"And what could I tell you, Señora, about the natural secrets I have discovered when cooking? […] but, Señora, what can we women know but kitchen philosophies? As Lupercio Leonardo so wisely said, one can philosophize very well and prepare supper.[1] And seeing these minor details, I say that if Aristotle had cooked, he would have written a great deal more."

—Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, *Response of the Poet to the Very Eminent Sor Filotea de La Cruz* (Grossman, 2014, 184-185)

"IF ARISTOTLE HAD COOKED": Contemporary Feminist Practices Within the Rhetoric of Young Latinas' Spoken Word Performances

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Abstract: Over three hundred years have passed since Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the first feminist in the Americas, wrote her famous response defending her right to learn and to speak through her poetry. Today, the spoken word poetry of Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Denice Frohman, Mercedez Holtry, Melania Luisa Marte, and Elizabeth Acevedo grapples with the same matters Sor Juana did more than three hundred years ago. This article analyzes the feminist practices within the rhetoric of the spoken word performances of Lozada-Oliva, Frohman, Holtry, Marte, and Acevedo by positioning their work as performed testimonios (Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodriguez 2012; Diaz 2011). Understanding these spoken word performances as performed testimonios helps us examine the connections between the rhetor's personal experience of injustice, the collective struggle of the community to which the rhetor belongs, and the political agency that the rhetor demands. This article also traces the historical and cultural intersections between the spoken word poetry of Latinas and Latina feminism by identifying the echoes from Sor Juana's work in the performed testimonios examined here.

Mexico City, 1690. New Spain is loosely ruled by the Spanish Crown and strongly guarded by the Catholic Church. The rhetorical scene of Mexico City consists of an Indigenous population, a Creole class of Spaniards born in New Spain, a growing Mestiza/o population, and a powerful clergy that rules the area's souls and the literary realms. Under the surname of Sor Filotea de la Cruz, the Bishop of Puebla— Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz—publishes a letter admonishing Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz—a self-taught audacious nun who has gained literary acclaim writing secular poetry, plays, and essays—for going against the mandates of the church and for writing a critical essay about the sermon given by the Jesuit priest Antonio Vieira years ago. Sor Filotea's reproving letter is published along with the critical essay written by Sor Juana, without her consent, as evidence of the Bishop's message to the literate audience of the city. In his letter, Fernández reminds Sor Juana about the teachings of Saint Paul against educating women "to avoid the danger of presumption in [this] sex, always so inclined to vanity" and advises her to be obedient like all women should and to focus on writing about religion (Grossman 2014, 144-45).

Mexico City, 1691. Sor Juana writes back defending her right to learn and write, explaining in great detail her upbringing and hardships without the guidance of formal teachers and without other students from whom to learn (Grossman 2014, 168). She claims to "have sailed against the current" and to have faced "among the flowers of [her] acclamations more serpents than [she] can count" (173). As the rhetorical evidence of her defense, the nun discusses the numerous cases of historical and mythological learned women. And at the end of her extensive evidence, Sor Juana firmly summarizes her closing argument: "If the evil lies in a woman writing verses, it is clear that many have done so in a praiseworthy way; where is the evil in my being a woman?" (203).

Sor Juana was, in several ways, the feminist spoken word artist of her time. She wrote and performed poetry for the court of the New Spain and thereafter for the residents of her cloister. Although her audience was privileged, the subject matter of her work often contradicted what her elitist audience epitomized. As a criolla—a woman born in Mexico of Spanish descent—she occupied a blended identity that informed her work. And as the first feminist scholar of the Americas, she created work that intersected the realms of poetry, performance art, rhetoric, and philosophy, setting the stage for feminist Latina/x, Afro-Latina/x, and Chicana/x poets who came after her.

As such, there are echoes of Sor Juana in the spoken word performances of young Latinas/xs, Afro-Latinas/xs, and Chicanas/xs, in spite of the evident temporal and geographical differences. In lieu of letter-writing and newspaper print that Sor Juana used, spoken word poetry functions as an important platform to speak out against oppressive systems. For Latinas/xs, Afro-Latinas/xs, and Chicanas/xs in particular, spoken word poetry has also become a venue to condemn some of the same unjust practices Sor Juana grappled with more than three hundred years ago. For this project, I focus on the contemporary feminist rhetoric in the spoken word performances of five Latinas/xs, Afro-Latinas/xs, and Chicanas/xs as they unmask oppressive patriarchal systems, denounce racial prejudices, and grapple with liminality. Drawing from a decolonial Latina feminist framework to inform my rhetorical analysis, I examine five spoken word performances as *performed testimonios* (Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodríguez 2012; Diaz 2011) which empower the voices of the speakers through enacted personal narratives that address collective struggles against dominant and hegemonic ideas of gender, femininity, feminism, sexual orientation, white supremacy, anti-blackness, and heteronormativity as a means to bring about social change.

Importantly, this article problematizes calls by feminist rhetoricians that feminist scholarship in the field of rhetoric should move beyond historical recovery (Royster and Kirsch 2012). Feminist contributions by Latinas, like Sor Juana, have yet to be fully excavated, as rhetorical records and rhetorical practices of Latinas/xs, Afro-Latinas/xs, Chicanas/xs have been largely sidelined by Western studies in both mainstream and in feminist scholarship, and these distinct Latina/x rhetorical practices have yet to be unpacked of their colonial vestiges. For Latina rhetoricians like myself who recognize this untapped source of knowledge and wish to sieve through it using various decolonial approaches, projects like this offer the promise of (re)writing history by contextualizing the impact of that very history on Latinas/xs, Afro-Latinas/xs, and Chicanas/xs present and on their fluid identities (Rivera 2020).

Additionally, there have been calls in the field to move beyond clustering women in a collective body in order to exalt "individual rhetorical actions" of women rather than continue a "devaluing" collective lens through which mainstream feminism tends to be viewed (Biesecker 1992, 144). I contend there is value in examining the collective rhetorical practices that can bring about social change within the cultural traditions of Latinas/os/xs. Therefore, if feminist rhetorical scholars of color pursue research that, as Royster and Kirsch (2012) argue, "honors the particular traditions of the subjects of study, respects their communities, amplifies their voices, and clarifies their visions" (14), they ought to engage in an active dialogue that situates the historical lineage of their ethno-racial communities' current rhetorical practices and their individual stories as much as their collective struggles. And thus, part of my work in this article consists of tracing the historical and cultural intersections of spoken word poetry by Latinas/xs, Afro-Latinas/xs, and Chicanas/xs and their feminist praxis in order to map out the elements of a performed testimonio.

Defining the Historical Intersections

Latina Feminism. As a self-identified Latina, my concept of feminism is rooted in the feminist scholarship by the radical women of color of the 1980s (Moraga and Anzaldúa 2002), who advocated for a more inclusive view of feminism and for the acknowledgement of the role coloniality played in their lives. As such, my rhetorical inquiries seek to identify and analyze performing feminist practices that 1) acknowledge voices that are female, whether the idea of female is a traditional notion, or a sexual preference, or a cultural construction as phantasmatic as Judith Butler (1999) asserts; 2) denounce debauched experiences of Otherness sprouted from colonial systems; and 3) inhabit positions of conscious streaming (Anzaldúa 2012) between the past and the present, between identities, between cultures, and between languages, which allow us to occupy several spaces at once and to organically move throughout our positionalities cognizant of our role(s) within them. My analysis of the spoken word performed by the various Latina/x, Afro-Latina/x, and Chicana/x poets here is guided by these principles.

Spoken Word. Spoken word poetry can be defined as provocative poetry that mixes different styles by combining "voice, visual aesthetic, and theatricality" (Habell-Pallán 2005, 59). It is "radical theater" created to be performed in front of an audience (Johnson 2017, 3). Spoken word as we know it today began with the poets of the Harlem Renaissance, and was later popularized by the Black Arts Movement (Johnson 2017) and the Puerto Rican poets of the 1960s (Noel 2014). Nonetheless, it should be noted that Mesoamerican cultures possessed a rich tradition of performance poetry. For example, Chicana rhetorician Gabriela Raquel Ríos (2015) argues that Nahua thinkers built a "relationship with the earth in order to gain more self-knowledge" (86) through performances of song and dance known as *in xochitl in cuicatl* (the flower and the song), a *difrasismo* (words used together to convey an idea)

that signifies the arts. In fact, Sor Juana's work, albeit strongly grounded in European traditions, was also influenced by Indigenous poetry. She wrote in Nahuatl more than once, and she experimented with Nahua *tocotines* (Stavans 2018), theatrical ballads that were sung and danced.

Moreover, the characteristics of spoken word make it uniquely attractive to marginalized groups. Because anyone can participate in a spoken word event, it is democratic; because the audience influences the delivery, it is fluid; and because the storytelling aspect embodies, in many cases, the stories of the underprivileged, it exercises rhetorical activism. Javon Johnson (2017) believes that Black spoken word poetry, in particular, is so imbued with activism that it "refuse[s] any distinction between art and activism, between the popular and the political." Michelle Habell-Pallán writes that spoken word narratives can "change space by making new spaces—in the world and in the imagination—where oppressive social practices based on structures of racism, sexism, and nationalism can be exposed, critiqued, and transformed" (2005, 80). Therefore, many poets of color have found in performative poetry the perfect public discourse to obtain rhetorical agency using distinctive styles grounded in their own cultural traditions.

Testimonio. Testimonios are narratives that construct and reconstruct (Mora 2007) a personal account that embodies a shared collective experience (Benmayor 2012). Although testimonios can be—and often are—written, they are primarily characterized by an oral delivery rooted in the Indigenous practices of *huehuehtlahtolli*, or wise dialogues, which consisted of storytelling narratives imbued with wise advice (León Portilla 1991). Furthermore, testimonios carry an underlying factor that urges civic engagement to produce social change. This factor is ingrained in the Nahua practice of *in ixtli in yollotl* (a face a heart), which Ríos (2015) defines as the "process of becoming

human" (86), and it relates to a performative act that urges people to reflect on "what it means to be a human being" (86). Coloniality, however, has turned most testimonios into "spoken accounts of oppression" (Blackmer Reyes and Curry Rodríguez 2012, 526), actions that often prevent ones' own humanity from being fully realized.

Although Sor Juana's own biographical account in "La respuesta" can be read as a testimonio speaking against the injustices of a patriarchal system, feminist testimonios did not enter Latin American feminist theories until the 1970s via the seminal works of Domitila Barrios and Rigoberta Menchú (Tula 1994; Latina Feminist Group 2001). Since then, Latina feminists have located testimonios in "autobiographical narratives, short stories, poems, and dialogues" that contest systems of oppression (Latina Feminist Group 2001, 1), allowing for multiple modes of telling to be rooted in this tradition.

Performed Testimonios. Understanding the spoken word performances in this article as performed testimonios helps trace their pre-Columbian genealogy and the resulting historical intersections between poetry, testimonios, and spoken word. It also helps analyze the juxtaposition of the personal, the collective, and the political in the narratives and in the theatricalized delivery of the narratives. Drawing on Diaz's (2011) work, which broadens the literary notions of testimonio to articulate Chicana/o/x visual art as a performed testimonio, I posit that spoken word performances by Latina/x, Afro-Latina/x, and Chicana/x poets can similarly be understood as such. For this project then, a performed testimonio is grounded in a narrative arc that typically begins with a personal experience; links to a collective struggle resulting from various systems of oppression (such as colonization, sexism, patriarchy, misogyny, and/or homophobia); climaxes with a cathartic and restorative desahogo; and ends with the exploration of new

possibilities that seek to bring about social change. Desahogarse (Flores and Garcia 2009) is the act of releasing a distressful sentiment that keeps a person on the brink of not being able to breath. It is much more than just venting, because desahogarse comes from experiencing extreme and painful sentiments. It is a cathartic act that openly releases a suffocating anguish, providing a therapeutic feeling after the affliction is liberated from the body. As the performed testimonio is delivered, poets embody this catharsis by shifting the tone, tempo, and volume of the voice and using theatrical body language for an effective emotional connection with the listeners that invites them to feel this catharsis as well. Performed testimonios of Latina feminist poets often problematize gender, race, sexuality, and mainstream cultural norms, articulating this critique for their Latina/x, Chicana/x, and/or Afro-Latina/x audience members. They use humor, sarcasm, and poignancy, as well as a range of vocal registers in ways that are reminiscent of Sor Juana's strategies to resist continued disenfranchisement categories of identity. Notably, whereas not all spoken word poetry is a performed testimonio, and vice versa, the performances analyzed here are both; therefore, the terms spoken word and performed testimonio are used interchangeably to refer to the works examined in this article.

While there are numerous notable Latina/x performers of spoken word poetry, I have selected an array of contemporary Latina, Afro-Latina, and Chicana feminist voices that effectively articulate a range of identities. Additionally, because spoken word is intrinsically connected to performative practices, I examine artists who perform at poetry slam events—since their performances are readily accessible online—by exploring the dilemmas with which young Latinas/xs contend. I do this by pinpointing the elements of their performed testimonio in their routines. I then juxtapose the performed testimonios of these select artists—Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Denice Frohman, Mercedez Holtry,

Melania Luisa Marte, and Elizabeth Acevedo—with the writings of Sor Juana not only because the voices and rhetorical strategies of these young poets echo the work of the defiant nun, but also because despite progress, they address the same systems of oppression three hundred years later. I also interweave contemporary Latina/x, Afro-Latina/x, and Chicana/x feminist thought to reveal the enduring threads of resistance and resilience. Finally, I conclude by offering a discussion for conceptualizing spoken word as performed testimonios.

Spoken Word as Performed Testimonio

On Being a Woman. In 2010, Taylor Mali, a well-known White male performer, enacted a spoken word performance in which he criticized and mocked those who speak *uptalk*, a speech pattern largely associated with young women.[2] In his performance, Mali ridicules uptalk conversations by mocking the use of interrogative intonation and filler words such as "like" and "whatever." He urges uptalkers to stop speaking as if inviting people to join them on the "bandwagon of [their] own uncertainty" and "to speak with conviction" (1:24, 2:27). A few years later, in a Sor Juana-like witty response, Melissa Lozada-Oliva (2015) replied to Mali's concerns about young women's insecurities with a humorous performance titled "Like Totally Whatever."

After acknowledging Mali's spoken word five years prior, Lozada-Oliva (2015) begins her satirical performance by implicitly revealing a personal experience with a defiant, playful remark exaggerating the use of uptalk: "In case you haven't realized, it has somehow become necessary for old White men to tell me how to speak?" (0:10). To emphasize the uptalk that Mali so despises, her gestures move to the rhythm of her voice intonation; her head tilts to the side and her hand rises at the end of the sentence. Lozada-Oliva responds by creatively using uptalk as a device to speak against censuring young women for revealing their insecurities when speaking. Her poem then suggests that

White hypermasculine voices are to blame for the lack of confidence many young Latinas/xs experience. To make her point about the systemic roots of this uncertainty, she points to the use of "totally White men sentences" that resound in college classrooms, rendering those uttering them to be unquestionable. They also temper the voices of young women by acting as "invisible red pens," unremittingly correcting them as if their mere existence were flawed (1:05, 0:50). With this, Lozada-Oliva exposes the insecurities many young Latinas/xs share because their voices continue to be undermined by White male voices. "It's like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway were geniuses for turning women into question marks" (1:19), she affirms, turning her playful tone into anger.

Sor Juana also found humor to be the best technique to respond to misogynistic remarks. When the Bishop of Puebla publicly censured and humiliated her with commands that belittled her intelligence, such as "improve the books you read" and "I should like you to imitate [the poems of canonized saints] in the choice of subject as well as in technique" (Grossman 2014, 146, 144), Sor Juana cleverly responded by stating that she was surprised to find out that the bishop had taken the time to read her "rough scribblings" (153), and that it was not easy to figure out how to respond to the bishop's "most learned, most prudent, most saintly, and most loving letter" (153). In a similar remark, Lozada-Oliva (2015) humorously asserts in her performance that White male voices have "declared themselves to be the loudest, most-truest, most-taking up the most space" (1:00). The striking similarities between the style of Sor Juana's letter and Melissa Lozada-Oliva's performance are not coincidental. Both demonstrate that humor can be a powerful feminist tool to address women's right to learn or the causes of young women's insecurities.

By suggesting that the confidence issues of young Latinas/xs grow from being constantly "cut off" by a society that continues to privilege White male voices (1:38), Lozada-Oliva (2015) releases her cathartic desahogo and positions uptalk as a "defense mechanism" that protects young women, much like "knee pads" when falling or like "knifes we tuck into our boots at night" when walking alone (1:42, 1:51, 1:52). Her exasperation as she condemns both verbal and physical violence against women by exposing how females have to live in a perpetual defensive mode signals her deshago with these conditions. In this performance, Lozada-Oliva unmasks the ways in which patriarchy impacts the talk of young women. Her transformative ending reorients the issue that Mali's performance triggered, demanding a closer look at the structural reasons behind the many insecurities that result from the multiple forms of harassment young Latinas/xs face in an effort to undercut their influence.

Denice Frohman (2013) also uses humor in her performances. In "Dear Straight People," Frohman uses a more direct technique emphasizing the tempo of her voice and the theatrical body language to draw the audience into the narrative of her story. Her tempo changes from slow to hasty, while the tone of her voice and her body language overstress her personal experience:

> Dear straight people: [she pauses, and the audience laughs] Who do you think you are? [she crosses her arms and makes a semi-pause; the audience chuckles] Do you have to make it so obvious that I make you uncomfortable? Why do I make you uncomfortable? Do you know that makes me uncomfortable? Now we're both uncomfortable [the tempo of her voice moves faster throughout this set of questions, and her body language and face gestures are hyperbolized before pausing again to wait for the audience response]. (0:10)

Clearly, Frohman is having a conversation with the audience by offering a personal perspective, and the chuckles, the laughs, the claps, the "ahh," the "yeeeeaah!" and the "mmm" it evokes are all part of her performance to broaden that first-person voice to include the audience. As Michelle Habell-Pallán (2005) states, the audience's response to a spoken word performance "completes its meaning" (50). The audience, without a doubt, plays an active role in spoken word performances, but, in the case of this performance, the audience likewise experiences it too.

Moreover, Frohman's (2013) performed testimonio hails other individuals who suffered because of their sexual orientation and non-conforming gender identity to incorporate a larger collectivity. In a cathartic desahogo, she names Jorge Mercado, Sakia Gunn, and Lawrence King,[3] teenagers who died victims of violence against LGBTQ+ communities caused by heteronormative ideologies regardless of ethnicity. "What happened to the souls alienated in between too many high school walls, who planned the angles of their deaths in math class, who imagined their funerals as ticker-tape parades, who thought the afterlife was more like an after party?" (2:00), she asks with a hasty tone as she reaches the peak of her desahogo, eliciting the audience to participate in it with a sad "mmm." This painful allusion to suicide within the LGBTQ+ communities, triggered by heteronormative ideologies, prompts a palpable reflective silence in her audience. Frohman then slows down the arc of her performance with a softer tone by offering a transformative possibility. She challenges a reality where she is not fully accepted by imagining a world for her and her beloved where there is no room for prejudice caused by homophobic attitudes: "Imagine that we are in a sea of smiling faces, even when we're not…digging deep into each other's eyes" (2:55).

Feminist scholar María Lugones (2007) believes that to understand gender oppression in Latina/o/x communities, we must historicize gender as a combination of "heterosexuality, capitalism, and racial classification" constructed by the colonial system (187). The Latina female gender, as we understand it today, is for Lugones a colonial concept introduced to organize the production of commodities in colonized lands and the property of colonized peoples. From this lens, gender is a political concept constructed around race, an idea mostly absent from mainstream feminist scholarship. "For a woman of my culture," Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) similarly explains,

> There used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. […] Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother—only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children. (39)

Considering that gender expectations in Latina/o/x communities have been driven by the religion instituted by the colonial system, it is ironic that only within a life entirely dedicated to God, as stated by Anzaldúa, are Latinas/xs freed from the wife/mother duty that is imposed on them.

Much has been said about Sor Juana's motivation to become a nun as the only way she found to be educated without the responsibilities that marriage and motherhood bring. But the controversy surrounding Sor Juana also involved her gender identity, which some claim was not as clear as the church would have wanted to see. For instance, Ilan Stavans (2018) believes that Sor Juana's poem "In Reply to a Gentleman from Peru" is an "implicit confession of

[her] sexual identity" (41). In this poem, replying to a man from Peru who suggested that if she wanted to be a poet, she had to become a man, Sor Juana declared, "for a woman I shall never be/who may as woman serve a man;/and I know only that my body,/not inclined to one or other,/is neutral, or abstract, to/what only the Soul consigns" (41). While Stavans is not the first scholar to signal Sor Juana's sexual orientation, the significance of the full poem does not rest on reading it as a "confession," but as a defiant act historically situated against the chauvinistic view of a man who believed that literary production was only a male gift and that to possess the two gifts of reproduction (life reproduction as a woman and literary production as a man) was a monstrosity (Kirk 2016, 125). Whether Sor Juana's gender neutrality affirmation in this poem signifies her identity as a female poet and nun, or her sexual orientation, the poem is primarily one more of her arduous arguments in defense of her right to embody whichever gender she wanted.

Like Melisa Lozada-Oliva (2015), Sor Juana in her time publicly pushed back on men's view of what is appropriate for women. Interestingly, and in spite of the different time periods, Lozada-Oliva's performance argues against those who criticize women for being too insecure and Sor Juan's writing argued against those who criticized her for being too confident, confident enough to become a poet. Whether defending women's demeanor, like Lozada-Oliva (2015), or defying gender roles, like Sor Juana, or addressing sexuality, like Frohman (2013), women continue to grapple with expectations about how they should embody womanhood and how they should not.

On Embodying the Other. When I see a spoken word performance by a woman of color passionately speaking about racial issues, I often think of Dawn Lundy Martin's (2016) "Weary Oracle."[4] In this article, Martin appropriately calls young activists of color, weary oracles whose bodies "bear the collective weight of what

others do not" (2016). An oracle bursting with justified rage is what I imagine when I see Mercedez Holtry (2015) perform "My Blood is Beautiful," in which she confronts the effects of the colonial caste systems on Latinas/os/xs today. She begins her performed testimonio with her personal narrative of a visit to a coffee shop. In her story, her last name ignites a heated conversation about her Mestiza identity. "'Holtry huh? If you're Chicana, how did you end up with a German last name? Oh, you must be a coyote, a child of mixed blood'"(0:20), the old man preparing her coffee asked, using the pejorative word Coyote to indicate that she is not of *pure* blood. This, Holtry says, shifts their conversation into "a history lesson" about the many "questions and assumptions" that arise from assigning a person's value based on the color of the skin (1:24), which is an experience common to an array of ethnic Latinas/os/xs she references here. Holtry's casual tone gradually morphs into a frenzy that details the complex colonial caste systems that created racial categories to position people of color as inferior.

All these questions about race—from casual conversations to government documents—amass into a heavy collective burden that Holtry (2015) discharges in a cathartic desahogo in the same way I imagine Greek oracles and African diviners did.[5] Holtry's subtle body language and facial expressions contrast with the sharp high and low changes of volume in her voice. The emotional connection to the audience emanates from her unapologetic use of pathos and her effervescent desahogo. Her act is like a throbbing wound, "una herida abierta" (Anzaldúa 2012),[6] about to burst. Holtry embodies what Cherríe Moraga (2002) calls a "theory in the flesh," which Moraga defines as the act of becoming political "out of [the] necessity" to speak of the reality of a group that continuously experiences oppression (21). "My blood is the story of nine million Americans who like me check the *other* box on the census," (Holtry 2015, 1:27) Holtry (2015) declares, alluding once more to Latina/o/x collective history. Holtry's first-hand

encounters with racism trigger the embodiment of a mestiza collective voice that has grappled with prejudices for generations. For many people of color, race is an omnipresent shadow, a perpetual question mark about their genetic makeup based on what is visible and what is not. It is a construct that incites categorization of bodies and elicits tension when bodies are not neatly contained. Many women of color, like Holtry states in her performance, are weary of "always having to hear whispers about the skin [we]'re in, the assumptions about where [our] blood comes from" (0:50). Hence, in performing testimonios about embodying the Other, the body becomes a powerful vessel for political activism.

Latina feminists have disrupted mainstream feminist theories by inserting complicated and messy discussions of race and coloniality and interrogating the colonial moment that triggered a historical record that elided the histories and ways of knowing of women of color. For example, from her position as a White Criolla, Sor Juana could acknowledge the complexities of race as a colonial woman, but she could never *feel* the effects of these complexities in the flesh (Moraga 2002). In her time, convents "reproduced and reinforced racial hierarchies" (Kirk 2016, 175), which meant that in addition to their subjugated role in the patriarchal system of the Catholic church, Criolla nuns like Sor Juana were regarded as "spiritually inferior" than the nuns born in Spain (175). While the diminished position of Criollas certainly created an unfair situation for White women born in the Americas, their marginalization differs from that of women of color who were not even allowed to become nuns and were forced into roles of servitude.

To be clear, Sor Juana's attempts to examine the complexities of colonialism and race in her work were done through the lens of a White woman. For instance, in her poem "Amor es más laberinto" (Love is more labyrinth),

Sor Juana acknowledges the racial inequalities within the colonial system by expressing that although men were born equal, there is a great effort to differentiate them "[para] que unos sirvan como esclavos/y otros manden como dueños" (so that some serve as slaves/ and others command like owners) (Martínez-San Miguel 1999, 1). Although Sor Juana was clearly aware of the immoralities of slavery and colonialism and tried to incorporate the voices of people of color in her poems, she often fell short. Her problematic representations of "habla rústica" (rustic accent) in villancicos (Christmas carols) are good illustrations of her peculiar attempt (5). In a villancico dedicated to San José, Sor Juana plays with the voice of an Indigenous man who insists that the Indigenous carpentry from Xoximilco is better than all others, even better than the craft of San José: "Espere osté, so Doctor:/¿no ha visto en la Iglesia osté/junto mucho San José,/ y entre todos la labor/de Xoximilco es mijor?" (Wait Mr. Doctor:/haven't you seen in the Church/among San José,/and among all others the work/from Xoximilco is better?) (14). In a similar way, in a villancico to the Virgin Mary, Sor Juana experiments with the linguistic register of two Black men who cry for the departure of Mary while protesting about both Mary's neglect of Black people and her indifference toward their enslavement:

> Iguale yolale,/Flacico, de pena,/que nos deja ascula/a turo las Negla/Si las Cielo va/y Dioso la lleva,/¿pala qué yolá,/si Eya sa cuntenta?/Déjame yolá,/Flacico, pol Eya,/que se va, y nosotlo/ la Oblaje nos deja. [It's all the same to cry,/Flacico of sorrow:/She leaves us, leaving in the dark/all Black people./Leaving for Heaven/ and God takes her,/Why cry, if She is happy?/Let me cry,/Flacico, for her/for she leaves us/leaving us all the Labor]. (Martínez-San Miguel 1999, 8).

Clearly, the voices of people of color with fractured Spanish that Sor Juana portrays in these examples are not their genuine voices; these are representations seen through a White woman's lens who witnessed racism but did not experience it. Nonetheless, Sor Juana used her pen to acknowledge the presence of racism and criticize it in her writing.

As a result of the censure Latina feminists have leveraged against mainstream feminism for their years of neglect, the stereotype of an angry woman of color—particularly of the angry Black woman—has gained traction. Spoken word poet Melania Luisa Marte (2018) tackles this personification head on in her startling performance "Mad." As an Afro Latina, she plays with the angry Black woman stereotype by switching the role and positioning a hypothetical White feminist as an angry woman triggered by Black feminism. "Mad she gets last place for taking a story that ain't hers to tell and scoring badly on it" (0:22), Marte states with an irritated tone. She switches linguistic registers back and forth, from a register that one may associate with an African American woman to a register associated with a White woman and vice versa:

> [She is] mad her struggles don't bleed like mine. Mad she don't bleed like me. Like, [switches to uptalk and raises her hands as if asking questions] "Like, women of color? Like Black men? Like immigrants?" [switches back to an African American register] Anyone who has ever been othered. Like we bleed for fun. (0:30).

Like Sor Juana, Marte plays with different linguistic registers. But unlike Sor Juana, Marte's tone is stern; for she speaks from the position of a Black woman who has *felt*, in the flesh, the heavy burden that oppressive systems have placed on people of color for centuries, laying out the personal narrative of her performed testimonio. "Like my grandmother ain't have to stomach

burying more than one Black son" (1:42), Marte sadly reveals a personal experience while alluding to the high mortality rate among young Black men, situating this experience within a larger collective struggle. And as she approaches her desahogo, she switches to an even angrier tone to end her performance with a loud, choleric "Why. Are. You. So. Freaking. Maaad!" (3:15). In her restoring ending, Marte reproaches White feminists who dismiss the critiques of women of color without untangling the roots and the effects of racism in their feminism, and without understanding the reasons behind this exasperating anger.

At times, this anger is even hard to understand for members of the Black community. Dawn Lundy Martin (2016) analyzes her own mother's dismissal of the rage of Black protesters. Martin's mother, an older Black woman born in the Jim Crow South, is bothered by protesters' "displays of 'excessive vulnerability'" (2016), a vexation Martin attributes to the trauma suffered by her mother, a wound that is best not to remember. Her mother does not want to be reminded of lynchings, the KKK, or the Black boys shot by the police. And still, "folks want to know, why are you so enraged, what is causing your pain, why do you act so insane?" (2016), Martin asserts.

These forms of deep seeded trauma is what Elizabeth Acevedo (2016) discusses in her spoken word performance "Hair," using African hair as a metaphor to illuminate the vestiges of the same historical violence Martin's (2016) mother tries to suppress. Acevedo (2016) begins her act with what appears to be an inconsequential comment about her mother asking her to "fix" her Afro-textured hair, to "straighten it," to "whiten it" (0:15), to camouflage the deep historical trauma caused by slavery and oppression that the curls convey. While Acevedo begins her performed testimonio by speaking of a personal experience in first person, she switches to a plural point of view right after her

introduction in order to interpose the collective voice in the narrative. "Did they [African cousins in ship bellies] imagine their great-grandchildren would look like us and would hate them how we do, trying to find ways to erase them out of our skin, to iron them out of our hair?" (0:30), Acevedo asks.

While at first glance Acevedo (2016) seems to confront the persistence of Western standards of beauty, a close and careful analysis shows that her performance aims at revealing misery so profound that many have been socialized to forget: "They say Dominicans do the best hair. They can wash, set, flatten the spring in any lock. But what they mean is we're the best at swallowing amnesia" (0:55). In her performed testimonio, Black people have learned to bury sorrows caused by trauma in cups of "morir soñando" (die dreaming).[7] Acevedo claims that some people of color, like Dawn Lundy Martin's mother, have normalized casting aside the trauma, because it is too painful. Avoiding this torment is paramount, so much so that the Black parents in Acevedo's spoken word discourage their daughters from dating Black men in order to circumvent prejudices that will come to the daughters of two Black parents. "What they really mean is 'have you thought of your daughter's hair?'" (1:30), Acevedo states.

Together, the elements of performed testimonios presented here serve as catalysts for social change. When Lozada-Oliva (2015) positions uptalk as a "defense mechanism," she is in fact exposing the ways in which patriarchy impacts the talk of young women. When Frohman (2013) indicates to her beloved to "imagine that [they] are in a sea of smiling faces, even when [they]'re not" (2:55), she is challenging heteronormative ideologies. When Acevedo (2016) utters, "My mother tells me to fix my hair, and so many words remain unspoken. Because all I can reply is, 'You can't fix what was never broken'" (2:02), Acevedo is combating anti-blackness. When

Marte (2018) shouts that "she [White feminism] still doesn't totally understand what the problem is" (3:10), she is taking control of her own feminist rhetorical agency by confronting White feminists who dismiss the critiques of women of color. When after spouting her frustrations, Mercedez Holtry (2015) puts together the pieces of her mixed self, transforming from a monstrous mutt into a beautiful swirl, she is defying prejudices against Chicanas/os/xs. And when Sor Juana asked in her response letter to the Bishop of Puebla, "Where is the evil in my being a woman?" she was demanding an explanation from those who dimissed the value of women.

Each rupture, each desahogo, transforms. Frantz Fanon (2008) believes that the ontological experience of bursting apart our identity helps recover the pieces of the self on our own terms. Through this release, feminist scholar Chela Sandoval (2000) asserts one can "transform the politics of power" (129). By acknowledging systems of oppression in their performed testimonios, the spoken word poets studied here transform the narrative of their own stories. This ability to transform is what Anzaldúa (2012) calls la facultad, which she describes as "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface" (60). Ultimately, possessing this sensitivity allows Lozada-Oliva, Frohman, Holtry, Marte, and Acevedo to resist the condition of *otherness* imposed upon their bodies and reorient their realities on their own terms.

Discussion

The Latinas/xs, Afro-Latinas/xs, and Chicanas/xs in my research perform dynamic, vibrant feminist testimonios with powerful contemporary poetic voices, harvesting the pathos of their cultural experiences, locating them in their socio-political histories. They navigate through their histories, cultures, and identities in order to address matters that concern women who continue

to be affected by the residuals of colonization. This colonial difference is, like María Lugones (2010) suggests, the great variance between mainstream feminism and Latina feminist theories. Therefore, it is crucial to continue to seek decolonial approaches to feminist theories as they yield transformational possibilities that embody "a weave from the fracture locus" and that are never performed alone, for "communities rather than individuals enable the doing" (754). In short, the feminist concerns of women of color, like the performed testimonios in this article, go beyond mere interrogations of gender and gender roles; they mirror multicolored experiences and challenge a hegemonic understanding of gender and racial identities.

In addition to illustrating contemporary Latina feminism epistemologies, the spoken word rhetors in this study make a valuable contribution to the field of rhetoric by centering an oral tradition that deserves to be examined. Rather than addressing feminism in a traditional academic style, the performed testimonios of Melissa Lozada-Oliva, Denice Frohman, Mercedez Holtry, Melania Luisa Marte, and Elizabeth Acevedo dramatize their lived experiences with a wit and acerbity that honors their racial and gender subjectivities, contextualizes their current norms and realities, and subverts dominant ideas that malign or exclude them. In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Diana Taylor (2003) advocates for performances of "embodied memory" that promote rhetorical agency through orality, gestures, and movement (20). The oral knowledge conveyed through performed testimonios, as Taylor argues, is neither the opposite of written knowledge nor the resurgence of an ancient mode. Orality as a system of transmission of knowledge has always been present, mixing with archival written practices, like this article shows. Moreover, performing testimonios "makes visible an entire spectrum of attitudes and values" (49). Through the sound of voices, gestures, and body language, performed

testimonios allow us to examine dimensions unreachable through written knowledge, dimensions that speak directly to our vivid Latina/o/x, Afro-Latina/o/x, and Chicana/o/x cultures.

Conclusion

Over three hundred years have passed since Sor Juana wrote her famous response defending her right to learn and write and to speak through her poetry, and I am unsure about what would astound her more: the bold, vibrant performances of spoken word Latinas/xs, Afro-Latinas/xs, and Chicanas/xs, or that these five performative rhetors are defying the same colonial systems of patriarchy she resisted three hundred years ago. Although her writings do not fully problematize race, Sor Juana left a commendable legacy. Her work not only intersected poetry, drama, rhetoric, and philosophy but it also destabilized gender roles because, to put it mildly, women were not supposed to write in the first place. Countless women have since continued her fight for gender equality, and women of color have fought to reposition the ontological understanding of woman as a bricolage that refuses to be caged in circumscribed concepts of gender and race.

One of the ways that struggle advances is through performed testimonios by Latina/x, Afro-Latina/x, and Chicana/x spoken word poets who interlace the personal, the collective, and the political. Positioning the feminist spoken word performances examined in this article as performed testimonios helps us see the link between the personal experience of the rhetor, the collective struggle of the community to which the rhetor belongs, the liberating desahogo communicated through a vocalized and embodied pathos, and the political agency that the rhetor demands. As delineated here, all the spoken word performers analyzed in this article display the narrative arc introduced earlier (a personal experience, a collective struggle, a cathartic desahogo, and

an ending that explores new possibilities), use voice intonation and body language to maintain an emotional connection with the audience, and exhibit their own style by emphasizing specific elements throughout a performance.

Each body movement, each gesture, each voice inflection in the performances analyzed here seek a dialogue, an emotional connection with the audience. The pathos conveyed through their desahogo serves as an emotional counterclaim to the dominant rhetoric of the oppressor. And this cathartic climax causes a metaphorical explosion that yields healing as these poets deconstruct and reconstruct an identity that eschews colonial, white supremacist, patriarchal, and heteronormative ideologies. Each performed testimonio is an exploration of new, more just possibilities. This article itself is a testimonio of the rhetorical activism inspired by the performed testimonios of these spoken word artists. And echoing Sor Juana, I say that if Aristotle were a young Latina/x, Afro-Latina/x, or Chicana/x, today, he indeed would have a lot more to say.

Notes

[1] Lupercio Leonardo de Argensola was a sixteenth century Spanish poet and playwright.

[2] The speech pattern of rising intonation as if asking questions instead of making statements is known as *uptalk*. According to sociolinguistic Paul Warren (2016), it is a phenomenon perceived as negative because it gives the impression that the person speaking is waiting for reassurance, and it is "typically associated with women" (115). Warren believes that media commentary has caused people to associate uptalk with teenage girls with severe insecurity problems (51).

[3] Jorge Mercado was a gay teenager murdered in Puerto Rico in 2009. Sakia Gunn was a fifteen-year-old lesbian murdered in 2003. Lawrence King was a fifteen-year-old gay boy murdered in 2008.

[4] In "Weary Oracle," Dawn Lundy Martin (2016) narrates an episode of her life when she takes her mother to a student demonstration at Claremont McKenna College. The protest, Martin explains, sought out reparation for "racial slights" boosted by the culture of the school (2016). The young Black woman at the microphone cried and shook as she spoke. Her weary voice didn't only speak about her personal experience, as Martin narrates in her essay. She spoke as a witness of the collective testimonio of Black women who have endured racism for centuries.

[5] According to Ancient Greece history, the high priestess of Delphi performed divination acts during a trance state of mysterious frenzy, similarly to African diviners (Whittaker 1965).

[6] In her seminal work *Borderlands/La frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa (2012) describes the borderlands as an open wound that is constantly bleeding as a result of the region's continuous political and social struggles.

[7] Morir soñando (to die dreaming) is the name of a popular drink in the Dominican Republic.

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