

Introduction: Folked, Funked, Punked

My life as a child, teenager, and young woman consisted of one constant. I knew and understood that I did not fit. I did not fit the entire role that was placed on me as a poor person, a sexually fluid woman, a person of color, and a female athlete. I understood that my desire for gender equality at a young age seemed odd to others. Most girls and young woman found me too masculine or too odd to understand, and most boys found me intimidating or not a “true” girl. My advocating for equality thus was often ignored or misunderstood.

As a poor person, I realized quickly that my life experiences would be directly affected by the income my family did not have. Despite my rigorous work ethic, natural knack for networking, and strong scholastic ability, my experiences as a child and young adult were hindered by my family’s lack of income. I was not able to learn the importance of education, financial freedom, and stability until much later due to my socioeconomic class.

As a young girl and woman, I also understood that I did not conform to binary ideas of sexuality nor did I entirely embrace heterosexual culture. I appreciated it because I had to function in it, but it never really truly felt like a comfortable space for me mostly because of the patriarchal restrictions present like conforming to gender roles and feminine ideals of beauty.

With regard to being a person of color, I understood early that certain expectations of what I could do, how I should speak, what I should like, etc . . . were already placed on me due to the color of my skin. I remember many times in my childhood, people being surprised at my ability to articulate myself, shocked at my

educational goals, but not really flinching when I discussed my athletic pursuits. In hindsight I know that some of this was an experience of people being shaken out of their own stereotypes, but it is also an example of the mesh between racism and classism.

In my experience as a female athlete, I encountered an added outsider layer. In this realm, I did have equal footing with women who also had found gender norms restrictive and patriarchal (no matter if straight, gay, bisexual, transgender), but there was never a space where articulating such experience as a female athlete was available. Thus, I seemed to be in simultaneous community and isolation. I was surrounded by women whose worldview was similar, but who remained repressed in the patriarchal realm of athletics.

By my early twenties I had begun to embrace my loner status and understood that I simply thought differently, experienced my society differently, and saw the root to so many injustices pointing to a different source. I reflected on my natural attraction to outsider cultures (punk, skater, b-boy, grunge) as a way to somewhat satisfy a desire for belonging, but had to disassociate (hooks “The Oppositional Gaze” 121) myself from the oppression of women in those subcultures.

My longing for kinship was realized in the fall of 2001 when I experienced the album *Living In Clip* (1997) by folk musician and poet, Ani DiFranco. Immediately her lyrics, poetry, musicianship, style, and content connected to me. I felt I had finally found an artist and poet who understood not only what being an outsider felt like but also what a woman as an outsider felt like as well.

Shortly thereafter, I decided to experience my first live concert. I drove to Bloomington, Indiana on the campus of Indiana University to watch DiFranco perform.

The next two and a half hours proved to be one of the most powerful experiences of my life. In reflection on that concert almost a decade later, I experienced four influential and radical concepts, which have consistently pushed me in my work as a poet and as a researcher: performance poetry, subversion of the feminine ideal, spectatorship, and fan culture.

Performance poetry

The concept of performing a poem was not a far off idea to me. Growing up in a family with charismatic storytellers and older black women humming low melodies, the thought of witnessing someone recite a poem or perform from memory did not seem revolutionary. Why then did I find Difranco's performance so compelling? Because it was bluntly feminist. She addressed aspects of women's experience (sexuality, reproductive rights, struggles within the patriarchy, menstruation, sexual abuse, and oppression) and offered vulnerable autobiographical accounts of her own experiences. Through her vulnerability she established an immediate rapport with us in her audience even as she was a woman who commanded the stage, directed a large group of musicians, and illustrated how to be empowered and successful as a person who does not conform to the gender status quo.

Subversion of the feminine ideal

Until watching Difranco perform, I had never seen a woman on stage that did not conform to "feminine" ideals of dress, behavior, body language, and verbal language. Also, she represented the poor and working class in her performance, which I had never witnessed (unless the illustration of a lower or upper class was the overt point of the performance). Difranco subverted those gender concepts of dress by wearing a nose ring,

tattoos, dressing casually in large platform boots, cargo pants, and a t-shirt, and locking her hair. She also moved seductively, revealing her comfort with her sexual body, but simultaneously commanding agency so that she never appeared a passive object.

Spectatorship

The subversion of the feminine ideal also had an impact on me and on the remainder of the spectators because Difranco's energy seemed to heighten the potential to exercise our own radical nature. This energy existed due to watching Difranco imbue her body with agency. The interplay between the audience and Difranco was not sexualized. Her presence on stage was not to entice a sexual arousal from the crowd, rather as an artist, to have the audience experience her performance. Albeit, her sexual energy is part of her performance and an erotic energy can be transferred between her and her audience, but it did not prompt the intentions of the audience's experience. To witness a performance by a woman where she wasn't sexualized or not conforming to the expected exploitative sexual performance role was sadly unfamiliar to me. Popular female musicians at the time consisted of Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and Destiny's Child who were all overly sexualized in the media. Watching Difranco's performance humbled me toward seeking out more feminist performers as well as making me better realize my blindness toward patriarchy in our society.

Fan Culture

In the process of experiencing Difranco, I was also made aware of the culture of the fans. There were many parallels as far as dress, hair, and openness in sexuality, I had witnessed from Difranco's performance, as well as a shift in gender expectations and roles.

Additionally, there existed a D.I.Y. (do it yourself) spirit, which consisted of the “merch table,” presenting opportunities for profit and marketing, without Difranco’s work being commodified by a larger music label.

These four concepts have become the foundation for my research and have given me the framework for my research questions:

1. How does the historic underrepresentation of women in the arts affect or shape performance poetry?
2. How has patriarchy affected poetry, and who decides what is “good” poetry?
3. What is the relation of poetry, a discourse so long associated with private emotions and subjectivity, to civic ideals of democracy, equality, and access?
(Crown 664)
4. How do identity-based politics intersect with [or oppose] conventional ideals of aesthetic value? (Crown 664)
5. How does feminist performance poetry create and inspire coalitions for change through activism?

The four concepts I experienced at the Difranco concert have also given me a space to articulate these very complex sociological paradigms of awakening and feminist/womanist/queer positions in my work.

Chapter One: The Context

If the goal is to change the world, there is reason to believe that publicly performed or privately read poems have been a force as powerful as any other. (T.V. Reed “The Poetical is the Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women’s Rights” 77)

Since the 1960s a standing tradition of feminist performance poetry has existed to provide a voice for women to be heard, a sphere for them to feel affirmed, and a message that connects to their experiences, birthing coalitions for change. In its multiple styles, modes, audiences, and aesthetics, performance poetry has provided outlets for women to seek refuge and restoration from a patriarchal society.

Feminist poets continue the resistance movements of the past by collapsing the distinctions between high and low art, merging theory and practice, and blending art forms all while foregrounding an ideology to see women and men as true equals. Perhaps more than earlier artistic movements, feminist poetry changed consciousness by not separating the instrumental and expressive. T.V. Reed contends in “The Poetical is the Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women’s Rights,” that this merge must be understood when realizing the social impact of feminist poetry:

Some social scientists divide social movement activity into (serious) “instrumental” social and political action, and (merely) “expressive” cultural activity. We will never find the real women’s movement if we use these categories. Culture was a prime “instrument” of change for the movement, not some decorative, “expressive” addition. So-called cultural activity, or what might more accurately be called “cultural politics,” created changes in consciousness that provided the basis for calls for legislative and other forms of political change. And changes in consciousness were even more important in shaping behavioral change in those “personal” realms that feminist consciousness-raising redefined as “political,” such as family life; male-female solidarity; female bodily self image; and the right to reproductive decision-making. Feminist cultural activity also brought attention to the politics of cultural sites between

government and the private realm: the workplace, the medical office, the classroom, [and] the church. (79)

Feminist expressive art within patriarchy has made space for systemic social change. The use of “feminist cultural activity” as a tool to change social consciousness by redefining the “personal” realm as the “political” realm has been a critical contribution to society as well as an evolution in “social movement activity.”

The feminist refusal to split the political from the personal, the instrumental from the expressive, signaled a shift in how knowledge was conceived. Feminist poets cultivated an art that merged the analytical with the spiritual as Nancy K. Bereano contends in her introduction of Audre Lorde’s *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*:

But what about the “conflict” between poetry and theory, between their separate and seemingly incompatible spheres? We have been told that poetry expresses what we feel, and theory states what we know; that the poet creates out of the heat of the moment, while the theorist’s mode is, of necessity, cool and reasoned; that one is art and therefore experienced “subjectively,” and the other is scholarship, held accountable in the “objective” world of ideas. We have been told that poetry has a soul and theory has a mind and that we have to choose between them. . . We are easier to control when one part of our selves is split from the other, fragmented, off balance. There are other configurations, however, other ways of experiencing the world, though they are often difficult to name. We can sense them and seek their articulation. Because it is the work of feminism to make connections, to heal unnecessary divisions. (8)

Feminist performance poetry’s radical integration of knowing and feeling allows performers and audience members to move beyond the destructive fragmentation of patriarchal culture. Those “experiences” Bereano speaks of become not “difficult to name” but accessible and empowering. Collaboratively, poet and audience create a constant conversation, which goes beyond the poet’s words, encompassing multimodal, extratextual dimensions such as social and political contexts, the space or location of the

performance, semiotics of the performance, the aesthetic markers of the performer, and the interaction between the performer, her accompanist(s), and her audience.

Ani Difranco, Alix Olson, Andrea Gibson, Ursula Rucker, and Jessica Care Moore all participate in continuing this conversation, both textual and extratextual, in resistance to the patriarchy's efforts to conceal social injustices. This group of poets continues the tradition of feminist poetry by "challenging the norm, the status quo, and the patriarchal power structure" (Brand "The Feminist Art Project" 180). Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore do so by delivering their poems with a distinct set of characteristics: challenging elite poetry's emotional mutedness and controlled poetic form, espousing an aesthetics of spontaneity, using poetry as cultural work, and rooting their work in music culture.

Challenging elite poetry's controlled poetic forms and emotional mutedness

The poets of study present their work in hybrid variations of song, story telling, and protest. They write with the intention to be heard and to be seen. Anticipated by the resistance movements of the Beats and the Black Arts—Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore write their work with a pulse of nonconformity and potent political emotion. They do not subscribe to the formal poetics of academe, but instead work from a political literary lineage. As in Allen Ginsberg's "Howl" or Ntozake Shange's "My Father Is a Retired Magician," their passions for social change and their abilities to convey social injustices drive their poetics. In 1979, modernist poet and writer, Gwendolyn Brooks commented on her writing aesthetic when asked about its relation to content, stating, "I'm not writing sonnets, and I probably won't be, because, as I've said many times, this does not seem to me to be a sonnet time. It seems to be a free

verse time, because this is a raw, ragged, uneven time—with rhymes, if there are rhymes, incidental and random” (qtd. in Whitehead 13). In matching her poetic style with the political and cultural climate of her time, Brooks continues the activist lineage of poetry as a tool for change. Although the social and political climate of the 1970s does not mirror the present, the spirit of activism still exists, producing the continued resistance to controlled forms in political poetics.

Difranco echoes the sentiment that the motivation for her writing is social change and not the adherence to elite forms in “Ani and Sekou Sundiata In Conversation,” she states:

[P]oetry is not just writing in long skinny columns, but more a way of seeing . . . I think, to an extent, that everyone [sees]—until we have it socialized out of us. . . Socialization—the process by which we are drawn into society—can create a cloud between us and our nature, and between us and our awareness of the powers that animate and connect things. It’s funny to me that society uses language to divert our attention away from being present, because it is also with language that the poet pierces that cloud and shines light once again on awareness. (90)

Difranco challenges the notion of controlled poetics and adopts a more unruly aesthetic to allow herself to remain politically and spiritually integrated. She also uses this aesthetic to allow her audiences to realize this same integration. The by-product of this process then becomes a more aware and informed social consciousness.

Alix Olson demonstrates a similar attitude in “forward, we go,” the foreword to her collection *Built Like That: The Word* asserting, “I take seriously Adrienne Rich’s words, ‘art means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of the power that holds it hostage.’ My spoken word is built within the tradition of political artists; a lineage that understands beauty is not discredited by having an opinion” (*Built Like That: The Word* 11). Olson implies that the notion of aesthetics in its traditional sense of fixed form,

formalness, and subjectivity has no bearing on the traditions in which she is writing upon. This same attitude is seen in the ardent political messages of Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore as they demonstrate the same political intent of Difranco and Gibson in their use of poetry as a tool for social change.

All of these poets resist the formal tradition of writing for the page. They write their poetry to be heard and seen as well as read. Similar to the philosophies behind Black Mountain poetry, Beat poetry, Black Arts poetry, and most recently slam poetry, Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore align with the use of poetry as a platform to speak to the sources of oppression. They all have produced their poems much more on CD rather than text (with the exception of Care Moore), and instead of adopting the reserved, formal reading style of academic poets, they again align with the lineage of Black Mountain, Beat, Black Arts, slam, as well as New York School and some feminist poets, in that they perform their poems, with passion and with their full bodies and musical accompaniment instead of simply reading them. Difranco, a musician and poet, intersperses her poetry in a hybrid of song and musical accompaniment. Olson and Rucker often collaborate with musicians on their CD's as well as their performances. Moore releases her poems in print, but often performs with musicians. And Gibson, although utilizing sparse musical accompaniment on her records, and rarely in her live show, always performs her pieces instead of reading them.

Additionally, all these poets memorize their work as part of the performance. Similar to performers in a concert or play, these poets utilize their art to provoke a response from the audience in a more organic and immediate way than a formal reading.

Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore also reject traditional locations for reading. As in the Beat, Black Mountain, and New York School performances at St. Marks Church on the Lower East Side, the Beat readings in the Six Gallery in San Francisco, the Black Arts performances at the Black Arts Repertory Theatre, and early feminist performances in lesbian bars or rural homes (Howd Machan 123), these poets perform in alternate spaces and venues. Difranco began her career performing coffee house and bar circuits in the Northeast, centered around her native Buffalo, New York. Rucker began performing in small venues on the east coast as well accompanying hip-hop artists such as *The Roots*. Care Moore, Olson, and Gibson all began as slam poets—Gibson competed on the Colorado Slam Team and in 2008 became the first Women of the World Slam Champion. Care Moore and Olson both competed on the Nuyorican Slam Team (Care Moore in 1996, Olson in 1998)—aligning them with the experiences of performing in coffeehouses, bars, community centers, colleges, and music venues, where slams most typically occur.

In addition to resisting controlled poetic forms and traditional spaces, these poets also counter elite poetry's emotional mutedness through their identification with the common woman/man. Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore all adapt the use of colloquial speech, personal stories, and autobiographical experiences to connect to their audiences and make their work accessible. There are no barriers between them and their spectators, but instead their work forms a bridge. Drawing on the intimate themes of Confessional poetry, the pulse of overt resistance in Black Arts poetry, and the awakening of multiculturalism by third wave feminist theorists such as bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, and texts such as *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by*

Radical Women of Color and *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men: But Some of Us are Brave: Black Women Studies*, these poets often address the working class and poor in a way that fosters a coalitional spirit.

For example, in Difranco's "Coming Up," on her second album *Imperfectly* (1992), she revises The Lord's Prayer, bringing forth connotations of class, urban stratification, capitalism, and religious iconography, beginning,

our father who art in a penthouse
sits in his 37th floor suite
and swivels
to gaze down at the city he made me in
he allows me to stand
and solicit graffiti
until he needs the land I stand on (Difranco *Verses* 8)

By playing with scale in the first line she satirically depicts the corporate executive having lord like status, as implied by her use of scale, land ownership, and association to graffiti artists, being at the mercy of "our father" as he omnisciently "gaze[s] down" at them, controlling everything. The lines, "he allows me to stand/ and solicit graffiti" also speaks to "urban renewal" in which artists live cheaply in the community and transition a district area from desolate to trendy, and then to a real estate developer's dream.

Difranco continues with scale, building an "us" versus "them" undertone, as she continues to intermingle the idea of the executive as omniscient patriarch and the working class/poor as the enslaved by their economic situation:

he's up there
the ice clinking in his glass
he sends us little pieces of paper
i don't ask
i just empty my pockets
and wait

it's not fate
it's circumstance
i don't fool myself with romance (Difranco 9)

She then leaves the poem with a cry for social justice, calling upon a collective promise of rebellion if her pleas go unanswered.

this country
is too large
and whoever's in charge up there
had better take the elevator down and put more than
change in our cup
or else we
are coming
up (Difranco 9)

With her unruly style, free form, and allusions of scale to amplify social class, Difranco successfully uses her poetry to incite a coalitional spirit in her audience.

Rucker similarly in “i/we” from record *Silver or Lead* (1999) focuses on the working class and poor. Specifically, she examines how too often individualist thinking overlooks structural causes of poverty, but that communities are still present which recognize and fight against classist oppression. In her examination of urban neighborhoods, children, and the family unit, she plays with the idea of community to the extent that people are interchangeable. She begins with identifying herself with working class and poor children by stating, “We are children/I am a child/I am all of the children that compose that at-risk statistic (I am a child).” In these lines, Rucker comments on public school system’s targeting of children as “at risk” based on their lack of parental support, socioeconomic status, and neighborhood. Rucker then continues with laying ownership on the neighborhoods that presumably house “at risk” students and counters the notion that support is lacking in working class/poor communities, but rather reveals that most are abandoned stating,

I live on that block the cops don't patrol
I live on that block glocks control
I live on that block with the community garden
On the corner
I live on that block where the community's forgotten
On the corner
I live in that neighborhood
Discarded and left curbside until election time
I live in that neighborhood
Where everybody knows your name and we all look out for one another
Despite what the media say (don't listen to the media)
Despite what the media portray (don't listen to the media)

She then goes on to extend her theme of coalition building of adults and children to

include race and gender:

Who am I (I am)

I am
Black, White, Asian, Latino
Child, student, son, daughter
Friend, neighbor, future
Black, White, Asian, Latino
Child, student, son, daughter
Friend, neighbor, future
Black, White, Asian, Latino
Child, student, son, daughter
Friend, neighbor, future
Future
Future
Future

By describing herself as different ethnicities and gender, Rucker heals divisions and provokes her audience to consider their community as a whole and perpetuates a message of grassroots activism, particularly through the youth. Adopting the social philosophy that *I am my sister/brother's keeper*, Rucker uses the pronouns "I" and "we" as interchangeable parts of speech to provide a coalitional voice for the working class and poor.

Espousing an aesthetics of spontaneity

The poems of Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore see the energy of freedom and independence with the outsider lineage of confrontation. They inspire optimism and revolt, and speak to a sense of pride in being an active citizen of this democracy. They all take on the role of calling out for a new way to view the world, urging for a paradigm shift, to make the society more inclusive and just. Following the lineage of postwar artistic movements—jazz, modern dance, Black Mountain and Beat poetry, as well as more contemporary movements of multiculturalism, Riot Grrrl music, and slam poetry—these poets resist conformity and support the aesthetics of spontaneity. For example, all these poets project raw emotion via their voices and body. By screaming, jumping, crowd surfing, sweating, laughing, yelling, or softly whispering their poetry, they create art that is deeply relational.

Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore take on the outsider tradition of “raging against the machine.” They share their disappointments in society by examining their own lives and stories as a communal offering to their audience as if to say, *Yes, yes, I see this too. Believe me, you’re not the only one*, and in revolt, challenge present worldviews and beliefs and promote the need for a re-examining and a re-approaching of how to do things. In “The Poetics of Chaos: American Abstract Expressionism and American Poetry,” Antonio C. Marquez encapsulates the reasoning behind this revolutionary impulse. He states: “Its [American abstract expressionism’s] philosophical foundations and aesthetic notions were constructed on an American ethos; it envisioned a new space, the space of the American frontier and the reassurance of American mythology – that the new can be created and recreated, that the engines of

American society and culture are changed by energy, movement, intention, and renewal” (69). This same philosophy is applicable to the poets of study, for they continue to push for the newness Marquez speaks of through their powerful feminist messages.

For example, Rucker’s “Supa Sista” *Supa Sista* (2001) presents an alter ego, who becomes fed up with patriarchy and decides to overthrow it by challenging it with knowledge-based action. She begins by establishing her frustration with patriarchy:

I rose and fell
as he called my name
I played his game
as . . .
he came and came
then . . .
he changed my name
called my blackness untamed
he . . .
put me in chains
then . . .
he changed my name
then . . .
he changed my names . . .

But now I will rewrite history

Her charge to “rewrite history” is motivated not only by gender oppression, but also by her status as a woman of color as referenced to her allusion to slavery, “he . . ./ put me in chains.” Rucker also loads an arguable double meaning into the lines following, “then . . ./ he changed my name/ then . . ./ he changed my names . . .” to reference the change of her name via slave ownership, experienced by her ancestors. Or the lines could refer to the change of names under the institution of marriage, implying the double oppression under patriarchy for women of color.

Rucker then channels her intent to subvert patriarchy within an allegorical-like figure she names Supa Sista:

Supa Sista
I see you off in the distance
comin' at me like a twister
packing more force than a four-time
heavyweight champion
kinkycoil topped cauldron
of pain, passion and black-mama strength
hellbent on
making your mark in this world

Rucker animates Supa Sista to march through the world, Godzilla-like, destroying constructs of patriarchy. She begins with racism as Supa Sista uses her matriarchal powers of child-rearing to create a new generational path of nurture for black men:

Supa Sista
I see you off in the distance
pistons ablaze
as you raise
your black mistas
to be

victors not victims
of the systems and prisons
aimed at stifling their . . . visions

Rucker then focuses Supa Sista's "tek9" on misogyny:

Supa Sista
I see you off in the distance
gaining momentum
as you deconstruct their preconceived mis-conceptions

Blowing their notions
right up out the ocean
pathway to your auction

Rape
Hate
Blame
Conversion

By envisioning a matriarch-superhero, Rucker establishes a world where patriarchy can be destroyed and oppression obliterated.

Similarly to Rucker, Olson envisions a deconstruction of society and a hope for a new one. Olson's "Cunt Cuntry" *Built Like That* (2001) seeks to deconstruct America and rebuild it without the patriarchy. Reclaiming the oppressive and sexual objectifying, female slur, "cunt," Olson proclaims,

I've decided to start
Cunt Cuntry!
Write our own Cunstitution
Let our liberated clit bells ring out:
The Cunts are coming; It's the Cunt Revolution!
(*Built Like That: The Word* 67)

After stating her intent, Olson then strategically pinpoints oppressive aspects of the patriarchy in US society and cleverly subverts them by imagining a museum where they would be put on display:

And kids would have weekly field trips
To the Museum of Un-Natural His-Story
With the display glass jars of rapist dicks in all their
shriveled glory.
And behind velvet rope, ancient relics of the past, like:
Female Guilt, Circumcision knives, Certificates turning
whole people into Wives.
And there'd be torture chamber exhibits
with tall, skinny heels
Inviting little girls to:
Try this, and see how this feels-
Cunted Creatures wore these to work or to anywhere formal:
This Pain was called Sexy. This process was called
Normal!
And there'd be old collections of posters like:
Keep Abortion Legal- with a plaque:
Not much is known. But these come from an era when
Insecure Ruling Dickheads thought of
Bodies as something to own. (67-8)

By examining existing patriarchal norms as if they were extinct, Olson rattles the audience's imagination as to what society *could* be. She utilizes humor to reveal the extent to which women are oppressed and time to emphasize how archaic these social norms could be interpreted. Olson concludes by investigating the constructive effects of Cunt Cuntry:

Because daughters would be freer and dykes would be
Freer and dicks would be freer
If we stood up and sang:
My cunt tis of thee
My cunt tis of thee (68)

In her deconstruction of patriarchy, Olson's "Cunt Cuntry" provides an alternative feminist world rooted in re-examining itself for the betterment of all. She argues for a shift in social consciousness that would be inclusive and as a result, more liberated and free. This new sense of liberty, Olson argues, would not only be for women, but for men as well.

In performance, Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore, use their bodies—gestures, movement—to reinforce their feminist messages. They move organically—swaying to music, following the energy of the audience, sometimes jumping off stage, and challenging traditional ideals of feminine beauty. As these poets witness to the oppressions women face, their bodies become unavoidably fused with the content. Their corporeal delivery is simultaneously merged with their oral delivery on stage, creating a performative hinge between their theories of change and their actions toward change.

For example, in “Cunt Cuntry” and “Supa Sista,” discussed above, Olson and Rucker write about seeking change from patriarchy and describe what that change would look like (in images); however, both deliver their poems through their subversive bodies and physically stand against patriarchy (in action). Because the female body has been so packaged as to how it should look, what it should wear, how it should move, and what it should say and in what manner it should say it, delivering these feminist messages via a freely moving and dressed female body offers a vehement stand against patriarchy and a dynamic example of social action.

These poets use their bodies as a subversive act. By standing on stage and speaking out on their oppressions as women in a patriarchal society, they rebel against the oppressive forces, which would prefer silence. Kathleen Iudicello labels this rebellion the “exposed body” in her dissertation, *Women Take Stage: Punk Rock, Performance Art, and Pussycat Fever*, stating,

By “exposed body” I mean bodies that are naked, exposed by the subjects who inhabit them for the performance of a spectacular act or a political gesture (or both, for the line between the two is often blurry, if not absent). These women are not nude, as women are in paintings by male artist that overwhelmingly inhabit traditional art galleries and museums. Naked women are the subjects of their own performances. They signify something different, something more, due to the absolute vulnerability of these bodies and the sexist ghosting of these bodies by violent crimes, media objectification, and “low culture” ill-repute. (9)

Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore expose their bodies on stage and are as Iudicello notes, “subjects of their own performances” in order to witness to their audiences. These poets are vulnerable and transparent in both their poetry and their performance, and in this act, they continue to break the silence and build havens for activism and change.

Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore also reveal their aesthetics of relationality through stage talk. A crucial part of the performance, stage talk is the conversation, which occurs between poet and audience before, in between, or at the end of a poem as well as the conversation she has on stage with any accompanying musicians/poets. Stage talking is how the performer connects with her audience in setting up a poem/song, delivers a political message, defends or scorns the audience for disruptive behavior or injects humor into the performance. Stage talking ties the performance together, but most importantly it is always spontaneous, rooted in the interactions with a live audience.

Often, stage talk involves a complex layering of anger, frustration, love, and pride surrounding issues of women's rights, justice for the working class/poor, racism, and homophobia. It serves as a way to re-establish and validate cultural codes specific to outsider subcultures. But it accomplishes all of the above most often through humor to both affirm their audiences' beliefs and lifestyle as well as revisit their (including the performers') collective social classification in some respects as still being an outsider.

In 2004, I attended Difranco's *Vote Damnit!* Tour where she was promoting the importance of voting during the release of her 13th album, *Evolve* (2003). After "Evolve," the title song of the album, she praised the audience's energy and clapping along to keep the pace of the song. She laughed saying, "Oh man, thank you folks for keeping up. . . I almost petered out." In response, a group of young girls in the front row pointed to a young man who was with them and yelled in unison, "No Ani, Peter's been out for a long time!" Simultaneously, Ani and the rest of the audience laughed as she began her next song. In this instance, the audience member's wit and comedic timing initiated the stage

talk, but the success of the joke lay in Difranco's as well as the audience's understanding of the term "out" or to "come out" and the powerful and negative consequences the act often has. Recognizing the term, the group could collectively laugh at this subcultural rite of passage as well as mourn its necessity.

In Andrea Gibson's second album, *Swarm* (2005), she delivers a live version of an autobiographical poem entitled, "Wal-Mart," about her parents' homophobia. She begins by establishing the extreme tension between her and her parents due to her masculine appearance:

It was the type of quiet that twitched like fire.
Napalm silence.
It was tick, tick, tick before the bomb
but without the bomb
or the tick
while they looked me over.
Their parental lenses five feet thick,
protection from the glare of the mutated form
that was once
their sweet little daughter

Gibson then reenacts her parents' frustrations with how her appearance has kept her from marriage:

Silence.
"You're twenty five years old,
where the fuck's your diamond ring!"

Silence.
"Ain't no wonder they'll look at you,
wash your hair, take that metal shit out of your face!
You dress like you live in the streets for fuck sakes!
And why the hell you sit'n like you gotta cock between your legs?"

In re-enacting her parent's voices and comments, Gibson allows the audience to relive her experience and feel her oppression. Exercising a literary retribution, Gibson then begins to passionately stand up to her parents, explaining her repulsion to their "picket

fence-right wing-pedophile preacher-finish line” and taking pride in her queerness by threatening to announce her sexuality to their small town on a billboard at Wal-Mart, stating,

You say one more thing I don't like.
You say one more thing I don' like.
I'm driving to Wal-Mart myself,
hanging up a fifty foot billboard that says:
“Mark and Shirley's daughter, Andrea,
is a fucking dyke!”

As the sounds of the audience's applause, whoops, and yells settle on the CD, Gibson quietly clears her throat and states in a tranquil voice, “So . . . I'm a lesbian.” By juxtaposing her loud finale with her quite explanation, Gibson reveals her pride in her sexuality and simultaneously connects to the common tension between family members who are threatened by gay pride. Also, Gibson's comment provokes the audience to burst into laughter and applaud, revealing the importance of humor as a way to acknowledge outsider cultural status.

From poets to cultural workers

Like the Beat poets who stood against nuclear warfare, the Black Arts poets who advocated Black Power, Riot Grrrl culture which aggressively spoke out against violence upon women, and slam poetry which often addresses racism and sexism, these poets inspire activism. Aspects of their political aesthetics can be understood in discussions of coalition-building, poetic content, and contextualizing their poetry from multimedia materials.

With regard to coalition-building, these poets help to foster a community of “cultural workers” (Olson *Built Like That*). For example, Difranto has sections on her webpage for activists entitled “action” and “mobilize” which provide resources to vote,

seek alternative media, join coalitions for peace and justice, and join street teams to market upcoming shows for independent artists. In the dedication in Rucker's *Silver or Lead* album (2003) she states, "Silver or Lead is dedicated to all women . . . mothers, lesbians, activists, wives and self-proclaimed bitches . . ." On Olson's second album, *Independence Meal* (2003), she thanks, "the risk-taking college groups, venues, and audiences for listening, writing, and shifting [the] world little by little," and in Gibson's first collection of poems she thanks Vox Feminista "a multi-passionate performance tribe of radical, political performers bent on social change through cultural revolution" (89), and in Care Moore's second collection, *The Alphabet Verses The Ghetto*, she dedicates it to a number of individuals including her "mum Irene and survivalist/ women everywhere." In the rhetorical act of thanking, these poets reveal an underlying message that their poetry resonates and permeates throughout a larger community, one that's engaged and active.

Also, Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore espouse the D.I.Y. approach inspired by the feminist movement's encouragement of independent presses and from Riot Grrrl preference for independent labels. All of these writers maintain creative control by the production and dissemination of their own material. Care Moore, through Moore Black Press, Olson through Subtle Sister Productions and collaborations with Feed the Fire Productions, Gibson via independent album releases on CD Baby (and print work with A Write Bloody Books), Rucker's exclusive work with K7 records, and Difranco's creation and ownership of Righteous Babe Records.

Having creative control enables these poets to take on issues of injustice without corporate ownership. For example, in "I Do," Gibson critiques the United States' stance

on gay marriage stating, “I do /But the fuckers say we can’t.” In Care Moore’s poem, “The Words Don’t Fit In My Mouth,” she comments on cultural insensitivity with allusions to black vernacular being oppressed in urban schools stating, “Notes home read/ Quote/ ‘My teacher can’t understand what I wrote.’” And Rucker, in her poem, “Womansong,” addresses domestic violence proclaiming, “Ain’t your doormat, your sugar tit/ your own supply of bliss/ your in-house ass to kick.” Also, both Difranco and Olson, use voice samples from activists, clearly displaying their political charge. Difranco, during her 2000 tour, at the beginning of her first film, *Render* (2002), and at the beginning of her *Living In Clip* album (1997) played Free Speech activist, Mario Savo’s incendiary quote before beginning her performance:

There comes a time when the operation of the machine is so odious that you cannot even passively participate. You’ve got to place your bodies on the gears, the wheels, all the mechanism, and you’ve got to indicate to those who own it and those who run it that unless you are free, the machine will be prevented from working at all.

In addition, Olson samples the voice of progressive historian, Howard Zinn in “Pirates” *Independence Meal* (2003). He booms out the lines: “It takes only a look at history to realize how dangerous it is to think that the people who run the country know what they’re doing” and “Two words: Governments Lie.”

The use of political messages via the poet’s lines or of those sampled from other activists illustrates these poets’ pronouncements of their political intent to challenge and disrupt oppressive social institutions.

Lastly, an understanding of how these poets are boldly political can be understood through their use of multimedia to contextualize their poetry. As noted in the section on aesthetics, these poets seek to reinvent their poetry in the light of earlier resistance

movements for social change. Propelling those ideas forward, DiFranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore continue to use the multimodal, extratextual realm in their productions of film. By utilizing film, these artists are able to communicate their political messages to a larger audience and are also able to illustrate the context in which their poems are created and performed.

For example, in the film *Render* (2002), DiFranco documents her 2000 and 2001 tours of the US. In the film, she addresses the gender double standard in Columbia, South Carolina when one performer, Animal, of the punk duo Bitch & Animal, on her label Righteous Babe Records, was threatened with arrest for showing her breasts on stage. The film poignantly shows a scene where in which the white, male, middle-aged officer knocks on her dressing room door to reprimand Animal. He states, “I can arrest you right now . . . What you were doing on stage, touching them [her breasts], playing with them, bouncing them . . . it’s illegal in Columbia.” When Animal replied, “But if I was a man I could,” the officer asserted, “Well, yeah.” This scene, the last on the film, seems to evoke the spirit in which DiFranco writes and why she writes. By providing an example of oppression in everyday life for women in the United States, DiFranco visually says, *You see this. This is why I write and this is why I perform. Because this, this needs to stop!*

In the film, *Truth* (2004), film maker Danny Clinch reveals the events surrounding and during Ani DiFranco’s shows from May 11-12, 2004 at the 9:30 Club in Washington, DC. The film opens with illustrations of the community DiFranco draws. There are young artists, die-hard fans, feminists, couples, and community activists. Within this collage, there is a poignant scene in which DiFranco washes her face in the venue’s restroom and begins speaking with Clinch (behind the camera) about her

upcoming *Vote Damnit!* Tour to encourage people to register to vote. She describes how her shows are not just about music and poetry, but also about activism. The scene then splits to representatives of the Feminist Majority Foundation and an anti-nuclear group who express their political stances and efforts to bring social awareness to their respective issues. Also, there is a wonderful scene where Difranco and Todd Sickafoose¹ introduce Cleveland Congressman Dennis Kucinich to open the second half of the show and to share some words about his political goals of peace, pulling out of Iraq, and universal health care. Difranco utilizes this scene as a nod to her fan culture for its organized activism and illustrates to the viewer the results of standing against oppression.

In the film, *Left Lane: On The Road with Folk Poet Alix Olson* (2004), film maker Samantha Farinella captures Olson's unique way of injecting humor to connect politically with her audiences. There is one scene in which Olson stage talks about the "I See You Revolution." She commences by describing an incident where she and Farinella were on the road to another show when they saw a man in the car next to them beating his girlfriend. Olson narrates, "Sam (Farinella) was saying, 'Pull over! pull over!' and I was going like twenty and she's pulling at the door, and she hurries up and gets out and I'm still going, and she stares at the guy and looks at him and Olson, imitating Farinella, growls in a heightened voice, 'I see you!' and then imitates the man's face as very shocked, and makes the sound effect of his car skidding off, "Skkkkrrrrrrttttt!" Olson takes a breath and leans into her microphone as the audience settles from laughing to realize the weight of the story, "because you know," she says, "people don't like to be

¹ Tod Sickafoose is an upright bass player who began touring with Difranco in 2004.

seen, they like to act upon, but not be looked at. . .but looking is the real essence of power, isn't it?"

Olson's use of film documents this crucial moment on stage where she has an opportunity to stage talk with her audience and illustrates how she moves from art into praxis. In sharing this story, Olson shows her audience how to practically apply activism as well as reveals her commitment to women's rights.

Also, *Left Lane* (2004) reveals another candid scene of how political connections can be made to audiences when Olson, Pamela Means, and Lyndell Montgomery² were pulled over after stopping at a gas station while on the way to a show on Chapel Hill, North Carolina. After being stopped it was soon discovered Olson's license was expired justifying the "four squad cars and six police officers" to decide whether Means, who wears an extremely large afro, or Montgomery, who has multiple face piercings and tattoos, would drive as Olson sarcastically comments on her tour mates' appearances stating, "Now on CNN we're going to have a voter's poll; the safro or the pierce tube. Safro, pierce tube? You can vote now for your choice on drivers to shuttle us to our next show. . . Thanks for tuning in. We'll see you next time on race, class, gender: who the fuck cares!"

Similar to the scene with Bitch and Animal in Difranco's *Render* (2002), Olson provides examples from everyday life to illustrate to the viewer the context in which she writes and performs her poetry.

² Pamela Means, an acoustic guitar player and Lyndell Montgomery, a bass and violin player, frequently accompany Olson on tour.

Rooting poetry in music culture

Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore situate their activist work in the context of music culture. By utilizing musical stances, styles, and cultural codes, these poets wield resonant instruments of resistance against patriarchy. Also, although these poets may “fit” primarily in one or more music culture or music style, they all evoke a complex fusion of musical roots in their poetry.

Folk

Ani Difranco proclaims herself as “the little folksinger” and Alix Olson has given herself the nickname, “folk poet,” identifying as she does with the tradition of the traveling artist espousing grassroots social change. Both Difranco and Olson continue the tradition of folk musical culture. They both utilize folk instruments to accompany their poems (guitars, harmonicas, drums), and they take on the Old Left spirit of activism as patriotism. As Difranco notes, “I [have] learned to distinguish between America and the government of America, and realized that loving one can often mean being willing to take action against the other” (Verses 91), and Olson states that the way to change is “As Allen Ginsberg says, ‘putting the queer shoulder to the wheel,’” (*On the Road*) they take on the folk role of being truth teller, traveling from city to city providing messages of hope and change.

Also Difranco and Olson help to evolve folk’s attention to women. For example Difranco’s “Paradigm” and Olson’s “Deadbeat Daddy” allude to labor unions, the labor party, and America’s history of grassroots citizenry, but they provide them from a female child’s point of view. Difranco, recalls:

i was just a girl in a room full of women
licking stamps and laughing
i remember the feeling of community brewing
of democracy happening (*Knuckle Down*)

And Olson recounts:

My daddy use to sing me to sleep
with labor songs,/
whisper me to sleep with stories of faraway lands
where things
were done right. (*Built Like That: The Word* 25)

By performing these lines, the poets not only re-write the presence of women and children into the folk tradition, but they also ground their stories in its tradition to again make space and give recognition to women.

Hip Hop

Ursula Rucker and Jessica Care Moore both allude to rap groups, lyrics, and cultural codes to subvert their demeaning, objectifying, and inferior attitudes towards women and to reinvent the hip hop genre. As Rucker pronounces, “We are not cootchies with back” in her poem “Poon Tang Clan” and Moore laments in “How Can You Fuck Without Kissing?”:

A sport of the masses
Of men who unconsciously rape our dignity
Covering our mouths with tape
Throwing brown bags over our heads
Pussies without face. (*The Words* 67)

Both poets aim to expose and challenge misogyny in hip hop culture. Feminist hip hop critic, Gwendolyn Pough establishes this term as “wreck” to describe how women disrupt dominant hip-hop discourses by contesting stereotypes that often leave women without agency while pushing for feminist space in hip hop culture: “[Wreck] can best be described as a rhetorical act that can be written, spoken, or acted out in a way that shows

resistance” (86). Rucker and Moore take these rhetorical acts as an aesthetic in their performance via dress, body movement, and content. For example, both poets play with the masculine and feminine spectrum of these rhetorical acts to reclaim hip hop for women. Rucker is known to wear masculine coded clothing such as dark sunglasses, baggy pants, and large jackets, and she moves her body to suggest masculine posturing. But she contends this gender parody with feminist messages of taking over rap in poems such as “Untitled Flow,” “I/We,” or “What???”

I demand reparations
from all irresponsible
fake mogul
crap musicmakers and movefakers
your bad examples could kill my children’s future
but we’re [women] here to supply the sutures
needed
to close the bleeding hole. . . in the soul of black music (*Supa Sista*)

Here, too, Rucker contests the corporate representation of black masculinity on major music labels.

Similarly Care Moore also makes use of male coded clothing and aggressive posturing, but instead of banishing men from hip hop culture, She includes them in a conversation about the state of the hip hop community as in “Detroit Red,” “My caged bird don’t sing and every Black bird ain’t a piece of fried chicken,” and “I’m a Hip Hop Cheerleader” where she states,

I’m a hip hop cheerleader
I buy all your records
despite the misogyny
Not looking for the blond in me
respond to me
I feel molested hip hop fondled me
I know the conscious brothas follow me
hollow me with half breaths
real emcees don’t half step (*The Alphabet* 146)

Through Rucker and Moore speaking out on their views of misogyny in rap music and the reinforcement of it via hip hop culture, they challenge audience thinking and provide space for women to be considered something other than a present day Hottentot Venus.

Punk

The term “punk” is used to describe the aggression, anger, and resistance found within activist art and culture and is not necessarily exclusive to the problematic connotations of white, heteronormative, and predominantly male subcultures. The rhetorical stance I label “punk” of Difrancio, Olson, Rucker, and Care Moore resembles a rebellion against gender codes and conformist paths of creating, presenting, and selling one’s art.

In her writings on punk, Iudicello discusses the “radical feminist potential” (10) in the “present body” (10) of performers by their ability to challenge traditional confines of the female body “marked by nontraditional dress and nontraditional speech” (10). For example, Difrancio and Olson allude to punk through their dress, performance style, and musical temperament. Early in Difrancio’s career, it was common for her to wear ripped leather, fishnet stockings, steel-toed boots, and multi-colored or shaved hairstyles. Olson commonly wears handmade or secondhand t-shirts and performs in a manic, aggressive fashion. Also, as Lauraine Leblanc notes in *Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture*, “When joining the punk subculture, young women seek alternatives to the norms that dictate their position in mainstream society; chief among these are the norms of femininity” (159). This same sentiment can be applied to the piercings, dress, and hair Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore display.

In addition, all of poets demonstrate rhetorical stances of punk in their aversion to signing with major labels and/or printing presses, D.I.Y. ethic, their politically-driven messages, and their use of aggression in their poetry and their performances.

Understanding the culture as well as the music of these three genres provides further context for the performance poets addressed. For not only do they speak to the oppressions they experience in society, but they also address the interconnectedness of that oppression in their own cultures and subcultures where music exerts great influence. For example, T. L. Cowan, author of “Punk Rock Clit Lit: Reading Toward a Punk Poetics in *Bent on Writing: Contemporary Queer Tales*,” addresses the need to incorporate the influence of music and musical culture as an extratextual element to reading. In her article Cowan argues a need to re-learn how to evaluate poetry by understanding the specific aesthetics and politics of the particular poetic style addressed. Thus, she advocates the need to define and understand a woman’s culture, language, and poetic aesthetic “in order to engage with it on its own terms” (104); “it” in this case being what Cowan terms as “dyke/queer punk poetics” (104), however the “it” can just as easily be “folk/punk poetics” or “hip hop/ punk poetics.”

In Cowan’s analysis, she explains that she has to re-see feminist performance poetry with counter-patriarchal lenses because it exists in a counter-patriarchal realm:

I realized that the political and aesthetic stances of many of these performances were not as random as they first appeared. Once I began to think about a punk genealogy for much of the poetry I was seeing, it became clear that this work served a different function and needed to be appraised not solely based on the criterion I applied as a student of poetry but, rather, required a new criterion which inflected poetic principles with standards articulated through the range of punk practices. (104)

Therefore, Cowan urges an examination of music genealogy to further inform a “reader” of performance poetry. She also begs the question, “Are all qualified to determine what good poetry is and what bad poetry is if they are ignorant to the realms in which the content is formed or refers to?”

Cowan additionally notes critics of “spoken-word-style” often dismiss the genre due to its “tendency toward a utilitarian, semantically over determined ‘message,’ in which language is commodified, subordinated, and consumed as either spectacle or propaganda (‘false consciousness’), both of which are considered too epiphenomenal to ‘real poetry’” (109-110), yet reveal such critics’ ignorance of the performance poetry aesthetic in the paradigms of those that are marginalized. Cowan’s examination of punk musical culture’s influence on the poetics of feminist performance poetry illustrates another plain where womanist/feminist messages can be heard and articulates a model of understanding applicable to other music cultures as well.

In conclusion, DiFranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Moore present a poetics that continues to make the personal political. By continuing the legacy of grassroots art such as jazz, folk, punk, rap/hip hop, Riot Grrrl; resistance movements: Black Arts and Feminist; and political poetry: Black Mountain, Confessional, Beat, Feminist, and slam, they are able to build on outsider/political traditions, but further evolve their feminist messages to continue to reach audiences, nurturing and supporting climates for activism and change.

Chapter 2: The Performance

Performance has the potential power to transform how female bodies are viewed. The political possibilities of performance contribute to the feminist project of constructing cultural alternatives to the violated female body. Performance helps in reconstructing the female body so that it is understood as having access to agency. Individuals with agency have the power to act and are the subjects of their actions. (Kathleen Iudicello *Women Take Stage: Punk Rock, Performance Art, and Pussycat Fever* 5)

There's just so many ways to use one's resources to do political work. You know when they [the audience] come to the show it's not just for the music . . . You know, you come for the community, you come for the [gestures around her]. (Ani Difranco *Trust: May 11-12, 2004 Live at The 9:30 Club, Washington D.C.*)

When I first witnessed the feminist performance poets of my study, something revolutionary shifted in me. I felt affirmed in how I viewed the world and felt comforted to experience art from someone who looked and believed the way that I did. When I presented some of my research in this chapter at the seventh annual Feminisms & Rhetorics conference in East Lansing, Michigan, a member of the audience described that revolutionary shift as a phenomenon. In reflection I felt her term was appropriate because it encapsulated the unnamable, multidimensional, movement which occurred within me from being so moved by a performative experience. This phenomenon also seems to appropriately suggest the massive scope of transformation possible in a reader/viewer when understanding the multiple modes of subversion this group of poets embodies in their extratextual performances. These planes of subversion encompass the message, the female body, the fan culture, and the performative space.

The message represents the oral delivery or spoken word of the poem and how that delivery affects the audience's reception of the piece. The female body should be

defined as a site or platform used during and after the performance to communicate resistance against conventional ideas of feminine beauty (long hair, shaved legs, form fitting clothing, use of make up, and so on) and disposition (meek, subservient, helpless, reserved). The fan culture, in this context, is made up of individuals who attend the performances of the poets studied, but also activists who have the power to take the feminist messages learned at shows and apply them to their own communities. Lastly, the performative space represents the physical venue where the poet performs, but also the connection or vibe present when the spectators commune together in the shared experience of witnessing this transformative poetry live.

The Message

When witnessing Jessica Care Moore pronounce from her poem “Black Statue of Liberty,”

I stand still above an Island, fists straight in the air
Scar on my face, thick braids in my hair
Battle boots tied, red blood in the tears I’ve cried
Tourists fly from all over just to swim near my tide (*The Words* 1-4)

or Rucker warn in her piece “womansong,”

Now, I was born a slave, a rebel, an inherent queen no thing.
situation or person can steal my birthright I came forth in the
night a force to be unreckoned with you sure you want to get with
this (31-34)

or Difranco lament in her poem “Fuel,”

they were digging a new foundation in manhattan
and they discovered a slave cemetery there
may their soles rest easy
now that lynching is frowned upon
and we’ve moved on to the electric chair (*Verses* 1-6)

or Olson reveal in poem “Pirates,”

see, I was taught to believe in a scale of justice
but the people with the power in their pockets, they outweigh us.
and now the executive class buys executive branch status
by purchasing supreme court time (*Independence Meal: The Ingredients*
7-10)

and Gibson inform in “Birthday,”

Beauty, catch me on your tongue.
Thunder, clap us open.
The pupils in our eyes were not born to hide beneath
their desks.
Tonight, lay us down to rest in the Arizona desert,
Then wake us to wash the feet of pregnant women
who climbed across the border with their bellies aimed
towards the sun.

I know a thousand things louder than a soldier’s gun. (*Pole Dancing* 54-62)

their lines take on yet more potency in performance. Watching these poets elevate their written words from the page and project them into a space of listening ears and watchful eyes commands an extratextual effect, which is both powerful and revolutionary.

Powerful because the speaking of the lines binds the listener/watcher to the words’ message. Uttered aloud, the poem moves between the poet and the spectators; thus the performance becomes an established, shared experience. This idea is similar to what J. L. Austin refers to in *How To Do Things with Words*, where he explains that the power of a “performative utterance” (60) lies in words becoming an actual act, its presentation communally to a group, and the group’s collective belief that it is so. For example, in communal prayers, wedding vows, and oaths there is an aspect of uttering words which makes it an act, as well as uttering them to a group and the group’s witnessing and collective belief which makes it so. This effect helps explain, in part, the power of feminist performance poetry.

The poems performed by Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore are also revolutionary because of the feminist and political content of their work. By speaking their feminist-charged poems aloud to audiences, they use what theorist Steven Connor describes in *Analyzing Performance: A Critical Reader* as “performative force” (107) or bringing a particular set of circumstances into being through spoken performance. They radically seek to change consciousness through extending their poems beyond the platform of text into a space where others can “talk back” (hooks *Talking Back* 5).

In the act of speaking their poems, these poets reveal that they too have experienced inequality and social injustices, and in revealing those experiences, they continue the legacy of breaking the silence. Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore deliver poems specific to their lives and circumstances, but also provide a unique, diverse insight into how women experience oppression differently as they move through the world. The combination of speaking about shared oppressions and describing them through unique life experiences authenticates the poet’s message and aligns the collective consciousness of those in attendance. As Kim Whitehead explains in *The Feminist Poetry Movement*,

A coalition adheres for the purpose of accomplishing a particular cultural or political goal or set of goals, and the relationship between the individual and the group always requires a recognition of difference. According to this idea, it is only in speaking out of the integrity of her own personal experience that the feminist poet establishes her relationship to the community. She cannot simply assume a common identity, for difference abounds. However, she can with integrity find a way or ways to speak to and for the community, or coalition, by very carefully charting her own experience within a complicated nexus of identities (that includes not just gender, but race, ethnicity, class, age, and sexuality [as well as able bodiness]) and perspectives on political theory/strategy and even aesthetics. Again, the idea of ‘the personal as political’ plays a key role,

for it is only in relating and understanding her own location in relation to both systems of oppression and feminists themselves that the feminist poet can begin to achieve coalitional voice. (38)

It is the act of poets' speaking and the audience's receiving that solidifies the message as a crucial site for understanding the impact of the feminist performance poets addressed. For in their work, they pinpoint where they are on the spectrum of oppression and feminism, and in doing so, bear out their experiences to the audiences,' fostering a coalitional spirit.

In a feminist climate after the likes of Gloria Anzaldua, Cherrie Moraga, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Barbara Christian, bell hooks, Barbara Smith, Patricia Bell Hooks, and Gloria T. Hull, we understand that many feminisms exist due to the intersections of race, class, sexuality, age, and physical ableness (Zack 7). Therefore, the ways in which these poets address these intersections, they continue on a more holistic and inclusive path of consciousness-raising, which was set before them.

The Female Body

The female body is also a site that contributes to the phenomenon that occurs when experiencing the poets in this study. Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore all perform with an awareness of and attention to their bodies. Difranco typically dances and pounds aggressively on her guitar, Olson moves manically with her body and at times flips her hair for dramatic effect, Gibson slowly gesticulates to bring impact to her distinctive voice, Care Moore keeps a stance behind a microphone, and Rucker slowly walks across the stage with a cool demeanor.

Each poet's body carries a set of aesthetic markers, which subvert sexist ideals of beauty and imbue each poet with agency. For example, all typically perform in T-shirts

and jeans or cargo pants, wear their hair dreadlocked, afro'd, or dyed, and traditionally wear platform shoes or heavy boots. Difranco, Rucker, and Olson have piercings, Difranco, Gibson, and Care Moore have tattoos, Olson and Difranco often perform with unshaved bodies, Care Moore and Rucker wear jewelry and head wraps representative of their cultures, and all have, at different phases of their careers, selected clothing representative of folk, punk, hip hop, or a hybrid of multiple music cultures. Earlier in her career, Difranco wore leather dresses and skirts, platform boots and fishnet stockings, and kept her hair shaved or partially shaved. Olson wears political T-shirts, and both Olson and Gibson sport cropped hair, all illustrating their association within punk culture. Rucker and Care Moore perform in baggier jeans, hoodies, and t-shirts, aligning themselves with hip hop culture, and presently both wear more form-fitting clothing and ornate jewelry signifying a connection to the fashion of the neo-soul movement, a genre most noted for its fusion of hip hop and R & B, sophisticated fashion, and the inclusion of poetry interspersed with music.

A visual breaking of silences, these aesthetic markers signal resistance to sexist notions of beauty regarding the female body. After all, so much of visual history is bound up with the female form. Since the advent of the female nude in Western art, women have been depicted as objects to be viewed. Their only role is to entice arousal from men—evolving from the motionless, averted gazes of painted nudes into the averted or “come hither” poses in mainstream advertising, film, print, and digital mediums.

For example, the impact of this aesthetic principle that still haunts the female body is addressed in Kathleen Iudicello's dissertation, *Women Take Stage: Punk Rock, Performance Art, and Pussycat Fever*, where she addresses this concept in a term called "ghosting":

a naked female body cannot perform on stage without images that haunt it. Audience members cannot help but recall the numerous images of unclothed or partially clothed female bodies that are ubiquitous in popular culture. Such images frequent local and national news programs, advertisements, and television shows, especially violent crime dramas. (9)

Therefore, when the poets in this study perform, they truly do *take* the stage as Iudicello so aptly puts it. They create a site with their physical bodies and in doing so acknowledge the ghosting of other nude female bodies. They completely subvert the identity of a woman's body as a passive object to view, watch, and be aroused by. Instead these poets present themselves as having agency, wielding powerful words that signal to the audience a presence of strength, security, and agency.

Their rhetorical markers of hair styling, clothing, choosing to shave or not, and having tattoos challenge stereotypical attributes of femininity which ghost the female body. As the poets perform, either with hair afro'd or dreadlocked, dyed red or blonde, with jeans and T-shirts, or with a nose or eyebrow ring, these poets visually break away from a conventional feminine ideal and imply a different standard of beauty. They push for a collective consciousness, which would allow women to embrace their bodies as they are and to present their bodies in ways they feel comfortable. These poets further what aesthetic philosopher Naomi Zack describes as "active subjectivity" (48). Zack concludes "that women and girls exhibit a conflict between regarding their bodies as objects and

living their bodies as free subjectivities” (46). She posits that true freedom in the intersection between conforming to the roles of femininity (in hopes of leveraging power) or completely rebelling against them, lies in the women’s active choice instead of compliancy to the way her body is or is not seen as feminine. Difrancio, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore use their bodies in their performance to impel a consciousness that allow us to free ourselves from viewing the female body as a bound object. Granted that not all the poets embrace this intersection in identical ways, but they do, as Zack asserts, display a sense of active presence in how their bodies challenge sexist ideals of beauty.

The Fan Culture

Upon reflection I have understood the phenomenon that occurs when watching the poets of my study has just as much to do with my interpretations as it does with their performances. The interplay between the message of the poets and the expressiveness of their bodies falls short if spectators do not experience it. As Kim Whitehead writes in *The Feminist Poetry Movement*, “The key to the definition of the poem as tool, and to poetry as a functional element of cultural life, is the relationship between the poet and her readers/listeners. In this view, a poem cannot exist as a poem without the author’s vision, disciplined practice, and skill. Neither can a poem exist, however, without the reader/listener, who completes the artistic act by reading or hearing the poem and responding in some way to it” (37). This, too, is a site where I feel the traditional literary critic can miss the power of performance poetry. Making sense of the performances of these poets also requires analyzing the fan culture.

Theorist Elaine Aston expands this idea in “Gender as a Sign-System: The Feminist Spectator as Subject.” She discusses a necessary shift in understanding performance, which incorporates feminist approaches to the representation of staging:

A fundamental premise of the semiotic approach is the understanding of theatre as a communication model in which a series of coded messages are sent or enacted and their meaning/s received or encoded. Most of the early work in the field of theatre semiotics was concerned with the mechanisms and processes of encodification: how meaning is encoded and transmitted through the various systems of engaging—set, lighting, costume, music, props, etc. In a more recent phase of semiotic study, the emphasis has switched to the decodifying activities of the receiver: the spectator. (57)

Emphasis on the spectator is necessary for understanding how Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore create havens for activism and change because the use of their messages and the expressions of their female bodies inspire a shift in those who view/experience them.

The site where this shift begins is with the subversion of the patriarchal gaze. Foregrounded by John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* and revised in feminist discourse by Laura Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” the gaze becomes a complex, multidimensional site where spectators actively participate in the shift of consciousness from woman blazoned as object to woman as subject, whole and present. With regard to the ghosting of the female body, it is the patriarchal gaze that actively projects the attributes of the female nude—meekness, timidity, helplessness, and absence—onto a female’s performing body. Also, it is the patriarchal gaze that has projected characteristics of the feminine ideal on female bodies with the use of make up, shaving, form fitting/revealing clothing, and soft, preferably longer hair. As Aston asserts, “In the realm of audience reception, the gaze is encoded with culturally determined components of male sexual desire, perceiving ‘woman’ as sexual object” (59).

Women as well as men, despite sexual preference, are all socialized to develop the same misogynistic gaze toward the female body. Aesthetic philosopher Peg Brand expands this concept in “Disinterestedness and Political Art,” stating,

[W]omen who watch the same films come to view them *as men*—with a male gaze—learned through habituation and training. The female spectator’s masculine point of view is a ‘trans-sex identification,’ i.e., ‘*a habit* that very easily becomes *second nature*.’ In other words, women gaze at women in films as men do: by viewing them as erotic objects on view for the pleasure of heterosexual males (both inside and outside the filmic structure), as potential possessions of males, as subjects of male fantasies and desires. (160)

The trans-sex identification Brand speaks of is also applicable as trans-sexual preference identification. As a gay/bisexual male or straight/bisexual/gay female, the same socialization occurs in viewing the female body as object, particularly as an object with traits most pleasing to a heterosexual male. This trans nature also speaks to the idea of hooks’ concept of the “oppositional gaze.” She addresses how black women cope with seeing themselves in film as subservient or exoticized. hooks describes how they must disassociate from their identity in watching such films or banish them altogether in order to exist. Instead, such viewers yearn for an alternative way to view a performance without separating from themselves.

As aspects of the patriarchal gaze and the oppositional gaze get layered upon performers, Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore seek to disrupt such gazes with their performances. By speaking their poems aloud with force, they take on the role of truth-teller, of witness, continuing the consciousness-raising of their foremothers and speaking against social injustice and inequality. They hold the system accountable, but they also radically change perceptions of what women are, what they can do, what their roles are in society, and what boundaries would contain them. By having an awareness

and understanding of the ghosting of the female body, these poets embrace the rhetorical markers of dreaded or afro'd hair, loose-fitting/worn clothing, masculine boots, ornate jewelry and head wraps, unshaved bodies, and tattoos, to trouble the patriarchal spectator's gaze and nurture the fan culture's gaze. Also, in *taking* the stage by body movement, positioning, and commanding attention through their performance, these poets imbue the female body with complete agency shouting a down right message of *Yes, I'm here! Yes, we're here!*

The patriarchal spectator's gaze is short-circuited through the poet's message and the expressiveness of her body, and a re-seeing and a reconfiguring becomes necessary to properly process the performance. These poets allow a spectatorship that will move past this patriarchal gaze into a realm where one can become aware of the ghostings and projections on the female body. And in so doing the patriarchal spectator can more fully appreciate the poets' intentions through how they present their poems orally (and sometimes musically) and visually with their bodies. This revolutionary process is where the spectator comes face to face with her or his patriarchal notions of women and can begin to dismantle them, layer by layer!

The Performative Space

Finally, in understanding the phenomenon that occurs when viewing these poets, I want to acknowledge the effect of the performative space itself. Viewers bring with them their own aesthetic markers, political views, and forms of privilege. However, overall the common thread among audience members is their support of the poets and alignment with their alternative viewpoints. Sharing these viewpoints engenders communal

consciousness and creates an energy that is at the heart of the space. This energy can be understood through discussing aspects of the fan culture.

For example, when entering a venue to see DiFranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, or Care Moore, one notices a shift in privilege with regard to sexuality and race among the fans. At varying degrees, gay and lesbian couples freely hold hands or show each other affection just as heterosexual audience members do. Similarly, audience members of different races also show each other affection, be it romantic or friendly, as well as exhibit a freedom in dress and self-expression. Aesthetic markers dictated by race are non-existent; being black does not mean having to illustrate rhetorical stances of a certain community, nor does being white, brown, or red determine how one displays rhetorical markers to show resistance. Thus, audience members reveal a freedom in presenting themselves in ways they feel comfortable. The common acceptance of these acts allow for them to become privileges specific to the space and not the outside community for some acts, such as showing affection toward a same sex partner, may not be possible for fear of verbal or physical attack. The presence of difference in the space and outside the space further solidifies the audience's recognition of their shared outsider status.

Also, the rhetorical markers of the poets parallel those of their fan culture. Most audience members reveal their political views and beliefs through their rhetorical markers of hair, dress, unshaven body, piercings, and tattoos similar to those of the poets they've come to see. This act radically pushes for a continued evolution of the female body and how it is to be seen and understood.

In addition, by redefining social privileges and mirroring rhetorical markers of the poets addressed, the fan culture seeks to re-socialize their communities with the intent

that women be treated justly. In collectively displaying cultural privileges at poetry shows, the fan culture reinforces the poet's message and affirms one another to continue pushing for those privileges after the show as they integrate back into mainstream society.

The model for this process is indebted to women's festival culture, which helped to provide opportunities for the performative space to exist. Dating back to the late 1970s where festivals were developing and growing, so too was the performative space. For as most women's festivals occurred in remote, rural areas, and were often restricted to or attracted all-female crowds, the festival circuit provided the potential for women to seek out their sociological ideals of a gender equal society. As a result, the festival culture helped to act as a source of refuge from the patriarchal world, but also presented a sense of encouragement and inspiration for women for what could be. As Laurie J. Kendall states in *From the Liminal to the Land: Building Amazon Culture at the Michigan*

Womyn's Music Festival:

While the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival does create a model of a matriarchal culture where womyn feel whole and experience themselves as fully participating members of their community, ultimately it does not change the fact that womyn return to a patriarchal world that ritually marginalizes them and forces them into the liminal ways of living. What changes though, is that womyn leave with a new sense of personal strength, new families they can call on for help, and new cultural traditions that help them survive the patriarchal oppression. Yet, for most womyn, Michigan is not enough. They want more. They want to share the love of their families year-round, and practice their traditions in community . . . [they] want concrete, permanent spaces to call their home, and spaces that institutionalize their values in art, education, [and] policy. (333-4)

Kendall hits the pulse of how powerful the performative space can be. This same desire is something I had before attending the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival and the Ohio Lesbian Music Festival for the first time in 2009, but as Kendall describes, my desire

became more focused after experiencing the performative space at both festivals. For example, while watching Olson perform “Womyn Before” at the Ohio Lesbian Festival, a poem about revering foremothers such as June Jordan, Adrienne Rich, and Angela Davis, she cut the final five lines of the piece:

the womyn before me, the womyn before me.
you see, I take this legacy.
i take this legacy.
i take this legacy,
seriously. (*Independence Meal: The Ingredients* 88-89)

and instead repeated the line, “the womyn before me, the womyn before me,” as a summons to the audience. As she motioned with one hand and repeated the phrase into the microphone with her other hand, women began to yell out names. Names of their heroes, names of mentors, names of those that had passed. A woman next to me yelled, “Gloria Steinem!” and ceremoniously watched and listened to the other women. I immediately felt both awed and lucky to experience such an overwhelming veneration of women leaders! It is through Olson’s recognition of the power of this performative space that experience was possible.

In the performative space, female poets demand room to be heard and seen, but outside the space the fan culture helps to establish new boundaries and to challenge cultural norms. The effect of this process provokes social change by allowing the sociological shift, which occurs inside the venues, to occur outside as well. Kathleen Iudicello classifies this process as a result of the “the present body,” (10) by which the fan culture challenges social norms outside the space:

By 'present body' I mean a female body marked by nontraditional dress and nontraditional speech. The women who inhabit such bodies are subjects of their own performances, whether those are spectacular acts or political gestures. The tattoos and piercings that cover parts of their bodies refute the gender and sex roles that mainstream society continuously constructs. Challenging such norms allows for the possibility that females may represent the spectrum of their sexuality and gender (i.e. between straight and queer, masculine and feminine) on the streets, in real life, becoming agents of their own actions, as their individual identities are unavoidably present. (10)

The space becomes the epicenter where the physical stage—the site where the traditional confines of women (meekness, embracing timidity, domesticity, confined motherhood, beholding a body that's not one's own)—is dismantled in order to transform the projected stage—the site where the confined roles of women in performance are projected onto them in everyday life. Thus, the space acts as a radical catalyst in promoting social change.

The Need for Extratextual Analysis

In most conventional feminist criticism, much focus has been given to the realms of reshaping social consciousness, aesthetics, and linking poetics to politics. Thus, much is owed to earlier feminist critics who showed courage and discussed the impact of feminist poetry on society and stood against more formalist critics who believed that politics should be separated from poetry. As Barbara Christian notes in "The Race for Theory," it is critics writing about outsider art and artists that has kept such revolutionary poetry alive:

My readings do presuppose a need, a desire among folk who, like me, also want to save their own lives. My concern, then, is a passionate one, for the literature of people who are not in power has always been in danger of extinction or of cooptation, not because we do not theorize but because what we can even imagine, far less who we can reach, is constantly limited by societal structures. For me, literary criticism is promotion as well as understanding, a response to the writer and to whom there is often

no response, to folk who need the writing as much as they need anything. I know, from literary history, that writing disappears unless there is a response to it. Because I write about writers who are now writing, I hope to help ensure that their tradition has continuity and survives. (288)

Christian's discussion reveals the connection between outsider art and outsider audience, as well as how crucial early feminist criticism's work was to keeping feminist art alive. By creating and supporting a discourse, which gave serious pause to feminist literature, poetry, and art, feminist critics provided a necessary life-blood for an otherwise marginalized and dismissed field of study. With an understanding of the impact early feminist critics have made, we also need to acknowledge the limitations of some earlier feminist scholarship.

The poem's text, the performer's body, and the transformative space conspire to effect resistance. However most critics examine only the text, not taking into account how the performer takes charge of her body and the space. For example, Kathryn Howd Machan discusses the history of women's poetry readings in "Breath Into Fire: Feminisms and Poetry Readings," asserting, "At the end of the 1960s, members of the emerging feminist movement, such as Judy Grahn, Alta, and Susan Griffin, began literally, by giving readings, to break the silence in which most women had remained, and their initiative encouraged women writers to swell the ranks of writer-performers" (122). Howd Machan powerfully contributes to feminist history by introducing and archiving the beginnings of community and coalition in women's poetry, but she does not express how and why those communities and coalitions formed. She notes the impact of earlier performance poets such as Judy Grahn, but there is no discussion of the message in the context of performance. For example, Howd Machan cites Grahn's articulations on the power of performance—"We used poetry to help energize women and speak to

women's needs and women's energy. We derived our sources from that and we put it back to that same audience and we literally built up not only a woman's poetic literature but also a women's audience who understood it and wanted it" (123)—but does not expand on this powerful concept.

In *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, Identity in Women's Writing*, Jan Montefiore discusses the collective consciousnesses that develop when experiencing feminist poetry: "Poetry is, primarily, the stuff of experience rendered into speech; a woman's poems are the authentic speech of her life and being. In reading or listening to a woman's poem, we share the poets' experience, which is the experience of suffering and resistance common to all women, and we enter into her mind" (3). An examination of the collective consciousness that develops among women during a reading helped to establish its distinct aesthetic. However, Montefiore does not note how women collectively enter into a poet's mind or if this process differs if the poem is read silently versus performed aloud.

Alicia Ostriker notes in *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*, that contemporary women poets discuss their bodies more within their poems:

They write about the sensations of making love. They write about eating and sitting on the toilet. They write about their faces and hands, their arms, their breasts, their wombs, their menstrual periods. Necks and throats, knees and teeth. They write about giving birth, giving suck, growing old. Poems about abortion, poems about breast surgery, poems about rape, have become part of women's poetic repertoire. (92)

Ostriker noting this stylistic shift provided a necessary platform for feminist/womanist poetics to continue to evolve and reclaim the female body in art. However, she stops

before expanding this concept into readings/performance and restricts her discussion to the realm of text.

Lastly, T.V. Reed writes in “The Poetical Is the Political: Feminist Poetry and the Poetics of Women’s Rights,” that feminist poetry aligns with consciousness-raising in its efforts to make the subjective objective or the personal political, and in doing so, feminist poetry becomes a revolutionary way to organize and provoke social change:

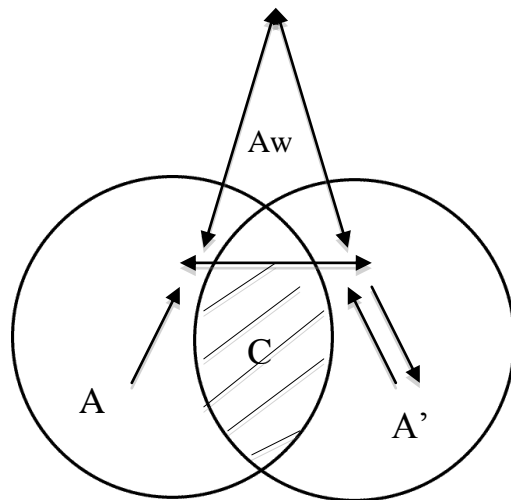
Before the 1960’s poetry was still mainly a genteel, feminized but male-dominated form, and that aura still lingers around it. But there was nothing genteel about the raucous, often sexually frank, and always politically charged poetry that came out of the women’s movement. Moving poetry from polite lecture halls and quiet living rooms out into the streets was part of many 1960’s movements, but no one did it more intensely or effectively than the poets of the women’s movement, and in doing so they reclaimed public space as women’s space. (77)

But Reed does not focus on the performative aspects of feminist poetry and how those aspects help support his comparison of feminist poetry to the consciousness-raising (CR) groups of the feminist movement, for in those groups the foundations of extratextuality—the message (speaker and listeners), the female body (women at the CR groups), and the space (the homes, churches, coffeehouses women met)—were present. Although Reed’s analysis is valuable in connecting and articulating the intersections between the feminist movement and feminist poets, he could have incorporated extratextuality into his analysis. It is extratextuality that solidifies the coalition and continuously renews it in the goal of social change. Therefore in understanding the power of Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore, the semiotics of performance and the space must also be taken into account along with the message.

Incorporating Extratextuality

Similarly to poet Muriel Rukeyser's discussions of consciousness in *The Life of Poetry*, I feel that there is a powerful exchange that occurs between the poet and the spectator and that exchange is the transference of human energy or consciousness. I also agree that this consciousness is "the capacity to produce change from the existing conditions" (183), but unlike Rukeyser, I would argue the implications of the female body on stage, the presence of non-mainstream privileges in the space, and the fan culture's ability to carry those privileges outside the space, are integral in examining what she deems "the exchange" and I "the phenomenon."

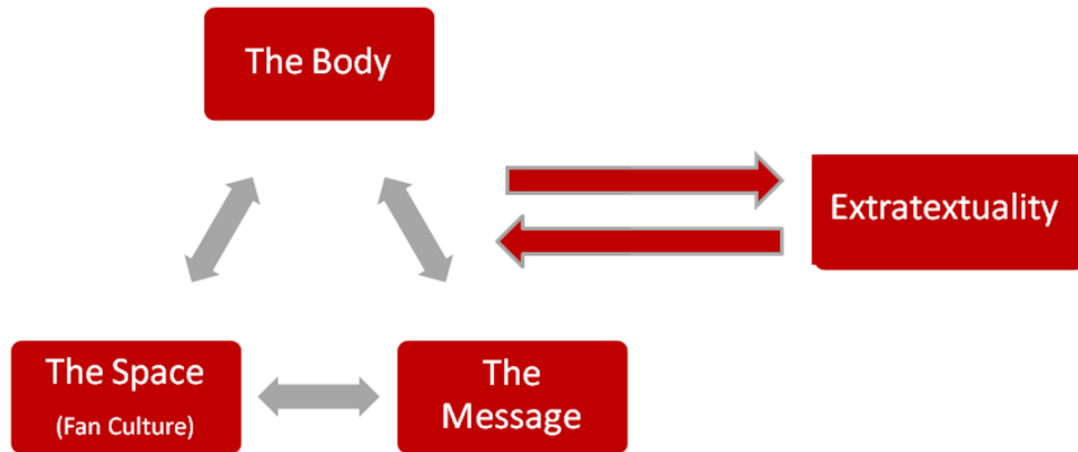
As seen in Rukeyser's Venn diagram (53), an examination of the female body and the theorizing of space are not directly considered, but indirectly alluded to perhaps by her use of directional arrows and preface of the Venn diagram to be imagined in motion.



This diagram is false until all the components are shown in motion.

Identifying "A is the Artist, A' the audience or witness, and C the consciousness of both. . . [and] Aw the artwork, seen in motion, and the vectors, the relation to it" (53),

Rukeyser's diagram alludes to the presence of extratextuality. Expanding the concepts of **A**, **A'**, **C**, and **A_w**, I feel the incorporation of the female body, the rhetorical stances used to subvert it, as well as the theorizing of the space need to be brought to the fore. The diagram below represents this integration.



In the incorporation of the message, the female body, and the space as a means of extratextuality, a contextual understanding of Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore's performances is possible. Therefore, in chapter three, I will use extratextual theory in practice, applying notions of how the intersections of rhetorical stances, fan culture, and content can brilliantly collide together in performance—resulting in a flurry of radical notions, all surrounding the idea that through literary art, activism and change is possible!

Chapter 3: The Poets

I had been born a woman, and I was trying to think and act as if poetry—and the possibility of making poems—were universal—a gender neutral—realm. In the masculine paradigm, I naturally absorbed ideas about women, sexuality, and power from the subjectivity of male poets—Yeats not least among them. The dissonance between these images and the daily events of my own life demanded a constant foot work of imagination, a kind of perpetual translation and an unconscious fragmentation of identity: woman from poet. Every group that lives under the naming and image making power of a dominant culture is at risk from this mental fragmentation and needs an art which can resist it. (Adrienne Rich “Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet” 528)

For women then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives. As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. (Audre Lorde *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* 37)

Still relevant, Rich and Lorde speak to us about poetry as a hedge against patriarchy and a life force for feminism. As Cherrie Moraga writes in *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings by Women of Color*, “The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, no authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups can take place” (29). The successful fusion of theory and emotion, of the personal as political, has been a tremendous gift from feminism. However, because misogyny is still widely accepted and condoned, we need to understand how and why feminist poetry has evolved as it is one of the main vehicles for identifying, naming, formulating, and disseminating

feminist issues (Reed 92). As in the legacy of the outsider and grassroots movements discussed previously, the poets in this study have been able to incorporate music, music culture, performance, art, and politics in their hybrid styles. However, unlike the outsider and grassroots movements before them, Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore, have been able to deliver their messages to a global audience, which has been saturated with pop cultural iconography and technological access.

For example, Kate McCarthy writes in “Not Pretty Girls?: Sexuality, Spirituality, and Gender Construction in Women’s Rock Music:”

Indeed, it has been said that while 1970’s feminism was text-driven, current feminism is pop-culture driven. . . ‘Third wave feminism is distinguished from the second wave by a greater literacy in popular culture and technology: this enables both a critical approach and a willingness to work within systems critiqued for being patriarchal.’ (74-5)

Therefore, in an age where textual, visual, and auditory imagery resides in a nexus of multimedia outlets such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, photo-sharing platforms, blogs, interviews, podcasts, performances, and live streaming, the poets in this study are better able to influence not only their fan culture, but also invade mainstream discourses, all while avoiding contracts with major record labels and dominant presses, which would threaten their creative control.

With that said, it must be understood that the power of how Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore have been able to counteract modern patriarchy has been through their performative styles of message, stage talk, and rhetorical markers. Aspects I note, along with the space, as extratextuality. This can be understood by examining the feminist themes such as challenging religious assumptions, subverting

misogynistic feminine archetypes, paying homage to foremothers, and addressing issues of the female body.

However, before addressing each theme, I must first address an aspect of the phenomenon of performance as discussed in chapter two and how it applies to extratextuality. When first witnessing the feminist performance poets in my study and even still as I encounter new performances, I am constantly renewed. Their sense of affirmation encourages me to re-see and act against social injustices. This transformative force is powerful in part because of extratextual dimensions of the performance. I recall the poets' performances and the planes of subversion—the message, the body, and the space—that made the experience so powerful. This extratextual recall provides a reader/viewer with an interactive residue, which can be summoned and added to their experience as they watch the same performer again. Therefore, an understanding of utilizing extratextual recall in an extratextual examination must be anticipated.

Subverting misogynistic feminine archetypes

In such poems like “Cinderella” by Anne Sexton and the common woman poems by Judy Grahn, we see a subversion of misogynistic archetypes. This theme also continues in the works of the poets addressed. In Rucker’s “What a Woman Must Do” and Olson’s “Eve’s Mouth,” they continue the tradition of challenging problematic feminine archetypes, but they further their stand against patriarchy through extratextual displays. For example, as Rucker performs “What a Woman Must Do,” she stands with eyes closed and microphone to her mouth, commanding the space on stage, but also, through her closed eyes and slight nod to herself as if to say, *Ok, here I go*, she reveals a vulnerability to the audience. But her expression and voice change when she sings:

Until you walk, run, fight a mile in her shoes
Don't you dare stand in front of me and tell me
What a woman must do

She snarls at the word “dare” and points to her chest in confidence at the phrase “tell me,” signifying to the audience a sense of agency and authority. Rucker then provides sexist double standards of duty to justify her snarl:

She must
Swing from chandeliers for undeserving spouses and
paramours
Who deny her suffrage by day, but crave and praise her
womanly wiles by
night
Good enough to fuck but, not good enough to vote

Her facial expressions and gestures still convey authority, as she takes a stand against the virgin/whore dichotomy. She also comments on the multiple oppressions women of color, specifically black women have faced:

She must
go from the beauty of Africa, to the horrors of massa
go from titties dangling bare and shameless
to being branded, licentious, temptress, embarrassed
Go from land of yams and heat hot
To land of cash crops and sellers block
Go . . . from God names, to no name, to his names
Go . . . from God names, to no name, to his names
Now Black
Now inhuman
Freedom stolen, family stolen, now beholden . . .but still golden
Field hollerin' . . . and Ain't I a Woman
Ain't I a Woman

As Rucker recites these lines, her body begins to move in rhythm with her hands, which syncopate the syllables of her lines and her eyebrows contort, revealing further passion. She also sings the lines, “Ain't I a Woman/Ain't I a Woman,” to place more emphasis on them and to evoke a mournful tone. Rucker follows this sorrowful tone with lines such

as, “Tricking to buy baby shoes/She must/ Be called a muse/ Which is just a synonym for use,” and “when seeking or achieving any kind of power/ Reduced to labels like . . ./ Concubine. Cunt. Bitch. Whore. Stunt. Witch. Dyke.” In these lines, she links how these slurs sabotage a woman’s power. By using such sexualizing labels, women become robbed of their power and reduced to a slur. As Rucker performs, her message and her rebellious body project a resistive force that names oppressive strategies of patriarchy. Also, the spectators have been bound by the space in their shared experience of witnessing Rucker’s performance, thus enriching their experience and the impact of Rucker’s feminist message.

Also in Olson’s “Eve’s Mouth,” the extratextuality of her performance helps to further the feminist message of challenging misogynistic archetypes. For example, in her poem, Olson derails, stanza by stanza, the myths of Eve, and stereotypical feminine attributes of meekness, timidity, and helplessness through reclaiming the stories of Queen Victoria II, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, and Helen of Troy, stating:

Eve’s mouth hurts from trying not to laugh
at some joke some scholar made
about her being someone’s half.
It was a joke, a lie, exaggeration, a fib.
And now you all believe I came from his rib.

Now, we’ve got Cinderella, she’s chilling at home
quite content with being alone.
She is playing with the mice and singing with the birds
and they’re the only ones who ever heard these words.
She said, “I’ll get in the damn pumpkin. Do it all right,
weep and lose my slipper, freak out at midnight.
But there’s one thing that the prince might not like,
it’s the Fairygod I’m after.
I’m a dyke.”

The energy of Olson's body and the interactions with her audience amplify her message. She also reinforces the aim of subverting misogynistic feminine archetypes by the rhetorical markers of cropped hair, a nose ring, unshaven underarms, heavy boots, and a T-shirt, as well as communing with an audience that similarly challenges conventional notions of feminine beauty. In addition, Olson's distinct ability to animate her voice in re-telling these stories with a subversive bend is also powerful.

Paying homage to foremothers

Paying homage to foremothers has been a prominent theme taken on in feminist poetry by poets such as Alice Walker, Lucille Clifton, and Maya Angelou. The poets in this study continue this tradition, but add an extratextual element, which further solidifies the message and acts as a bridge between feminist generations. For example, in Olson's performance of "Womyn Before" at the 29th National Women's Music Festival (seen in her film, *Left Lane*), she begins her poem stating,

I was still sucking my thumb
the first time I sang "we shall overcome."
it was a numb december night,
a small town fable,
my first corporate villain,
and my mother was the hero.
and I was clutching the back
of my mother's kneecap,
i squinted up at her first,
i asked her, "why are we so mad?"
(*Independence Meal: The Ingredients* 81-2)

In these lines, Olson builds imagery within the text of a generational link of feminist activism between her and her mother, "the hero" but she also assembles images through the use of her body as she recites these opening lines with pierced nose, wild hair, patterned pants, and a cut-off t-shirt. While uttering these lines, she walks through a dark

auditorium tailed by a large spotlight which encompasses her as well as audience members. The lighting choice visually “bridges” Olson and her audience together, as well as her decision to perform “in” the crowd as opposed to onstage.

As Olson continues her mother’s activist example, she goes into a litany of many more mothers who have helped to pave the way for social change:

“this is solidarity,”
she whispered to her baby girl.

and she smelled, right then,
like the coal mines of the Industrial Age,
she was perfumed in truth and she reeked of risks taken,
“because the time to strike is when the iron is hot,”
Martin said, “all truth crushed to earth will rise again.”
Like the words of the womyn before me:

June Jordan, Barbara Smith
Sonia Sanchez, Adrienne Rich
Flannery O’Conner, Ruth Ellis
bell hooks, Flo Kennedy
Gertrude Stein, Dorothy Allison,
Angela Davis, Mary Daly
my mother, my grandmother,

and all the other womyn before me. (82-3)

The power of these lines communicates a poetic tradition of thanking those activists who came before. In addition, Olson adds to the message of the poem by the use of her body and of the space. As she recites these lines, she moves through the audience, makes eye contact, smiles, and changes the pitch of her voice to take on the dialogue of she and her mother, as if re-enacting it to an old friend. She also holds the microphone in her right hand and gesticulates with her left, again displaying motions indicative of conversation.

Her conversational style is amplified further through the spotlight trailing her throughout the performance and her choice to walk up and down the aisle. Olson creates,

through using the space, an illusion that the watcher/viewer is listening to her during a walk to the store (or to a movie) by blacking out the size of the auditorium via light. However, through her use of flipping her hair and pushing her voice into the microphone when reciting the names of feminist foremothers, Olson heightens her rhetoric into a passionate treble, similar to the climax of a political speech. This use of extratextuality also acts as a social bridge between feminist generations. For in “Womyn Before,” she reveals that younger feminists remember, acknowledge, and appreciate the women before them and also creates a climate for younger women to acknowledge their herstory by taking on activist work themselves.

This same notion can be seen in an extratextual performance of Rucker’s “Libations,” performed at the Blues Alley in Washington D.C. Similar to Olson, Rucker focuses on why her foremothers and forefathers are important to her:

In these days and times expressly,
I feel the need to call
on our ancestors, our forbearers;
speak their names, give thanks,
pour a little out for them that
fought for our freedom, promoted peace
resisted,
resisted,
resisted
challenged our ideas about words, sounds, images

Holding a microphone in one hand and her written poem in the other, Rucker amplifies the poem’s meaning with her body. She sways slowly to the beat of the drum, keeps her eyes closed during these lines, and stresses the beats of each line with her hand, almost as if in a trance or prayer in front of her audience. Rucker then begins to speak the names of literary artists such as Audre Lorde and Gwendolyn Brooks, painters such as Georgia O’Keeffe and Frida Kahlo, musicians such as Mahalia Jackson, Bob Marley, and Tupac,

actors such as Josephine Baker and Redd Foxx, activists such as Coretta Scott King and Sojourner Truth, victims of hate “who have died needlessly” such as Mathew Shepherd, Latasha Harlins, and the Anasazi people.

By upping the tempo of this naming and by swaying her body, Rucker triggers energy within the space. Audience members begin sporadic whoops and the band, subtly ad-libbing djembe, bass, and top hat notes, evoke an energy of praise evocative of the black church and African ritual. Naming the “spirits that you may choose to guide you,” such as Kuan Yin, Mary Magdalene, Buddha, Moses, Muhammad, Jesus, and Akanaki, Rucker evokes the anaphoric cadence, “Will we ever say never again and mean it” and intersperses it with events such as the Rwandan genocide, the battle at Wounded Knee, and the Holocaust. In this way she inspires her audience to take up the legacy of their forebears and critiques the perpetual ignorance and hate which give rise to genocide.

Rucker closes the poem by connecting the consequences of not pushing for social change and more recent examples of mass social injustice as she states,

Will we ever say never again and mean it?

The moon fire
on Osage Avenue
in a place called Philadelphia.
Will we ever say never again and mean it?

This so-called war
in a place called Iraq
Will we ever say never again and mean it?

New Orleans
New Orleans
New Orleans
New Orleans

Ending with the repetition “Watch over us,” Rucker exudes a mood of praise. She holds the last word of the final line, “us,” in a long, low note, almost in a chant to signal the end of her vocal libation, her offering to those who came before.

Lastly, Difranco’s “Grand Canyon” continues the legacy of feminist poetry in paying homage to those that have come before her. For example, in the film *Trust*, Difranco begins her performance first by stage talking with the audience about her feelings of touring with upright bassist Todd Sickafoose. She then begins thanking the audience for coming to the show. This stage talk, customary in poetic and musical performances, creates an immediate level of rapport. Through Difranco sincerely thanking the fans for attending and the fans replying with yelps and loud applause, one witnesses the community and intimacy present in the space. As Difranco begins,

I love my country
by which I mean I am indebted joyfully
to all the people throughout its history
who have fought the government to make right
where so many cunning sons and daughters
our foremothers and forefathers
came singing through slaughter
came through hell and high water
so that we could stand here
and behold breathlessly the sight
how a raging river of tears
cut a grand canyon of light (Difranco *Verses* 85)

The audience is seen in silence taking in the performance, not only listening to the words or viewing them as they are signed by an interpreter, but also viewing Difranco’s body, listening to her voice, and viewing each other as they share in the experience. Difranco walks onstage alone with a microphone wearing dark cargo pants, a cut off T-shirt, and long dreadlocks. Her multiple hand tattoos are visible as is her unshaved body.

As Difranco reaches the climax of the piece, her informal diction, hard end rhymes, and rebellious tone, provide a pulsating, resistive energy to the space:

I mean no song has gone unsung here
and this joint is strung crazy tight
and people here bin raising up their voices
since it just ain't bin right
with all the righteous rage
and all the bitter spite
that will accompany us out
of this long night
that will grab us by the hand
when we are ready to take flight
seatback and tray table in the upright and locked position
shocked to tears by each new vision
of all that my ancestors have done
like say
the women who gave their lives
so that I could have one (Difranco 86-7)

The crowd screams and applauds, further communicating the struggles endured by activists before and the benefits to society at present. In addition, Difranco enunciates the hard “n” sound from “done” and “one” to mark a climactic timing for applause.

Continuing with her rebellious energy and hard end rhyme style, she encourages her audience, like Olson and Rucker, to remember their foremothers:

people, we are standing at ground zero of the feminist revolution!
yeah it was an inside job, stoic and sly
one we're supposed to forget and downplay and deny
but I think the time is nothing
if not nigh
to let the truth out
coolest f-word ever deserves a fucking shout!
i mean why don't all decent men and women call themselves feminists?
if only out of respect
for those who fought for this
i mean look around

we have this (Difranco 87)

As DiFranco concludes the climactic stanza, she plays with her facial expressions and voice to further the meaning of the poem. At the lines, “yeah it was an inside job, stoic and sly/ one we’re supposed to forget and downplay and deny,” she speaks more quickly and her face reveals a subtle snarl. And in performing the lines, “let the truth out/ coolest f-word ever deserves a fucking shout!/ I mean why don’t all decent men and women call themselves feminists?” DiFranco slows her speed, smiles, and sarcastically ponders as if she is unaware of the patriarchy.

Calling attention to the female body

Feminist poetry has consistently brought to the fore taboo subjects such as menstruation, pregnancy, abortion, rape, sex, and aging. Poets such as Judy Grahn, Lucille Clifton, and Sharon Olds helped push the boundaries of what was considered taboo in an effort to create further space for women and to reach an audience hungry to read about authentic bodily experience. The poets in this study continue the tradition of taking on bodily themes, but further it through the extratextual dimensions of their performances. In Olson’s “Armpit Hair” *Built Like That* (1999), she humorously writes about body hair and alludes to the social ramifications for women who do not shave in our society. Performing at the 2003 Lilish Fair, Olson begins the poem by bouncing to a b-box beat produced by a female accompanist, and states, “The little girls here, I’ve heard, like this song because they’re the ones who have yet to make a choice.” She then points out a few girls in the crowd and encourages them to come on stage as she begins,

Well, I want to go to Europe, the land of Brave and Free
Here it’s considered natural for girls to be hairy.
Where Gillette don’t make a profit off of
keeping womyn busy
As pleasers with their shavers
and their razors and their tweezers.

So to all the boys and the men
with the furry, furry masses
With the ape like backs
and the very hairy asses.
I don't find that particularly pretty
So get your opinion out of my hair pitty.
(Olson *Built Like That: The Word* 50)

Throughout the performance of these two stanzas two girls dance on stage with make-shift choreography they prepared on the spot. As Olson smiles and rocks to the beat, the crowd can be heard whooping and cheering the young girls on for participating. Her message of body liberation is reinforced by her own unshaven body performing the poem and the participation of the girls performing on stage.

Gibson's "Blue Blanket" also takes on the female body in a poem about rape. When performing this piece, her powerful voice, subtle facial expressions, and slight gesticulations intensify the impact of the poem, as does the support of the audience. For example, on her website, one can view Gibson's performance of "Blue Blanket" at The Girl Fest festival and conference. In it, Gibson powerfully performs a piece recounting the story of her lover who had been raped:

She knows how much control is worth,
knows what a woman can lose when her power to move
is taken away

by a grip so thick with hate
it could clip the wings of [god,]
leave the next eight generations of your blood shaking

And tonight
something inside me is breaking (*Pole Dancing* 30)

She intensifies her voice and at moments closes her eyes, exuding a further depth behind and at the line, “it could clip the wings of god.” Gibson extends her arms and makes a sharp thrust with her fists to visually signify the clipping of wings.

Gibson also modulates her volume and gesture to communicate how excruciating rape is, how the trauma remains beyond the act of violation:

What would you tell your daughter of the womb raped empty,
the eyes swollen shut,
the gut too frightened to hold food,
the thousands upon thousands of bodies used?

It was seven minutes of the worst kind of hell.
Seven.
And she stopped believing in heaven.

distrust became her law,
fear her bible,
the only chance of survival. . .
don't trust any of them. (31)

At the powerful line, “Seven,” she holds her left hand up near the microphone and her body sways signifying she is lost in the piece. Also, since the audience is attending Girl Fest, a festival and conference focused on supporting issues involving violence against women, one can also assume that the context of the piece contributes to the shared experience of the fan culture and to fan's future activism. Therefore, it is no surprise as Gibson closes the poem:

She was whole before that night.
Believed in heaven before that night,
and she's not the only one.
She knows she won't be the only one.
She's not asking what you're gonna tell your daughter.
She's asking what you're gonna teach
your son. (34)

The audience can be heard applauding this injunction to stop rape!

Challenging religious assumptions

Feminist actions such as suffragist, Elizabeth Cady Stanton re-writing the bible and feminist poems such as “Consorting with Angels” by Anne Sexton and “Lady Lazarus” by Sylvia Plath, show a connection of gender oppression and orthodox religion. This theme is extended in the poets of this study. Difranco’s “Literal” and Gibson’s “Every Month” challenge patriarchal notions of religion and imply a separate redefinition of spirituality. Because Difranco includes “Literal” in her book *Verses* (2007) and in the cd booklet of album, *Educated Guess* (2004), but is not recorded, and because Gibson’s new album, *Yellowbird* (2009), contains the poem, “Every Month,” but she, as of yet, has not included it on her set lists, these two poems can be addressed with extratextual recall.

For example, when reading “Literal” by Difranco it is clear that her stance on orthodox religion is negative due to its literal platform of interpretation. She instead prefers, like Mahammad Ali, to speak and interpret with metaphor:

when they said he could walk on water
what it sounds like to me
is he could float like a butterfly
and sting like a bee
literal people are scary, man
literal people scare me
out there trying to rid the world
of its poetry
while getting it wrong fundamentally
down at the church of “look,
it sez right here, see!” (Difranco *Verses* 8)

“Every Month” by Gibson illustrates the same resistance to literal interpretation:

Every month when I get my period
I breathe a sigh of relief and thank god I’m not pregnant,

‘cause you never know when Jesus is coming back
and you never know who god’s gonna choose
to be the next Virgin Mary

and can you imagine anything more scary
than staring down between your legs
and seeing the little glowing head of baby Jesus?
Holy shit, no thank you.

I mean, what kind of bumper sticker would you get?
*'Your son's an honor student? Yeah well,
My son walks on water and heals lepers, motherfuckers!'*

Think of the pressure.
Personally I'd prefer to give birth to Lucifer,

A fixer-upper, the kind of kid who would sit at the last supper
and complain that Peter got more mashed potatoes,

'cause god knows
the holy have done more damage to this world
than the devil ever could. (*Pole Dancing* 64)

It is clear that both artists critique formal readings and interpretations of Christianity as well as rigid and exclusive interpretations of the bible. Difranco likens the biblical account of Jesus walking on water to Mahammad Ali's boastful descriptions of himself during a fight. Gibson shares her preference, if chosen to be "the next Virgin Mary," to give birth to Lucifer, "a fixer upper" instead of giving birth to Christ, whose followers have "done more damage to this world than the devil ever could." While reading these poems, it also becomes apparent that it is difficult to do so without recalling extratextual associations. Because both artists are performers and do not work exclusively in text, but rather in performances which are accessible via their tours, their films, their websites, or on the internet, exposure to them in isolation of their performance is nearly impossible. Thus, when I read "Literal," I can hear Difranco's voice, imagine her body movements, and remember the energy of the fan culture. Likewise, when I read "Every Month" or listen to it on cd, I cannot help but hear Gibson's distinct, booming voice, see her short,

spiked hair, tattooed forearms, and her eyes closed reciting the poem among fans silent in awe.

Nurturing a coalitional spirit

Like Sonia Sanchez, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Audre Lorde, the poets in this study also promote a coalitional spirit, but expand the message with the use of extratextuality. For example, as Care Moore performs her poem, “Warriors Walk Alone” on *Def Poetry Jam*, she utilizes her exposed body via persuasive posturing to communicate themes of resistance with feminist overtones.

Care Moore commands of the audience via pointing her finger, and shaking her written poem in her hand for women to uprise:

laugh and breathe/cross your
legs/ get your gun/ wage the war /make them buy it, bat your
eyes/ rock it out/ make them beg/ put the hits on the b side/ smile
warrior/ listen for your tribe (*The Alphabet* 12)

As the poem continues, she increases the speed at which she reads and begins to clinch her eyes shut and hit higher pitches in her voice, evoking sense of urgency:

store your milk for
ammunition/ use your intuition/shave your hair/wish them luck
tell the witch hunters/ we don't give a fuck/
scar your face/ pierce your nose/ unwrap the package
define the present

tell then naw!
just when they think they have it (12)

As Care Moore delivers the lines above, she uses a staccato, manic pace—as if her voice were a machine gun—reinforcing the war imagery of her poem. It is clear as well that the fan culture within the performative space is moved by the performance as they watch intently with some nodding their heads in support. References to Miles Davis’ *Bitches*

Brew (1970) in the lines “Know that all your wishes/ Add to our spicy bitches brew” and to the fairy tale of the blue bird in lines, “We are who was sent to you/ So who sent you?/ When the shit goes down/ Will you remember which way the blue bird flew?” (11-2) provides intratextual and extratextual connections. Intratextual because Care Moore modifies the women’s role in both pieces as the most significant, even though in their original context they are either a muse (Davis’s record) or a naive pawn (the fairy tale). Extratextual, because Care Moore imbues these archetypes with her own rebellious energy to call for coalition. Her subversive style causes audience members to nod and throw their hands up in enjoyment and give Care Moore a standing ovation upon completion of her poem.

Similarly, Olson’s “Subtle Sister” praises the coalitional work that feminists have done as well as discusses the social inequalities still present that require such feminist work. In her film, *Left Lane*, Olson’s exposed body displaying a cut off T-shirt, unruly hair, and an aggressive attitude, merge with the fan culture to catapult the poem into the extratextual realm. She grabs her hair and her crotch while pronouncing:

Still, we’ve tried being patient,
Collected, calm, nice
tried praying, tried laying you
paying the price.
we’ve learned to scream
until our throats throbbed –
what else do you do
while your cunt’s being robbed?
(*Independence Meal: The Ingredients* 100)

and growling the word, “mine,” at the end of the lines,

So, I take back the whispers,
the cute mute act,
and the high pitched giggles, yeah
i take them back.

i won't avoid your stare, evade your step,
nothing of that kind,
won't help you help me victimize
the only space that's mine. (101)

Olson projects a radical resistance against patriarchal customs and a vehement freedom with her body in expressing it. Simultaneously, she provides a model to her audience of resistance, which can then be carried outside the space and into mainstream society.

This “performative force” (Connor 107) is something that is transferable from poet to poet. Each, in their specific style and choice of rhetorical marker, create a unique collision between their own experiences and that of the audience's, which elevates poetry from experience to mind-shift to action. This symbiosis is both unique to each performance and culturally familiar. It allows, at every opportunity, the nurturing of radical feminist ideas and lifestyles as well as the support to put those ideas into practice. Difranco, Olson, Gibson, Rucker, and Care Moore help to create this force, birthed from the extratextual where poetry is motion, is tool, and is the life-blood toward change. With this force, poetry becomes verb instead of noun.

Conclusion

This study illustrates the necessity of a multimodal, extratextual critical approach for responding to feminist performance poetry. To ignore semiotic markers of dress, body language, performative space, and fan culture would mean missing heightened layers of meaning that occur in the relation of performer and audience. This is what has been missing from understanding the significance of performance in poetry. For it is the relation between performer and audience that creates webs of activism due to audience members, fortified by witnessing such performances, returning to their own communities to work for change. Audiences are equipped with sophisticated semiotics of performance

and understand, through watching the poets of study, how to intentionally disrupt the patriarchal gaze and advocate unconventional notions of feminine beauty. Audiences too are exposed to earlier generations of feminists where poetry has been in sync with activism or are taught by contemporary artists, such as the poets of study, through their use of multimodal, extratextual performance. And lastly, audience members are exposed to the powerful influence of media in efforts to disseminate feminist messages and nurture feminist communities. The poets of study use poetry as tool, as weapon, and load their messages and performances with complex cultural codes and aesthetic markers which resist the patriarchy. They fight—they folk, funk, and punk!

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