This project explores the difficulty of putting language to physical pain, particularly when that pain is chronic. The American medical system seeks to obtain objective knowledge in the diagnosis and treatment of illness. Unfortunately, pain cannot be measured in a completely objective way. Pain is an unavoidably subjective experience, as is its communication. This project begins with a theoretical narrative that explores the rhetoric of pain – how we define, discuss and diagnose it – within Western medical practices today. I reveal how the gendered objectification of pain descriptions, and of the body itself, can be traced to the gendered dichotomization and Platonization of classical rhetoric. I expose how an objectivist view of knowledge manifests itself today in the discriminatory treatment of women in pain, and, more specifically, their rhetorics of pain.

Employing Ernesto Grassi and Kenneth Burke’s writing on humanism and metaphor, as well as Elaine Semino’s study of patient pain reports, I argue for a more humanist, “embodied” and poetic rhetoric of pain.

I then craft a new rhetoric based upon my own experiences with chronic pain. What results is a hybrid genre of memoir, autobiographical critique, and poetry that is informed by and woven with research on the rhetoric of pain, medical reports, as well as artistic performances of pain (in particular, the works of the painter Frida Kahlo). Ultimately, I seek to demonstrate – through both research and creative practice -- the need for and power of a more humanist and poetic rhetoric of pain; such a shift in our conception of pain rhetoric would transform how we understand and respond to those who suffer.