhetorical study perpetuates the exclusion of resistive women's voices from the field of rhetoric. The rhetorical domain currently contains that which is "concerned with the use of symbols to induce social action" (Hauser 3). Past rhetorical theorists have deemed poetry unfit for rhetorical study. This line of thinking can be traced back to Plato, who criticized poetry as an illegitimate means of inducing social action. He characterized art (including poetry) as further removed from the pure essences, which he called "the forms," than true rhetoric. Art, according to Plato, is merely an imitation of an imitation of the forms. Poetry in particular, is a deceptive and harmful means of persuasion in his view. Plato's critique has been "powerful and enduring" (Farrell 105), leading to continued separate treatment of rhetoric and poetic. Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of poetry echoes Plato's critique of poetry as the opposite of the dialectical method. As Bakhtin praises literary prose and the novelistic style for its polyphony and dialogicity, he is commonly understood to criticize poetry for its monologicity and structural rigidity (Eskin 380). However, criticism of poetry based on its fixed structure is hardly applicable to the poems in *Word Warriors*. The poems take diverse rhythms and patterns, indicating that their authorial preference produces their structures any mandate of the poetic form.

A more recent example of the separation of rhetoric and poetic in rhetorical theory is Walter J. Ong's, *The Province of Rhetoric and Poetic*. Ong, like many before him, draws a boundary between rhetoric and poetic, keeping them as two distinct categories. He claims that poetry and rhetoric have discrete ends. For Ong, rhetoric is a means to inspire action, while poetry has no end beyond the contemplation of its beauty (24). From this theoretical perspective,

the poetic is definitionally separate from persuasion and philosophy. Therefore the poems collected in *Word Warriors*, which have dual poetic and rhetorical ends, exist in a separate realm as “some sort of monster” (25).

While Ong laments the marginalization of poetry in comparison to rhetoric and philosophy, he does not seem to recognize how his own theory is equally problematic. By breaking these differing communicative modes into mutually exclusive categories, he makes intersectional speech and writing untouchable for analysts. Chiding analysts who claim to see poetry doing rhetorical work, Ong instead claims that poetry’s effect can only be indirect and individual. However, as in depth analysis of the poetry<sup>2</sup> in *Word Warriors* reveals, audiences can engage with feminist spoken word poetry through more than just contemplation of its beauty. As Olson writes, “I have refused to remain obedient to the theory that poetry should adhere to the confines of an on-the-page, up-for-interpretation, nonpoliticized prescription” (168).

### **Claims of Poetic Exceptionalism**

#### *Introduction*

Even as the rhetorical tradition’s focus on the institutional public sphere often excludes poetry or relegates it to secondary status, there are many who take a stance on the opposite extreme, arguing that poetry has special, or exceptional rhetorical abilities<sup>3</sup>—scholars of poetry,

---

<sup>2</sup> I do think that Ong would consider the contents of *Word Warriors* poetry although they do rhetorical work because he concludes his essay on rhetoric and poetic with an acknowledgment of the fuzziness of the boundary he creates. He writes, “We must generally rest satisfied with calling a thing a poem because it is mostly a poem, or a political speech a work of rhetoric because it is nearer to that than it is to anything else.” (27).

<sup>3</sup> There even exists an interpretation of Bakhtin’s *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Art* which argues that, “he suggest that [poetry] is an exemplary mode of the discursive enactment of existence precisely because it facilitates the completion of one of the most important ethical tasks, namely,

poets, consumers of poetry and even policymakers in New York City take this position. An example of this belief in action is a new traffic safety campaign that employs poetry as an alternative to traditional signage to encourage the public to behave more safely in traffic and pedestrian situations. John Morse, the poet whose haikus<sup>4</sup> are now displayed on New York City streets with accompanying visual artwork, said of his work, “Poetry has a lot of power, if you say to people: ‘Walk.’ ‘Don’t walk.’ Or, ‘Look both ways.’ If you can tweak it just a bit—and poetry does that—the device gives these simple words power.” He and those who made his project possible seem to think that the poetic form will add power to a well-known message and thus succeed in promoting traffic safety where other rhetorical forms have not (NPR Staff).

### *Ego-Function*

Unsurprisingly, many vocal believers in poetic exceptionalism are themselves poets. Adrienne Rich, a well-known advocate of poetry, goes so far as to say “poetry is above all a concentration of the power of language, which is the power of our ultimate relationship to everything in the universe” (qtd. in Johnson 195). She clearly sees poetry as possessing an exceptional power. Rich identifies one manifestation of this quality as self-empowerment. Through the expression of oppressive emotions like anger and despair, poets and their audiences claim the agency to heal and move forward. Rich also sees poetry a means for identifying what is already within us. She says, “[poetry] speaks of our desire; it reminds us of what we lack, of our need, and of our hungers. It keeps us dissatisfied” (qtd. in Gwiazda 170). Poetry is not only oriented toward an external audience. It has clarifying and revelatory functions for the self.

---

the creation of mutual understanding and, concomitantly, the subversion of sociopolitical, potentially repressive, authority” (Eskin 389).

<sup>4</sup> For example, “She walks in beauty / Like the night. Maybe that’s why / Drivers can’t see her.” (NPR Staff).

This quality is a case of what Richard B. Gregg calls the “ego-function” of the rhetoric of protest. Certain aspects of resistance performed through poetry make little sense from a traditional rhetorical perspective. Like the protestors about whom Gregg writes, the word warriors do not always appeal to their audience. In fact, they might actively alienate their audiences, “facing deliberately away from those persons, actions, and things grouped together and identified in the construct, ‘establishment’” (74) (or in this case patriarchy). Gregg argues that protestors do this because their appeal is self-directed. Poets like Adrienne Rich and many of the word warriors use their poetry to constitute their own identities rather than to persuade external audiences. The main ways in which this ego function appears in the rhetoric of protest is through claims that one’s ego is “ignored, damaged, or disenfranchised,” promoting one’s own identity, and disparaging an enemy ego (76). I will discuss how this function is present in *Word Warriors*, but do not go so far as to agree with Rich’s suggestion that poetry is more powerful than other uses of language.

### *Facilitating Audience Engagement*

Mary S. Strine takes a more traditional perspective on poetry when she argues that the way in which audiences engage with a text weighs more on its ability to coordinate social action than does anything inherent in the text. For example, a reader or listener could identify with, question the authenticity of, or passively consume a poem (Strine 66). However, in her analysis of Carolyn Forché’s poem, *The Colonel*, she points to ways in which the text encourages favorable audience engagement by taking the reader into Forché’s confidence. Strine even writes of how *The Colonel* “forces the reader to critically reflect on the interdependence of the colonel’s prosperous lifestyle and his exercise of social and political oppression” (65). So, although the

audience may hold the ultimate power of interpretation, Strine claims that the textual qualities of poetry can facilitate certain modes of engagement.

In his book *Radical Spaces of Poetry*, Ian Davidson seems to agree with Strine when he claims that one of the benefits of the poetic form is its exceptional ability to support audience engagement. Poetry tends to demand more active interpretation than more explicit forms. In order to find meaning in a poem, he argues, audiences must actively connect the piece to one's own experience (1). Therefore, poetry might be better suited to encourage audience engagement than an essay on the same subject. Application of Kenneth Burke's theory of the psychology of form to *Word Warriors* demonstrates that spoken word poetry can facilitate audience engagement as Strine and Davidson describe, however a case study such as this cannot speak to the inability of other forms to do the same.

### *Responding to Silence*

The claims I have discussed so far address the abilities of poetry in contrast to other rhetorical forms quite generally. Since I am discussing feminist rhetoric in particular, the more specific relationship between rhetorical form and oppression is worth consideration. Rhetoric (and its form) is inevitably immersed in power relations. Some poets and scholars argue that for marginalized rhetors, alternative rhetorical forms such as poetry are the only logical choice. For example, Audre Lorde explains in her essay, *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, that poetry is a necessary response to oppression. She views poetry as a way for women to release the power that we all hold, to reflect upon our condition, and to constitute our experience by "giv[ing] name to the nameless so it can be thought" (Brown 370). She claims can liberate marginalized groups from oppressive silences.

Arabella Lyon and Lester C. Olson discuss how such oppressive silences are enforced. In the context of human rights rhetoric, they argue that the “means of communication can work against advocates’ endeavors to actualize social justice.” In an argument reminiscent of Lyotard’s discussion of the *différend*, Lyon and Olson note how “systems of representation reflect the histories of domination and power within them” (205). Lyon and Olson are referring to language and symbols here, but the same could be said of the form those symbols take.

Ian Davidson offers another reason that poetry is especially useful for social resistance. Davidson argues that the poetic form offers a space to voice more radical topics, complaints, and ideas. Content that might be silenced or dismissed when expressed through other rhetorical forms can be freely articulated and more readily heard as poetry (3, 5, 9). This perspective recommends poetry as an appropriate form for expressions of social resistance and innovation. Davidson’s theory of “radical spaces” suggests that a feminist poetry anthology such as *Word Warriors* would provide a space for ideas even more radical than those showcased in essay anthologies.

Similarly, Michael Dowdy, author of *American Political Poetry in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, speaks of poetry’s knack for “revelation.” He sees exceptional power in poetry’s ability to reveal meanings that are otherwise difficult to communicate. Dowdy claims that, “poetry’s role is to strip away surface veneer in order to create new perspectives, meanings that are present but must be unveiled through poetry” (10). He believes that other rhetorical forms such as journalism or traditional political speech do not adequately uncover such meanings (8).

Nancy Billias summarizes and synthesizes many claims<sup>5</sup> about poetry’s power to resist oppression and silencing. She challenges Theodor Adorno’s dismissal of poetry as a valid source of social resistance. She calls poetry a “rational response to evil,” and an “ethical act.” Billias

---

<sup>5</sup> Billias draws from the writings of Giorgio Agamben, Denise Levertov, Jaques Taminiaux, and Pedro Gonzalez.

sees poetry as an especially appropriate rhetorical form in cases of injustice because of its ability to empower those whom “evil” has silenced and desubjectified (137). Billias claims that poetry can more easily access our subjective experience, and give voice to the silence (136). She credits this ability to its reflexive and flexible nature (137). My analysis of *Word Warriors* evidences the fact that poetry is one means of response to exigencies of oppression and that some of its poets choose poetry for reasons described above.

### *Limitations to the Inquiry into Poetic Exceptionalism Thus Far*

As can be seen from this review of the literature, there are many grand claims about the exceptional abilities of poetry. These writers agree with one another that the poetic form offers qualities distinct from the essay. They attribute the capacity to constitute one’s own identity, reveal complex meanings, engage audiences, and speak what cannot be spoken through other forms uniquely to poetry. All of these claims about poetry begin with the assumption that poetry certainly offers something unique as a form. Some authors do not link their arguments to any examples of poetry (Billias, Nuyen<sup>6</sup>) and others (Davidson<sup>7</sup> and Dowdy) include exemplifying

---

<sup>6</sup> Nuyen supports his claims with the writings of Luce Irigaray, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Donna Haraway. These three feminist authors write in unusual styles that include, “mixtures and hybridizations [ ] unfinished sentences [ ] stretched syntax and grammar [and] neologisms” (82). Nuyen mentions poetry as an escape from the *différend*, but does not look to poetry to see if it truly escapes male domination. I question his recommendation of poetry as the way out of marginalization because poetry has no weaker a history of male domination than the essay.

<sup>7</sup> Davidson uses survey, author study, and close reading to support his arguments. This methodological variety is supposed to show the reader that his findings are generalizable (3). However, with no discussion of how he selected the poems on which he uses these methods, I wonder how generalizable his claims truly are. It seems likely that he would have chosen poems obviously exemplifying the qualities that he claims characterize poetry as a form. My own project adds another method of analysis to Davidson’s collection, thus checking the reliability of his findings. Additionally, I selected *Word Warriors* as a representation of feminist voices rather than based upon content already familiar to me. So, although I can make predictions based on Davidson’s work, it is important not to let inquiries about poetic form conclude with his analysis.

poems, but I question the generalizability of those examples. The inquiries I have summarized all answer the question, “what makes poetry exceptional?” rather than starting with the question, “is poetry exceptional?” If these claims are correct, it follows that there will be significant points of departure between the thematic content of *Word Warriors* and its cousin anthology *Listen Up*. My comparison of the two texts to test these claims fills a need for a more systematic and skeptical inquiry into the existence and nature of poetic exceptionalism. The similarities in thematic content between *Word Warriors* and the feminist essay anthology *Listen Up: Voices in the Next Generation of Feminists* do not support extreme claims of poetic exceptionalism. The analysis does, however, find that as seen in *Word Warriors*, spoken word poetry does rhetorical work of a slightly different kind than that seen in *Listen Up* indicating that it plays a somewhat different role within feminism than the essay does.

### **Feminist Rhetoric**

In addition to evaluating claims about poetry’s distinct powers, my analysis uncovers a less-studied side of the feminist movement and offers a new perspective on feminist rhetoric focusing on the significance of form instead of the more common focus on particular strategies. Inquiries into feminist rhetoric have come up with many solutions to the problems that marginalized rhetors face. These surveys of feminist rhetoric do not include poetry.

Stacey K. Sowards and Valerie R. Renegar reconceptualize rhetorical activism to make room for feminist modes of resistance that don’t fit within traditional rhetorical theoretical perspectives. Beyond the well-established methods of public protest and confrontation<sup>8</sup>, Sowards

---

<sup>8</sup> Read Robert S. Cathcart’s *Movements: Confrontation as Rhetorical Form* for a traditional perspective on social movement rhetoric.

and Renegar add “creating grassroots models of leadership, using strategic humor, building feminist identity, sharing stories, and resisting stereotypes and labels” to the possible modes of rhetorical activism (58). Julia M. Allen and Lester Faigley continue the discussion of non-traditional rhetorical strategies employed by marginalized rhetors with a survey of what they call, “discursive strategies for social change.” Using a case study to exemplify each, they identify eleven strategies: new languages (145), new pronoun constructions (147), neologisms (150), redefinitions and reclamations (152), reversal (153), juxtaposition of languages (156), musical forms (159), perspective by incongruity (161), calling without naming (162), metaphor (163) and narrative (165). Each of these strategies could be present in either poetry or essay. Neither Allen and Faigley, nor Sowards and Renegar consider poetic forms as a strategy. Given their methodologies, their non-inclusion of poetry indicates a lack of case studies on the poetry of marginalized rhetors. My own study of *Word Warriors* fills this gap and illustrates poetry’s role in feminist rhetoric as addressing content similar to that covered by feminist essays, but different in its composition of ways of knowing, being, and doing. The spoken word poetry of *Word Warriors* has an eloquent way of knowing, a self-oriented way of being, and a way of doing or performing feminism that is stronger than the way of doing seen in *Listen Up*.

## **Word Warriors**

### *An Introduction to the Text*

Alix Olson, editor of *Word Warriors* and feminist spoken word poet, selected both emerging and well-known spoken word poets for her anthology. For each of these poets, she again selected an already popular poem and a newer, often unpublished one. In addition to the poems, she also includes an interview, essay, or narrative from each poet. From reading these

pieces, it is clear that most, if not all, of these women are feminists. Olson sees these women as more than the common, apolitical poet—they are “warriors” in a “revolution.” This characterization makes sense because in the context of feminism and the history of women’s oppression, simply for a woman to have a public voice is an act of resistance. Published in 2007, twelve years after the first edition of *Listen Up*, the poems in *Word Warriors* were written well into the third wave of feminism. Olson writes, “these poets build upon our political and feminist/womanist vertebrae, contributing unabashed and flawed, precise and untethered voices to the spine of persistence...us[ing] language to claim, reclaim, and rediscover this tattered but glorious world” (xvii- xviii). My analysis will discuss how spoken word poetry contributes to this task<sup>9</sup>.

#### *A Feminist Text*

*Word Warriors* responds to multiple exigencies<sup>10</sup>. To a certain extent, each poet responds to her own unique rhetorical situation. My focus, however, is on the exigencies to which the text as a whole responds. The condition that Olson most emphasizes is silence (xviii). Before *Word Warriors* the voices of spoken word poets were missing from published feminist discourse and the voices of women were missing from published spoken word collections. The most basic aspect of *Word Warriors*’ response to this silence is to increase the numbers of women (or poets) featured in published works. The response does not, however, stop there.

---

<sup>9</sup> Some scholars of poetry define poetry as necessarily apolitical, but following the feminist tradition I challenge the distinction between the personal and political and also support the self-definition of these women who see themselves as poets.

<sup>10</sup> An exigence is an “imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be.” (Bitzer 6) demanding a rhetorical response.

When Olson calls the word warriors “spokeswomen for a new generation” (xv), she references an exigence established by Findlen in *Listen Up*. In naming a new generation of feminists, both Findlen and Olson challenge the silence of the contemporary feminist movement, which Findlen argues hasn’t received much media attention or public recognition (Findlen xiii). When the young and more inclusive third wave was first emerging, the media were giving more attention to postfeminism, (a disaffiliation or even backlash to feminism by young women) than to the continued feminist struggle. For example, *Time* magazine published a story on the “death of feminism.” (Heywood, 253). *Word Warriors* amplifies voices that the public might not know about or ignore. Additionally, through their choices of authors and essay topics, the editors of these anthologies constitute the new generation of feminists as more diverse and inclusive than the second wave. Olson and Findlen both feature many women and ideas that might have been marginalized by the relatively fixed second wave feminist identity of the previous generation. *Word Warriors* addresses the silence by increasing both the number and diversity of voices represented in feminist discourse and poetry anthologies.

### *A Spoken Word Text*

I have just described how *Word Warriors* fills a gap in the voices represented within the published sphere of the feminist movement—the voices of poets. But the anthology also responds to a silence of women in the published sphere of the spoken word movement. The title, *Word Warriors: 35 Women in the Spoken Word Revolution* places the poems it contains in the context of “the Spoken Word Revolution.” The word choice in the title emphasizes that these poems are not isolated; they are parts of a movement that includes slam poetry and hip-hop. The label “spoken word” can reference a category including performed poetry and verse, or indicate a

distinction from the performative arts slam and hip-hop. Javon Johnson, who writes about heterosexism in Los Angeles' slam and spoken word communities, explains the difference between slam and spoken word: "Spoken word is the performance of poetry that is free of competition and the scoring of poets or their poems; the poetry slam is the competitive art of performing poetry" (397).

In 2003, Mark Kelly Smith and Mark Eleveld published *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip-hop & the Poetry of a New Generation*. Of this book's almost fifty contributors, fewer than ten are women. Published and unpublished, men have historically dominated the spoken word scene, especially slam and hip-hop. Olson attributes the recent surge of feminist spoken word poetry to the slam scene, and credits Marc Smith for popularizing the form. She explains that this popularization facilitated poetry's expansion beyond the academic and elite to be more universally accessible and appealing (Olson xi-xii).

Despite its increasing popularity, spoken word poetry is still less accessible to women. Olson recalls that she identified misogyny in slam poems and noticed a low ratio of women performers to men during her first experience of the slam scene (xiii). With *Word Warriors*, Olson showcases those women's voices that might otherwise be lost in a still male-dominated rhetorical form. This text provides women with representation and acknowledgement within the spoken word movement.

## Analysis

### *Comparative Thematic Analysis*

I began my analysis of *Word Warriors* with a comparative thematic analysis between *Word Warriors* and *Listen Up: Voices in the Next Generation of Feminism* (Findlen). I used thematic analysis to identify recurring or emphasized words, phrases, and meanings from the poems in *Word Warriors*. Allison Lea Howry and Julia T. Wood used the same methodology (325) in an analysis of *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (Findlen). *Listen Up* is a better-known text claiming the same purpose as *Word Warriors*. Both seek to represent diverse contemporary feminist voices. The two collections take different rhetorical forms—essay and poetry. Because the two texts respond to similar rhetorical situations, but differ in form, I hoped that a thematic comparison would reveal whether or not the poetic form invites different kinds of content than the essay

*Listen Up* is one of several feminist essay anthologies. Because of its recognition and primacy, Howry and Wood consider *Listen Up* to be a reasonable representative text for the third wave. Similarly, I see it as an appropriate representative text for feminist essay anthologies. In their analysis of *Listen Up*, Howry and Wood compare the themes present in *Listen Up*'s essays to already known and established second wave themes. They identify continuities with, departures from, and criticisms of the second wave.

Instead of identifying thematic differences between waves of the feminist movement, as Howry and Wood do, I focused on differences within the third wave<sup>11</sup> on the basis of rhetorical form. Additionally, a thematic analysis is one way of describing the focus of a text, and shows

---

<sup>11</sup> Olson does not explicitly identify *Word Warriors: 35 Women in the Spoken Word Revolution* as a third wave text; but similarities in purpose, content, and time of creation lead me to place it in the same category as the explicitly third wave essay collections.

what feminist poets are writing about. The purpose of this comparison was to see if feminist poets are writing about different topics than feminist essayists, or if they are just using a different form to address the same issues and make similar statements.

I used an adapted version of William Foster Owen's method of thematic analysis to identify recurring themes in *Word Warriors*—the same method that Howry and Wood use in their analysis of *Listen Up*. This parallel methodology facilitated a comparison between the two texts in which I could identify the points of departure between *Word Warriors* and the feminist essay anthologies that address the same general exigence. The purpose of a thematic analysis is to identify recurring or emphasized words, phrases, and meanings in a text. It is an especially appropriate method for recovering women's rhetoric, because by limiting and structuring the role of the analyst, it preserves the voices of the poets. The criteria that guided my identification of themes are: the frequency of recurrence of meaning, the repetition of exact words or phrases, and forcefulness as indicated by underlining, italicizing, bolding, or exclamation points.

*Word Warriors* is a printed text, but the poets wrote their poems for oral performance. The print versions collected for the anthology are not complete representations of the poems. For this reason I located audiovisual or audio recordings of the poems whenever available. Thirty-seven out of the anthology's seventy poems are available as either audio or audiovisual recordings. To account for the spokenness of spoken word poetry, I used some additional indicators of forcefulness. Spoken word poets often communicate emphasis through tone, volume, inflection, pauses, rate of speech, or gestures. First, I read through each of the poems, applying Owen's indicators to identify themes. Then, I either coded recordings of the poems incorporating the additional information found therein, or revisited the print version for a second time when no recording was available.

This process revealed that the indicators of forcefulness applicable to the performed poetry were much more illuminating and clear than those used to analyze the printed versions of the poems. For example, in Rachel Kann's poem, *Titular* (Olson 199-203), she does italicize words and lines for emphasis, but she yells some un-italicized lines louder than lines without such typographical emphasis. Lenelle Moïse uses italics to indicate that she is now speaking from someone else's perspective instead of to signal an important point. Her emphasis is much more clearly identifiable through her vocal tone than through any typographical emphasis. Many other poets in the anthology also take liberties with their use of punctuation, capitalization, bolding, underlining, and italicizing. For these reasons, each of the examples illustrating a theme or rhetorical quality is a poem for which its recorded performance was available for analysis. I also adapted Owen's indicators to account for poetic repetition. A poem may repeat the same word or phrase for rhythmic or other aesthetic purposes rather than because it is the main theme of the piece. Since my focus is on *Word Warriors* as a whole, my analysis will include all of its collected poems. I will identify the main themes in each poem and then ascertain which ones repeat throughout the anthology.

The first section of my analysis focuses on comparing the thematic content of *Word Warriors* and its sister essay anthology *Listen Up*. The categories into which Howry and Wood break *Listen Up*'s themes overlap and co-occur, but I discuss them separately for purposes of clarity. I found that although the two texts take different rhetorical forms, they have quite similar thematic content. In the following paragraphs I provide examples to illustrate how poetry can address the same themes as prose.

### The “Starting Point” or Rhetorical Situation

One of the themes in *Listen Up* is the articulation of a different starting point for the new generation of feminists. Many of the essays describe the ways in which their generation demands a different sort of feminism than what was required during the second wave (334). What Howry and Wood refer to as a “starting point,” is an aspect of the rhetorical situation for both *Word Warriors* and *Listen Up*. The word warriors grew up in a world undeniably altered by the second wave, and thus the things “waiting to be done” (Bitzer 6) through their poetry differ from those waiting to be done by the second wave. The audience also differs in that the word warriors and other third wave rhetors begin their work in a society that already generally recognizes sexism as problematic and has made gains in the structural enforcement of gender equity. To apply this observation to just one of the themes of the third wave: some negative social messages of the past (women are ill-equipped to vote) have practically disappeared; others persist, but in different, less blatant forms.

Word warrior Leah Harris addresses the tension between the recognition of the newness of objective conditions and the similarity of underlying problems in her poem, *Revenge of the Crazy Wimmin*. In this poem problematizing the pathologization of women, she compares antiquated diagnoses of “witch,” “hysteria,” and “penis envy,” with modern diagnoses like “paranoid” (Olson 81). She writes,

and the more things change  
 the more they stay  
 the same  
 they use the same tactics  
 they just change the names (80)

This poem questions the idea that the third wave's exigence differs from past exigencies in any deep way, suggesting instead, that any differences are only superficial. At the same time, her need to point this out indicates that even a societal perception of a different starting point for third wave feminism changes the rhetorical situation. The exaggerated perception of progress is itself an imperfection to which *Revenge of the Crazy Wimmin* responds.

Another example is *A Sylvia Plath Sliver*, in which Karen Garrabrant contemplates a postcard picturing Sylvia Plath. The image draws Garrabrant into the past so that she can compare Sylvia Plath's struggle with those women face today. I have selected two passages to showcase the way in which she frames the tension between appreciating progress and recognizing that we still have work to do: "our battles are different now, the same as they ever were" (102) and "It's too easy to congratulate ourselves / in color with how far we've come / while we slip / further behind the progresses we've made" (103).

These two poems exemplify how *Word Warriors* celebrates progress but demands more. *Word Warriors* exists in a space that preceded the text's creation, but its presence in that space changes and reinforces aspects of the meaning of the third wave. Here, we see poetry reconstituting an exigence, revealing that poetry is just as much a means of symbolic action as forms that traditionally earned the label of rhetorical.

### **Resisting Negative Social Messages (about women)**

One type of rhetorical work performed by the poems of *Word Warriors* is resistance against negative social messages. Howry and Wood found resisting negative social messages about women to be the most pervasive theme throughout *Listen Up* (Howry and Wood 326). The theme of resisting negative social messages also emerges in *Word Warriors*, although it is less

pervasive. In *Word Warriors*, these negative social messages may be about women or other identities intersecting with their identity as woman. *Word Warriors* resists racism, classism, ableism, and sizism, among others, as women's issues.

The opening poem of *Word Warriors* is Sarah Jones's *Your Revolution*. This poem is one example of how *Word Warriors* resists negative social messages about women. Jones's re-write of Gil Scott-Heron's *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* expresses dissatisfaction with the persistent negative messages about women in hip-hop. By repeating the phrase, "your revolution will not happen between these thighs," (Olson 8-10) and a variety of references to misogyny in hip-hop, Jones opts out of the male-dominated hip-hop revolution. Instead of settling for a revolution that demeans women, Jones demands a revolution that includes and serves hip-hop's women as well as its men. In her reconstitution of what the hip-hop revolution will be, Jones resists misogyny in hip-hop.

This theme reappears as a constant presence throughout *Word Warriors*. An example of how resistance manifests itself on the intersections of women's identities in this anthology is Aya de Leon's poem *Cellulite*. This poem challenges negative social messages about women—fat women, in particular. Like Jones, de Leon takes an iconic hip-hop piece (LL Cool J's *Jingling Baby*) and gives it a feminist message. *Cellulite* offers a radical alternative of acceptance in response to negative social messages about women's bodies. With the lines, "a sick society / turns women's bodies into problems to be solved," (Olson 69) de Leon relocates the source of the problem of fatness. Instead of women's bodies being sick, it is the society that polices them. De Leon also redefines fatness as "health is life is fertility is womanly" (68) instead of as a flaw. Another way *Cellulite* challenges negative social messages about women is through the playful positivity that comes through lines like, "& next time you're working out in step aerobics class/

don't forget to enjoy the bounce of your ass / it's jiggling baby / *go head baby*" (emphasis in original 69). Through relocation, redefinition, playful positivity, and self-acceptance De Leon takes power away from messages criticizing fat women's bodies.

### **Claiming a Voice**

For resistance to occur, potential resisters must have a voice. Most of *Listen Up*'s contributors wrote about how feminism provides them with a voice. Howry and Wood broke this thematic category into four sub-categories: "naming women's experiences into existence," "understanding and articulating women's experiences," "providing a means of healing," and "enabling feminist activism" (328). Rhetorical scholars attach varying meanings to the concept of "voice." The different uses of the term can be broken into two categories. Those who approach rhetorical studies with an interest to critical interpretation of the possibilities of language apply "voice" to the culturally specific rhetorical styles of marginalized rhetors. To those who approach rhetorical studies with an interest in the phenomenology of speaking and agency, voice refers to the act of resistance through rhetoric (Watts). Howry and Wood's analysis applied the latter perspective. Their use of "voice" is fundamentally synonymous with "agency" with the added specificity of relating to women's voices, which have been historically marginalized.

This phenomenon of poetry as a means for constituting or reconstituting experience and identity has a strong presence in *Word Warriors*. Definitional agency frequently appears as testimonial poetry in *Word Warriors*. What appears more broadly in *Listen Up* as naming women's experiences into existence, shows up more specifically in *Word Warriors* as naming

women's experiences *of injustice* into existence. Through their testimonial poetry, the word warriors call attention to societal problems that might otherwise be overlooked or dismissed.

An example of how poetry can speak what is otherwise invisible is Lenelle Moïse's *Loch Ness Monsters*. In this poem, Moïse recounts a racially motivated attack in a liberal city and critiques the community response. She says,

after the ithaca times  
 reported the incident four days  
 late, the local liberal whites simply  
 could not believe  
 it happened here. *here?*  
*in ithaca? my god,*  
 they said, *that's just*  
*incredible. Are you serious? here?*

and i wonder how some people can keep their minds  
 open to the possibility of a loch ness monster  
 open to extraterrestrials

...[long list of other crazy things people are willing to believe]...

but the sun we can all confirm and agree upon  
 will shine down on one black woman--  
 patricia—getting her ass kicked

by three epithet-wielding whites--  
 her spirit and features evidently crushed  
 by their hate—the rage in her  
 gut, the insistence of her fists  
 obviously outnumbered

and some people just cannot  
 see it.

and some people just don't believe it. (41-42)

For Moïse, poetry is a way to bring public awareness to the awful reality of the situation in opposition to the disbelief of white Ithacans. Through this poem, Moïse reframes the event and the public response to it in contrast to how this community responds to other claims. She redefines the act of violence as indisputable and relatively unsurprising, thus challenging the community definition of the event as shocking and difficult to believe. Moïse's presentation of the event highlights it as an act of injustice characteristic of an oppressive society. Further, the poem implicitly accuses the Ithacans, and any readers or listeners who have acted similarly, of perpetuating the injustice. This accusation moves her audience to reflect on their own tendencies. Through poetry, Moïse and the other word warriors find the agency to voice their own interpretations of events, often identifying injustices that their audience might otherwise overlook.

One of the claims of poetic exceptionalism in the literature on poetry, is that it has a special ability to break silence. Meliza Bañales does just this when she speaks previously unspoken experiences in her poem *Do the Math*. After listing the equations making up her life,

like “Learning to fold sheets at least three to six ways / means I can clean three to six houses a week / which equals rent, tortillas, and lettuce for the month” (92), she says, “Just once I’d like to write an equation for all the things I could never write about.” (93). The rest of the poem is an example of Lyotard’s paradoxical *différend*, because Bañales goes on to do exactly what she said she could never do—she writes about “the hundreds of times I saw my parents laugh / until the tears rolled down their cheeks, / even in a neighborhood of drugs and gangs.” (94). Bañales sees poetry as a way to speak those experiences that are harder for her to otherwise express.

Many of the word warriors explicitly reference how poetry has provided them with a means to articulate their own experiences. Sini Anderson does this when she says, “I’m speaking code to you, poetry, that nobody like god or any teacher could have showed me” (282) in her poem, *God in You*. With this line, she draws attention to how poetry allows her to communicate in new ways. This poem also exemplifies what Howry and Wood call a “means of healing.” In *Listen Up*, the healing was primarily from experiences of cultural devaluation and marginalization. In *Word Warriors*, the poems also provide a means of healing from personally painful experiences that are more detached from systematic oppression. Anderson’s above-mentioned poem is about the death of her friend and lover. By performing *God in You* Anderson publicizes her healing process, constituting and sharing her relationship with her loved-one as well as her experience of loss. Patricia Smith also highlights this aspect of poetry in her poem *Building Nicole’s Mama*, which is about a lived experience with a young girl who had never admitted that her mother was dead until she heard Smith’s poem about her own dead father. Smith says,

and now this child with rusty knees

and mismatched shoes sees poetry as her scream

and asks me for the words to build her mother again.

Replacing the voice

stitching on the lost flesh. (396)

One way to provide healing from more systematic injustices, as opposed to personal loss, is through redefining or completely rejecting restrictive or otherwise hurtful categorizations. Many of the word warriors use their poetry to reconstitute their own identities in addition to voicing their experiences as previously discussed.<sup>12</sup>

### **Recognizing Connections and Building a Collective Identity**

Howry and Wood identify recognizing connections and building a collective identity among women as the second most prominent theme in *Listen Up* (327). As the word warriors are bonded by both their identities as women and their identities as poets, their collective identity takes a different shape. The word warriors simultaneously have a more specific connection, as women poets, and a broader network of connections linking them to other identity groups. This theme appears in varying subtlety throughout the anthology. Entire poems in *Word Warriors* are dedicated to honoring earlier women poets. Many others express gratitude to or recognition of other women, poets, or otherwise connected people with a brief mention. Other poems imply a collective identity through repeated words like “we” and “our.”

Sarah Jones’ poem *wax poetic* takes her experience of getting a bikini wax to show the connection between herself and the woman who works at the salon. The poem ends,

---

<sup>12</sup> I return to how the poets do this in my later discussion of the ego-function.

it would be unseemly to tease  
 apart the reasons some women must touch  
 other women's pussies for  
 train fare and tips every day and  
 so instead we leave it to the wax  
 in the melting pot (Olson 12)

*Wax poetic* implies that it their locations as women in American culture leads these women to such a bizarre situation. Even though it affects them in different ways, shared systems of oppression connect these strangers. Staceyann Chinn makes a similar point with her poem, although much more directly. In her *Poem for the Gay Games* she screams out loud “*all oppression is connected you dick*” thus speaking the importance of recognizing connection to other oppressed groups if we want real change.

### **Investing in the Continuing Feminist Struggle**

In the same poem, Chinn enacts the most common way in which the word warriors demonstrate their investment in the continuing feminist struggle—she and fourteen other poets in *Word Warriors* demand action from her audience. In *Listen Up*, authors write about the struggle to embody feminist goals and maintain their critical feminist perspective in their daily life. In *Word Warriors*, there is much less expressed doubt and difficulty with enacting a feminist identity. Instead, the poems in *Word Warriors* do the work of feminism as the poets call others to join them. Chinn's *Poem for the Gay Games* critiques the apathy of the American LGBTQ community and ends with an emphatic invitation to mobilize against oppression, yelling,

the time to act is now!  
 Now! while there are still ways that we can fight  
 Now! because those rights we have are so very few  
 Now! because it's the right thing to do  
 Now! before you open the door to find  
 they have finally come for you (Olson 373)

A necessary part of activism is recruiting and mobilizing others. The comparatively strong presences of mobilizing rhetoric in *Word Warriors* indicates that spoken word poets may be some of the leaders of the contemporary feminist movement.

### **Inclusivity**

A final theme present in *Listen Up* is a push toward inclusivity in the feminist movement. The essays of *Listen Up* describe the importance of inclusivity and demand a commitment to achieving it. Only one of *Word Warriors*' poems was explicitly about this theme. C. C. Carter directly addresses and problematizes the divisions and suspicious exclusion among women and feminists. *Warning* shares Carter's experience as a black woman who has felt judgment from white feminists for her choice to wear lipstick and lace instead of resisting objectification by opting out of wearing makeup and feminine or sexualizing clothing. She writes,

Lipstick and lace make me suspect  
 to women who say  
 women like me  
 set the feminist movement back  
 one hundred years (161)

A following passage calls attention to the ignorance driving such judgment against her and other women who do feminism differently than the ways prescribed by the second wave. This passage reads,

we interrupt this poem with a special announcement.

An unidentified black female

*has infiltrated the system*

and all

*We Repeat*

*ALL*

*national security defenses are at risk*

Cause this is a warning warning warning!!!

There's a person passing as woman

Carter celebrates the importance of different ways of being feminist with an image of women working within the system passing the key to liberation to those working outside the system in a passage that says,

This

is a warning

to my militant marys

toting handguns

downgrading sistahs

Whose weapons are BAs or MAs

some with PhD degrees—

Working in corporate capitalists  
 man-decision-making companies  
 for the key to the office—  
 While you're protesting  
 on the outside  
 she's lobbying for your rights  
 on the inside  
 passing  
 the key outside the window  
 for you to come through (162-163).

The poem questions an essential feminist identity, and the idea that there is one right way to be feminist. Carter concludes the poem with just the sort of demand that appears in *Listen Up*; she says,

This  
 is a warning  
 It takes a lot of women  
 to form an army  
 It takes all kinds  
 to win  
 this  
 revolution (165).

Despite the fact that only one poem references a need for inclusivity in feminism, *Word Warriors* demonstrates a commitment to this goal through the inclusion of diverse voices. As I

have already mentioned, spoken word poetry is notable for its accessibility to those outside of academia and thus it is unsurprising that Olson found contributors with such diverse identities and experiences. Some of the poems in *Word Warriors* do not resist negative social messages, build collective identity, commit to the continuing feminist struggle or describe how poetry or feminism provides the authors with a voice. These poems focus instead on constituting the identity (or one aspect of the identity) of the author. The *Word Warriors* constitute themselves Americans, Blacks, daughters, transgender, transsexual, disabled, fat, poets, Mestizo, poor, feminists, Christian, Palestinian, lovers, a member of the “Nothing Generation,” Polish and Jewish, New Yorker, Muslim, victim, hippie, lover of literature, a Kennedy, or completely reject attempts to classify their identities.

### **Word Warriors as Feminist Rhetoric**

The thematic content of *Word Warriors* is not strikingly novel or unique. Although the themes appear in slightly different proportions,<sup>13</sup> *Word Warriors* generally addresses the same subject matter as *Listen Up*. These women are responding to and reconstituting feminist exigencies as they name and resist them. Like prose, spoken word poetry offers a vehicle for voice or agency and a means of building collective identity. Since spoken word poetry is accessible to those whose experience makes prose less available, it facilitates a true polyphony of diverse voices in anthologies like *Word Warriors*. Although *Word Warriors* takes a different form than *Listen Up*, their similar content reveals that spoken word poetry is not limited to pure aesthetics, and is just as deserving of rhetorical analysis as prose.

---

<sup>13</sup> And it is impossible to say whether those differences come from editorial preference, analyst bias or the invitation of the poetic form from only looking at the frequency of theme recurrence between *Listen Up* and *Word Warriors*.

*Knowing, Being, and Doing: A Rhetorical Perspective on Word Warriors*

Thomas W. Benson describes rhetoric as “a way of knowing, a way of being, and a way of doing” (1). He argues that these rhetorical modes of action cannot effectively stand solo and suggests that true rhetorical acts only occur at the intersection of all three. This perspective supports my assertion that *Word Warriors* is a rhetorical text. The poems impart knowledge of otherwise inexpressible feelings and experiences. Many of the poems evoke an empathic knowing of the author as she cultivates a shared understanding. The poems also constitute the identities and experiences of their authors and subjects, exemplifying a way of being. Finally, the poems in *Word Warriors* demonstrate a rhetorical way of doing; they perform feminism.

**Knowing: Form and the Psychology of the Audience**

So far, this analysis has focused on *Word Warriors*' content. Now, the analysis turns to a more holistic view of the poems that includes both content and form. Kenneth Burke disputes the validity of a division between informational or thematic content and the form through which that content is communicated. From a Burkean perspective, the two are inseparable and the recognition of their connection facilitates observation of the way form shapes how an audience comes to know a symbolic meaning. Therefore, even if the thematic content of *Word Warriors* and *Listen Up* are similar, the form through which that content is bodied forth contributes to the creation of the meaning of that content. Assuming that audiences play an active role in the creation of meaning, form's role in shaping audience expectations is quite influential in the process through which an audience comes to know the meaning of any rhetoric (Gregg 3-5).

For Burke, a discussion of form is the same as a discussion of the psychology of the audience. He writes, “form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite” (Burke 2). He argues that to maintain suspense, the psychology of form uses the strategy of eloquence as opposed to the suspense and surprise used in the psychology of information (7). Burke creates a separation between scientific and artistic truth, by which “Truth in art is not the discovery of facts, not an addition to human knowledge in the scientific sense of the word. It is, rather, the exercise of human propriety, the formulation of symbols which rigidify our sense of poise and rhythm” (11-12). His emphasis on this distinction was in reaction to what he called a “hypertrophy of the psychology of information... accompanied by the corresponding atrophy of the psychology of form” (33). Burke’s psychology of form is a defense of art as valuable for the sake of beauty, taste, or eloquence instead of only as a means to some other end (Parker). This separation between art and science is reminiscent of the separation between poetic and rhetoric. While I do not dispute that poetry can be worthy of appreciation without imparting scientific knowledge or carrying persuasive power, I do challenge the discreteness of psychology of form and psychology of information. Analysis of *Word Warriors* muddies Burke’s distinction between the psychology of information and the psychology of form. The use of the poetic form certainly mediates audience expectations of eloquence, rhythm, and the sharing of affective experience; but the poems of *Word Warriors* do more than “externaliz[e] taste.” They also conjure novel knowing for the audience.

Exemplifying the strategic implementation of the psychology of the audience in *Word Warriors*, Aya de Leon makes eloquent use of the poetic form in her poem *Grito de Vieques*. This poem, which personifies Vieques, Puerto Rico invites the audience to engage emotionally with a location as they would a woman. Given the cultural assumption that poetry expresses

personal experiences, de Leon gratifies the audience's appetite for social identification with universal experiences. Her repetition of "My name is Vieques" is acceptable and even pleasing to the audience because poetry, like music, has "remained closer to the psychology of form" (5). However, even with this repeated phrase and structure, the poem takes the form of a qualitative progression as de Leon takes the audience along through the transformation of Vieques. De Leon begins the poem by testifying to the trauma of Vieques and follows her history to reach hope and determination for freedom.

My name is Vieques.

I am a Puerto Rican girl.

My stepfather is the United States.

He comes into my room at night to do his business.

.....

My name is Vieques.

Sometimes my stepfather sells me to whole groups.

He calls them allied forces.

I fought back the best I could with chains and live bodies and fishing boats.

It happened anyway.

.....

I look at my body and see the devastation.

Lagoons, like self-esteem, have dried up to nothingness.

My womb is wilting with radiation

from illegally used uranium ammunition.

Where my skin was once lush and soft, I am scarred.

.....

My name is Vieques.

The numbness is subsiding.

Tender shoots of grass push up toward the sky.

A lizard sneaks back to sun itself on a chunk of shrapnel.

.....

My name is Vieques

and I will be free. (Olson 70-72)

Following a familiar narrative progression of the persistent underdog, de Leon creates an appetite for the liberation of Vieques in her audience and satisfies this appetite with the poem's conclusion that Vieques will be free. De Leon invites the audience to align with the personified island against the United States.

However, this poem does more than achieve artistic truth through eloquence. It also imparts a knowing on the audience resembling the psychology of information. In the telling of Vieques's story, de Leon provides the audience with factual information about the history of the island. An audience who knew nothing about Vieques's history would come away from a performance of this poem knowing new facts about it (or her). This audience would know that

Spain colonized Puerto Rico before the United States, it would know that the indigenous people of Vieques are the Taina, and that the United States bombed Vieques and illegally used uranium ammunition. After hearing this poem, even the most uninformed audience would have a knowing of the general historical trajectory of exploitation followed by resistance, and thereby more independence.

Instead of resisting the domination of scientific prose by defining a discrete and uniquely valuable alternative as Burke does, *Word Warriors* exemplifies the ability of spoken word poetry to use the psychology of form to facilitate a deep knowing in the audience. The appetite de Leon creates in her audience has power beyond beauty alone. From an instrumental perspective, *Grito de Vieques* imparts a knowing onto the audience more effectively than scientific prose could. De Leon coaxes the audience into sympathetic alliance with Vieques, familiarizing them with her struggle. This poem increases awareness and understanding of the United States' exploitative actions in Vieques. For this purpose, it is not as important that the audience comes to know the G.P.S. coordinates of Vieques, or even the dates of the bombings. Presented via the poetic form, the history of Vieques and the U.S. naval training range located there is known by the audience both as an informational history and as affective knowledge. This coupling gives staying power to the knowledge that a history taking the form of scientific prose is unlikely to be able to offer. The poem conveys an affective knowledge of the importance of the events prompting its audience to seek out a more detailed history independently. While *Grito de Vieques* is "an exercise in human propriety" (Burke 42) it also does rhetorical work to share an understanding of the effect U.S. military action has had on Vieques and affirm its strength while creating sympathetic allies out of its audience. In this way, *Word Warriors* illustrates how feminist spoken word poetry defies traditional categorization.

### **Being: Ego-Function**

As mentioned in the discussion of inclusivity of contributors in *Word Warriors*, many of the poems' primary functions are to constitute the identity of the author. For these poems the psychology of the audience is less important. Like other rhetorics of protest, much (but certainly not all) of what feminist spoken word poetry does is monologic in the sense of facing toward oneself. As a reminder, the ego-function of rhetoric is "the act of communication wherein one's self is [her] primary audience and where others identify with the rhetoric insofar as they share similar ego concerns" (Gregg 74). Bitch's *Pussy Manifesto* faces toward women, and especially other feminists. Her musical poem is very reminiscent of a protest chant that has no chance of, and makes no attempt to, appeal to nonfeminists. When she shout-sings,

Manifest this Motherfuckrr #4:

The power of Pussy could be blinding.

Do not misinterpret its strength and fear it. Do not try to control it. It is light, rich  
and full of warmth.

Use it wisely and with jeweled intentions (Olson 372),

Bitch performs the ego-function of rhetoric common to protest. In Gregg's words, she "appear[s] to reject opportunities for identification, refuse to make the kinds of appeals which might gain [her] a receptive audience, and in fact flaunt and make a mockery of the values and ways of behaving which are so meaningful to the 'establishment. Rhetoric, as we usually understand it, seems to flee the scene" (73-74). This is not a poem to convert misogynists—it is a poem of pride and solidarity. The poems I have described as building collective identity perform the ego-

function in the same way that *Pussy Manifesto* does. They strengthen connections and create a group identity through a symbolic act.

Poems of protest are not the only manifestation of the ego-function in *Word Warriors*. Andrea Gibson's poem *Andrew* does contain social messages that could reach an audience of others, but a primary function of the poem is to reject externally imposed identities of self and replace them with her own image of self. Gibson writes,

No I'm not gay  
 No I'm not straight  
 and I'm sure as hell not bisexual damnit  
 I am whoever I am when I am it  
 Loving whoever you are when the stars shine  
 And whoever you'll be when the sun rises  
 Yes, I like girls  
 Yes, I like boys  
 Yes, I like boys who like boys  
 I like girls who wear toys and girls who don't  
 Girls who don't call themselves girls  
 Crew cuts or curls or that really bad hair phase in between  
 .....  
 I am my mother's daughter  
 I am midnight's sun

You can find me on the moon  
 Waxing and waning  
 My heart full of petals  
 Every single one begging  
 Love me, love me, love me  
 Whoever I am  
 Whoever I become. (Olson 219-221)

This poem frees Gibson from restrictive, simplifying, and inaccurate self-hoods, affirming herself as whoever she is, and whoever she becomes.

Sometimes the ego-function is less reactionary. Natalie E. Illum realizes herself through her poem *I am from, third cycle* without rejecting or denying association with the often-derogatory word “cripple.”

I am from the ocean,  
 sea salt tangled in my hair.

I am from an ancient lineage  
 of seers, shamans, and crazy women  
 believing in scattered prophecies.

I am from the cast out and the called in.

I am from a broken womb, a dead landscape  
 of swollen tissue, spastic limbs, a falling down

I cannot control. I am from the lexicon of *cripple* (Olson 59)

The poem constitutes her identity as complex, and multifaceted—a mixture of historical connections and life experience. Through verbalization she takes control of her own sense of self and influences how her audience sees her. Although these poems are performed for audiences, the purpose of influencing the audience is for the external realization of her internally generated identity. The poems of *Word Warriors* exemplify a way of “constituting the self in a symbolic act” (Benson 1), otherwise known as a way of being.

### **Doing: Performativity**

*Word Warriors* also contains types of ego-functioning rhetoric that Gregg does not discuss. Feminist spoken word poets use the ego-function in a more active way when they write poems as a way to do the work of healing, processing, and sense-making. The several poems about death, for example, speak to others who have experienced loss, but they also exist for the benefit of the author as a way of moving on from the tragedy. There is a quality of performance inherent in the form of spoken word poetry. The rhetorical performative is “the composed and more or less unified act of rhetorical discourse which does not merely say, argue, or allege something about the world of social action, but which constitutes...a significant social action in itself” (Beale 225). More simply put, the performative aspect of rhetoric is a “way of doing,” or “exercising control over self, others, and by extension the scene” (Benson 1). Instead of a primarily descriptive or deliberative relationship to the themes as is common in *Listen Up*, the poems in *Word Warriors* tend to enact those themes. Just as the selection of contributors to *Word Warriors* embodies the inclusivity described in *Listen Up*, *Word Warriors* actively resists negative social messages, constitutes connections, and constitutes experiences and identities

rather than merely referencing them. *Word Warriors* isn't a text *about* feminism; it participates in feminism; it does feminism. *Word Warriors* as an anthology performs inclusivity through its diverse authorship and content. Individual poems, and thereby the entire anthology, perform resistance and mobilization,

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this analysis was two-fold. First, this project challenges traditional distinctions in rhetorical and literary theory between rhetoric and poetic. Analysis of *Word Warriors* illustrates the inadequacy of applying a single analytic perspective to feminist spoken word poetry. When viewed as pure poetry, in a category distinct from rhetoric or scientific prose, one can only acknowledge the beauty and eloquence of each poem in *Word Warriors*. Although Burke may have appreciated the clever, blunt, and sometimes shocking style of feminist spoken word poetry, I do not think these were the qualities to which he referred when he wrote of the taste and eloquence of poetry. Similarly, the sort of audience engagement invited by the poems in *Word Warriors* is often more than Ong's contemplation of beauty. As their active and combative title suggests, many of the *Word Warriors* actively perform feminism by resisting negative social messages and constituting their identities as feminists or calling their audiences to action. Even those poems that don't mobilize their audience directly have persuasive power or impart novel knowledge to their audiences. After recognizing that *Word Warriors* shares a similar rhetorical purpose as other obviously rhetorical works, it made sense to experiment with fitting the poems into a rhetorical frame.

Second, this analysis preemptively recovers the voices of women spoken word poets to contribute to a more complete rhetorical history. As a previously unexamined and yet very vocal

population, the word warriors provide insight into the feminist movement and the role of spoken word poetry within its rhetoric. I found that spoken word poetry has similar thematic content to the third wave essay anthology *Listen Up* and responds to a similar rhetorical situation. One unique role of spoken word poetry as opposed to other rhetorical forms within feminism is to invite a different mode of engagement from the audience. The psychology of form in *Word Warriors* invites the audience to affectively engage with the poet and poem in a lingering way. The use of pathos through symbol and vocal tone, the sharing of personal experience, and the strategic use of poetic beauty to make a broader point makes spoken word poetry an effective rhetoric for societal critique and rhetorical resistance. These spoken word poems are exceptional for their word economy. The word warriors find ways to craft poems voicing criticisms and ideas that are quite similar to those in *Listen Up* in far fewer words. For some women the spokenness of spoken word poetry gives it an immediacy that makes a more accessible expressive form than other rhetorical genres. This immediacy can be explained by the spokenness of spoken word. When so much is communicated through tone, rate of speech, pauses, gestures, and volume, the symbols themselves have less communicative work to do.

While I did find that *Word Warriors* evidences a specific role of spoken word poetry within the feminist movement as particularly direct, active, and emotionally evocative, I do not think that this means that spoken word poetry, and especially not poetry more generally, is necessarily exceptional. Although *Listen Up* as a whole exhibits the qualities of directness, performativity, and affectivity less frequently than *Word Warriors*, these qualities do exist in certain essays in *Listen Up*. It isn't that spoken word poetry can do what is impossible to do through other rhetorical forms, it just fills a slightly different space within the feminist movement than prose. Although there is some overlap between poets and essayists, because

poetry is available as a means of expression to women outside of academia, spoken word poetry represents a different and more diverse set of voices than the genre of essay. This different population inevitably has different experiences and concerns. Therefore the publication and rhetorical study of spoken word poetry contributes to the diversity of voices and issues recognized as feminist.

My analysis was not designed to produce precise markers defining the extent of the uniqueness of spoken word poetry. In order to more precisely evaluate claims of poetic exceptionalism a more empirical kind of study is needed. To determine whether or not poetry was more or less effective than other rhetorical forms at persuasion, communicating particular meanings, or facilitating audience empathy, researchers could collect poems and essays or (other rhetorical forms) that share a rhetorical goal and distribute poems to one group of participants and essays to another. After the two groups read or listened to their poems and essays the researcher could administer a survey measuring the extent to which each participant was persuaded, retained the information, or empathized with the author. Without an empirical study like that one, I can only reject the hardest claim of poetic exceptionalism.

In addition to being an inappropriate method for evaluating softer, more nuanced claims of poetic exceptionalism, this study has another minor limitation. Many of the poems featured in *Word Warriors* are not publicly available in audio or audiovisual recordings. I could be much more certain of the accuracy of my analysis of those poems for which I did find some recording. Because of this, the poems with available recordings carried more weight in my analysis. This is unlikely to be a representative sample. Probably, the more famous poets are the ones whose performances would be publicly archived or available for purchase. This may have skewed my general representation of *Word Warriors* as a whole. However, this limitation does not weaken

my main claim that *Word Warriors* exemplifies the poetry's rhetorical capacity but that it is not so exceptional as to do that which is impossible through other forms.

The similarities between *Word Warriors* and *Listen Up* and the presence of rhetorical ways of knowing, being, and doing in *Word Warriors*'s poems challenge the validity and usefulness of traditional distinctions between poetry and rhetoric. *Word Warriors*' poems demonstrate that spoken word poetry can induce social action and contains all of the qualities necessary to earn the label of rhetoric rather than existing as a purely aesthetic genre not concerned with praxis. This paper concludes by rejecting two extreme but persistent positions about poetry's uniqueness. I reject first the idea that poetry is unique for its lack of rhetorical ability. Second, I reject the idea that poetry is unique for rhetorical abilities that exceed other forms. At least in the form of feminist spoken word poetry, poetry is not powerless, mysterious, nor especially grand.

## Works Cited

- Allen, Julia M., and Lester Faigley. "Discursive Strategies for Social Change: An Alternative Rhetoric of Argument." *Rhetoric Review* 14.1 (1995): 142. Web.
- Aristotle. *Politics: Book One*. Tran. Benjamin Jowett. , 350 B.C.E. Web.
- Beale, Walter H. "Rhetorical Performative Discourse: A New Theory of Epideictic." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 11.4 (1978): 221. Web.
- Benson, Thomas W. "Rhetoric and Autobiography: The Case of Malcolm X." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 60.1 (1974): 1. Web.
- Billias, Nancy. "Overturning Adorno: Poetry as a Rational Response to Evil." *Promoting and Producing Evil*. New York, NY: Editions Rodopi, 2010. 131. Web.
- Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 25 (1992): 1. Web.
- Burke, Kenneth. "Psychology and Form." *The Dial* 79 (1925): 34. Web.
- Campbell, Karlyn Kohrs. "Agency: Promiscuous and Protean." *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 2.1 (2005): 1. Web.
- Cathcart, Robert S. "Movements: Confrontations as Rhetorical Form." *Readings on the Rhetoric of Social Protest*. Eds. Charles E. Morris III and Stephen Howard Browne. 2nd ed. State College, Pennsylvania: Strata, 2006. 95. Print.
- Davidson, Ian. *Radical Spaces of Poetry*. Great Britain: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010. Print.

- Dowdy, Michael. *American Political Poetry into the 21st Century*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Print.
- Eleveld, Mark. *The Spoken Word Revolution: Slam, Hip Hop & the Poetry of a New Generation*. Naperville, Illinois: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003. Print.
- Eskin, Michael. "Bakhtin on Poetry." *Poetics Today* 21.2 (2000): 379. Web.
- Farell, Thomas B. "A Rereading of Poetic and Rhetoric." *Norms of Rhetorical Culture*. New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1993. 103. Print.
- Findlen, Barbara, ed. *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation, New Expanded Edition*. 2nd ed. Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 2001. Print.
- Gregg, Richard B. "The Ego-Function of the Rhetoric of Protest." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 4.2 (1971): 71-91. Web.
- . "Kenneth Burke's Prolegomena to the Study of the Rhetoric of Form." *Communication Quarterly* 26.4 (1978): 3. Print.
- Gwiazda, Piotr. "'Nothing Else Left to Read': Poetry and Audience in Adrienne Rich's 'an Atlas of a Difficult World'." *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.2 (2005): 165. Web.
- Hauser, Gerard A. *Introduction to Rhetorical Theory*. 2nd ed. Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2002. Print.
- Heywood, Leslie, and Jennifer Drake, eds. *Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism*. Minneapolis, MN: Regents University of Minnesota, 1997. Print.

- Howry, Allison L., and Julia T. Wood. "Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed: Themes in the Voices of a New Generation of Feminists." *Southern Communication Journal* 66.4 (2001): 323. Web.
- Johnson, Javon. "Manning Up: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Los Angeles' Slam and Spoken Word Poetry Communities." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 30.4 (2010): 396. Web.
- Johnson, Jeannine. *Why Write Poetry? Modern Poets Defending their Art*. Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corp, 2007. Print.
- Lorde, Audre. "Poetry is Not a Luxury." *Sister Outsider*. 1st ed. Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984. 36. Print.
- Lyon, Arabella & Olson, Lester C. "Special Issue on Human Rights Rhetoric: Traditions of Testifying and Witnessing." *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 41.3 (2011): 203. Web.
- Meyer, Michaela D. E. "Women Speak(Ing): Forty Years of Feminist Contributions to Rhetoric and an Agenda for Feminist Rhetorical Studies." *Communication Quarterly* 55.1 (2007): 1. Web.
- NPR Staff. "Haiku Traffic Signs Bring Poetry to NYC Streets." Dec 3, 2011. 2011. Web.
- Nuyen, A. T. "The Rhetoric of Feminist Writings." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 28.1 (1995): 69. Web.
- Olson, Alix, ed. *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2007. Print.

Ong, Walter J. "The Province of Rhetoric and Poetic." *The Modern Schoolman* 19.2 (1942): 24.

Web.

Owen, William Foster. "Interpretive Themes in Relational Communication." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 274. Web.

Parker, Maegan,. "Review of "Formal Propriety as Rhetorical Norm," by Beth Innocenti Manolescu." *KB Journal* 2.1 (2005). Web.

Rich, Adrienne. ""Adrienne Rich: I Happen to Think Poetry Makes a Big Difference." an Interview with Matthew Rothschild." *The Progressive*: 30. Print. January, 1994.

Ryan, Kathleen J. "Recasting Recovery and Gender Critique as Inventive Arts: Constructing Edited Collections in Feminist Rhetorical Studies." *Rhetoric Review* 25.1 (2006): 22. Print.

Sowards, Stacey K., and Valerie R. Renegar. "Reconceptualizing Rhetorical Activism in Contemporary Feminist Contexts." *Howard Journal of Communications* 17.1 (2006): 57. Print.

Strine, Mary S. "Protocols of Power: Performance, Pleasure and the Textual Economy." *Text and Performance Quarterly* 12 (1992): 61. Web.

Watts, Eric King. ""Voice" and "Voicelessness" in Rhetorical Studies." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87.2 (2009): 179. Print.