

Word Warriors: 25 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution

Edited by Alix Olson

Week: 1 of 2

Pages: 169-171; 95-97; 346-350; 160-165; 92-94; 59-60

Themes:

- Woman power
- Heritage
- Work
- Growing up/ memories
- Identity

Opening (in large group): Share your name + where you're from + What's one thing people might not know about you just by looking?

Introduction to the Book (in separate groups): *Word Warriors is a collection of poems and essays written by female spoken word poets. Spoken word poetry is a form of oral poetry that is performed on stages. Most of the poems in this collection express strong views about women rights, tell stories about heritage, and address issues surrounding the LGBTQ communities.*

Poems and Questions:

“Subtle Sister” by Alix Olson (pp. 169-171):

- What are your thoughts on this poem? In your words, what is the poet saying? What emotion do you get from the poem when you read it? What is the poet reacting to as far as expectations for women?
- Why do you think the author titles the poem, “Subtle Sister?” What do you think it means to be subtle? What do you think it means for a woman to be subtle? How is she being asked throughout the poem to be “subtle?”
- In the second stanza the poet asks, “You wanna see what it’s like down in here in this pool of someone else’s rules...” Why does she ask this? Whose rules might she be referring to? What rules do you think she is talking about? Have you ever experienced feeling like “the rules” exclude you based on your gender, or are built to benefit someone of another gender than yours?
- The fourth stanza begins with the line, “And they say you’ve made progress, girls, take a rest in between.” Why do you think the poet brings this up? What type of progress might she be referring to? Who do you think the “they” is in this line? Why would “they” say we’ve made progress? Why do you think they are asking the girls to take a rest in between? What does the poet say might happen if “you’re resting?” Do you agree or disagree?
- In stanza four, what is the poet saying she will do now? What is she taking back? Why do you think she is taking back these things?
- In stanza five, the poet says, “When we cackled, they called us witches/ now we don’t giggle they call us bitches.” What are your thoughts on this? Are there other behaviors that are expected of women that we get “punished” for not adhering to (*dress, speech, behavior, work roles*)? How do you respond when people expect certain things of you simply based on being a woman? What do you think it does to others when women defy gender stereotypes or prescribed roles?
- What are your thoughts on the line, “cause they want domestics?” What does it mean to be domestic? Do you think that women are still expected to be “domesticated?” Why or why not? Do you believe that “ego” has a role in how men expect women to behave? Were you taught to be “domesticated” growing up? In what ways?

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- The poet references people encouraging her to be, “subtle sister...you can make your point without leaving such a mark.” What do you see going on here? Do you think that there’s a right way to fight for equity/equality? Why might people want her to make her points with “less bite?” What would have to happen in the world for you to feel like it was “even” for women?
- Towards the end of the poem, the poet says, “sometimes anger’s subtle, stocked in metaphor, full of finesse and dressed in allure.” What are your thoughts on this line? Do you agree or disagree? Why or why not? In what ways can anger be subtle? In what ways might it be good to be subtle with your anger? In what ways might it be good to be bold/direct with your anger?

“Generations” by Meliza Bañales (pp. 95-97):

- What type of relationship does the poet seem to have with her father and possibly her great-grandfather?
- In the fourth stanza she refers to the land owner as “the owner of lives.” What does she mean by this? What does the poet mean by “we are replaceable?” How does this make you feel? Have you ever been in a situation where you felt like someone didn’t value you or the work you have done? How did you handle it?
- On page 96, the poet says “weaknesses” doesn’t grow on trees either. Why do you think she includes “weaknesses” with hands, blood, strength, and courage, which are all powerful images?
- What are your thoughts of the poet describing herself as “the third generation of brown blood gone white” (96)? What could make her brown blood white? What are ways the poet does or does not seem to be connected to her heritage? What are some other ways that someone can stay connected to his/her heritage?
- The poet repeats that she doesn’t hear “shame” when she calls her father and when her father speaks back. Why do you think she says this? Why might someone feel shame in a moment like this? What keeps her from feeling shame about it? Has anyone ever tried to make you feel ashamed of who you are? How did you handle it? What type of things make you proud of who you are?
- The poet’s father tells her that “the universe only gives you as much as you can carry” (96). Do you agree or disagree with this idea? Why?
- On page 96 her father tells her there are “fields of soldiers swimming through her veins.” What does he mean by this? How does this image make you feel? How does her father saying this seem to affect the poet? Do you have a connection with anyone or anything outside yourself that helps you push on through challenges?
- At the end of the poem, she says, “I have come to know what the truth tastes like.” What does she mean by this? What is the truth she is referring to?
- Have you ever felt like you discovered the truth about something? How did you get to it? How did it feel to figure it out?

“No You Don’t Know Me” (pp. 346-350)

- Why do you think the poets start the poem off the way they did with the scattered words and the different names? Why do you think they present them this way on the page? What is the effect for the reader?
- What lines of the poem stand out to you? Why?
- On page 346 the poets say that people are always trying to categorize us and demystify us. Who is the “us” they are talking about? What do you think about this statement? Have you ever felt like you were being categorized or stereotyped? How did it make you feel?

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- On page 348 the speaker says, “Sometimes we’re tired of you?” Who is the “you” they are referring to? What could they be tired of? How does this statement make you feel?
- The poets name a few experiences of people thinking that you are one thing or saying that “you speak well.” Have you ever had any of these experiences before? How did it make you feel?
- What do the poets seem to think about interracial relationships? What do you think about their view of them?
- On the last page of the poem they say, “we are more than MTV personifications.” Why do you think they say this? How do you think MTV, or the media generally, represents black people?
- What do you think of the poets’ statement: “really listen so that when you say you know me, you can say it with honesty?” How might listening to someone tell you who they really are? How might it not? What kinds of things should a person be listening to?
- What do you think it means to really “know” someone? Who are the people you feel like you really know? How do you get to know them in this way?

“Warning” by C.C. Carter (pp. 160-165):

- What lines/thoughts stand out to you from this poem?
- What do you think the speaker means when she says, “. . .women who say women like me set the feminist movement back one hundred years”? What kind of woman do you think the speaker is? Why would her wearing “lipstick and lace” be interpreted by some as a setback to feminism?
- What does the poet mean when she says, “Until I saw she was me who magnified all my insecurities?” Why was she no longer embarrassed for the stripper but for herself? What are the “barriers” and “obstacles” she might associate with her sex (female)?
- The poet repeats “this is a warning.” Who is she warning? What is she warning against? Why do you think she repeats this line?
- The poet talks a lot about passing. In what ways does the poet seem to have passed or tried to pass? What are other ways that people try to “pass” for something other than what they are? Why do they do this? What do you think about this? Are there certain ways you think a person can look, sound, and/or act which make them more “acceptable” to hire in certain environments? How do you judge the difference between a “workplace culture” and prejudice/discrimination?
- Why do you think the poet’s great-great-grandmother was receiving judgmental stares and snubbed shoulders? What do you make of the fact that that same great-great-grandmother seemed to benefit from the colorism (being shown favoritism as a slave for being lighter-skinned) and also was a woman “who hid a kitchen knife in sweet potato pies weaved escape routes in quilts then helped twenty to freedom?” Why do you think the poet makes a point to tell us about this woman being judged for being light and treated better than darker slaves, but also was active in helping other slaves escape? What point—if any—do you think the poet is making between how we judge one another, and how activism and progress actually occur?
- Why do you think that the “militant mary’s/ toting handguns and grenades,” are “downgrading the sistahs” with higher degrees and working in corporate companies (page 162)?
- On page 163, why do you think some think the speaker is “a sellout”? Have you ever judged another woman as a “sellout” to womanhood? If so, what were the circumstances? If not, is there anything another woman could do that would make you think of her that way?

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- At the end of the poem she says, “It takes all kinds to win this revolution.” What revolution is she referring to? What does she mean when she says, “all kinds?” Why would it take all kinds to win this revolution? What do you think of the overall message of this poem?
- Throughout the poem the speaker seems to be talking about the fact that there’s not one “right” way to be a woman or feminist or fight for women’s rights. What do you think of this concept? Are there certain ways women shouldn’t act, speak, dress, or present themselves if they are fighting for equality? Why do you feel that way?

“Do the Math” by Meliza Bañales (pp 92-94):

- What do you know about the speaker from reading this poem? What are the different pieces of her identity that she shows us?
- Work and education seem to play significant roles in this poem. What do you notice about the jobs the speaker does? Why does she take on these jobs? Can you relate or sympathize with any of the work she takes on?
- The speaker connects the math to all of her actions throughout the poem. What do you make of lines like: “...I can clean three to six houses a week/which equals rent, tortillas, and lettuce for the month.” and “One bare ass in face gets a twenty, one crotch-drop earns a fifty,/one tongue licking cage bars while slowly gyrating hips/equals I am the first in my family to go to college”? Have you ever thought of your own work/survival in terms like these? What are sacrifices you or others you know have made in order to pursue education or work?
- Race and ethnicity also show up in this speaker’s journey, as she reflects on her father’s accent and how she was convinced that if he lost it, “he could get a better job and we wouldn’t be poor anymore.” What do you think of this? Have you ever experienced discrimination in the workplace based on your own race or ethnicity? (*If folks are not responding, may also link to gender.*)
- The speaker also references her “fear and ignorance” in terms of being “thankful for looking the most white in a family of coffee-colored children.” What do you think was going on for her at this time? Why do you think she associated being light-skinned or “most white” looking with her ability/chance to “learn English, get an education/make my parents proud of half-white, half-brown accomplishment”? What do fear and ignorance have to do with that response/thinking?
- This poem tells the story of this speaker earning her college degree and being the first in her family to do so. What do you think of the higher education system in America? Do you think it is accessible to everyone? If not, should it be? Do you think the story in this poem is common? Is it fair? How much “work” do you think young people should have to put in as they pursue education?
- What do you make of the line, “I am writing an equation./Using the universal language of numbers to describe ten thousand ways/that something can mean everything.”? What do you think she means by “everything”? What do you think was her “something”? In what ways can something mean everything? Have you ever had an experience that may have meant “everything” for you?

“I Am From, Third Cycle” by Natalie E. Illum (pp. 59-60):

- What lines stand out to you?
- What type of things/places does the poet say she is from? Why do you think she says she is from these things?
- Why do you think she calls herself a “dirty secret”? What do you think might have happened to make her feel this way?

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- On page 59, why do you think she describes herself as “A girl no one would claim?” What do you think she is saying about her history or her heritage? How do you think this affects how the poet sees herself? What do you know about your heritage? How does this affect the way you view yourself, if at all? How important is one’s heritage or background? Why?
- What do you think the poet means when she says, “I am from a lover I couldn’t hold on to?” In what ways do you think our past relationships help to shape how we think of ourselves?
- What is she describing or saying in the line where she says, “I am from the exhausted scribes of teenage angst and track lines?” How do you think the poet was as a teenager?
- In the last line the poet says, “The pulling tides and I are whispering.” What do you think she is whispering? Why do you think she ends with this line?

Poetry Prompt: “I Am From”

Note to BGL: This is a double-sided prompt – participants can choose what side they’d like to write on. One side is structured with blanks to fill in. The other is open-ended if they’d like to free-write.

In the poem, “I Am From, Third Cycle” Natalie Illum describes the different things, places, and people in which she is from. Things that have made her who she is. Write about things you think have made you who you are. What are they? What do they look like? In what ways have these things impacted you? Try to use rich descriptive language like the poet does in her poem.

Closing: “I am a woman, a human being of extraordinary strength, wisdom, and grace...” –Ann Valliant