

Word Warriors: 25 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution

Edited by Alix Olson

Week: 2 of 2

Pages: 8-10; 80-83; 199-203; 84-86; 369-373; 284-286

Themes:

- poetry
- woman power
- sexuality/body politics
- sexuality
- power

Opening: “Words, better than bullets cause they don’t lodge and kill, they lodge and spin, lodge and free, lodge and learn, lodge and spread like possibility through the whole f***ing system.” – Eve Ensler (from the foreword of *Word Warriors*)

- What are your thoughts on this quote? What stands out to you?
- How can words “lodge and free?” Why might they be freeing? Have words ever felt freeing to you? In what situation?
- How do you think words can spread like possibility? What possibilities can spread through words? Why?
- What system do you think the author is referring to? Why do you think the author feels strongly about the system? How does she think words can affect the system?
- Was there ever a time when “words” have had a big impact you or left a lasting impression either written or spoken? Do you ever use them for a special cause/ weapon other than talking to your friends and family?

Introduction to the Book: *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.*

Recommended Poems and Questions:

“your revolution” by Sarah Jones (pp. 8-10) (OPTIONAL):

NOTE: If watching YouTube video of Def Jam performance, there is a bit of divergence between written and performed versions of this piece.

- What would you say is the feel or tone of this poem?
- Which of the song lyrics/musical artists do you recognize?
- Which lines or ideas most stood out to you? Why?
- When you hear the word “revolution,” what comes to mind? What kind of revolution does this piece seem to be talking about? (BGL will probably need to offer some guidance to help group think about revolution in terms like what Gil Scott-Heron did with the original—a call to action for a specific group of people to fight for rights and advancement/not being defined by “mainstream” group that doesn’t reflect you.)
- Why do you think the poet/performer chose to use hip-hop/rap songs to talk about what the “revolution” will not be? What things does she seem to say are NOT associated with the revolution? Which things ARE associated with it?
- What does it mean that, “the real revolution/ain’t about booty size/the Versaces you buys/or the Lexus you drives”? Why would some people think that it *is* about those things? Why might she say it’s *not* about them?
- The poet repeats that “your revolution will not happen between these thighs” throughout her piece. Why do you think that is? Who do you think she’s talking to? What is she trying to communicate to them?

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- Throughout the piece, Jones seems to speak to the superficial sex that's celebrated in some forms of music. What do you think of this? How do you feel about the lyrics she references—are they harmless? Are they harmful? Are they helpful? Something else? What do they promote?
- In the last stanza, Jones says, “your revolution will not be you flexing your sex and status to express what you ‘feel’.” Why do you think she says this?
- *If watched video or listened to performance: What was it like to see/hear the performer deliver this piece? How did it feel in comparison to reading the words for yourself? What choices did she make about her delivery and how did it affect you as a viewer/listener?*

“Revenge of the Crazy Wimmin” (pp. 80-83):

- How did reading/hearing this poem affect you? What, if anything, resonates for you in what the poet says here? What do you think is her charge/purpose in writing and sharing this poem?
- What is the poet describing in the first half of the poem? What are some of the things she describes that are happening to women during these various time periods?
- In the first stanza the poet says that “when women exceed the emotional speed limit society put on the brakes.” What does she mean by this? How does society try to stop women for being overly emotional? Have you ever someone tell you that you were being “too emotional?” If so, how did it make you feel? How did you respond?
- What do you make of the lines in the fourth stanza: “cause there’s nothing scarier than a woman mad and/or aware of her own magic?” Why would those things be scary? What’s scary about a woman “aware of her own magic?” What magic do you think women have? What magic have you seen yourself or other women accomplish/use?
- In the fifth stanza, after mentioning a period of time when women speaking up/acting contrary to how they were expected to act (subserviently), was called hysteria and linked to menstruation, the poet says, “what they call paranoia we call reality hitting us hard.” How do you respond to that line? What realities do you think women get “hit hard” with? What are some realities you’ve had to confront in your own life? How do you do that? How have people in your life responded as you’ve made sense of your realities? How do you want people around you to respond?
- Throughout the poem, the poet looks at the trials and tribulations women have endured over the years and continue to endure, and she seems to end with celebration and call to action—“this is for every woman who’s ever survived hell and emerged to tell the tale to her sisters//our voices thick with saliva and blood speaking truth my sisters...yes we are ‘acting out’.” What does the ending of this poem make you feel or think about? How do you “act out” or want others to “act out” in order to help women achieve the best in their lives?
- On page 83 the poet mentions writing a “prescription for the maximum dose of justice.” What do you think she means by this? What would justice look like for these women? For you?
- She says, “We are rising up, picking up the pieces of what was shattered.” What does this mean to you? Can women repair what was shattered in the examples the poet gives? Why/why not? In what way are the women rising up in this piece? In what ways can we, as women, speak up or make a difference about issues such as rape and abuse?
- At the end of the poem she says that the crazy women are going to have the last laugh someday. Why do you think she says this? What makes the wimmin “crazy?” Why would the laugh be loud? How do you think the crazy “wimmin” will get their revenge (as the poem is titled)?

“Titular” by Rachel Kann (pp. 199-203):

- What is the feel or tone of this piece, to you? What attitude(s) does the poet/performer seem to have?

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- Before you reached the line that says this poem is about a conversation about her boobs, did you expect that? Why or why not?
- Why might someone choose to write and perform a poem like this? What do you think she's trying to tell/communicate to other people?
- How did you respond to the conversation the poet has with her ex-boyfriend in the car? Why do you think she mentions multiple times the song her ex is singing as he talks to her ("just the way you are" by Billy Joel)? (*BGL may want to use the term irony here.*)
- The speaker proudly tells her ex, "Listen, honey, these titties don't belong to you, they belong to me!" and "...your perception of my worth physically doesn't mean *shit* to me!" What did you think of this and the rest of her response? How would you respond if someone said something similar to you?
- Why do you think her ex felt like he had a right to comment/advise her on her breast size?
- Have you ever experienced someone commenting on your body and how they prefer it? How did you respond? Why did you respond that way?
- The poet ends her piece by saying, "My boobies, my body, my beauty. Newsflash: It's not for you, it's for me. Me!" Why do you think she ends on this note? When you think about your own body, how much do you think about what it means/is to others versus what it means/is to you?

"Take Refuge" (pp. 84-86):

- What emotions/thoughts does this poem stir for you when you read/hear it?
- At the end of the first stanza, the poet tells us, "No matter how bleak these days Of aggression and oppression We know our fates are not sealed." What aggressions and oppressions do you think she might be talking about? Why might someone feel like their "fate is sealed" because of the aggressions and oppressions they encounter? Why do you think the poet says our fates are NOT sealed despite those?
- The poet references it being the year 2005—how much do you think things have changed or stayed the same since 2005?
- What does the narrator want us to take refuge in? What does it mean to take refuge in something? What types of things do you take refuge in? What gives you peace or hope for the future?
- On page 84 she refers to our present culture as "toxic" and "eating our souls." What might be toxic about the culture of the time she is referring to? What might be still toxic today?
- The poet encourages us to "be still, be silent/ And feel the mystery of this holy minute" (page 85). What does it mean to "be still"? What mystery do you think she is referencing? What do you think you might find or feel if you took time to be still and silent?
- What do you think about the lines towards the end of the poem, "When your soul is most hungry and your heart is most empty?" Do you ever feel like your soul is hungry or your heart is empty? What does this feel like in your own words? What do you do in those moments?
- The poem ends with the poet encouraging us to "take refuge in the everyday extraordinary poetry that is our living, loving, evolving, revolving community." What does this mean to you? How can a community be "everyday poetry"? What communities do you feel a part of? How do those communities support you or provide "refuge" for you?

"Poem for the Gay Games" by Staceyann Chin (pp. 369-373):

NOTE: BGL may want to give readers a heads-up that this poem co-opts hate language/terms – some may be uncomfortable bearing or saying aloud some words/phrases. BGLs feel this language is in service to the message of the poem, but readers should take care of themselves in whatever way is right for them.

- What were/are your first reactions to this poem?
- Were there any lines that stood out to you? If so, which ones?

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- What is the world the speaker is describing? How does this connect with your own experiences?
- How does the speaker react to her publicist saying, “Being queer has no bearing on race/ *or class or creed*”? How do you react to this statement?
- How do you think “all oppression is connected,” as the poet states?
- What does she mean when she says, “every day/ under the pretense of unity/ I swallow something I should have said”? Why is it “under the pretense of unity”? Are there things you “swallow” or don’t say that you wish you did? If so, what are they? Why do you not say them?
- How do you respond to people who say ignorant or offensive things about groups or individuals? Why do you respond this way? What do you think is the most effective way to respond to comments like this?
- Why do you think the speaker uses words usually considered offensive (faggots, niggers, dykes, trannies)? Is it different the way she uses it? Why/why not?
- At the end, the speaker proclaims, “the time to act is now!/ Now! while there are still ways we can fight...” What do you think are the ways we can fight? What do you want to or already fight for and how?
- Why do you think certain parts of the poem are italicized?
- Why do you think the poem is titled, “Poem for the Gay Games”? What are the “gay games”?
- What feeling does this poem leave you with?

“Say More” (pp. 284-286):

- The poet repeats that she wants to “run into every wall that the upper class puts in our path.” What type of walls does upper class put in our path? What issues does the poet address in the poem?
- She also says, “When you think you have nothing to say stop and remember what you tell your friends.” Why do you think she says this? What kinds of things do you talk to your friends about that you may not say to other people?
- What is the narrator asking you to do? What does she want to say more of? Why is it important for someone to say more? If you could, what types of things would you say more of?
- She says “this feels much better than when I was writing it alone in my room.” Why would it feel better? Have you ever written or thought something and when you finally shared it with someone it felt better?

Prompt: “Say More”

In the poem, “Say More,” Sini Anderson calls on us to “speak up about injustices we see related to race, class, and gender. Now it’s your chance to “say more” about something that is important to you. Pick one thing that you are passionate about – something you see in the world around you, at home, in school, in your community – that you want to speak about. Explain why this issue is important, how it affects you, and what you think should be done about it. Think about the times you wanted to say something and didn’t – this is the time to SAY MORE!

Closing: “Words have no borders. Every experience deserves a hearing. Everyone has a story to tell and we are all the better for the telling.”—Edwidge Danticat