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## **Embodying Truth: Sylvia Rivera's Delivery of *Parrhesia* at the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally**

*Sylvia Rivera is a critical figure in queer and activist rhetorical history. At the Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally in 1973, Rivera engaged in parrhesia to push the movement to include and amplify the voices and needs of the most vulnerable members of the gay community: drag queens, homeless youth, gay inmates in prison and jail, and transgender people. Her delivery, including voice, gesture, and interaction with the audience, emphasizes the truthfulness, frankness, and criticism of her truth. By analyzing Rivera's delivery of parrhesia, this article draws attention to the body's role in speaking the truth as an activist rhetorical act.*

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In 2015, the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery hung a newly acquired portrait: a black and white photograph of Sylvia Rivera sitting at a protest for gay rights.<sup>1</sup> This portrait is the first photograph of an out transgender person to be hung in a Smithsonian museum. Kim Sajet, the director of the gallery, told MSNBC:

At the National Portrait Gallery, we look to include portraits of people who have made a significant impact on American culture. In the aftermath of the Stonewall riots, Sylvia Rivera expanded the gay liberation movement and fought for equal rights for people who embraced different gender identities. (Ring)

Rivera, a Latina transgender woman who had advocated for an inclusive vision of gay liberation and transgender rights for decades, died of liver cancer in 2002. After her death, recognition of Rivera's role in gay and transgender history and activism finally emerged. In addition to her inclusion in the Smithsonian, Rivera's legacy is honored by multiple eponymous awards and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, an organization that advocates for freedom of gender identity and expression.<sup>2</sup>

I aim to expand the emerging attention paid to Rivera's life and legacy by studying her as a skilled rhetor, one who can teach us about the rhetoric of the early gay liberation movement, truth-telling in an activist community, and delivery. To do so, I focus on the text and video of her most famous speech: Her disruption of the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Rally (CSLDR), an annual celebration of the Stonewall riots and the precursor to Gay Pride Parades.<sup>3</sup> Just four years after the Stonewall riots, the gay liberation movement was becoming fractured, and Rivera was

angry that she and her drag queen, homeless gay youth, and sex worker friends were being pushed out of the movement they helped to create. Thus, for Rivera, the 1973 CSLDR was an opportunity to hold the center of the movement—those she describes in her speech as a “white, middle-class, white club”—accountable for their neglect of the most vulnerable members of the gay community (“Y’all Better Quiet Down” 30). The speech is notable in its physicality and delivery: Rivera pushed her way through the crowd, jumped on the stage, and grabbed the microphone to deliver a scathing indictment of the trajectory of gay liberation.

In this article, I study Rivera’s speech at the 1973 CSLDR as *parrhesia*, or truth-telling, and investigate the role of delivery in Rivera communicating her truth. For Rivera, the delivery of her speech underscores the urgency of her truth-telling. The content of her speech cannot be separated from its delivery in that her journey to the stage, her gesture, and her voice all communicate the aggression, anger, and hope of her message. Thus, I argue that *parrhesia* is an embodied phenomenon, one that is marked not only by its content but also by its delivery. Through an analysis of Rivera’s delivery, I highlight the embodied moves and risks of *parrhesic* delivery. By analyzing *parrhesia* through the lens of delivery, I aim to contribute to rhetorical studies a new focus on the role of the body in truth-telling.

To begin, I frame my analysis by reviewing rhetorical scholarship on *parrhesia* and delivery, highlighting how an expanded conceptualization of delivery can heighten rhetorical studies’ understanding of *parrhesia*. I move on to situate the speech within both Rivera’s life as an activist and the gay liberation movement’s early beginnings. Then, I unpack Rivera’s speech and illustrate the embodied elements of Rivera’s performance and delivery of *parrhesia*. I conclude by emphasizing the importance of studying Rivera and other transgender women of color as rhetors and truth-tellers.

### ***Parrhesia* and Delivery in the Rhetorical Tradition**

*Parrhesia* has a long history and rich tradition within rhetoric and philosophy. *Parrhesia* was a highly valued verbal tradition in ancient Greece, specifically Athens, where freedom of speech was seen as a central component of democracy (Colclough 180). For the Greeks, *parrhesia* was intimately linked to Truth, and very often, unwelcome truth directed at the powerful. Building on ancient Greek traditions of *parrhesia*, Michel Foucault outlines five essential characteristics of *parrhesia*: frankness, truth, danger, criticism, and duty. Foucault incorporates all five characteristics in his definition, writing that *parrhesia* is “a verbal activity in which a speaker expresses his personal relationship to truth, and risks his life because he recognizes truth-telling as a duty to improve or help other people (as well as himself)” (19).

Foucault offers a thorough and helpful framework for *parrhesia*. However, Foucault described *parrhesia* in opposition of rhetoric, a claim that classical and modern rhetorical theory contest.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, contemporary rhetoricians have observed the rhetorical strategies involved in *parrhesia*, especially for oppressed and activist rhetors. Two notable examples are David Novak’s article on Malcolm X’s truth-telling as a democratic ideal, and Jonathan Rossing’s article about Richard Pryor’s deployment of humor in his criticism of white supremacy. Novak and Rossing both demonstrate how X and Pryor deploy *parrhesia* in their speeches and stand-up comedy respectively, but neither discuss X’s and Pryor’s well-known and striking delivery. In fact, little attention has been paid to the delivery of *parrhesia* within rhetorical studies.

When discussing delivery generally, classical rhetorical theory prescribes rehearsed gestures and a modulated voice. For example, Cicero's ideal orator has the utmost control over his own body, as he can speak smoothly and with a "pleasant carelessness" (340). Furthermore, Cicero warns rhetors from speaking too vigorously throughout the speech. To do so, he claims, risks "to be a raving madman among the sane, like a drunken reseller in the midst of sober men" (343). Instead, Cicero suggests that rhetors begin calmly and then build up to a vigorous delivery. However, the *parrhesiastes* will often reject Cicero's advice: After all, truth-tellers do not necessarily seek applause, but rather, accountability, and thus, the delivery may violate expectations and standards of "pleasant carelessness." This can be especially true for activists who intentionally violate expectations of delivery and control for argumentative purposes. Consider, for example, Michael J. Fox campaigning for stem-cell research in 2006, his Parkinson's-related movements defying Cicero's advice for controlled gesture yet persuasively serving Fox's argumentative purposes (Quackenbush). For activists and *parrhesiastes*, then, breaking with expectations of delivery can amplify the transgressive nature of their *parrhesia*.

Recent rhetorical scholarship has expanded upon classical approaches to delivery, broadening the canon of delivery to encompass more than gesture and voice (Porter, 2009; Buchanan, 2003; Ridolfo & DeVoss, 2009). To better understand the strategies and risks Rivera undertook in her speech, I turn to Lindal Buchanan's expanded and contextual definition of delivery. In *Regendering Delivery: The Fifth Canon and Antebellum Women Rhetors*, Buchanan writes, "[d]elivery involves far more than a speaker's use of voice, gesture, and expression on a public platform; it involves complex interplay among a speaker, an audience, and a plethora of social and ideological factors" (3). The interplay between audience and speaker is especially crucial in *parrhesia*, I argue, as the truth-teller directs their criticism toward a potentially hostile—and often more powerful—audience. Furthermore, Buchanan urges rhetoricians to take note of social and ideological factors surrounding the delivery. She thus argues for a "socially situated fifth canon," one that

might examine who is permitted or denied access to the public platform as well as how rhetors obtain an education to prepare for public speaking. It might identify the types of rhetorical constraints imposed upon particular groups in particular contexts as well as the strategies devised by groups to honor, circumvent, or revise those constraints. (3)

Again, Buchanan's concept of delivery enables rhetoricians to study how truth-tellers must often reject standards of decorum and create their own public platform, especially when their audience proves to be uninterested or threatened by the speech. Buchanan calls for rhetoricians to acknowledge the ways rhetors—and particularly women rhetors—operate within and against constraints imposed upon certain groups.

By reading Rivera's *parrhesia* through the lens of delivery, I aim to highlight the body's role in sharing her truth with an initially unreceptive audience. Her rhetorical delivery did not begin with her first utterance, but instead, when she fought her way through the crowd and climbed onto the stage. But before I analyze Rivera's speech and delivery, we must understand the rhetorical situation that led to such a contested and conflicted moment in gay liberation history, and furthermore, how Rivera's life shaped and was shaped by gay liberation—an inclusive term used to describe the 1960s and 1970s political organizing for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and non-gender-conforming people.<sup>5</sup>

### **Sylvia Rivera's Early Life and Gay Liberation**

Rivera's truth was formed by challenges—she left home at the age of ten, performing sex work, using drugs, and dealing with police harassment—but her life was not tragic. Rivera established a strong community amongst other drag queens and sex workers, including her best friend Marsha P. Johnson. As her friends gathered to find shelter and drugs, they discussed their political and material realities: “[W]e’d be getting high or something and we’d start talking politics. We’d start talking politics and about when things were going to change for us as human beings” (Rivera “Queens in Exile” 74). These discussions grew into activism.<sup>6</sup> In 1970, Rivera and Johnson launched STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries), an organization that offered both service and advocacy for homeless queer youth. Though STAR was short-lived, activists and scholars note its legacy.<sup>7</sup>

Before the birth of STAR, Rivera participated in the Stonewall Riots, a moment in gay liberation history in which different factions—gay men, lesbians, drag queens, and transgender people—united against homophobia and state violence. For the protestors, the police raid and resulting riot at Stonewall Inn was the catalyst for mobilization for an ongoing movement toward gay liberation. Immediately after the Stonewall riots, gay rights groups rose to prominence, including the radical anti-capitalist, anti-racist Gay Liberation Front (GLF) and the more assimilationist, incremental civil rights National Gay Task Force. The GLF splintered into small factions, including the Gay Activist Alliance (GAA), STAR, and the Lesbian Feminist Liberation (LFL) (Meyers 165). Chief among the LFL's complaints was the participation of drag queens in gay liberation. At the 1973 CSLDR, LFL members passed out flyers accusing drag queens of mocking women for entertainment.

As the GLF splintered into smaller and smaller factions, the better-funded National Gay Task Force grew in power and funding. Their assimilationist approach to gay rights became increasingly popular; thus, Rivera was determined to resist the exclusion of drag queens, transgender people, homeless youth, sex workers, jail and prison inmates, and people of color from gay liberation.<sup>8</sup> As major gay organizations mobilized around a “more limiting vision of the acceptable ‘gay’,” Rivera and her band of street transvestites were increasingly pushed to the margins of the movement (Cohen 160). Therefore, gay liberation became increasingly fractured, with radical feminist lesbians and assimilationist gay organizations both proposing a future for gay liberation that excluded Rivera and members of STAR.

The CSLDR's organizing committee knew about the emerging tensions between mainstream gay organizations, the people of STAR, and radical feminist lesbians and wanted to avoid conflict at the event. Thus, the CSLDR Committee “did its utmost to ensure a harmonious march and rally, by focusing on entertainment and choosing two speakers (Morris Kight and Barbara Gittings) considered unembroiled in NYC's fractious infighting” (Cohen 155). The 1973 CSLDR was the third annual commemoration of the Stonewall riots and saw its biggest turn out yet: Organizers estimated that twenty-thousand people had attended (Darton). From the outside, the march and rally, with a roster full of singers and musicians, looked to be a day of music, unity, and fun (Darton). Indeed, activist Barbara Gittings greeted marchers from the stage by cheering, “we meet in unity to enjoy our diversity!” (Clendinen and Nagourney 171). The mood was decidedly celebratory, which Rivera would soon challenge in her speech.

### **Rivera's Moment of Truth-Telling**

In this section, I move to my analysis, unpacking how Rivera's delivery—specifically, interactions with the audience, her voice volume, gesture, and the speech's aftermath—rewrote the CSLDR

to be a day of vulnerability and accountability. As a participant of Stonewall, active member of GLF, and co-founder of STAR, Rivera was frustrated about her absence from the CSLDR's program. Since she was not invited to speak, Rivera had to fight her way through the crowd, climb onto the stage, interrupt emcee Vito Russo, and wrestle the microphone away from him.

From the start of Rivera's speech, her delivery was confrontational and aggressive, and her body bares the violence she faces in ascending to the podium. As Rivera later recounts, "I had to battle my way up on the stage and literally get beaten up and punched around by people I thought were my comrades, to get to that microphone" (qtd. in Shepard 127). Buchanan reminds rhetoricians that delivery does not begin with the speech itself but with the act of getting onto the podium—a more difficult task for marginalized rhetors speaking to a reluctant audience. Thus, Rivera's delivery is marked by violence and confrontation before she even enters onto the stage. The recording shows that the crowd was not happy about Rivera's interruption. Much of the audience came to celebrate and dance, so Rivera's sudden appearance on the stage threatened the intended joyous tone of the event. Rivera is made aware of embodied risks of *parrhesia* before she even begins her speech; multiple accounts describe her as "beaten" or "bloodied" by the time she climbed upon the stage (Rivera, Shepard). Before Rivera utters a single word, her delivery highlights the urgency of her *parrhesia*: Neither her absence from the official schedule nor the violence and dejection from the crowd can stop her from getting on stage.

Once Rivera claims the microphone, she uses her body to physically distance herself from her audience. This distance is a crucial aspect of Rivera's truth, and she uses gesture to emphasize the divisions between herself and the audience. For almost one minute before addressing the crowd, Rivera walks around the stage, waves her hand dismissively to the audience, and then stands defiantly with her hand on her hip. As the crowd continues to yell at her, Rivera begins her speech loudly, speaking directly into the microphone. She responds to the crowd's antagonism with her own: "I've been trying to get up here all day, for your gay brothers and your gay sisters in jail! They're writing me every motherfuckin' week and ask for your help, and you all don't do a god damn thing for them" (Rivera "Y'all Better Quiet Down").<sup>9</sup> A central claim in Rivera's speech is that those present at the CSLDR should be caring for gay people abused by state violence, and that their inaction is the cause of the community's rift. Therefore, Rivera immediately contradicts the performance of unity that permeated the CSLDR through gesture and movement, setting the stage for Rivera's accusations and demands for accountability.

As she launches into her truth, Rivera points her finger at the audience repeatedly, emphasizing who is responsible for the problem she is describing. Her pointing is dynamic; she points to the audience, often emphasizing each "you" she shouts. Then, Rivera's arm rests for a second, only for her to lift her hand again and point at the audience. At times, her wrist is relaxed as she points at the audience; other times, especially as her volume ramps up, her fist is rigid as her index finger points directly to the crowd. Each time she points, Rivera underscores her accusations of silence and inaction that she shouts into the microphone. Rivera's gestures amplify the criticism of her *parrhesia*, highlighting the anger and frustration Rivera feels toward her audience. Quintilian writes of the importance of hand gesture, stating that "with our hands we ask, promise, call persons to us and send them away, threaten, supplicate, intimate dislike or fear; with our hands we signify joy, grief, doubt, acknowledgment, penitence, and indicate measure, quantity, number, and time" (Book 11, Chapter 3). Rivera appears to understand the significance of hand gesture in her speech, pointing aggressively to her audience to punctuate each "you" in her opening statement. Intent on signifying the difference between herself and her audience, Rivera violates a long-standing rule of Western decorum to avoid pointing and thus further holds her audience accountable for their neglect of STAR and the people it serves.<sup>10</sup>

Rivera's gestures are accompanied by her voice—booming, hoarse, and unforgiving. The interplay between audience and rhetor shapes the delivery: As the crowd continues to boo Rivera after her opening statement, Rivera is forced to shout over the jeers. Her brashness directly contrasts with the expected upbeat mood of the event. Slightly bent forward with a voice that grows louder and louder, Rivera scolds the audience for their neglect of some of the most marginalized members of their community: “And they [gay and transgender inmates in prison] write STAR, not the women’s group. They do not write women. They do not write men. They write STAR, because we’re trying to do something for them” (“Y’all Better Quiet Down” 30). Her vigorous style—she is still shouting and pointing—amplifies her criticism of the audience as she prompts them to reflect on their community’s *ethos*: If incarcerated gay and transgender folks are not turning to the gay liberation movement, whom does the movement represent? Rivera pushes her audience to expand their definition of gay liberation to include the bodies of those who cannot be in the audience—those in prison and jail. Rivera’s truth-telling not only engages in criticism, which threatens to expose the hierarchies and injustices within the burgeoning liberation movement, but it also redefines the situation for the audience. No longer a lively party for the gay community, Rivera’s volume and tone transform CSLDR into a moment of *parrhesia*, accountability, shaming, and criticism.

Rivera’s delivery is vividly emotional throughout her speech, but when she describes her own experience with jail and assault, her rage boils over. After Rivera describes the plight of STAR members, she engages in both the frankness and truthfulness aspects of *parrhesia*. She raises her voice, sometimes crescendoing to a hoarse scream with her mouth wide open, and recounts her personal connections to incarceration and the gay liberation movement:

I have been to jail. I have been raped and beaten many times, by men, heterosexual men that do not belong in the homosexual shelter. But do you do anything for them? No! You all tell me, go and hide my tail between my legs. I will no longer put up with this shit. I have been beaten. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail. I have lost my job. I have lost my apartment for gay liberation, and you all treat me this way? What the fuck’s wrong with you all? Think about that! (“Y’All Better Quiet Down” 30)

Rivera employs directness and frankness to account for the abuse she has suffered at the hands of various oppressors—rapists, police, prisons, employers—and now, the gay liberation movement. Rivera’s voice punctuates the harshness of her truth, with her volume increasing as she lists the brutal treatment she has received, emphasizing each “I” in the list: “I have lost my job. I have had my nose broken. I have been thrown in jail.” As she yells low and loud to the crowd, Rivera’s voice becomes grave. By shouting each “I,” she situates herself as a victim and a survivor, a woman who has overcome brutal treatment to bare her truth to an unwilling and unwitting audience. Rivera frankly outlines her experiences with violence and discrimination without apology, bolstering her credibility as an authoritative truth-teller on oppression.

Rivera’s raw emotional delivery communicates her “outlaw emotions,” emotions that are transgressive and inappropriate for the situation yet yield insight on the realities of oppression (Jaggar). Here she is, at a rally intended to bring people together through epideictic speeches and music, yelling about her own rape without shame or apology. With her frank delivery and her words, Rivera challenges the celebratory atmosphere and forces the audience to witness the violence enacted upon her body and her wellbeing. Rivera violates all expectations of decorum

in the rhetorical situation, striking out against the carefully constructed program organized to ensure peace among the different factions of gay liberation. She will not hold back her truth or her anger, even if they threaten the civility and joviality of the rally—the mark of a true truth-teller. For the first time, the audience responds with modest applause. Perhaps the crowd is so moved by Rivera's commitment to gay liberation—a cause that benefits the entire community—that they briefly feel aligned with her and her quest for an inclusive gay liberation.

Now that Rivera's audience seems to be listening and receptive, her delivery shifts from a stance of anger to hope as Rivera invites her audience to visit STAR and learn more about its work. Her voice is steady as she recites the address of STAR, inviting her audience to visit the STAR house and support STAR's efforts. In her conclusion, Rivera continues to move toward unity: "I believe in us getting our rights or else I would not be out there fighting for our rights" ("Y'all Better Quiet Down"). For the first time in her speech, Rivera associates herself with her audience through the use of first person plural pronouns, a move that signals her position within the movement and investment in the progress of the entire gay community: "I believe in *us* getting *our* rights." As she transitions to unity, Rivera's voice is warmer—she displays a sincere eagerness to connect with her audience, despite their previous neglect of Rivera and STAR. Though angry, Rivera is also motivated by hope: hope that the gay liberation movement will devote themselves to STAR's work of serving the most exploited members of the gay community.

Even as Rivera seeks identification, she never abandons her role as *parrhesiastes* as reflected by her voice volume and gesture. Rivera follows her invitation with fiery passion for both STAR and gay power. After inviting the crowd to stop by STAR, Rivera shouts at the audience again as she describes STAR as "the people who are trying to do something for all of us and not men and women that belong to a white, middle-class, white club" ("Y'all Better Quiet Down" 30). Rivera, I believe, understands that alliance and community must be built on truth, and thus continues to harshly and vividly deliver *parrhesia* even as she seeks connection with her audience. Rivera never eases on holding her audience accountable, yelling and pointing in her most overt move toward unity.

Despite Rivera's last criticism of her audience—as the "white, middle-class, white club"—the crowd demonstrates support and affirmation to Rivera by the end of her speech. Rivera leverages the audience's sudden enthusiasm by leading them in a chant. Loudly, eagerly, and proudly, Rivera leads the crowd in a call-and-response to spell out gay power: "REVOLUTION NOW! Give me a G! Give me an A! Give me a Y! Give me a P! Give me an O! Give me a W! Give me an E! Give me an R! GAY POWER! Louder! GAY POWER!" ("Y'all Better Quiet Down Now" 30–31). When watching this moment on video, I make two observations: the audience's participation and Rivera's exhaustion. This is the same audience that beat her and shouted at her to "shut the fuck up," but four minutes into Rivera's speech, they are cheering her on as she shouts "Revolution now!" They join the chant, each letter booming with resounding volume from the audience. Just seconds ago, Rivera reminded her audience that they are all members of a "white, middle-class, white club," but the differences are momentarily put aside as the rhetor and audience join together to spell out their community's ethos and goal: gay power. Though their visions of gay power may differ, both Rivera and her audience are united by a shared interest in gay rights and a thriving gay community. Rivera has redefined Gay Power and Revolution to include the movement's outcasts and STAR, and after four minutes of passionate truth-telling, the audience accepts Rivera's expanded vision.

While the crowd responds to Rivera's call with lively shouts, Rivera herself appears to be exhausted, weighed down from the work of speaking her truth to an initially unwelcoming audience. Rivera chants into the microphone, her voice breaking as she orders the audience to



join her in spelling out gay power. She nearly loses her voice, unable to finish the first “gay power!” as she bends over with a small smile on her face. The crowd finishes the chant for her, calling out “gay power!” Energized by the crowd, Rivera stands back up, shouting “Louder! Gay Power!” before leaving the stage. This moment illustrates the final component of Foucault’s model for *parrhesia*: duty. For Foucault, the truth-teller is motivated by “moral duty instead of self-interest and moral apathy” (20). Rivera clearly feels a moral duty to speak her truth, beginning her speech by censuring her audience for making her fight her way to the stage. Rivera is compelled to face danger and claim the stage out of a sense of responsibility to her truth, her cause, and her friends. Furthermore, Rivera’s physical demeanor demonstrates the sacrifices she makes in order to engage in *parrhesia*: she is both bloody and exhausted. Motivated by a moral duty above all else, Rivera prioritizes truth-telling over her own physical and mental wellbeing.

It is impossible to ignore Rivera’s desperation, anger, and vulnerability when watching the video footage of the speech. Historians Dudley Clendinen and Adam Nagourney<sup>11</sup> describe Rivera’s affective delivery, noting that her “voice, sometimes effeminate and soft, was a screech today, so loud and distorted through the hand-held microphone that some of what he [sic] said was lost to the crowd” (171). Indeed, Rivera’s speech is an emotional one, and furthermore, her emotions—anger, sadness, disgust, and hope—redefine the rhetorical situation. While much of classical rhetorical training instructs the rhetor to analyze the audience and put forth an appropriate response, Rivera defies expectations of appropriate delivery. The event planned to foster feelings of pride and triumph within the gay community, but Rivera instead leverages her anger into a powerful, transgressive delivery, radically shifting the tone and disrupting purpose of the rally. Rivera reformulates the emotional tenor of the situation, and thus, the situation itself.

### The Physical Toll of *Parrhesia*

The mood of the CSLDR had now shifted thanks to Rivera. In response, others jumped on stage to express their frustrations with gay liberation. After Rivera finished her remarks, she, visibly exhausted, returned the microphone to Vito Russo. However, Jean O’Leary, representing the LFL, quickly stole the microphone and demanded an opportunity to address the crowd. O’Leary never responded to Rivera’s comments about STAR or the movement’s exclusive politics; instead, she misgendered Rivera as “a man” and denounced drag queens (a category that, for O’Leary, included transgender woman like Rivera) as “female impersonators” who “insult women . . . for entertainment or profit.” Immediately after, activist Lee Brewster jumped on stage in full drag and grabbed the microphone. Brewster chastised the LFL for ignoring the fact that today’s celebration “was the result of what the drag queens did at the Stonewall” (qtd. in Clendinen and Nagourney 172). Rivera’s re-routing of the epideictic moment through *parrhesia* revealed the multiple tensions in the movement: Radical feminist lesbians, professional gay organizations, drag queens, and STAR were all divided on the direction and definition of gay liberation.<sup>12</sup> Rivera’s battle to the stage and then O’Leary’s comments coupled to make one thing very clear: despite the unified chanting at the end of Rivera’s speech, Rivera was not welcomed in the emerging gay liberation movement.

Scholars of *parrhesia* have overlooked the high cost of truth-telling on the body, heart, and soul. Foucault speaks of external danger but not the sacrifice required of a truth-teller. Even though Rivera’s “gay power” chant may have suggested unity at the CSLDR, it was only in the moment. After that day, the gay movement became increasingly focused on the needs of white, middle-class gay men and lesbians. As Cohen writes,

By the mid-seventies social, personal, and economic revolutions had given way to an incremental gay civil rights agenda promoted by professional organizations. This more limiting vision of the acceptable “gay” left little room for transgender youngsters. Many gay liberation youth groups disappeared. (160)

For Rivera, fighting to speak at the CSLDR marked a turning point, the moment when she realized she was no longer a part of the movement she had helped to build: “I literally had to fight my way up onto that stage. I was beat. I got to speak. I said my piece. And I basically left the movement for many years” (“Queens in Exile” 53). Though support for STAR and Rivera appeared to have been achieved during the Rivera’s call-and-response, Rivera left the movement. This marginalization by her fellow gay community took a toll. In 1974, she attempted suicide, resulting in sixty stitches on her arm (Rivera “Queens in Exile” 82). Rivera’s departure from gay liberation illustrates how truth-telling can take its toll on the *parrhesiastes*.

Other scholars and activists have discussed and expressed the emotional toll of fighting injustice. Ralph Turner and Lewis Killian describe exhaustion within activist settings as “combat fatigue”—the “wear and tear of participating in a continuing struggle” (363). Most famously, Civil Rights community organizer Fannie Lou Hamer exclaimed, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired” (62). Hamer speaks to the enervation of facing oppression on a daily basis, and Rivera’s physical demeanor during the speech and her declining wellness afterwards demonstrate the intense pressure felt by oppressed truth-tellers during and after *parrhesia*. In 1973, Rivera was moved by a sense of moral duty to take to the stage and face the consequences of speaking her truth to her own community, but continuing in that role would have meant sacrificing her safety, health, and sense of self.

Rivera’s departure from the mainstream gay liberation movement did not mark a departure from her activism and advocacy as a whole. STAR thrived in the early 1970s, disappeared for some time, and then was resurrected in the 1990s. She never ceased advocating for queer youth of color, homeless youth, sex workers, and drug users. Rivera eventually rejoined the gay rights movement; twenty years later, she re-established her role as truth-teller, this time directing her criticism toward corporation-style LGBT organizations such as the Human Rights Campaign. Indeed, she felt moved by duty to the transgender community until her death from liver cancer in 2002. In a personal essay, Rivera reflects, “Before I die, I will see our community given the respect we deserve. I’ll be damned if I’m going to my grave without having the respect this community deserves. I want to go to wherever I go with that in my soul and peacefully say I’ve finally overcome” (“Queens in Exile” 87). She was true to her word, negotiating for the inclusion of transgender people in the Empire State Pride Agenda while on her deathbed (Klebine).

### Future Directions

By studying Rivera’s speech, we can expand our understandings of both *parrhesia* and delivery. Furthermore, we can continue Buchanan’s call for a regendered fifth canon, one that “permits feminist scholars to examine the immediate temporal and material issues confronting the rhetor as well as the overarching social and ideological factors enacted, resisted, or revised by her in the act of public speaking” (10). By examining *parrhesia* through the lens of regendered delivery, rhetoricians can investigate how truth-tellers navigate various material and ideological forces that shape the content and delivery of the truth. For in Rivera’s case, the violence and resistance she faced upon entering the stage shaped her tone, her argument, her voice, and her gesture. I see the continued study of Rivera, *parrhesia*, and delivery contributing to rhetorical studies in two important ways.

First, future study of Rivera and other transgender women of color, such as her best friend and co-organizer Marsha P. Johnson, is needed to reconceptualize delivery in expansive and inclusive ways. In K. J. Rawson's chapter "Queering Feminist Rhetorical Canonization," Rawson envisions approaches to feminist rhetorical canonization that challenge the gender binary and make space for feminist rhetoric outside gender normative boundaries. He argues, "Recovery efforts could focus on figures who have engaged in gender advocacy or on work that supports free expression and embodiment for an infinite range of genders, supporting true freedom of gender expression" (47). Indeed, by framing Rivera as a skilled rhetorician, a producer of feminist rhetoric that "supports free expression and embodiment for an infinite range of genders," we can examine how activists like Rivera circumvent, remix, affirm, and dismantle gendered expectations of delivery and re-envision simplistic binaries such as "feminine and masculine" delivery, a question I did not explore in this article. Furthermore, by centering rhetors like Rivera, a poor transgender woman of color, we are forced to interpret how race and class intersect with gender and embodiment in the invention and delivery of rhetoric.

Second, focusing on delivering *parrhesia* enables rhetorical scholarship to locate and analyze the connections of rhetoric and survival. When Rivera spoke to the crowd at the 1973 CSLDR, she was speaking with urgency because she needed the audience's collaboration and support for her community to survive. So often, truth-tellers choose to face danger because they see truth as intrinsically tied to their survival. Rivera and her friends—homeless street youth, sex workers, and drug users—faced state violence on a daily basis by police officers and within jail and prison. For Rivera, the resolve of her speech is cultivated by the necessity of an inclusive caring community, one in which the most privileged members support the most vulnerable members. By studying improvised moments of *parrhesia* by marginalized rhetors, we can better understand the relationship between survival and the rhetorical canons. How do rhetors embody their truth when they feel as though their bodies are threatened before, during, and after the moment of *parrhesia*?

Outside of rhetorical studies, studying the physical toll of *parrhesia* within activist communities can prompt activists to nurture truth-tellers who hold the community accountable. After her truth-telling, Rivera attempted suicide and then left gay organizing. This case study reveals that the gains of *parrhesia* can be short-lived, and that the risks may outweigh the potential rewards. The battle scars from that day were etched upon Rivera, impacting future rhetorical and activist actions—including her silence for decades. Rivera's speech illustrates the dire consequences of truth-telling when survival is on the line. What models can activist communities create to support and foster truth-telling? How can activists create spaces that allow for *parrhesia* and support simultaneously? For though truth-telling requires danger, perhaps the *parrhesiastes* need not bear the burden alone. Instead, activists can build communities of communal sacrifice, love, and interdependence, communities that welcome, affirm, and respond to harsh truths.

In many ways, Rivera's speech could be deemed a failure. Though the audience joined her chant, the growing gay liberation movement—today known as the LGBT movement—never heeded her call. Rivera observed this in a 2001 interview, arguing "I see us [LGBT community] reverting into a so-called liberated closet because we—not we, you of this mainstream community—wish to be married, wish for this status. That's all fine. But you are forgetting your grass roots, you are forgetting your own individual identity" (Rivera "Bitch on Wheels" 37). But failure—especially a queer rhetorical failure—need not be a tragic ending. As Judith Halberstam writes in the book *The Queer Art of Failure*, "Under certain circumstances, failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world" (2). And today, we can see how Rivera's speech inspires alternative ways of making and being in the world, especially for transgender activists. Since the video of the speech was uploaded to *Vimeo*, a video hosting service on the Internet, by Reina

Gossett, it has been viewed 60,900 times within four years. And the video continues to be shared widely. Prominent transgender writer and activist Janet Mock often tweets out the link to the video of Rivera's 1973 CSLDR (Gossett). For Mock and other contemporary transgender activists, Rivera's 1973 speech offers new futures, possibilities, and calls to action.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> I thank *RR* reviewers Alexandra Cavallaro and Belinda Southard for their supportive and constructive feedback. Many thanks to Michelle Murray Yang for encouraging me to write this paper in her seminar, and to Jessica Enoch for reading countless revisions of this essay.

<sup>2</sup> CUNY's Center for LGBT Studies (CLAGS) and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project both give out awards named after Rivera.

<sup>3</sup> This article, and many other recent texts about Rivera, would not be possible without the committed labor of Reina Gossett, the activist, archivist, and filmmaker who collected archival material about Rivera, Johnson, and STAR—including the 1973 CLDS speech— and published it on the Internet.

<sup>4</sup> Both ancient Greek philosophers and Foucault described *parrhesia* as in opposition to rhetoric. Michael A. Peters asserts that “unlike rhetoric, which provides the speaker with technical devices to help him persuade an audience, covering up his own beliefs, in *parrhesia*, the speaker makes it manifestly clear what he believes” (Peters 212). Foucault makes a similar claim: “[I]n the Socratic-Platonic tradition, *parrhesia* and rhetoric stand in a strong opposition.” However, Arthur E. Walzer defends rhetoric's claim of *parrhesia* by tracing a tradition of sincere yet artful *parrhesia* in classical texts such as Plato's *Gorgias*, Isocrates's *To Nicocles*, and the *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*.

<sup>5</sup> Cohen writes, “For Rivera, ‘gay’ meant non-heteronormative (or ‘queer’ in today's lexicon), crossing sexual and gender boundaries to include lesbians, gay men, and transvestites, as well as street youth who had participated in Stonewall” (2). Rivera's usage of the term gay as an umbrella term illustrates her approach to gay liberation as a movement and community for all non-heteronormative people. In this paper, I similarly use the terms “gay liberation” and “gay community” to identify the beginning LGBT movement.

<sup>6</sup> I will be writing about Rivera and Johnson's friendship as a form of disability activism in my dissertation. Using feminist and queer archival methodologies, I will demonstrate how Rivera and Johnson modeled the importance of interdependence, care, and survival in activism.

<sup>7</sup> Stephan L. Cohen writes, “STAR did more than shelter homeless transvestite youth and adults. It provided a political platform, lent legitimacy to non-traditional gender expression, and formalized a transgender identity” (161). Underscoring STAR's historical significance to transgender history, Michael Bronski observes, “out of almost nothing Sylvia and Marsha essentially started what was to become, more than 20 years later, the transgender movement we know today” (qtd. in Cohen 93).

<sup>8</sup> Indeed, as Mark Stein documents, the debate around the inclusion of street transvestites and drag queens ran rampant, “with some gay and lesbian activists expressing concern about negative responses to trans visibility and others arguing that trans liberation was integral component of, and necessarily linked to, gay and lesbian liberation” (113). Stein also writes that in San Francisco that same year, there were two gay pride events: one welcoming and another excluding transgender people (113).

<sup>9</sup> For Rivera, the criminal justice system's treatment of young gay people is personal. Gay homeless youth, especially sex workers and drug users, interacted with law enforcement frequently. Rivera herself had been arrested and jailed for heroin possession. Furthermore, at the time, people perceived to be dressed not according to their biological sex could be arrested in New York, exposing drag queens and street transvestites to increased harassment and arrest by police officers (“Arresting Dress”).

<sup>10</sup> It's important to note that the “no pointing rule” is not universal. For example, pointing is a grammatical feature in American Sign Language and considered acceptable in Deaf culture in the United States.

<sup>11</sup> Clendinen and Nagourney provide one of the more thorough accounts of the day. However, they also constantly misgender Rivera in their book, ignoring that Rivera used feminine pronouns throughout her adolescent and adult life.

<sup>12</sup> Multiple accounts report that the hostility among the factions was only tempered by an impromptu performance by Bette Midler (Clendinen and Nagourney; Stein).

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