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Rachel Beth Rozman

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The Evolved Radical Feminism of Spoken Word:

Alix Olson, C.C. Carter, and Suheir Hammad

**APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:**

Supervisor:

Lisa Moore

Dana Cloud

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Rachel Beth Rozman, BA

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Abstract

The Evolved Radical Feminism of Spoken Word:

Alix Olson, C.C. Carter, and Suheir Hammad

Rachel Beth Rozman, MA

The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

Supervisor: Lisa Moore

Radical feminism is often associated with the 1970s and 1980s in the United States. Although powerful in its goals of solidarity and coalitions, the movement is often criticized for its lack of attention to intersecting systems of power. However, several contemporary feminist spoken word poets are reconceptualizing radical feminism in their political projects, using the theories and activist strategies while paying attention to race, class, and sexuality. This piece traces some of the history and literature of radical feminism, Woman of Color feminism, contemporary Islamic feminism, and spoken word poetry. Using these frameworks, I close-read three poems: “Womyn Before” by Alix Olson, “The Herstory of My Hips” by C.C. Carter, and “99 cent lipstick” by Suheir Hammad to discuss the manner in which each uses coalitions. Olson’s poem provides an analysis of the performative and textual aspects of the poem as a way to envision an

activist project grounded in old social movements. Carter's poem connects history and archives, using a Woman of Color framework, and through Hammad, the structural critiques of an unjust system that disadvantages minority youth are seen through lenses of Women of Color and Islamic feminism. While these poets gain some knowledge from radical feminism, they interpret it in their poetry in ways that address the intersections of identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Radical feminism, like any form of feminism, is neither singular nor without its discontents. As one of the most often-criticized forms of feminism (and for just reasons), many of its powerful ideas and activist strategies have been quickly discounted, or seen as at odds with the contemporary feminist movement. Yet, many of these ideologies and strategies have found their way into contemporary feminist frameworks under different guises. The fear of being associated with radical feminism keeps many current feminists away from theorizing about coalitions and systems of domination in the same way as their predecessors of the 1970s and 1980s. However, many of the strongest points of these earlier theories are the unacknowledged sources of contemporary U.S. feminist ideologies.

Spoken word poets are one group of feminist artists who continue to draw on radical feminism in the 21st century. Within feminist spoken word, there is often a political agenda taken directly out of radical feminism. Most prevalent in this poetry is a revisiting of coalition politics, updated to promote solidarity across identity categories as well as movements. All three of the poets I will discuss use coalitions, though in very different ways and for varying political reasons: Alix Olson aims to create solidarity with both the labor and civil rights movements, giving a structural foundation for feminist action; C.C. Carter looks to create coalitions through history and archives; and Suheir Hammad writes about transracial coalitions in order to examine activism against racist systems.

The ways in which interlocking systems of domination form a basis for understanding oppression in terms of more than just sexism are also critical to the reconceptualization of radical feminism that the poets provide. An intersectional analysis recognizes, as many radical feminists of the 1970s and 1980s were said to have failed to acknowledge, how systems of race, class, sexuality, nation, and many other factors intersect with gender, meaning that different women experience patriarchy in different ways depending on social and geographic location. My analyses of Alix Olson and Suheir Hammad's poems will look at the ways in which a poet can work these intersections into her poetry in a critical way to form a political project. My discussion of C.C. Carter's poem will show how these concepts can work across time and space to create a subject out of a radical feminist ideal of collective identities, specifically in the formation of a movement.

It is important to note the ways in which the racial identities of the poets contribute to the ideas of collectivity and solidarity that I posit. While each comes from a different racial background, they are all able to obtain some of their central ideas from radical feminism. Alix Olson comes from a very second wave, Women's and Gender Studies curriculum form of feminism, which sets a framework for her to discuss many of the key themes from this strand of the movement. C.C. Carter's focus on Women of Color feminism draws from many of the same historical moments, but conceptualizes them using different approaches, and Suheir Hammad emphasizes a new wave of feminism that comes out of an Islamic feminist tradition that recognizes the impacts of nationalism and discourses of terror on Muslim bodies. While I will show that all of these

poets gain some forms of knowledge from radical feminism, the intricacies that they write about come from their locations as racialized beings.

It is also important to pause for a moment to locate myself within my work. As a white woman, I understand the need to incorporate the works of Women of Color into my writing in thoughtful, non-problematic ways. I recognize my positionality as having the privilege of an education, as well as what it means to be writing from a lesbian point of view. Growing up in the United States significantly after radical feminism's heyday, my perspective comes out of a historical analysis of the 1970s and 1980s, rather than firsthand experience. It is equally important to note that I center my work in a United States context. While other feminist movements were happening in other parts of the world at this time, I am looking at the United States-centric view of what feminism means in a particular socio-historical context.

As a feminist scholar, I am particularly interested in the ways in which this poetry forms a counter-narrative, a witnessing by and of people and movements. In discovering how to bear witness to movements that I did not live through, I frame much of my methodological practice on the works of Diana Taylor and Carolyn Forché. Forché notes that "poetry of witness reclaims the social from the political and in so doing defends the individual against illegitimate forms of compulsion" (143). Taylor's reflexivity and constant questioning of her own place within her research guided my understanding of how *I* could bear witness to these poets, as well as the ways in which their poetry bears witness to events and ideologies. In doing this, the recognition of the intertwining of the social and political became integral to my work.

In this piece, the use of history by all three poets will function as a technique in approaching feminism. For Olson, history is used to set forward an idea of what feminist action should look like, for Carter, it is how to connect in a feminist way to create the self as a subject, and for Hammad it demonstrates how institutions and systems have worked (and continue to work) to disadvantage certain groups. The archive then becomes generative, created by all of these alternative histories, existing in a space outside of the physical. The use of archives by these poets chronicles a struggle in multiple yet unique voices and also continues to evolve. This is a form of archive not only created through using the history of radical feminism, but also through the continued development of its theories and practices.

RADICAL FEMINISM

In order to proceed, it is necessary to clarify how radical feminism is defined in this work with a brief summation of several important pieces of literature and concepts. Radical feminists of the 1970s and 1980s emphasized women's oppression as the oldest and most widespread form of oppression (Tong 71). These thinkers reiterated that women have interests different from those of men, and that in order to combat oppression women must join together in sisterhood and solidarity. They noted that male power controls not just the public sphere but also family and sexuality, traditionally "private" domains (Bryson 163). Using concepts of universal sisterhood among all women, radical feminists aimed to involve women in a "revolutionary struggle against men" that sought to overthrow existing systems of domination and oppression (Bryson 164).

Integral to radical feminism is the concept of patriarchy. Kate Millett, in her 1970 book *Sexual Politics*, expanded upon this term. She argued that power governs all social relations, and that the most prevalent power is the domination of men over women. Because of its universality, Millett argues that patriarchy is invisible, affecting every aspect of life and making the power dynamic seem "natural" (25). Radical feminists adopted this theory of patriarchy as a way to understand male power over women in all social situations. In essence, radical feminism is the effort to eradicate patriarchy.

Radical feminism of the 1970s and 1980s split into several factions to eliminate patriarchy. Some radical feminist groups stood up against pornography, heterosexuality, or men's control of women's reproduction using patriarchy as the fundamental concept that illuminates the problematic nature of these issues (Tong 71). The political questions

taken up by radical feminists were diverse, and were theorized about and acted upon using different strategies.

Many of these strategies included direct action. Best known perhaps is the mass protest of the 1968 Miss America pageant, most famous for being the action in which feminists threw high heels, bras, and other items of perceived oppressive femininity into trashcans (Rosen 160). While no bras were actually burnt at this demonstration, it became the basis for the mass media conceptualization of bra-burning feminists. The 1970 sit-in at the office of *Ladies' Home Journal* is another action often cited within radical feminism. Over 100 women occupied the office of *Ladies' Home Journal* for 11 hours to protest the magazine's domination by men (Rosen 300). However, there were many other demonstrations, such as gatherings to speak out against rape and sexual violence, as well as women-focused events like music festivals (Bryson 187). While this is by no means an exhaustive list of the types of action employed by radical feminists, it is important to understand that actions focused on collective solidarity among women were popular, fostering the concept of sisterhood against patriarchy.

Two other important debates within radical feminism at the time were pornography as dehumanizing or alternatively empowering to women, and heterosexuality as contrasted with lesbian separatism. The pornography debate divided the movement into two camps: sex positive and anti-violence (the former became a basis for contemporary third wave ideals) (Bryson 191). Often associated with the anti-violence strain of radical feminism are the strict anti-pornography stances of theorists such as Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. MacKinnon and Dworkin argued

against pornography, claiming it was a violation of a woman's civil and human rights that demoted the woman into the realm of "object" or "thing," making it easier for men to justify raping and abusing them (Rosen 192). They aimed to prove (through legal measures as well as in their writing) that representations of violence against women are as harmful as the actual acts themselves.

In response to what was seen as extremism on the part of MacKinnon, Dworkin, and the anti-pornography feminist movement, a series of rifts began to appear within radical feminism, leading to a period that became known as the "Feminist Sex Wars" (Tong 111). The primary concern among these feminists and organizations was not that pornography was sexual objectification, but rather that in censoring pornography, these feminists were creating an "unhealthy alliance with the right wing 'moral majority'" (Bryson 193) that could lead to censorship of feminist material. They were also concerned about the increase in the power of the state and the negative portrayal of all men as rapists (Bryson 194). Groups such as FACT (the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce) opposed pornography limits from the legal perspective (Tong 116), while organizations such as Samois and the Lesbian Sex Mafia argued that the anti-pornography movement discriminated against sexual minorities, refusing to recognize a broad range of sexual practices incorporated in lesbian sex (Rosen 194).

There was also fragmentation around the issue of sexuality. Feminists such as Charlotte Bunch advocated for lesbian separatism, while others wanted to form alliances with men (or at least not exclude them completely) (Bryson 188). Much of what is in the current memory of radical feminism comes from this idea of lesbian separatism. Most

famously taken up by the group Radicalesbians, radical feminists sought to challenge what was seen as lesbianism, coining the phrase “the woman-identified-woman.” Separatism called for the woman-identified-woman to eliminate patriarchy from her life by only forming intimate relationships with women. Radicalesbians opened the idea of lesbianism to encompass more than sexual orientation, saying that: “a lesbian... is the woman who... acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society... allows” (153). In creating lesbianism as something that any woman could choose, lesbian separatists, or political lesbians as they were sometimes called, incorporated themselves into the women’s movement. Also critical to this sexuality-focused period in radical feminism was Adrienne Rich’s now-canonical piece: “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” which argued that all women “exist on a lesbian continuum, [and] we can see ourselves moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not” (651).

However, not all radical feminists believed that heterosexuality was incongruous with feminism. Critics of separatism and political lesbianism not only opposed the movement mandating a certain type of sexuality, but many also refused to disregard the positive experiences they had through sexual encounters with men (Bryson 189). The focus on lesbianism within radical feminism also proved to turn some away from the movement. Women who would have otherwise been interested in feminism but were not familiar or comfortable with alternative relationships were excluded from many feminist groups (Rosen 174). By placing such a high value on lesbianism (political or otherwise),

radical feminism alienated many straight or bisexual women, or those who refused to give up close ties with men.

WOMAN OF COLOR FEMINISM

While radical feminists paid close attention to issues of sexuality, much of the movement of this time was not racially or economically diverse. Early radical feminists drew significant critiques for the very principle upon which they were founded: universal sisterhood against patriarchy. Women of Color feminists did not see radical feminism as addressing their realities and experiences, leading to the formation of racial or national identity based feminist movements as distinct discursive fields. In putting forth ideas of interlocking oppressions, feminists of color were able to organize around the difference of their standpoints to fight patriarchy within their communities (Combahee River Collective 284). While Woman of Color feminism encompasses many groups, all of whom influenced the feminist movement with their theories, I focus in particular on Black feminism, because of the theoretical frameworks it presents, as well as the time period in which it emerged.

One of the most well known and widely cited works of Black feminism is the Combahee River Collective Statement. Formed in 1974, the collective claimed that their mission was a commitment to “struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (272). Their statement, written in 1977, is among the first to address what would eventually be called “intersectionality,” the idea that all systems of oppression work in tandem. They posited that the importance of Black feminism was rooted in identity politics and intersectionality. Since Black women were the most oppressed group, if they could be

liberated, everyone would be free by default (278). Out of their statement grew a framework for Black feminist politics, which, unlike white radical feminism, recognized the importance of creating coalitions that included men to eliminate systems of racism, capitalism, heterosexism, and sexism at once.

Barbara Smith, a member of the Combahee River Collective, recognized the need for *Women of Color* to be published and seen as figures in the feminist movement. In 1980, after prompting from her friend, poet Audre Lorde, Smith founded *Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press*. *Kitchen Table Press* published works solely by Women of Color and was best known for its anthologies of critical feminist work such as *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. While critical of what is often considered mainstream radical feminism, these anthologies embraced radical ideas but made them relevant to the issues of Women of Color. The anthology included sections addressing a myriad of issues that were for the most part previously ignored, such as racism in the women's movement, class, homophobia, the Third World feminist, and the differing perspectives in knowing and comprehending the world. In doing so they allowed for a new examination of the interactions between systems of oppression and identitarian issues raised in radical feminism. Published in *This Bridge Called My Back*, Cherríe Moraga poignantly defines “theory in the flesh,” a concept drawing from a framework of Woman of Color feminism but incorporating ideas of solidarity from radical feminism. Moraga explains that “a theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out

of necessity. Here, we attempted to bridge the contradictions in our experience” (23). The focus on the body, on individual experiences, and on physical reality ties *This Bridge Called My Back* to radical ideas pervasive in the women’s movement, but recognizes forms of intersections and embodiment that most of white feminism ignored.

Another powerful work to come out of *Kitchen Table Press* was *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, which included Bernice Johnson Reagon’s speech-turned-essay “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century.” In this piece, Reagon discusses how Women of Color should do coalition work with the mainstream feminist movement. She cautions her audience that the coalition is not a home; rather it is a space that should always feel dangerous (359). She compares the mainstream feminist movement to a room, and discusses what happens to the room when a Person of Color steps into it. Her in-depth analysis acknowledges the manner in which a Person of Color (or anyone who challenges narratives of who belongs in the room) changes the space, but also how the space affects the person who enters it. Reagon’s speech, originally given in 1981, was a turning point for radical feminism in that it encouraged Women of Color to challenge the racist and classist views of the mainstream white feminist movement, thus creating their own spaces within it. In doing so, she paved the way for scholars such as bell hooks to critique some aspects of radical feminism while acknowledging the value of others.

In her 1984 book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks explores this critique of radical feminism through a critical, anti-racist lens while recognizing the value of their ideas for feminists of color. Like Reagon, she espouses the need for creating coalitions outside of the safety zone of one’s own identity as a way to draw

strength into feminist organizing. hooks's views are radical in that she critiques the liberal feminist ideal of women's equality with men, recognizing that there are also differences in social positions of men based on race, class, and sexuality (71). Like the Combahee River Collective, her ideas of feminist coalitions do not exclude men as earlier radical feminists, such as the Radicalesbians group, advocated. In rejecting aspects of second wave feminism such as the notions of equality with men as an end goal, bell hooks iterated a project for feminism that addressed oppression and power through an intersectional lens. By doing so, she aligned herself with the radical potential for feminism, recognizing the problems with overlapping systems of domination and control.

Published the same year as hooks, Angela Davis's *Women, Culture & Politics* is a collection of essays and speeches that examine the place of Black women, specifically from an economic standpoint, in the early 1980s. The first speech in the book, "Let Us All Rise Together: Radical Perspectives on Empowerment for Afro-American Women," aligns most closely with the politics of Black feminism that Davis's contemporaries endorsed. The primary contribution that Davis added to Black feminism through this book was her detailed focus on class and the ways in which capitalism is detrimental for Black women (Davis, *Women* 5). The incorporation of class as a critical intersection helped Davis to tease out the ways in which radical feminism ignored Women of Color, not only along racial lines, but class lines as well. Her ideas on the politics of solidarity were revolutionary in this regard because she proposed political solutions through a socialist framework that worked with men and women across class, race, and gender lines (Davis, *Women* 28). Davis elaborated on several of the ways in which capitalism proves

detrimental for Black women: the politics of health, the education system, and representations of and by Black women in art and culture, to name a few. While her project never specifically uses the label of “feminist,” many of her essays focused on the need for women to join together to achieve change. The call for a women’s movement here is different than that of many of her contemporaries; Davis indicates that the way to thrive and survive in a capitalist system that seeks to disadvantage Black women is through coalitions that do activist work for progressive politics (Davis, *Women* xv).

Furthering the ideas of the politics of solidarity in Black feminism, Audre Lorde’s iconic book of essays and speeches, *Sister Outsider*, bridges poetry and theory to create a thoughtful and introspective look at what Black feminism means for Black women. Highly critical of the white women’s movement but unwilling to dismiss potential alliances, Lorde’s best-known piece “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” pinpoints the lack of Black women’s voices in the feminist movement in and to academia. Writing to academics, Lorde differs slightly from the previous works in Black feminism in her political project and incorporates an intersection of identity into academic feminist rhetoric. Her work comes out of a radical feminist tradition of sisterhood, but expands the boundaries from a mere tolerance of difference into a broader, radical nurturing of women’s bonds across race, class, and sexuality (111). In “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” she critiqued the consciousness-raising groups of radical feminism for not addressing how to deal with women’s anger at each other (130). To empower Black women, Lorde, like many other Black feminists, started with a framework of difference in order to reach for solidarity.

While many feminists have written about aspects of Black feminism, perhaps none have summarized it as thoroughly as Patricia Hill Collins. Her 1990 book *Black Feminist Thought* examines many of the authors previously mentioned and situates them in the context of Black feminism. Focused on empowerment, she looks at identity, activism, motherhood, and the media to theorize about the themes of Black feminism. Revised and reprinted in 2000, Collins's text alters the argument to incorporate the ways in which social class and heterosexism continue to shape the field. In what became a canonical piece, Collins helped to solidify what texts and concepts were adopted by Black feminism in the early 1990s and her work continues to shape the academic field as it continues to evolve.

CONTEMPORARY ISLAMIC FEMINISM

Although writings on Islamic feminism have begun to slowly permeate mainstream feminist consciousness since Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi's 1972 text *Woman and Sex* brought issues of female genital mutilation to a U.S. mainstream feminist audience, contemporary Islamic feminism has had to navigate the relationships between women, Islam, and nationalism in an increasingly Islamophobic world. Many of today's Islamic feminists writing from or about the United States incorporate the ways in which discourses on Islam in a post 9/11 society shape the conceptualization of feminism and women's issues. Common themes in Islamic feminist writings examine the tensions between imagined and reconstructed traditions and developmental/teleological ideas of modernity, as well as Western conceptions of women in Islam.

Perhaps the best known feminist to do this is Jasbir Puar, whose 2007 book *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* gained critical reception in feminist studies and queer theory. Puar makes connections between nationalism, sexuality, and race in order to create the racialized "other" as queer. Exemplified in her chapter on Abu Ghraib, she says, "this 'scandal,' rather than being cast as exceptional, needs to be contextualized within a range of other practices and discourses, perhaps less obvious than the Iraqi prisoner abuse, that pivotally lasso sexuality in the deployment of U.S. nationalism, patriotism, and increasingly empire" (113). Later in the chapter she reiterates that "perversity is still localized to the body of the queer Muslim terrorist, insistently deferred to those outside the U.S. perimeter or supposed normality" (113).

Puar's contributions to contemporary feminist and queer discourses aim to show strands of Islamophobia within current "progressive" U.S. based movements.

An oft-cited name in Islamic feminism, Harvard professor Leila Ahmed provides a historical, feminist context for the resurgence of the practice of veiling in her recent book: *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America*. Tracing the contemporary movements around veiling, she places special emphasis on women's motivations. Later she examines veiling in its post 9/11, war-filled discourses, providing a scathing critique of the Western ideologies that the veil oppresses women and contextualizing this in a militarized 21st century. Written from a distinctly feminist perspective, Ahmed places agency in the hands of women, and attempts to counter Islamophobic discourses within Western (and feminist) ideologies.

Another foundational text in contemporary Islamic feminism is feminist anthropologist Sherine Hafez's 2011 book *An Islam of Her Own: Reconsidering Religion and Secularism in Women's Islamic Movements*. Focusing on social movements in Egypt, Hafez works to complicate the religious/secular binary that proliferates much of Western Islamic feminist discourse. An ethnography of Egyptian women activists, Hafez's book uses the voices of religious Muslim women whose struggle for social justice shows the ways in which secular principles actively shape Islamic feminism. In her chapter on activism, Hafez identifies three themes that characterize "the slippages and ambiguities" that the women use to "narrate their life histories and experiences" in terms of their Islamic self-formation and their secular personhood (78). These themes include the characterization of religion as a private category, the activists' recognition of Muslim

womanhood as reflecting “the mutual embeddedness of secular agendas and Islamic ideals,” and the private/public dichotomy, which Hafez considers to be a secularist construct (78). Using these narratives of identity formation, Hafez looks at the ways in which religious women’s movements in Egypt are more complex than the Western perspective allows. These intertwining discourses of religion and secularism shape much of the theories in Islamic feminism, often contextualizing them in an increasingly Islamophobic West.

The poets I discuss below all respond in multiple and powerful ways to the theories and experiences analyzed and documented in radical feminism, Woman of Color feminism, and Islamic feminism. They use spoken word to draw together several of these frameworks to create coalitions between and among diverse academic and political fields within feminism, recognizing the history and ideologies of each of these strains of the feminist movement.

SPOKEN WORD

Spoken word can refer to several different kinds of poetic performance: “beat poetry, hip-hop lyrics, coffeehouse musings, avant-garde performance literature” (Somers-Willett 99) and many others, but often when people discuss spoken word poetry, they are often referring to slam poetry. Created in the early 1980s by Marc Smith, a blue collar worker in Chicago, poetry slams started as a way to “prompt the resurgence of poetry in the ‘average’ person’s life” (Olson xi). Despite its empowering history, slam became a primarily white space, according to several poets, democratizing all voices, including those that are racist and sexist. The traditional format of a slam begins with several poets and audience members randomly selected as judges. The judges score each poet and eliminate them in order to choose a winner, consistent with the competitive sports-mentality of the United States public. Slams brought poetry back into everyday consciousness (Olson xii), with teams forming in major cities and competing nationally and internationally.

One of these teams grew out of the Nuyorican Poets Café in New York City. Often thought of as the most famous of the United States Slam venues, the Nuyorican has launched the careers of many United States spoken word poets, including many revolutionaries and activists ([SlamNation](#)). In her foundational book *The Cultural Politics of Slam Poetry: Race, Identity, and the Performance of Popular Verse in America*, Susan B.A. Somers-Willett recognizes that while the Nuyorican “began as a safe space for urban Puerto Rican underclass poets and is now home to a number of urban African American poets working in the hip hop idiom,” in fact, slam’s first venue was “a

white, working-class Chicago barroom” (97). Because of the prevailing discourse on spoken word coming out of Black communities, the Nuyorican is often considered the epicenter of spoken word poetry, specifically in terms of the performance of identity. Many of the poets to come out of the Nuyorican have defied the traditional standards of whose poetry counts as valid, privileging the voices of people of color, women, queer people, and the working class, among other marginalized groups.

However, the feminist reaction to poetry slams has not always been positive. Most of the poets in *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution* acknowledge that slam is primarily a white, male genre. These women are able to verbalize their discomfort at being among very few women performing with groups of men. Alix Olson, editor of *Word Warriors* and a well-known feminist spoken word poet, noted this in her introduction to the book. She said that since slam poets can write about anything they want she immediately noticed “the misogyny in too many of the poems, but also the heavy male domination on stage” (Olson xii). One of Olson’s contemporaries, Andrea Gibson, also observed that the slam scene was “lacking women’s voices” (Gibson 215). Gibson claims that “men offered a variety of theories concerning the absence of women: the organizers and hosts of most slam events were male, the competition of the slam was intimidating, and my favorite, that spoken word was loud and women don’t like to be loud” (Gibson 215). However, she notes that the few women who were involved “saw it differently; while the slam scene was in many ways an incredibly liberal space, it still mirrored U.S. culture, a patriarchy that silenced women” (Gibson 215).

Due to these critiques of poetry slams, many feminists moved into spoken word poetry, which keeps the performance aspect but eliminates the competition. Feminist spoken word has its contemporary roots in the early 1990s with the Riot Grrl movement creating more than just music performances. Spoken word troop Sister Spit is often considered the foundation of feminist spoken word poetry. Touring the country in two large vans, Sister Spit, formed in 1994, consisted of a group of (mostly) lesbian, feminist poets of varying ages, races, and economic backgrounds (Tea 13). The group's rotating membership included many well known lesbian and feminist spoken word poets such as Michelle Tea, Sini Anderson, and Eileen Myles. While the group officially disbanded in 2004, Tea and Myles revived Sister Spit in 2007 with several new members (Sisterspit.com). This group allowed feminist spoken word poets to create spaces to "misbehave spectacularly, to feel temporarily invincible, to feel safe in a world that had taught us to fear it" (Tea 20). In the wake of Sister Spit, a greater number of feminist slam artists left the slam scene to pursue independent careers in spoken word.

Like any movement, feminist spoken word has roots in many political spheres and seeks to perform many types of actions. Tea called the work of Sister Spit "an act of defiance," (16) rallying against the patriarchal culture that told women they could not be writers or performers. However, for other poets, spoken word is rooted in radical feminist traditions or in a third wave framework. These poets use their poetry to explain the feminist movement that they believe in and use their performances as a rhetorical tool for action. One of these poets is Alix Olson, well known for her self-proclaimed "angry feminism." In looking at her poem "Womyn Before," (often misspelled as "Women

Before,”) I will show the ways in which Olson promotes a new brand of feminism: one that draws primarily from radical feminism in order to create a collective solidarity reminiscent of the radical coalitions of the 1970s and 80s, but based on a queer, socialist, anti-racist paradigm.

ALIX OLSON

Alix Olson is a United States based spoken word poet who self identifies as a queer feminist and an activist. Her poems explicitly recognize the history of the feminist movement and refer to socialism, radical feminism, separatism, and anti-racism. At the same time, they make a call to current feminists to remember these actions and create a movement that uses the wisdom from them to help reach today's feminist goals. She began in poetry slams, but now works primarily in non-slam spoken word, touring internationally at music festivals, colleges, and feminist events. She has released two CDs: one in 2001, the other in 2003, and edited a book on women spoken word poets (Olson xv). Currently in a PhD program in political science at The University of Massachusetts Amherst, Olson uses her knowledge of policy and world issues to create progressive, feminist poetry.

Olson's dynamic poem "Womyn Before" is a concrete example of how a contemporary feminist uses a revised version of radical feminism in order to set forth a framework for feminist action and collectivism in today's movement. I will examine the performance aspect of Olson's poem, as well as the rhetorical strategies in the print version that appears in the third wave anthology *We Don't Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists*. The performed version that I use is a 2007 recording at the National Womyn's Music Festival in Kent, Ohio. It is currently the only version of Olson performing her poem that is online, and was taped by a fan. It is apparent that the institutionalization of spoken word poetry does not often reach feminist poets, as Olson's most popular poem is audience-recorded.

She begins the poem with no spotlight, only her voice from the front of the stage: “i was still sucking my thumb the first time i sang ‘we shall overcome’” (Berger 8). At this point, the spotlight finds her lavender “Wasabi” t-shirt cut off at the sleeves and neckline in a crude home-made job, her short blonde hair bobbing as she moves up and down across the thrust at the front of the stage, unable (or unwilling) to stand in one place long enough to provide a solid view. The fashioning of this persona is a rhetorical strategy used by Olson to revive the aesthetic look of lesbian feminism. As Arlene Stein writes, “dress was a reflection of sexual style,” (29) a symbol of being a part of a movement, but identifying with a specific group within that movement, specifically lesbians in the women’s movement. Through her persona, Olson ties contemporary feminism with the political lesbianism of the 70s and 80s.

Olson’s persona is visibly queer. Often, to accentuate it, she will wear shirts that say “dyke” or “legalize gay,” but she is legible as such even without those markers. Her personal style leans towards traditional androgyny, working towards an ungendering of her character. This is reminiscent of lesbian feminism in the late 1970s and early 1980s when the “cultural ideal” of lesbianism (Stein 217) was to be visible and androgynous. As lesbian and gay life has moved more towards mainstream assimilation, those who still choose to adopt androgyny for political reasons are prioritizing this specific strain of a historical movement. In choosing this aesthetic for her public persona, Olson creates a radical space through the presentation of her body and the social change it represents. A drawback of this fashioning of identity, however, is that the separatist ideologies were seen as overwhelmingly white and middle class, which Olson also embodies. Not to

immediately dismiss her motives, this type of androgyny is not only radical feminist in nature; it draws from platforms of third wave feminism to make it more palatable to a younger feminist generation. Third wave feminism often encompasses queer theory, which focuses on deconstruction of identity and a dismantling of the gender binaries (Tong 219). Having the language of poststructuralism helps us to articulate what it is about Olson's persona that connects her third wave experience with her radical ideologies.

Creating this political space through her appearance is not only conscious, but recognizes a feminist movement she hopes to revive in some form. Throughout her performance of the poem, she makes references to past political movements and influential figures in feminism and civil rights struggles. Her use of such movements provides a concrete example of what she believes feminist activism does (and should) look like. Often critiqued for a lack of action, contemporary third wave feminism has been characterized by its focus on rhetorical activism, instead of the old social movements' tactics of protests. Stacey Sowards and Valerie Renegar aim to give validity to this rhetorical activism, expanding the definition from "public protest and confrontation" to "creating grassroots models of leadership, using strategic humor, building feminist identity, sharing stories, and resisting stereotypes and labels" (58). Olson, while using these tactics of rhetorical activism, focuses her ideas of feminist action on "old social movements," those centered on material, economic gains.

Opening the poem with a memory of a labor rally instantly creates solidarity with labor movements, anti-capitalism, and worker's rights movements. The young speaker of

the poem (presumably Olson herself), is painted as an ally to all of these struggles, so that in standing with her mother on a freezing night “so eager to mimic her symbol of angry/serious and small with my big mac truck union sign,” (Berger 9) she immediately sets forth parameters for action. Structuring feminist action not only as a physical protest, but as an old social movement moves her ideas of action back into a radical feminist frame and out of rhetorical activism. True to her third wave historical location, however, she does use rhetorical forms to do this, as this assertion of feminist action is in poetic/performative form instead of a picket line or direct action.

Eleanor Flexner, in her book *Century of Struggle: The Woman's Rights Movement in the United States* grounds women's action in the labor movement. Her analysis of the Knights of Labor included many ways in which women not only became involved in early trade unions but held active and critical roles in organizing (186). In Olson's poem, when the mother explains solidarity to the young poet in the context of a labor rally, she sets an outline for a modern, action-oriented feminist project. In forming these coalitions, Olson works within a radical framework to allow for a collective feminism.

The way that Olson's performance for an audience differs from the written text of “Womyn Before” also helps to reaffirm this collectivity that she sets forth. In performing before a collection of feminists and poetry enthusiasts, Olson is careful to acknowledge the audience and the effects that her performance have on the reading of the poem through her physical movements, as well as altering the language of the poem to suit the energy of the crowd. This cannot be done as effectively through writing. Reading a text

removes from the equation the quintessential difference between spoken word and its text-only predecessors: the immediate interpretation of the author/performer.

An energetic performer, Olson takes up a great deal of the stage, moving from the thrust to the stage itself and back at least twice in the three and a half minutes it takes to perform her poem. The pacing gives the poem a rhythm and a sense of urgency as does her strategic use of stillness. Her physical movements rarely stop during her performance, which has the expected result of drawing increased emphasis to the words when she does. It is a clear, tactile way to call the audience's attention to concrete concepts. The first stop occurs when she defines solidarity in terms of feminist protesting, and again shortly after with a quote from Martin Luther King: "the time to strike is when the iron is hot" (Berger 9). In setting up solidarity, followed by an allusion to the Civil Rights movement, she again draws attention to old social movements, rather than rhetorical activism.

In his book length exposition of SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), Howard Zinn successfully binds the ties between the Civil Rights movement and labor/leftist movements. Zinn notes that the members of SNCC "nurture a vision of a revolution beyond race, against other forms of injustice, challenging the entire value-system of the nation and of smug middle-class society everywhere" (216). With a reference to the Civil Rights movement in the context of feminist organizing, Olson accomplishes the same result of tying multiple movements together with the political goal of solidarity.

Her next physical stop comes much later in the poem, when she returns to the question of how one deals with oppression. She advocates again for learning from

history, for listening to those who have come before: “still/ the words of the womyn before/think me through these dark clouds of injustice,” and later in that stanza: “the womyn before/they have passed me graceful rage/and i’m out to save the world/when i’m not scrambling to save face” (Berger 10-11). Here too, the stillness is intentional as it draws the audience’s attention to her project. She describes what it is that she has to do as an activist, and by her openness, allows the listener to identify with those ideals. Once again, she creates an empowering sense of collectivism with a clear sense of the emotional personal difficulty of this “saving face.” The idea of “saving the world” could also be read as an ironic gesture towards third wave feminism’s narcissistic grandiosity of the self-declared activist.

In their chapter “Collective Action and Identity” from the book *Social Movements: An Introduction*, Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani argue that “identity production is an essential component of collective action,” (92) an idea that Olson uses to create the individual self in a historical and collective framework. The final moment of stillness in the poem comes right before the ending stanza when she says “i will not be afraid/of being called the same/names as the womyn before me,” (Berger 11) combining these radical feminist notions of solidarity, action, and collectivism, coupled with an acknowledgment and acceptance of history, all of which have been delivered in the moments without physical movement.

Olson uses other rhetorical forms of performance to convey different concepts to the audience. Her use of phrase repetition works similarly to her physical stillness in that it highlights points she wants her audience to regard as important. While there are certain

lines that are built into the poem as a refrain, others are repeated several times in a row for emphasis. After the change in dynamic from a history of feminist protesting to a personal acceptance of her own feminist project, which occurs about two thirds of the way through the poem, these repetitions become more frequent.

Most notably, she repeats entire lines, a stylistic choice that is not written into the anthologized print version. The lines she chooses to repeat are interesting because there are so few of them. The first comes in the last stanza, where she repeats “in this Hallmark Hub of a Century/ with its sugar cookie cutter white boy fame/, i will not be afraid of being called the same” (Berger 11). The repetition of this line is even more pronounced when she repeats the second part of the phrase three times, finally running into the next line: “i will not be afraid of being called the same/names as the womyn before me” (Berger 11). She moves into a list of the “womyn before,” mostly radical feminists, but some Black and Woman of Color feminists, as well as a few from a slightly earlier time period: “june jordan, barbara smith, sonia sanchez, adrienne rich, flannery o’connor, ruth ellis, bell hooks, flo kennedy, gertrude stein, dorothy allison, angela davis, mary daly, kay gardner¹, and all the other womyn before me” (Berger 11). Her choice of who to cite should be read as an implicit critique of third wave feminism.

Rather than cite her supposedly cool and evolved contemporaries, Olson instead displays a desire to be associated with the radical women of radical feminism and Black feminism, noting the “sugar cookie cutter white boy fame” of contemporary thinkers.

¹ In the spoken version, she mentions Kay Gardner, but in the written version of her poem, Kay Gardner is changed to “my mother.”

bell hooks writes about “attempts by white feminists to silence black women,” (13) an idea that Olson actively fights by incorporating Black feminist voices first in her list of women before. The second and only other place that she repeats phrasing outside of what is written on the transcription is in the final line, where she claims “i take this legacy, i take this legacy, i take this legacy/seriously” (Berger 12). In this, she aligns herself with a legacy of women before, rather than the current women’s movement.

Alix Olson is often identified solely with third wave feminism because of the contemporary context in which she writes, as evidenced by the inclusion of this poem in the third wave anthology *We Don’t Need Another Wave*, directed at young feminists. But in fact, Olson gives us instead a revised history of radical feminism as relevant to the concerns of contemporary anti-racist, socialist, queer feminisms. Spoken word poetry is an accessible way to bring this revised understanding of feminist history to a diverse set of people, as it does not require the poet to be in a privileged position (Olson xii). Spoken word events are often “open mic” and require no formal training or institutional affiliation. In this way, they may offer a critique of third wave feminism, often associated with privileged spaces like university women’s and LGBT studies classrooms and urban settings.

Spoken word may be associated with these same spaces, but it requires no tuition, no GPA, and no institutional admission. It is poetry for the people, to paraphrase June Jordan’s memorable phrase. Third wave is often criticized for not putting enough emphasis on these historical actions, instead dismissing them as outdated and passé (Walker 95). Olson’s feminist action recognizes the importance of direct action

movements of the second wave that are able to transcend the limits of third wave action.

The focus on collective solidarity is important in feminism, as Bernice Johnson Reagon wrote in “Coalition Politics: Turning the Century.” According to Reagon, the future of feminism was in creating coalitions across lines of race, nationality, and sexuality. She reminds us that coalition work “is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn’t look for comfort” (359). In pushing these boundaries between the safety of a space that feels like home and a coalition in which productive activist work is done, the ideas of collective solidarity that appear in Olson’s poem have their roots in a greater anti-racist, radical feminist history.

C.C. CARTER

Alix Olson provides one way in which contemporary feminists draw from radical traditions and Black feminisms to create a hybrid feminism, and poet C.C. Carter gives us another. While not explicitly a radical feminist, Carter's best known work "The Herstory of My Hips" includes many elements of radical feminism, specifically pertaining to collective solidarity and a connection to history, as well as to language (herstory) and the body (my hips). Carter's ideas of how to bring women together around collective identities differ from Olson's, but strive for many of the same goals. Her poem creates Women of Color as feminist subjects, allowing them the autonomy and agency to join together under a feminist framework in solidarity, and helping to bridge the gap between women of color feminism and the historically more white radical feminism. The text of this poem is found in the anthology *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*, and the video version is a 2011 performance uploaded by Carter. It is performed on a women's cruise and was taped by an audience member. For the analysis of the text of the poem, I use the anthologized version because at times, noise from the audience makes the video difficult to hear and understand.

Having won the Lambda Literary Foundation's National Poetry Slam and the Gwendolyn Brooks Open Mic Competition, Carter, a queer Black feminist poet, is a veteran of poetry slams who transferred most of her efforts to spoken word performances and activism around poetry (Olson 401). She currently organizes the women of color spoken word events at a Chicago coffee house, and teaches performance poetry at Columbia University. Carter funded POW-WOW Inc. in 2003, an organization with

weekly events devoted to being “a safe space for women to develop, showcase and listen to other women artists” (ccarterpoet.com).

“A Herstory of My Hips” is a poetic assertion not only of herself as a subject, but a tribute to her grandmother. This connection to ancestry is often a component in creating a Black subjectivity, as M. Jacqui Alexander asserts in “Remembering *This Bridge Called My Back*, Remembering Ourselves.” Alexander defines the ancestry of the subject not only in terms of those that share the same bloodline, but expands the definition to include those who are “unrelated on the surface only, for down in that abyss their currents reach for each other and fold, without the slightest tinge of resentment, into the same Atlantic, the rebellious waters of which provided the path for a more violent passage, many, many centuries but not so many centuries ago” (258). With this more inclusive definition of ancestry, Alexander opens a passage for identification across and within Black women in a way that Carter expands upon in her poem.

In “The Herstory of My Hips,” Carter recognizes this ancestry as within and among Black women, both as a connection to the maternal lineage in her family and to Blackness in general. Ancestry can take a simple, biological form, as Carter notes with: “for these were my great-grandmother’s/and my grandmother’s/and my mother’s hips/and now I am heir to this throne--my crown?/these hips, of course--/and I would proudly pass them on to my daughter” (Carter 158). The connection here is that of African societies as matrilineal (a sweeping generalization that she uses to her advantage), but Carter promotes a feminist idea of genealogy as well, clearly evidenced by the title of the poem mentioning “herstory.” This herstory is not only biological;

Carter's contextualization of her ancestry can also be found in her descriptors of Africa. She uses a geographical history twice: "the second largest continent in the world sired these hips/of course they would be as large" and a stanza later: "the oldest civilization on earth gave birth to these hips/of course they would be as wide--" (Carter 158). She connects herself (and her biological ancestors) with a geographic location, bringing this ancestry and solidarity to a more abstract, more influential level. In using language of reproduction: "sired" and "gave birth," Carter locates this origin in the body of the woman. Thus, her genealogy is expressed through an interconnected, gendered nature; her ancestors were literally sired and birthed from the same source.

Some strands of radical feminism emphasize a sexual component, but connecting this to Women of Color through poetry is a bold move because of the colonizing history of the sexualization of Women of Color. The tracing of the lineage not only as maternal and historical but also as sexual is illuminating and important. As Evelyn Hammonds notes in her famous piece "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," the "pleasure, exploration, and agency" (134) of Black feminist scholars have been under-analyzed, due in a large part to their status in the academy. As an academic as well as a poet, it is noteworthy that Carter embraces sexuality through the ancestry of her hips, "reclaiming the body as well as subjectivity" (Hammonds 134) and breaking these trends.

Carter is not shy about claiming her sexuality. The last and longest stanza includes the most erotic definition of sexuality through the body posed in the entire poem. Shortly into the stanza Carter begins this sexual/erotic affirmation with: "these

hips are for you to snuggle/for you to cuddle/for you to sink into and dream--/for you to get in all your fantasies--/wrap yourself around and let me squeeze you hips/draw you deeper so you can scream,/ “*dame a bueno, dame a bueno,*” hips/ shake with ecstasy, “what’s my name,” hips/rock your world and swing from chandelier hips/when you want to hold a woman’s hips” (159). This reclamation of sexuality seems to hearken back to Audre Lorde’s views on the erotic. In “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” Lorde describes the erotic as “an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (54). While not purely sexual in form, Lorde’s erotic is seen in Carter’s affirmation of her sexuality as “the open and fearless underlining of [the] capacity for joy” (Lorde 56). These ideas of what it is to be a woman and to give to other women in response come directly out of radical feminism but are expressed in a new way by Carter.

By connecting herself to ancestry, Carter is able to assert herself as a subject. While there is no solid definition for what it means to be a subject, or how one obtains subjectivity, its rooting in ancestry is critical to creating the subject as a whole. The technique of using history to create a story for the self is exhibited through many theoretical writings, which Carter draws upon to create a connection to storytelling as a way to affirm subjectivity. In her quintessential essay “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman looks at the ways a story can be told with very little historical rooting in a way that is non-violent towards the subjects of her story, but can also create the characters as subjects rather than objects of an archive. She describes her method in writing the story of Venus: “I want to tell a story about *two girls* capable of retrieving what remains

dormant—the purchase or claim of their lives on the present—without committing further violence in my own act of narration” (Hartman, Venus 2). In making the girls “capable” she gives them agency over their own story, recognizing that she is the narrator, not the one who can lay claim on their lives and histories.

Carter does something similar in excavating the history of her hips, but more importantly, of herself as a subject. She says: “These hips are pyramids--/no blueprints modern technology/no cranes and chains erected these hips” (158). The use of “pyramids” draws a distinct connection to Egypt/Africa, which is directly contrasted with “no blueprints modern technology,” setting up a critique of contemporary industrialization and capitalism. Carter is able to connect simultaneously with the past and present, holding onto how she in turn created the narrative and is created by it.

To assure that the subject of the archive is in fact an agentic subject, Saidiya Hartman asks: “How can a narrative of defeat enable a place for the living or envision an alternative future?” (Hartman, Venus 14). This is the crux of the difficulty in writing about subjectivity. In order to restore subjectivity to a group that has been disenfranchised, the writer of the narrative’s place becomes contested and tied intrinsically to her or his own positionality as subject. Hartman’s examination of the archive offers the solution of “interrogating the production of our knowledge about the past” (Hartman, Venus 14). While she is discussing the archive, the spaces which she considers to be worthy of archival interrogation are not solely of a material, historical sort. There is an emotional component to an archive as well, to quote Ann Cvetkovich: “an exploration of cultural texts as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are

encoded not only in the content of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reproduction” (7).

Using an archive that is based on cultural texts is a radical idea. In collectivizing the archive around experience, memories, and feelings, we can come to a more complete recognition of the self as a historical being, rooted in a collective rememory (to borrow Toni Morrison’s term), an active remembering (Morrison 36). This injects the self into the history, helping to create a subject that encompasses the history of a people.

Hartman’s caution to interrogate the archive is still there; however, when the archive is a collective procedure created by those whom it is about, much of the problematic notions of what constitutes worthy archival material are not relevant. The feeling archive of a people, written by that people, contains less of the taint of archival domination that Hartman warns us of in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. She reminds us that “writing the history of the dominated requires not only the interrogation of dominant narratives and the exposure of their contingent and partisan character but also the reclamation of archival material for contrary purposes” (Hartman, Scenes 10). One purpose would be the assertion of the collective feminist subject.

This concept of a feeling archive that goes against hegemonic narratives is entrenched in the collective, historical subject that Carter creates. Through all the connections to ancestry, Carter sets up a place to describe this archive and what it entails: “Cause my hips are hip--/they swing a jazz tune/they bop a blues beat/they talk a rap rhythm/they dance a drum solo—/” (159). This veers from her path of direct history

while still establishing a connection, giving the archive a voice, or a multitude of voices. In exercising the voice of the archive, Carter allows for a subject to step forward, a subject that is entrenched in an archive written by her ancestors, an archive of shared feelings, histories, and cultures. Like Cvetkovich's lesbian archive of feeling, Carter's archive is built around the shared experience of music.

The ties of music to spoken word poetry are important, as a few poets (Carter included) often set their poems to background music. On occasion, parts of a poem are even sung to this music, rather than spoken. "The Herstory of My Hips," when Carter performs, almost takes backseat to the music that is played in concert with the recitation. The use of the loud music with Carter's poem is not accidental; she stands by the microphone and dances while she performs the poem. The auditory construction of the archive that she puts forth juxtaposed with the music that incorporates all of the elements that she describes: jazz, blues, rap, and drums, not only allows for a deeper understanding of what she does with the history and the archive, but also presents a view of the subject that is complete and powerful. Her words are a creation of herself though this history as a subject, and her physical presence against music affirms that she has succeeded in this creation. Music is also a strong tie to radical feminism in that women's music festivals and female performers came to public prominence in the radical movement of the 1970s and 1980s. In not specifically calling upon these performers, Carter distances herself from them and aligns herself in solidarity with another history; yet, in her performances of this poem with music, she connects with these radical feminist performances spaces and genres.

In summary, Carter's poem, arguably her most well known work, is a brilliant exploration into the history that goes into creating the self as the subject. "The Herstory of My Hips" delves into issues of ancestry both as direct bloodline and as a connection to a greater concept, a transnational and transhistorical ancestor. Her creation of an archive of cultures, feelings, and experiences as written by those who have experienced them make her work deeply personal, but also applicable to many subjects. Carter affirms not only herself as a subject, but everyone who shares these non-bloodline ancestors with her as subjects as well. In return, her poem illuminates the powerful collective subjectivity that can come from using a poem as a means to create a more complete self, intertwined with history, culture, and art. Carter's work can be seen as a bridge between what is historically considered a white movement and a critical Woman of Color feminist analysis. She separates this history from traditional radical feminism where Women of Color were notoriously excluded, but reinvents what these ideas mean for today's Black feminists.

SUHEIR HAMMAD

Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian-American poet raised in Brooklyn, provides the final example of a reconceptualization of radical feminist ideas I will examine.

Hammad's poetry works across racial lines to illuminate the horrors of war and the ways in which institutional oppression is racialized and gendered. Her poem "99 cent lipstick" looks at the politics of transracial solidarity, as well as ideas of multiple identities. Much of her poem draws simultaneously from Black feminist theory and contemporary Islamic feminism, while illuminating radical feminist critiques of the structure and institutions in society.

Born in Amman, Jordan to Palestinian refugees in 1973, Suheir Hammad immigrated to Brooklyn with her family when she was five. Her work weaves influences from the hip-hop scene in Brooklyn with stories from her relatives about pre-1948 Palestine. Common themes in her works include sexism, Islamophobia, war, and Palestine. She has produced four books of poetry, three plays, and was the first Palestinian to perform on Broadway in *Def Poetry Jam*. She also frequented the TV version of *Def Poetry Jam*, and is an activist for Palestinian and women's rights (Olson 403).

Appearing in her first book of poetry *Born Palestinian, Born Black* in 1996, the poem "99 cent lipstick" is not one of Hammad's best known works, but it is important because of the manner in which she ties together Black feminism and the structural critiques by radical feminism. While many of the ideas seem reiterated in ideologies of post 9/11 Islamic feminism, her poem was written prior to these events. There are no

recorded versions of it available, so I am using the text from the poem as it appears in her book. Hammad uses short lines to make up stanzas of varying lengths, from two lines to 11 lines. Interspersed among these stanzas are centered stanzas, appearing one at a time, that are addressed to people by name.

Thematically, the poem is centered around an exploration of the structural inequalities that impact the lives of urban youths of color. In aligning herself with the subjects of her poem, Hammad works to create solidarity with those whom she names in the centered stanzas and their stories. Her centered stanzas focus on those whom society has cast out. The first one is “for arthur at 17/young black male in jail/he became a breathing statistic/for richie at 16/by junior year/his hand was forever bent/frozen around a fantasy 40” (53). The reference here to the prison system and its disproportionate incarceration of Black men harkens back to Angela Davis’s work in locating prisons as a space for racism and sexism to persist on an institutional level, as “an equal opportunity to perpetuate male dominance and racism” (Davis, *Abolition* 66). One long stanza later, Hammad again moves into a dedication, this time: “for shelley/a baby at 11 she was/pregnant at her grade school graduation/for sha/so angry at america’s god/at 16 he became his own” (54). In her book *Killing the Black Body*, Dorothy Roberts critiques the discourses around teenage pregnancy. She notes that “blaming teen pregnancy on poverty reverses cause and effect” (119). Much of Hammad’s project in this poem is exactly that: recognizing where poverty is the effect, rather than the cause of these issues.

The following dedication, after three short stanzas, is the only one that is focused on positive experiences. She writes: “for jason/his rap poetry more eloquent than any

shakespeare/for mike/urban warrior with heart of a country mouse” (54). These portrayals, while not addressing structures that harm youth, are formatted in the same style as the others and placed in between dedication stanzas that illuminate racism and violence. In adding this stanza, Hammad makes a powerful critique: that even these positive stories are trapped in the same structure as all the rest. One stanza later, Hammad reverts back to the dedications style that comes before, this time discussing drugs: “for junior shot to death at 12/by his 15 year old drug dealing bosses/he spent their money to buy candy” (55). Recognizing the ages of the people in her dedications is powerful in that it shows the ways in which the system has been harmful to people in her communities from very young ages.

The final dedication stanza breaks the form of naming and describing. Hammad addresses this stanza “for suzan sabrine sameeh omar/ cause there are nights when i’m still afraid/for us,” and then down a line, but still centered, she ends the poem “this fear don’t even belong to us” (55). The previous dedications brought up structural inequalities that ultimately disadvantage youth (with the one exception of the positive dedication stanza), but in this particular dedication, she makes her move towards collectivity. In putting two people in each dedication stanza, Hammad intertwines stories that otherwise may be seen as separate. The final move to add in names with no stories, and count herself among them is the type of collective solidarity that the previous poets have used to solidify ideas around a shared movement. In this list of names, she uses names that could be considered “foreign” to intertwine racism with issues of Islamophobia, leading to the creation of alliances among racialized groups.

As in much of Hammad's poetry, this poem aims to present a counter-narrative. Much of it is speaking back against the racist ideologies that "blame the victim," instead offering a critique from the perspective of those youth who are victims of oppression. From the start, she moves the blame onto the system, and away from the people: "there is out there/a deep dark void sucking/in my deep dark people" (53). In the third stanza, Hammad begins to state her own reaction, and moving from "I" statements to "we" statements, expresses that it is not solely hers. She writes: "fearful abused anger as/my primary language/labeled myself a bitch/before anyone else could" (53).

In "The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism," Audre Lorde articulates this anger as "a response to racist attitudes and to the actions and presumptions that arise out of those attitudes" (124). In many ways, this is the core of Hammad's poem; she is responding to the racist attitudes that society has about her "deep dark people" (53). In choosing to label herself before others could, she exhibits a type of agency, but recognizes the limitations of it, that society will still try to label her based on physical appearance and geography.

Hammad counters the dominant racist narrative by repeating the narratives of fear, turning the subjects of her poem into the victims of an unjust system, rather than the aggressors who act merely because it is in their nature. This mention of fear is always followed by a mention of "cheap red/99 cent lipstick," (53) thus tying this fear to gendered norms, as in the second stanza, where Hammad claims, "afraid i/hid behind cheap red/99 cent lipstick/dull 12kt doorknocker earrings" (53). This is also a direct reference to the commodification of style and personal expression through oppressive

market forces. Directly after the dedication stanza to shelley and sha, Hammad again picks up the fear, this time with “our fear was stronger than/that cheap red lipstick that/bled on me/my people have bled on me” (54). The powerful first person narrative here ties to this idea of a collective identity with a group of people. This line also draws from the violence that U.S. sponsored militarism and discourses of Islamophobia in the United States have exacted on Palestine. The next time Hammad mentions fear, she moves out of the metaphor of lipstick, but finds other tokens to hide behind: “afraid we hid behind our/curls curses crosses” (54). Similar to the stanza dedicated to jason and mike that was the positive portrayal of youth trapped in the same format as the negative, this stanza, that comes directly before that dedication, is the only time she breaks the metaphor for fear, instead bringing up different beauty, linguistic, and religious norms that color the personification of fear.

The final time that Hammad mentions fear, she goes back to the same metaphor as before: “we killed each other with/a fear that wasn’t even ours/a cheap red horror that was/older than our tired youth” (55). She ends the discussion of fear in the same manner she began, but with one important shift: the “I” has again become “we.” Also critical to this line is the “fear that wasn’t even ours,” which she articulates again in the last line of the poem: “this fear don’t even belong to us” (55). In calling this fear “older than our tired youth,” she alludes to previous generations, creating solidarity with them in their understanding of fear, and their impassioned, angry responses to it. Audre Lorde says that “anger is a grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change” (129). In this

poem, Hammad tries to direct her anger at the fear that she is forced to feel in order to push for a change of society's views.

The words that Hammad uses to describe the situation that the youth find themselves in is evocative of a radical feminist project of changing the system. She is frank about the recognition of the situation that the youth are in, and the ways in which the system continues to keep it that way: "the horror of our situation hit/us right in the face" (54). In addressing the situation as horrible and one that they are forced into, rather than one they choose to be in, she posits a counter-narrative of her community. Even the images of violence are not handled as brutal, but rather as sad or angry, a reflection of society's treatment of marginalized groups. She says that "we sliced our pain into/ each other's faces with/rusty blades" (54) and "shot bullets of frustration through/each other" (55). For Hammad, violence is a learned survival tactic rather than an ingrained notion of animality.

She reiterates the learned condition of violence with a reference to education: "we killed each other with our/*attitudes* *bullets* *crosses* *dirty looks*" (55). Tara Yosso, in her article "Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth," draws from critical race theory to claim that "schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower" (74). This view of the school as a site in need of radical transformation is what Hammad articulates in this poem, believing in the power of learned experiences to shape identity. However, the reference to crosses in this line adds

another dimension, that of religion being a factor that is taught as a vehicle of hate. This draws from her experiences of Islamophobia in a predominantly Christian country.

Hammad's activist project comes out in the form and structure of her poem. She does not capitalize anything, nor does she use any punctuation. The lack of capitalization serves several purposes. In refusing to capitalize at the beginning of stanzas, names, or "I," Hammad breaks traditional rules of style and form. Paul Fussell, in his scathing chapter on free verse in *Poetic Meter & Poetic Form*, claims that much of the effect of eliminating punctuation or rules of capitalization is that it is impossible to scan for meter in a line (77). In a poem about structural inequalities and being forced to fit a mold based on society's judgments, the act of breaking typical rules of the way a line is supposed to flow is a way to fight against that structure. The lack of capitalization makes everything in the poem hold the same quotidian value. In not placing more emphasis on certain words with capitalization, Hammad is able to attribute the same value to all of the people she names, which makes them more representative of the failures of a system. The lack of punctuation functions as a continuity of the inequalities. The issues she addresses are never followed by a period, thus, they never end. The poem feels open-ended and incomplete, as if it should keep going, continue listing names. Instead, Hammad leaves it without closure, giving the idea that there is still much to be done before this list can come to a close. While not explicitly stating "this is what needs to be done," through the way in which punctuation functions, she allows that conclusion to be easily drawn.

The use of enjambment and conscious placing of line breaks (as well as the use of negative space) also characterizes this project. Fussell theorizes that "if constant

enjambment takes place[...]we have a very different kind of free verse, a kind we can designate as meditative and ruminative or private” (81). He goes on to say that much of the contemporary poetry written in this enjambment-filled free verse have themes that are “ironic, or furtive” (81). While Fussell meant this condescendingly, sub-cultural poets use this irony strategically, as evidenced through much of this poem. Most of Hammad’s lines employ enjambment as a technique to make the lines and stanzas interconnected. This goes back to the idea of solidarity that Hammad tries to create through the poem, which she achieves in form as well as content.

Hammad’s poem draws from radical feminist ideas of collectivity and coalitions, but also takes up the question of structural inequalities. Through the form in which she writes, Hammad poses a critical counter-narrative to discourses around racism and Islamophobia. Her connections to radical feminism are supplemented with references to transracial coalitions, especially utilizing viewpoints of Black feminism, as well as an acknowledgement of feminism within Islam. This poem provides an intervention into racist ideologies, specifically around urban youth using a feminist framework to create these coalitions.

CONCLUSION

Although Olson, Carter, and Hammad approach feminism in different ways, the common thread among their work is the influence of the radical feminist ideas of coalitions and institutions in their poetry. Although radical feminism is often criticized for being universalizing and racially exclusivist, these poets supplement its key ideologies with a tradition of Woman of Color feminism that contributed an intersectional analysis, as well as the ways in which the body could become a site of defiance or resistance. While all of these poets chose different aspects of their lives and roles in feminism to incorporate, all are actively bearing witness to movements and systems that inform their ways of viewing the world.

I am critical of my place within this system of witness. Because so little work has been done thus far to link spoken word poetry to radical feminism and Black feminism, I need to reflect on why I am pursuing this project. As a white woman, I recognize the implications of my work, not only to communities of color, but to academia as a whole. To give validity to my words *about* Women of Color is a problematic and complex paradox of academia. Perhaps no scholar has articulated this better than Barbara Christian, in her intensely thought-provoking work “The Race for Theory.” Christian recognizes the problematic nature of whose theory is valued, noting that this system has “silenced many of us to the extent that some of us feel we can no longer discuss our own literature, and others have developed intense writing blocks and are puzzled by the incomprehensibility of the language...” (69). While Christian is talking specifically about literary theory, her critique of this is transferrable to other fields of scholarship as well.

My work in spoken word poetry to some poses a similar problem. I have been told that a white woman theorizing about Black ancestry or the systems that uphold racism through poetry by Women of Color is inherently problematic. To some extent, I agree. Feminist theory in this regard does not help me to navigate this paradox. Christian claims that “in the race for theory, feminists, eager to enter the halls of power, have attempted their own prescriptions. So often [feminists] restrict the definition of what *feminist* means and overgeneralize about so much of the world that most women as well as men are excluded” (75). This is a valid critique. As a white woman, I do believe that I am capable of understanding “the complexity of life—that women are of many races and ethnic backgrounds with different histories and cultures and that as a rule women belong to different classes that have different concerns” (Christian 75). In recognizing whom I cite as theory, who counts as creating ideas that are worth writing about, and whose opinions I privilege in writing about Women of Color, I hope I am able to recognize and combat what Christian argues are the pitfalls of feminist theorizing.

Anti-racist feminism can be achieved through spoken word poetry, and the creation of theory around it. Poetry aims to create alliances, to link many groups in a collective solidarity over portions of a poem that they hear and find relatable. One does not need to personally relate to Carter’s ancestry and archive as a Woman of Color, nor to Hammad’s experiences as a Palestinian woman in the United States. However, there can be work in an anti-racist strain of feminism that takes into account the ideas for solidarity put forth by bell hooks. In her book *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, hooks claims that “women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need

to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression” (67). White women can struggle alongside of Women of Color (in a conscious, critical way) to create theory and to eliminate many of the problems with the way that feminists and the academy in general view theory.

Aimee Carillo Rowe discusses this transracial solidarity in *Power Lines: On the Subject of Feminist Alliances*. Clearly, bell hooks has no problem with solidarity between white women and Women of Color if it is done critically; however, Rowe goes a step further and encourages these alliances. She states as the theoretical framework of her book that “deep connections across lines of difference are a transformative source” (4) and that “they provide a basis for shared experience and meaning from which we are excluded if we stay within our own racial ranks” (4). These transracial alliances are evident through many of the poems themselves, as well as through their critiques. However, in drawing again from Reagon to look at the formation of alliances or coalitions, we are reminded that coalition work “is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn’t look for comfort” (359). Spoken word poetry can be a way to create this coalition, to forge these alliances that lend a new understanding to fields of poetics, critical race theory, and feminism and to bear witness to the ways in which we are continuing to do this.

My goal in this piece was to begin to examine the ways in which contemporary feminism can use poetry as a technique to form coalitions. This alliance building is critical as fights against interlocking oppressions are not merely the responsibility of any one group. The power of solidarity lies in its solidification of the active roles of allies in

any movement. Feminism, to achieve meaningful change, must embrace the notions of Sisterhood put forth by bell hooks, who critiques the traditional notions of Sisterhood as a universal that eliminates the many differences among women, but finds power in the ideas of Sisterhood based on solidarity. She emphasizes that “we can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity” (67). It is crucial to gain inspiration from those who were thought to be too different for solidarity (at best), or the enemies of what we are taught to stand for (at worst). It is in the juxtaposition of these white, Black, and Palestinian poets, each of whom gives voice to the need to form coalitions that our actual mutual enemy is revealed: interlocking oppressions that inhibit feminist solidarity. Poetry may not be able to make all of these coalitions for us, but it is a powerful way to begin.

Appendix A

This is the text version for “Womyn Before” as appearing in the anthology *We Don't Need Another Wave: Dispatches from the Next Generation of Feminists*.

Womyn Before

Alix Olson

i was still sucking my thumb
the first time i sang “we shall overcome”
it was a numb december night,
it was a small town fable
my first corporate villain
and my mother was the hero
all ginsberg tradition, howling
“human rights for workers!”

and i was clutching the back
of my mother's kneecap
i squinted up at her fist,
i asked her, why are we so mad?
and she parked her head down in the freezing rain and she saw me,
so eager to mimic her symbol of angry
serious and small with my big mac truck union sign
she smiled to herself,
pondered the politics of fingers curled
this is solidarity,
she whispered to her baby girl,

and she smelled, right then,
like the coalmines 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 june jordan or barbara smith
sonia sanchez and adrienne rich
like flannery o’connor, like ruth ellis
angela davis and mary daly
bell hooks and flo kennedy
gertrude stein, dorothy allison,
my mother,

and all the other womyn before me,

they sniffed the boundaries carefully
it’s no mistake they chose the fringes
and they rode the horses proudly
who careened off the edges of the carousel
because our words are wild animals
sometimes just barely surviving
in words purchased by some industry
hunters are four-lane highways
and we are the road kill
cancer in our warrior breasts
asbestos in our tampons, still

the womyn before
think me through these dark clouds of injustice
so i propel myself past all the clowns on t.v.
and there i find myself stratospherically frozen
in-between how things are and how they should be
it’s easy to slip in these icy extremes
but the words of my mom on that cold december night
shelter me like an igloo
i shiver in their dimension
but at least i know from my herstory
that the courage of chattering teeth demands attention
sometimes, i see my pleasing self
all cheerfully flippant and full of quips,
but then i feel my queer spirit
jetting out from my hips.

because the womyn before,
they have passed me graceful rage

and i'm out to save the world,
when i'm not scrambling to save face

and i'm searching for an exit, sometimes
i wanna scream "fire, everybody run!"
cause we are packed too tight
into this world full of trouble,
the kid next to me's packing a gun.

but my mother raised me to tangle with the big boys
to pull out my thumb
and make friends with my voice
that's my weapon of choice
i'm just not a fan of silence,
you know there's still too much that needs to be said
peace and quiet is a good idea
but peace is never brought to those quieted
so in this Hallmark Hub of a Century
with its sugar cookie cutter white boy fame
i will not be afraid of being called the same names
i will not be afraid of being called the same
as the womyn before me

june jordan and barbara smith
sonia sanchez and adrienne rich
flannery o'connor, ruth ellis
angela davis and mary daly
bell hooks and flo kennedy,
gertrude stein, and dorothy allison,
my mother,
the other womyn before me, the womyn before me
i take this legacy seriously.
i take it seriously, the womyn before me.

Appendix B

This version of “Womyn Before” is transcribed from the video recording of Olson’s poem referenced in the report. I chose to follow her punctuation and lack of capitalization, as this was the way she intended the poem to be written; however, the stanza and line breaks are my interpretation of her performance of the poem.

Womyn Before

Alix Olson

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 fist and i asked her
why are we so mad?
and she parked her head down in the freezing rain and
she saw me so serious and small with
my big mac truck union sign
she smiled to herself,
pondered the politics of fingers curled
this is solidarity, she whispered to her baby girl

and she smelled right then like the coalmines 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'connor, ruth ellis,
bell hooks, flo kennedy,
gertrude stein, dorothy allison,
angela davis, mary daly, kay gardner,
and all the other womyn before me

you see they sniffed the boundaries carefully
it's no mistake they chose the fringes
and they rode the horses proudly who
careened off the edges of the carousel

because our words are wild animals sometimes
just barely surviving
in woods purchased by some industry
hunters are four lane highways
and we are the road kill
cancer in our warrior breasts
asbestos in our tampons, still
the words of the womyn before
think me through these dark clouds of injustice
as i propel myself past all the clowns on t.v.
and there i find myself
stratospherically frozen in between how things are
and how they should be.

and it's easy to freeze
in these icy extremes
but the words of the womyn before
shelter me like an igloo
sometimes i shiver in their dimension
but at least i know from my herstory
that the courage of chattering teeth
demands attention

and sometimes i see my pleasing self
all cheerfully flippant and full of quips
and then i feel my queer spirit
jetting out from my hips
because the words of the womyn before,
they have passed me graceful rage
and i'm out to save the world

when i'm not scramblin' to save face
i'm searching for an exit
i wanna scream "fire! Everybody run!"
because we're packed too tight into this world full of trouble
the kid next to me is packing a gun.

but my mother raised me to tangle with the big boys
to pull out my thumb and make friends with my voice
that's my weapon
of choice

so in this Hallmark Hub of a Century
with its sugar cookie cutter white boy fame
i will not be afraid of being called the same
no, in this Hallmark Hub of a Century
with its sugar cookie cutter white boy fame say
i will not be afraid of being called the same
no, i will not be afraid of being called the same
no, i will not be afraid of being called the same
names as the womyn before me

june jordan, barbara smith,
sonia sanchez, adrienne rich,
flannery o'connor, ruth ellis,
bell hooks, flo kennedy,
gertrude stein, dorothy allison,
angela davis, mary daly, kay gardner,
and all the other womyn before me
womyn before me
you see i take this legacy
i take this legacy
i take this legacy
seriously.

Appendix C

This is the text version of “The Herstory of My Hips” as appearing in the anthology *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution*.

The Herstory of My Hips

C.C. Carter

What is it that you misunderstand about these hips?
my hips?

These are my hips—
These forty-six inch hips
attached to this twenty-four-inch waist
are my hips and they tell herstory

Perhaps you question the size of my hips—
the second largest continent in the world sired these hips
of course they would be as large—

The oldest civilization on earth gave birth to these hips
of course they would be as wide—

For these were my great-grandmother’s
and my grandmother’s
and my mother’s hips
and now I am heir to this throne—my crown?
these hips, of course—
and I would proudly pass them on to my daughter
for her dowry, would you say—

These hips are pyramids—
no blueprints modern technology

no cranes and chains erected these hips
blood sweat and joy created these hips—

My West Indian “fadder”
loved my Dominican “madre”
and they mixed up the spices
to create the recipe for these hips—

‘Cause my hips are hip—
they swing a jazz tune
they bop a blues beat
they talk a rap rhythm
they dance a drum solo—

These are hot summer days
and cold winter nights
spring into action
make you fall in my lap hips—
These are my hips—

No aerobics
no treadmill
no run a mile—
these hips are for you to snuggle
for you to cuddle
for you to sink into and dream—
for you to get lost in all your fantasies—
wrap yourself around and let me squeeze you hips
lock you in and yell “si mommy” hips
draw you deeper so you can scream,
“*dame a bueno, dame a bueno,*” hips
shake with ecstasy, “what’s my name,” hips
rock your world and swing from chandelier hips
when you want to hold a woman’s hips
when you want to feel the difference between you and me hips
when hard hips want to be soothed by Charmin hips
these are my hips—
so let the legacy live on.

Appendix D

This is the text of “99 cent lipstick” as appearing in Suheir Hammad’s 1996 book of poetry *Born Palestinian, Born Black*.

99 cent lipstick

Suheir Hammad

there is out there
a deep dark void sucking
in my deep dark people

afraid i
hid behind cheap red
99 cent lipstick
dull 12 kt doorknocker earrings

fearful abused anger as
my primary language
labeled myself a bitch
before anyone else could

afraid of dying young
we shot each other up
when we weren’t shooting up
hiding behind greasy
guns and dirty needles

we became each other’s
niggas and hoes
so we wouldn’t belong to anyone else
just so we could belong to ourselves

for arthur at 17
a young black male in jail
he became a breathing statistic
for richie at 16
by junior year
his hand was forever bent
frozen around a fantasy 40

we sliced our pain into
each other's faces with
rusty blades hid
our fear behind dirty
looks and attitude
cool was what we ate
tough was what we talked
concealing our hungry
fragile youth beneath
hunched shoulders and
bad posture

for shelly
a baby at 11 she was
pregnant at her grade school graduation
for sha
so angry at america's god
at 16 he became his own

our fear was stronger than
that cheap red lipstick that
bled on me
my people have bled on me

the horror of our situation hit
us right in the face right into
our gold tooth fronts and
dirty looks

afraid we hid behind our
curls curses crosses

for jason
his rap poetry more eloquent than any shakespeare
for mike

urban warrior with heart of a country mouse

we pointed guns bought with dirty
food stamps at each other
shot bullets of frustration through
each other
that's right we killed each other
we killed each other with our
attitudes *bullets* *crosses* *dirty looks*

for junior shot to death at 12
by his 15 year old drug dealing bosses
he spent their money to buy candy

we killed each other with
a fear that wasn't even ours
a cheap red horror that was
older than our tired youth

for suzan sabrine sameeh omar
cause there are nights when i'm still afraid
for us

this fear don't even belong to us

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