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# Queering Adrienne Rich: The Poetics of Radical Thought and Transformative Vision

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QUEERING ADRIENNE RICH:  
THE POETICS OF RADICAL THOUGHT AND TRANSFORMATIVE VISION

An Honors Thesis  
Presented to the Department of English  
Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By  
Justin Ameen Hoden  
Lewiston, Maine  
March 28<sup>th</sup>, 2018

*One afternoon Gregory Corso came to visit...As he was leaving he looked at an old French crucifix hanging over my mat. Beneath the feet of Christ was a skull embellished with the words 'memento mori'. "It means 'Remember we are mortal,'" said Gregory, "but poetry is not." I just nodded.*

– Patti Smith, *Just Kids*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis would not have been possible without Robert Farnsworth, who taught me the importance of my own voice and how to find it; and Therí Pickens, who taught me how to sharpen it and wield it with precision and grace. My gratitude to them, and the many others who helped guide me here extends far beyond the reaches of these pages.

I dedicate this thesis to my grandmother, May Ameen, for all the beauty and love she continues to give to this world, and for all she can never know that she has given.

A note to the reader,

Inspired by a sense admiration for one of the greatest poets of our time, this project has led me to a deep feeling of affection for, and kinship with, Adrienne Rich the individual. If ever I speak of her with a tenderness uncharacteristic of a critical literary thesis it is because of the drive to do her justice that I have felt in the course of composing this paper. At every turn and new interpretive angle of approaching her works I have heard her voice in my head, repeating that often assertively uttered phrase: *you misunderstand me, you misunderstand me*. Rich's crusade for understanding found its way into her professional career both as a method of generating community – to feel less alone – as well as a means through which she came to understand herself. The candid yet profound honesty and clarity with which she navigates the utter chaos of being speaks to me in ways nothing else ever has. I do not believe there is a single word or phrase within her poems and essays that was not scrutinized, ruminated over. It is because of these machinations of her own mind that I have labored to take similar pains in analyzing her writing. Nothing has sustained, inspired, and motivated me more in the course of this undertaking than the gift that is Adrienne Rich's poetry.

## Introduction

*...art [is] as humanly necessary as bread. Art is an activity of the spirit and when we lose track of what makes an art an art, we lost track of the spirit.*

– Robert Hass, “One Body: Some Notes on Form”

What do you want poetry to be? What is the duty of the poet in society as artist, interpreter? Who does poetry belong to? Throughout the process of immersing myself in the poetry and prose of Adrienne Rich these questions have remained at the forefront of my mind. If we do not ask these questions of ourselves and of the literary establishment itself we risk the damaging possibility of misunderstanding the wealth of knowledge and revelation that is contained within Rich’s writing. Rich had a very particular understanding of the function and potential power of the poetic form, one that was directly informed by the experiences her life gave her. Much like Hass describes in the epigraph, Rich believed poetry to be a very serious artistic practice, one that demands a great deal of the poet as well as her reader. Both of these poets locate the vital nature of poetry in its direct relation to the individual; however, where Hass articulates this in the vague language of the “spirit,” Rich presents an identity-specific interpretation linked to the politicized identities of the author. In the works discussed in this thesis, Rich insisted that her poems be read through the lens of her identity as a woman, and later as a lesbian woman. In recognition of this, I will argue that through Rich’s successes and failures to address racial, gender, and sexuality-based oppression in her works, we are forced to recognize the nuanced ways in which the personal is political and how poetry may function as a form of identity-based resistance and intellectual liberation.

Characterizing Rich's writing in this way is not intended to confine it within a singular genre of 'political poetry,' but rather it is to do justice to her understanding of the form and what she desired of her own writing. Although Rich wrote and spoke about her views of art and politics as being fundamentally inseparable, I believe this sentiment is most forcefully expressed in the essay "Poetry is Not a Luxury" by Rich's friend and literary colleague Audre Lorde. In the essay, Lorde elucidates the connections between poetry and experience and positions experience as fundamentally defined by identity and the sociopolitical value that is attached to different identity groups. She speaks on "poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean...for women, then, poetry is not a luxury."<sup>1</sup> Lorde's words speak directly to the same questions I believe Rich's works force us to confront; namely, those of the ownership of poetry, the uses of poetic language, and how that usage differs across identity groups. We often think of poetry as merely beautiful or aesthetic, or dismiss it on the same grounds; however, poets such as Hass, Lorde, and Rich show us (albeit in uniquely different ways) that there is a decidedly more powerful latent potential within the form.

For Lorde and Rich, this potential is inherently linked to the bearing it has on their individual identities, something that charges their writing not only with passion, but also with the capacity to effect social and political change. Rich describes this in the essay "When We Dead Awaken," as she states the potential for poetry to offer "an imaginative transformation of reality that is no way passive."<sup>2</sup> Lorde also speaks on the potential of imaginative thought in "Poetry is

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<sup>1</sup> Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," *Sister Outsider*, (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 37.

<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 173-4.

not a Luxury” stating, “we rely solely upon our ideas to make us free.”<sup>3</sup> Although speaking from the viewpoints of different racial backgrounds, Rich and Lorde delineate in these essays a belief in the liberating potential of language that is directly linked to their marginal identity status as women. Language is perhaps one of the most uniquely human devices, and it is the instrument with which we give name and meaning to our existence. The challenge that Lorde and Rich collectively pose through their understandings of the poetic form is the need for this poetic language to explore and articulate the unique pains and obstacles they face. Over the course of her career, Rich came to see these challenges as inextricably linked to her identities as a woman, a lesbian, and a Jew. The arc of her personal essays, poems, and public speaking illustrate the struggles of an artist in the pursuit of understanding herself and also the expectations that were forced upon her as a woman writer, as a woman, and as a public voice. For Rich, all roads led to poetry; it was the space in which she found the freedom to examine her own life, speak truth to reality, and offer the possibility for those transformations in collective consciousness that she viewed as so critical for survival.

This is not to position poetry as an uncontested space for the rewriting of reality, indeed one of the most pervasive struggles of Rich’s professional life was with the poetic form and its constraints and limitations. In the essay “Poetry and Poets in the Public Sphere,” Assaf Meydani and Nadir Tsur state in reference to the capacity of poetry to effect political change: “poets are free from the constraints that obligate politicians...[poetry] often originates from the urge to love and be loved, from the need for social recognition.”<sup>4</sup> While this need for social recognition was no doubt a principal concern of Rich’s, the obstacles she faced and described throughout her

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<sup>3</sup> Lorde, “Poetry is not a Luxury,” 37.

<sup>4</sup> Assaf Meydani and Nadir Tsur, “Poetry and Poets in the Public Sphere,” *Israel Affairs* 20, no.2 (2014): 144, accessed February 18, 2018, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13537121.2014.889889>.



career upend the notion of the poet as unilaterally free from constraints. Rich argues for the need to challenge the literary establishment itself so as to develop new language, new possibilities of representing identity outside of mainstream discourses that perpetuate the privileging of some identities over others. Thus, for Rich, poetry became a means of resistance, a way to write her neglected self into existence. She also intended for this writing to move beyond the experiences that were specific to her own life and sought to create community through her continued focus on identity as ground upon which marginalization is based. Her writing directly engaged and challenged normative definitions of womanhood, and allows a great many insights into the potential uses of poetry as a means of subverting dominant political narratives.

As identity came to the forefront of Rich's discussions on political and literary discourse she was increasingly concerned with examining the ways that institutions such as patriarchy and heteronormativity affected not just her own life, but the lives of many others like her. It is on this period of Rich's career that I have elected to focus this thesis, something that has drawn me specifically to the essay "When We Dead Awaken," her poem "From an Old House in America," and collection of poems, *The Dream of a Common Language*. It is in the interplay of these texts that we can come to a nuanced understanding of Rich's contributions to the social movements of her time and what these insights grant us in our present literary discourse. From these works' experimentations, shortcomings, and successes I contend that Rich leads us to understand authenticity as a central means through which writers of marginal identity stand to challenge and dismantle the dominant narratives upon which their oppression is predicated. Authenticity functions here to denote an individual's understanding of themselves and ability to project that into creative works. As Rich shows us, this is especially necessary due to the dearth of writing and self-representation by individuals belonging to traditionally marginalized identities.

Although Rich wrote very directly and intently for women and lesbian women at this moment of her career, this emphasis on the creation of community through solidarity provides an invaluable insight into the mechanisms of oppression and how poetry may combat these mechanisms. From Rich's writing during this period we can understand how both the consumption and production of literary works functions as a form of intellectual liberation; a process that allows an individual to begin to shed the assumptions in which they are drenched, while also providing them with the tools to define their identities on their own terms.

Rich's life, when considered in conjunction with her writings, articulates the uniquely challenging yet profoundly liberating potential of striving for this authentic literary voice while also providing a framework through which we may envision the implications of this focus on authenticity in contemporary understandings of queer theory. The deficiency of representation in mainstream social discourses is something that is shared across the wealth of queer identities, something that has also contributed to the lack of a clearly defined queer tradition. This is not to say that there does not exist legitimate queer critiques of writing that was not produced by 'out' queer writers. There is certainly a vibrant and, no doubt, important movement among queer theorists that is concerned with examining queerness in texts by non-queer identifying authors. In the essay "Queer Theory," Christopher Nealon states in reference to authors such as Walt Whitman and Hart Crane, "it [is] damaging not to read these writers as gay, [and] we [fail] to learn something important about poetic work and poetic language if we [don't]."<sup>5</sup> This method of literary study provides a unique and fascinating insight into the, perhaps, esoteric influence of queerness in the production of literature; however, I have elected to focus on Rich's open

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Nealon, "Queer Tradition," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 14, no.4 (2008): 618, accessed October 17, 2017, DOI 10.1215/10642684-2008-009.

engagement with her sexuality and what it means for queer writers to now live and write openly. It is precisely within this context of an emergent queer tradition of openness that I situate Rich's emphasis on authenticity as a significant critical lens through which to examine queer writing, as well as a means through which queer writers may continue to represent themselves and their realities in a way that offers insight and the potential for liberation of both mind and body.

## Literature Review

*Survival begins when we "translate" our crisis into language – where we give it symbolic expression as an unfolding drama of self and the forces that assail it.*

– Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival*

Adrienne Rich's texts urge that we apply due biographical attention to the position of her works within the chronology of her life. Certain moments, events, and milestones in her life had a profound impact on the literature that she produced, or at least on her intentions for this writing. My purpose here is to highlight the specific aspects of her life that most notably affected and shaped her literary output and, from my perspective as critic, illuminate how we might read her more diligently. Rich was extremely intentional in everything she did, especially in what she wrote. Writing was, for her, a process through which she not only attempted to impart her visions and insights to the world, but also a means through which she sought to make sense of her own life. In many instances, especially in the later writings that are discussed in this paper, Rich had very specific agendas for what she wanted a work of writing to do and how she thought it must be read. In the biography of Rich, *Adrienne Rich* (2005), Amy Sickels describes that as Rich became more politically radical she "essentially told her readers to understand the identity

politics clearly explained in her prose before they made any attempt to read her poetry.”<sup>6</sup> It is through this emphasis on the direct connection between one’s personal life and the writing they produce that Rich simultaneously illustrates the importance of, and performs in her own works, new ways of writing about our lives and the world in which we live.

Rich stated during a 1979 interview with Susan Howe, “I think that it’s a form of propaganda to divide art from politics...politics and art are supposed to be somehow antithetical.”<sup>7</sup> This statement, when considered in conjunction with the above quoted line from Sickels’ biography of Rich, encapsulates the strong political drive that came to inform Rich’s later writing. At nearly every point of her life and career Rich was fixated with, and perhaps at times obsessed with, searching and looking into who we are as humans, how we think, and how we exist in this world. This fervent intellectual hunger often led her to feelings of disillusionment and frustration as she began to understand the ways that she and all women are disadvantaged in Western patriarchal society. Rich would frequently employ the phrase “awakening of consciousness” in her essays, interviews, speeches, and poetry to signal an increasing awareness of the mechanisms of these oppressive forces; and I do not believe any phrase more perfectly captures the constant state of mind that shaped Rich’s writing. Her insatiable desire for truth and understanding would lead her to a firm dedication to, and involvement in, the radical leftist political movements of the late 1960s and 70s. It was during this period of tremendous change in the American national consciousness that Rich found the poetic voice that would define her career. Based on the experiences her life gave her during this time, Rich refused to keep politics out of her poetry, and instead sought to utilize the poetic form to service these political

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Sickels, *Adrienne Rich*, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005), 89.

<sup>7</sup> Adrienne Rich, Interview by Susan Howe, *Pacifica*, [https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Rich/Pacifica-Radio-Archives/Adrienne-Rich\\_Pacifica-Interview-by-Susan-Howe\\_1979.mp3](https://media.sas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Rich/Pacifica-Radio-Archives/Adrienne-Rich_Pacifica-Interview-by-Susan-Howe_1979.mp3).

ambitions. Arriving at this conception of the poetic form was not sudden, but rather the product of a life-long journey that mandates we begin at the very start in order to understand completely what makes Adrienne Rich, Adrienne Rich.

Adrienne Cecile Rich was born on May 16, 1929 to Arnold Rich, an Ashkenazi Jew, and Helen Jones Rich, a Southern Protestant.<sup>8</sup> Rich would later come to view these aspects of her parents' identities as critical to shaping her early life, primarily through her father's suppression of his Jewish identity and stringent conformity to the norms of white middle-class protestant life. Rich's father was a very challenging figure for her throughout her life; he was the first to recognize her talents as a writer, and encouraged her to read and write from a very early age. However, he was also the cause of great internal discord for Rich, and she later found his strict conformity to the norms of a patriarchal, racist, misogynist, and anti-Semitic society utterly stifling. Rich wrote extensively about the challenges of her upbringing throughout her career, yet dedicates the essay "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982) to exploring its complex effects on her. In the course of composing the essay Rich wrote, "I feel belated rage that I was so impoverished by the family and social worlds I lived in...I had never been taught about resistance, only about passing. That I had no language for anti-Semitism itself."<sup>9</sup> This passage illustrates not only the distance that Rich felt from her sense of self as a result of her upbringing, but also the fervent need she felt later in life to uncover these hidden or suppressed aspects of who she was. Rich's need for self-discovery was only further fueled by her father's repudiation of it; she describes how "the Rich women were always tuned down to some WASP level my father believed, surely, would protect us all – maybe make us unrecognizable to the 'real Jews'

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<sup>8</sup> Sickels, *Adrienne Rich*, 6.

<sup>9</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity (1982)," *Blood Bread and Poetry: Selected prose 1979-1985*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 107.

who wanted to seize us, drag us back to the *shtetl*, the ghetto, in its many manifestations.”<sup>10</sup> This compulsory conformity that Rich was subject to during her youth made its way into her early published poems, which are wonderfully composed and utterly conventional. In her first published collection Rich wrote poems that feel as though they originate from a distinct understanding of what subject matter a poet is meant to address, and how those poems ought to be rendered.

Despite this apparent adherence to form and tradition, Rich’s later writings on this period of her life indicate that even at this time she was desiring more from her works and of the poetic form itself. However, it was this specific character of Rich’s early poems that the acclaimed poet and critic W. H. Auden hailed as he judged her winner of the 1951 Yale Younger Poets Competition. In the now infamous forward to Rich’s award-winning collection, *A Change of World* (1951), Auden commended Rich for “display[ing] a modesty not so common at that age,” and went on to claim that “in a young poet, as T. S. Eliot has observed, the most promising sign is craftsmanship for it is evidence of a capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions without which no art is possible.”<sup>11</sup> This commentary by Auden is so striking to many in retrospect, as it is these precise conventions and understandings of poetry that Rich sought to undermine in her later career. Although Auden applauded Rich for writing in this detached way, this was not – even at this time – what she desired her poetry to do. In the essay “Blood Bread and Poetry” (1984), Rich directly describes what this process meant to her:

Poetry soon became more than music and images; it was also revelation, information, a kind of teaching. I believed I could learn from it – an unusual idea for a united states citizen, even a child. I thought it could offer clues, intimations, keys to questions that already stalked me, questions I could not even frame yet: *What is possible in this life?*

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 111.

<sup>11</sup> W. H. Auden, “Forward to *A Change of World*,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 278.

*What does “love” mean, this thing that is so important? What is this other thing called “freedom” or “liberty” – is it like love, a feeling?*<sup>12</sup>

We must understand that for Rich, writing was as much about discovering truth as it was about declaring and describing it. While retrospective writing such as that of this essay may seem to be revisionist history of her own past, we must accept it as a truth; the evolution of her career from this point begs that we do. This passage from “Blood Bread and Poetry” conveys the profound value that Rich ascribed to poetry, and how that value was directly informed by the bearing it had on her own personal life – something Auden would most certainly have scorned.<sup>13</sup>

Shortly after winning the Yale Younger Poets Competition, Rich made what was perhaps one of the most monumental decisions of her life, and would set in motion for her things that could not be reversed: she married Alfred H. Conrad. Rich’s parents strongly condemned the marriage, and for years afterwards she rarely spoke to them. This was because “Alfred descended from an orthodox Eastern European family, and Rich’s parents disapproved not only of his Jewish-ness, but also of his lower social class.”<sup>14</sup> Even in an act as personal as marriage Rich was rebelling against what was expected of her, trying to free herself from that world in which she was raised. This marriage was not just a way for her to distance herself from the world of her parents, but it also became a way for her to better understand herself and her own identity as a Jew. In “Split at the Root,” she wrote, “I longed to embrace that family, that new and mysterious

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<sup>12</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Blood Bread and Poetry (1984),” *Blood Bread and Poetry: Selected prose 1979-1985*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 169.

<sup>13</sup> Despite the otherwise condescending and patronizing tone of Auden’s forward I did notice a rather curious insight that I would be remiss without mentioning. He states that “radical changes...in artistic style can only occur when there has been a radical change in human sensibility to require them” (*Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose* 277). This rather prophetically (if ever unintentionally) seems to capture the essence of Rich’s later works, as they were direct attempts to account for, or argue the necessity of, those radical changes in sensibility.

<sup>14</sup> Sickels, *Adrienne Rich*, 26.

Jewish world.”<sup>15</sup> However, whatever insights or freedom this marriage initially gave Rich quickly gave way to isolation, emotional and professional turmoil, and deep depression. These regressions were very directly brought upon by the birth of her children, which left her feeling utterly confused, frustrated, and simultaneously guilty for the resentment she was beginning to have towards them. In *Adrienne Rich* Amy Sickels remarks that “during this time, the mid-1950s, postnatal depression was still unheard of...as far as Rich knew, she was the only woman on earth who was feeling this way.”<sup>16</sup> However, it was in sorting through these complicated feelings that Rich had towards her marriage, children, and her role as a housewife that she came to some of her most powerful intellectual revelations.

Out of all the feelings of confusion and discontentment with her role as mother and wife, Rich found validation and refuge in the communities of women she had surrounded herself with in her political life. Rich had become very politically involved after moving to New York with her family in 1966; she and Alfred often hosted radical anti-Vietnam and Black-Panther fundraising events in their apartment.<sup>17</sup> However, it was not until she discovered the Women’s Liberation Movement that she began to feel most engaged and empowered. She writes in the forward to *Blood Bread and Poetry*; “I had been looking for the Women’s Liberation Movement since the 1950s. I came into it in 1970...I wanted and needed what this movement was affirming: the solidarity and empowering of women.”<sup>18</sup> The transformative effects of this kinship she was now discovering were compounded by the severity of Rich’s disillusionment with married life. She would later write about this period of time stating, “what frightened me most was the sense

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<sup>15</sup> Rich, “Split at the Root,” 115.

<sup>16</sup> Sickels, *Adrienne Rich*, 32.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>18</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Forward (1986),” *Blood Bread and Poetry: Selected prose 1979-1985*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), vii.



of drift, of being pulled along on a current which called itself my destiny, but in which I seemed to be losing touch with whoever I had been.”<sup>19</sup> As was the case with most things in Rich’s life, a change in thought or feeling demanded a change in action, and she ultimately left her marriage in 1970. Only a few months after this, her husband, Alfred Conrad, rented a car, drove to a field in Vermont, and shot himself.<sup>20</sup> There is no doubt that this tragedy had a powerful effect on Rich, as it does anyone who experiences the suicide of a loved one; and I do believe that Rich loved Alfred in spite of years of discontentment and conflict in their marriage.<sup>21</sup> It was precisely during this time in Rich’s personal and political life that she penned what is perhaps her most renowned collection of poems, and the one that marked a definitive transition in her career; no more would Adrienne Rich write the modest and impersonal poems that Auden and so many others in the literary academy had praised.

*Diving into the Wreck* (1973) is the collection of poems Rich composed from 1971-1972, and in it she wrote the most overtly and unapologetically political poems she had, to that date, ever written. Since the early 70s Rich had become more and more vocal about her political and personal revelations; she published “When We Dead Awaken” in 1971, an essay that emphasizes the importance of, and need for communities of women to uplift each other. The ideas presented in this essay reverberate throughout nearly all of Rich’s later works, and it illuminates the state of mind in which she approached literature at that time and onwards. Although “When We Dead Awaken” appears as a central focus of this paper and *Diving into the Wreck* does not, it is

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<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 173.

<sup>20</sup> Sickels, *Adrienne Rich*, 59-60.

<sup>21</sup> Much vitriol has been cast upon Rich for Alfred’s suicide, in both past and present criticism, to which I can only say that there is no explaining what drives someone, a father no less, to do such a thing. In the second-to-last section of the poem “Sources” (1982) Rich addresses Alfred in what is a stunningly beautiful and profoundly painful piece of writing. If ever there existed a need to prove her love for him, one would find it there.

absolutely vital to examine the title poem of this collection as it marks a transition in Rich's approach to writing that is crucial to understanding her intellectual and poetic transformations. The poem describes a woman diving, very literally, to discover the wreck of a sunken ship; yet it metaphorically traces the journey of a woman in the act of self-discovery. This is an extremely personal journey that the speaker is forced to undertake alone: "I am having to do this / not like Cousteau with his / assiduous team aboard the sun-flooded schooner / but here alone."<sup>22</sup> This journey of the imagined woman is one without a rubric, she must descend to make sense of this wreckage with no guidance but her own curiosity and determination. She has ventured to find "the wreck and not the story of the wreck / the thing itself and not the myth."<sup>23</sup> This process of learning and examining for oneself was of the utmost importance for Rich at this time in her life, as she had during all those years of isolation in marriage, been forced to undergo these journeys of self-discovery on her own. These ideas are a cornerstone of "When We Dead Awaken," and through both texts Rich emphasizes the need to alleviate the pains of this isolation through feminine community and solidarity.

The poem behaves as a metaphor for Rich's own life at this time, and indicates a movement towards a new form of writing that she deems so vitally necessary to change the condition of the lives of all women. The poem concludes, describing the speaker returning once more to this scene of wreckage and confusion:

We are, I am, you are  
by cowardice or courage  
the one who find our way  
back to this scene  
the one carrying a knife, a camera  
a book of myths  
in which

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<sup>22</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 53.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

our names do not appear.<sup>24</sup>

The emphasis of these final lines falls on the book of myths, which acts as a stand-in for the Western literary canon, and the absence of empowered women in its pages. The pronoun uses of “I” and “our” also strike a subtle yet tremendously powerful chord; here, Rich identifies herself as “the female poet,” a move that was challenging for her to make, but had incredible significance for her.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, she has eliminated the separation between poet and speaker, positioning this as a personal poem, but also an experience that is, and ought to be, shared with the collective feminine “we.” The challenge to the book of myths forces the reader to recognize the need for new books, in which these names *are* included, and actively demands that we look away from the antiquated myths of the past and look for new, fresh visions of the future. Rich emphasizes this further in “When We Dead Awaken,” making clear the need to create writing that is directly oppositional to the patriarchal foundations of the literary establishment. It is precisely in recognition of this need for new language, new angles through which to enter reality, that Rich would go on to write what I identify as one of her most ambitious and assertive collections, *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978).

In the years after leaving her marriage, Rich began to question her sexuality and confront the possibility that she was not heterosexual, which culminated in her coming out as a lesbian in 1975. In describing this monumental personal evolution, Rich wrote in “Split at the Root” that “the suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her limbs.”<sup>26</sup> Rich had written and spoken on lesbianism and the inclusion of lesbians within the Western literary canon in the past, including in “When We Dead Awaken.” However, this new

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>25</sup> Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 175.

<sup>26</sup> Rich, “Split at the Root,” 121.

personal shift demanded that Rich examine the implications of this new inhabited identity through the most effective means at her disposal: poetry. *The Dream of a Common Language* was the first collection she published after publicly coming out in 1975 and in it she navigates the experiences, anxieties, and insights that this new perspective granted her. In a contemporary review of *The Dream of a Common Language*, Olga Broumas states that “everything in Rich’s work, both poetry and prose, has prepared the way for this book, in theory, in the mind.”<sup>27</sup> It is in this collection that Rich draws on all of these preceding intellectual and personal revelations to espouse her transformative vision for literature, and for our culture at large. Broumas touches on this in her review describing how “the emphasis...is not on *common*...but on *dream*.”<sup>28</sup> While Rich was adamant at this time that she was writing with the “belief that women must devote all their creative energies to one another,” this dream of a common language asserts out of all the discord and conflict at the time that a restorative future *is* possible.<sup>29</sup>

Although our understanding of “common” might lend to an interpretation of this work as intending to be, or striving for a kind of universality, this was undoubtedly not the case; yet in this boundless space of the “dream” it becomes possible to see how this vision may extend beyond Rich’s moment without doing injustice to her intentions. Although a common language may remain the ultimate – if unattainable – ambition of this vision, Rich was adamant that this would never be achievable without a focus on, and exploration of individual identity. In the book *Feminism and Poetry* (1987), Jan Montefiore states that “feminists rightly attach extreme importance to the articulation of one’s experience, which can’t be thought and therefore in a

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<sup>27</sup> Olga Broumas, “Review of *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978),” *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 323.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 323.

<sup>29</sup> Susan Stanford Friedman, “I Go Where I Love: An Intertextual Study of H.D. and Adrienne Rich,” *Signs* 9, no.2 (1983): 243, accessed October 17, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173779>.

sense doesn't exist unless it can be named and articulated."<sup>30</sup> While this dream of a common language represents the apex of Rich's transformative vision of literature, it is not to ignore the fact that she only saw this as possible through the critical examination of feminine identity in literature. Some have attempted to interpret *The Dream of a Common Language* as acting in favor of obliterating the individual, and thus the personal, in order to "escape reduction to the categories of identity."<sup>31</sup> Such approaches to this collection not only do a grave injustice to the context in which these poems were produced, but also directly undermine Rich's theory that an equitable common is only achievable through the recognition and acceptance of difference; something that is only possible through accepting that there exist unarticulated experiences directly linked to individual identity that demand representation.

The dream of a common language therefore stands as the pronouncement of a desire for understanding first and foremost between women, and perhaps, in the space of the dream, a greater yet existent common. I think it pertinent to make mention here of the fact that in the course of this project I have been working out of my mother's 1978 copy of *The Dream of a Common Language*, which includes a note penned by the friend who gifted it to her. In the note her friend writes, "this book seems written for us as women, as poets, as friends, and I want you to read it! Along with Virginia Woolf it has a particular strength, beauty, and hard fragility that gave me some wonderful moments of vision and clarity."<sup>32</sup> This note beautifully illustrates Rich's gynocentric communalism in practice and the effect that it can have on the minds of young women like my mother and her friend who were just coming into themselves as women,

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<sup>30</sup> Jan Montefiore, "The Lips that Never Lie: Female Language and Imaginary Identity," *Feminism and Poetry*, (London: Pandora Press, 1987), 167.

<sup>31</sup> Christian P. Haines, "The Impersonal is Political," *Cultural Critique* 96, (2017): 183, accessed October 13, 2017, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/669104>.

<sup>32</sup> Printed with permission of the owner.

intellectuals, and adults at the time that this collection was published.<sup>33</sup> I ultimately find myself in agreement with Amy Sickels that perhaps the most lasting and pervasive impression of Rich's poetic vision espoused during this period is how "Rich's poems suggest other possibilities, other ways of living. She wants people to realize that they are not trapped in the present, that they can change the course of history."<sup>34</sup> I believe that it is therefore possible to take Rich's example and theorizing and apply it to a broader schema of present identity politics so long as we do not betray that focus on the individual self, on authenticity, and Rich's strict focus on the awakening of women-specific consciousness.

Although adamantly specific to women, and at times only lesbian women, Rich's writing and approach to the poetic form during this period of her career grant us a means of understanding how we might make use of this example in our contemporary understandings of queer futurism. Perhaps Rich's most commonly referenced contribution to queer theory, the essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), grants us a lens through which we can conceive of how this queer future may take shape. In the essay Rich seeks to diagnose and explore the distinct challenges posed to lesbians, and how the lesbian existence has been relegated to a uniquely marginal position in Western society. As the title suggests, she identifies compulsory heterosexuality – operating in conjunction with patriarchal imperatives – as the primary means "through which the lesbian existence is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible."<sup>35</sup> As in nearly all of her writing at this time, Rich insisted that this essay sought to explore compulsory heterosexuality solely through its

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<sup>33</sup> I would be remiss without noting that my mother is one of the fiercest and most unrepentantly opinionated people I have ever known, and a part of me now likes to think that perhaps Adrienne Rich had something to do with that.

<sup>34</sup> Sickels, *Adrienne Rich*, 120.

<sup>35</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Blood Bread and Poetry: Selected prose 1979-1985*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1986), 26.

unique effects on women. Through this gynocentric focus, she argued that there existed a “specific difference between the experiences of lesbians and homosexual men.”<sup>36</sup> However, I do not think that this distinction prohibits us from discussing this writing outside of a specifically lesbian context. Much like the category of ‘woman’ itself, ‘queer’ is also not a homogenous identity, and any productive discussion of either category must include reference to the diversity of both as non-monolithic categorizations of personhood.

Our aim in this discussion of Rich’s contributions to a broader queer future must be to seek, in opposition to homogeneity, a recognition of the unique individual challenges posed to different groups in order to identify shared experiences. In spite of her insistence on the gynocentrism of “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” there no doubt exist areas that offer the possibility of intersection with other queer identities. She states that the “lesbian existence has been lived (unlike, say, Jewish or Catholic existence) without access to any knowledge of a tradition, a continuity, a social underpinning.”<sup>37</sup> In his essay “Haunted by the 1990’s: Queer Theory’s Affective Histories,” Kadji Amin articulates how ‘queer’ is an “infinitely mobile and mutable theoretical term that, unlike *gay* and *lesbian* or *feminist*, need not remain bound to any particular identity, historical context, politics, or object of study.”<sup>38</sup> As we consider ‘queer’ to be a broad theoretical term that defines non-normative identities it becomes clear that Rich’s continued emphasis on authentic self-representation in reference to her identities as a lesbian and a woman holds great power for any queer identity group seeking understanding and recognition. Using this definition of queerness in conjunction with Rich’s identity-specific writing allow us to conceive of how her vision of identity politics functions as a means of authentically representing

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>37</sup> Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality,” 52.

<sup>38</sup> Kadji Amin, “Haunted by the 1990s: Queer Theory’s Affective Histories,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 3-4 (2016), 175, accessed November 6, 2017, <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/632152>.

a lived experience that allows for the possibility of intersectional solidarity. In her later life Rich seemed more and more amenable to the possibilities of “empathy, for mutual solidarity among gay men and lesbians, not simply as people who suffer under homophobia, but as people who are also extremely creative, active, and have a particular understanding of the human condition.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps one of the most pervasive themes throughout all of Rich’s writings discussed in this paper is her emphasis on the lack of representation and “access to knowledge” that she describes in “Compulsory Heterosexuality.” As she indicated in the above quoted interview, this “particular understanding of the human condition” is no doubt defined by the shared experiences of social and intellectual marginalization that, to varying degrees, is a cornerstone of queer-identified existence. However, since Rich so adamantly and at times exclusively addressed a female audience in the articulation of her own queer experience, we must dissect Rich’s approach to gynocentric communalism, which I believe is most directly articulated in the essay “When We Dead Awaken.”

### Salvaging the Western Canon: Writing and Survival in “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”

*The Creative energy of patriarchy is fast running out; what remains is its self-generating energy for destruction. As women, we have our work cut out for us.*

– Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken”

Adrienne Rich’s essay “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision” (1971) appeared during a time of awakening consciousness in Rich’s personal and literary life, and evidenced the

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Klein, “A Rich Life: Adrienne Rich on Poetry, Politics, and Personal Revelation,” *Boston Phoenix*, June 1999. *Modern American Poetry* 2014.



strong political leanings that would come to define her later career. The early 70s was a time of tremendous change in Rich's life. Growing irreconcilably disillusioned with her married life, Rich walked out on her family in the summer of 1970 and only a few months later, her husband, Alfred Conrad, took his own life. Despite all of these upheavals, Rich remained highly active in and dedicated to the evolving radical feminist movements of the time. Leaving her marriage was, for Rich, the culmination of decades of unhappiness in addition to personal and professional stagnation. Amidst all the changes in Rich's personal and political worlds at this time, she found incredibly valuable support from the communities of women she had surrounded herself with. It was within these communities that Rich found a sense of kinship she had never known, and the comfort and insight this granted her fundamentally transformed her writing during this time. "When We Dead Awaken" acts as a testament to the new outlook this granted her, and in the essay, she espouses a new feminist vision of literature that stresses the importance of intersectionality, re-vision, and gynocentric communalism.

First delivered during a panel discussion on "The Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century," "When We Dead Awaken" speaks directly to women in the literary establishment and acts as a call to action for these women to fight for a more inclusive literary tradition.<sup>40</sup> Although the essay engages many literary and political themes, its central thrust rests on elucidating the complex ways in which patriarchal institutions plague the intellectual and personal lives of women. Throughout the essay Rich illustrates the fundamentally intertwined nature of her personal and intellectual development. She describes how the lack of female representation in literature instills in the female writer "problems of contact with herself, problems of language

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<sup>40</sup> Sickels, *Adrienne Rich*, 65.

and style, problems of energy and survival.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to articulating the connection between the intellectual and personal elements of our being, this statement asserts the notion that *who* we are directly affects *how* we write. Therefore, we can understand how the paucity of writings by women in the Western canon prevents women from comprehensively understanding themselves, a reality that inhibits their capability to effectively articulate their experience. In recognition of this, Rich espouses a new literature that is characterized by women “speaking to and of women...out of a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration.”<sup>42</sup> The profound merit that Rich identified in this vision was a direct product of the sociopolitical revelations she was undergoing at this time. She found that “women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage...women didn’t talk to each other much in the fifties – not about their secret emptinesses, their frustrations.”<sup>43</sup> This call for women to divest from patriarchal literary and social prerogatives emphasizes the need to redefine the role of women in Western culture while highlighting the uniquely powerful role of the woman writer in this process.

Rich articulates how she came to understand these multifarious effects of patriarchy through an examination of her own feelings in conjunction with re-reading and re-interpreting earlier texts by women. She highlights the redemptive possibility of this re-vision as she describes her experience rereading Virginia Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own”:

I recognized that tone. I had heard it often enough, in myself and in other women. It is the tone of a woman almost in touch with her anger, who is determined not to appear angry, who is *willing* herself to be calm, detached, and charming in a

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<sup>41</sup> Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 169.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, 176.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, 173.

roomful of men where things have been said which are attacks on her very integrity.<sup>44</sup>

Rich detects the pains taken by Woolf in the act of self-suppression, something that she does specifically to appease the looming and intimidating presence of the “roomful of men.” That Rich derives this understanding exclusively from the tone implies that Woolf’s choice of language and images spoke something different to Rich than the text itself, something uniquely feminine. This reinforces the notion that the experiences our identities give us form a wholly unique perspective that makes us inherently subjective creatures. From this, and Rich’s response to the text, we can understand that there was plenty more that Woolf had to say, but was unable to as a result of the presence of these men. Throughout “When We Dead Awaken” this roomful of men becomes a metaphor for the fact that “every woman writer has written for men even when, like Virginia Woolf, [they were] supposed to be addressing women.”<sup>45</sup> Rich’s re-reading of this passage from Woolf articulates the value, for her, of re-vision as a means through which to diagnose and recognize the highly complex ways that women’s voices have been suppressed. However, there exists a tension within Rich’s essay between her emphasis on these powers of re-vision, and the ability to actualize that vital need for a revolutionary transformation in literature.

Liedeke Plate recognizes and elucidates this tension in her essay “Remembering the Future: or, Whatever Happened to Revision?”, forcing us to consider Rich’s own subjectivity in positing this theory of re-vision. In the essay, Plate defines the aims of Rich’s process of re-vision as being how “opening the past to alternative stories meant opening the future to new

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 169.

possibilities, and realizing that things could be different was to change the course of history.”<sup>46</sup>

This speaks directly to the claim that Rich makes in reference to her experience reading Virginia Woolf. Implicit in this idea is that by recognizing the specific ways that Woolf’s voice was suppressed or limited allows for re-vision, to “retrieve an authentic sense of self that was not defined by patriarchal society.”<sup>47</sup> This is significant because it addresses how the body, or “self”, acts as a political arena, and that re-visioning the self thus becomes a political action and stands to disrupt traditionally held definitions of womanhood. While this certainly indicates a step in the right direction of undoing the assumptions in which women are confined, it forces us to consider the limitations of re-vision as a transformative process. Plate touches on this as she describes how “canons, however, continue to exist precisely by virtue of their texts being challenged and reinterpreted. Regardless of how critical they may be, rewritings paradoxically contribute to sustaining the very same canon they are challenging.”<sup>48</sup> Therefore, we can see in “When We Dead Awaken” that Rich seems unwilling, or perhaps not yet ready to commit to a radical assault on the Western canon, but rather presents a method through which it may be salvaged, not necessarily re-invented.

In this discussion, it is of the utmost necessity to consider how Rich’s attitude towards the Western canon was fundamentally shaped and influenced by her own privileged upbringing within that establishment. In “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich openly acknowledges her “luck...being born white and middle-class into a house full of books, with a father who encouraged [her] to read and write.”<sup>49</sup> Despite the multitude of conflicts and hardships Rich

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<sup>46</sup> Liedeke Plate, “Remembering the Future: or, Whatever Happened to Revision?”, *Signs* 33, no. 2, (2008): 391, accessed September 29, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/521054>.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 392.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, 397.

<sup>49</sup> Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 170.

endured during her upbringing, this experience afforded her not only a foundation of privilege in society but also an intellectual point of entrance into texts such as Woolf's. That her study of these texts was made accessible and was encouraged highlights how they were presented as belonging to her; that as an educated white middle class woman she had a right to study these texts and write within their established tradition. Plate describes this in her essay, urging us to consider writing within "the limits of cultural and literary property."<sup>50</sup> We must understand that writing within the Western canon to this date had been a process that not only belonged specifically to white men, but also a select few educated white women. Therefore, Rich's position, although marginal, within the context of that cultural and literary property contributed to her stance of "writing both within and against the tradition."<sup>51</sup> Rich recognizes the position this puts her in, stating that "our struggles can have meaning and our privileges – however precarious under patriarchy – can be justified only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts – and whose very being – continue to be thwarted and silenced."<sup>52</sup> While this statement surely was reflective of Rich's political understandings at the time, it does not necessarily resolve that inherent tension between salvaging a literary tradition that provides no point of entrance for the voices of those very women she intends it to empower.

This account of Rich's privilege is not to discredit her experienced revelations, but rather to recognize the limitations of her own subjectivity inasmuch as she sought to speak to the plights of women of color and other feminine identities that were not her own. However, it is also important to consider the essay within the limitations of its own time. Feminist movements in the early 70s were struggling with internal issues of classism, racism, homophobia, and the

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<sup>50</sup> Plate, "Remembering the Future," 393.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 393.

<sup>52</sup> Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, 170.

inclusion of more diverse feminine identities other than educated middle-class white women.<sup>53</sup> For Rich – a darling of the white literary establishment – to emphasize the urgent need for intersectionality was no doubt a bold and powerful move at the time. When we consider the essay within the context of Rich’s own personal evolution, we stand to glean from it an image of an artist rapt in thought and conflict. Up until this period of her career she had, more or less, operated with the “*politesse* of a young woman who knows she is treading on the sacred ground of male prerogative.”<sup>54</sup> “When We Dead Awaken” therefore acts as a pronouncement of departure from that mode of writing that necessitates, as Rich identifies in Woolf, a necessary suppression of oneself in order to gain acceptance. Although re-vision may not be a universally accessible method for achieving the ‘new writing’ that Rich strives for, she does not present this as the essential or only means through which this goal may be reached. In the conclusion of the essay Rich writes, “the awakening of consciousness is not like the crossing of a frontier – one step and you are in another country.”<sup>55</sup> Rather, she closes the essay by asserting the need for women to look within themselves and to each other for that new voice and new language that they, and the Western canon itself, desperately need in order to survive.

Although this rally cry was no doubt necessary at the time and marked a significant personal and professional shift for Rich, it is imperative to dissect her approach to this understanding insofar as it influenced her poetic attempts to enact it. We must return to Rich’s address to the academy stating, “our privileges – however precarious under patriarchy – can be justified only if they can help to change the lives of women whose gifts – and whose very being

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<sup>53</sup> Marion Rust, “Making Emends: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Anne Bradstreet,” *American Literature* 88, no.1 (2016): 93-116, accessed October 22, 2017, DOI 10.1215/00029831-3453672.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 102.

<sup>55</sup> Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 176.

– continue to be thwarted and silenced.”<sup>56</sup> Just as she had previously attributed her social status to “luck,” here too does Rich tiptoe around directly addressing the calculated social and political forces that have elevated her and trampled those she seeks to uplift. By seeking to “justify” her privilege through intellectual philanthropy, Rich affirms her own higher status, which is a direct product of privilege – *not* luck. Additionally, in tasking herself and the literary establishment with “helping” those oppressed women of which she speaks, Rich once more affirms the implicit hierarchy of that very institution by relegating these women to an aid-recipient status that positions their survival as impossible without philanthropy. Audre Lorde forcefully asserts in the essay “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” that “those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that *survival is not an academic skill*.”<sup>57</sup> From this we can understand what Marion Rust concludes in her essay “Making Emends: Adrienne Rich, Audre Lorde, Anne Bradstreet,” that “academia, like racism itself, is an ‘institution’ that exceeds individual intentionality in its capacity to render its participants complicit.”<sup>58</sup> Although this call for feminine solidarity and mutual support was a critically important assertion, we must recognize that Rich framed her vision for this community of women from an ivory-tower perspective as we approach her poetic attempts to generate this community

Although her presentation of this thesis contains many elements that demand our inspection and critique, Rich does at least begin to accept the notion that this community be formed out of a recognition of the differences in feminine experience. It is in understanding this

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 170.

<sup>57</sup> Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 112.

<sup>58</sup> Rust, “Making Emends,” 112.

fact of difference that she seeks to generate solidarity by “us[ing] these aspects of personal experience to determine how much an ideal can be shared across them.”<sup>59</sup> Rich outlines her dream for this form of writing to take form as a means of “speaking to and of women...out of a newly released courage to name, to love each other, to share risk and grief and celebration.”<sup>60</sup> However, this presents a challenge of its own, as it demands that the female writer reject the notion that “poetry should be universal,” while simultaneously inculcating the idea of a new universal: the universal feminine.<sup>61</sup> Here is where I believe we must turn to the discussion of Rich’s privilege, as her personal position of power in the honest rendering of difference cannot be ignored. This notion of a universal feminine introduces many of the same issues it is meant to combat: it risks essentializing the feminine identity as a cohesive and singular body, a notion that threatens to ignore the various significant racial and socioeconomic differences within that category of “woman.” However, it is important to note that this critique is not intended to undermine the influence and importance of Rich’s assertion within the context of early 70s feminist thought. At the time Rich was writing, this call for feminine solidarity was a direct response to the need for inclusivity within those feminist movements.<sup>62</sup> The limitations of this theory become visible upon an examination of her poem “From an Old House in America” (1974) in conjunction with her later collection *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978).

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<sup>59</sup> Brian Brodhead Glaser, “Blessing and Cursing: Politics and Self-Object Needs in the Poetry of Adrienne Rich,” *Journal of Poetic Therapy* 24, no.4 (2011): 236, accessed January 14, 2018, DOI 10.1080/08893675.2011.625202.

<sup>60</sup> Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 176.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 175.

<sup>62</sup> Claudia Rankine, “Adrienne Rich’s Poetic Transformations,” *The New Yorker*, May 12, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/adrienne-richs-poetic-transformations>.



## A Community of Women: Writing and Solidarity as Resistance

*Two women, eye to eye  
measuring each other's spirit, each other's  
limitless desire,  
a whole new poetry beginning here*

– Adrienne Rich, “Transcendental Etude”

In “When We Dead Awaken,” Rich articulates that “if the imagination is to transcend and transform experience it has to question, to challenge, to conceive of alternatives.”<sup>63</sup> In her poem “From an Old House in America” Rich attempts to do just this by creating a narrative of American history that seeks to give voice to unaired or underrepresented grievances. When the poem was published in 1974 Rich was becoming increasingly committed the radical feminist movements of her time, something that led her to a firm dedication to gynocentric communalism. For Rich, this vision for a community of women needed to be more intersectional and recognize the unique struggles and contributions of “black and lesbian feminists.”<sup>64</sup> She attempts to articulate this vision in “From an Old House in America” by frequently inhabiting feminine bodies that are not her own, and internalizing the struggles of women that are not her. The purpose of doing so appears to be to illustrate how the individual self is a direct product of history and all that accompanies it. By attempting to seamlessly drift between these different feminine identities, Rich also communicates the need for people, especially women, to understand the unique ways that history has affected and shaped their present reality. The poem articulates the challenges posed by history to those of whom it is not a wellspring of affirmation and pride, but rather a burden, a reminder of suffering and oppression.

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<sup>63</sup> Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 174.

<sup>64</sup> Rich, “From an Old House in America,” 66.

The poem begins within the house after which it is named, yet gradually the narration moves outward into a much broader context and pointed social commentary. As the speaker imagines the history of the house and its previous inhabitants she immediately identifies with an imagined woman who lived there before her, describing how the vine crawling up the house was “her creamy signature.”<sup>65</sup> The speaker then begins to envision and empathize with the plight of this past female inhabitant stating, “I flash on wife and husband / embattled, in the years.”<sup>66</sup> This assumption of marital difficulties introduces the first of many examples where the speaker cites images or experiences of strife as a cornerstone of the feminine experience. The confident specificity with which these lines are delivered in the poem indicates Rich’s own personal understanding of this kind of marital conflict. Rich had a very complicated and difficult relationship with her husband that was largely related to the very institution of marriage and the isolation that she felt within its confines. As Rich touches on her own experience with married life in “When We Dead Awaken” she describes that “female fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being; partly from the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores, errands, work that others constantly undo, small children’s constant needs.”<sup>67</sup> Therefore, we can understand how in this section of “From an Old House in America” Rich is drawing on struggles that are directly related to her own experience, while projecting them outward to generate solidarity with experiences her audience of women would potentially be able to empathize with.

The seamless way that the speaker glides into this sense of apperception with the previous female inhabitant of this home suggests a kind of underlying universality to certain

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid, 63.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 64.

<sup>67</sup> Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 173.

elements of the feminine experience. However, it is highly significant that this understanding is generated out of the speaker's own experiences with the topic – marriage – that she addresses in that section. The significance of this is emphasized when the speaker attempts to extend this solidarity above and beyond her own experiences to a more universal and inclusive feminine experience, which reads as far more forced and embellished:

I am an American woman /  
Foot-slogging through the Bering Strait  
Jumping from the Arbella to my death  
Chained to the corpse beside me /  
I never chose this place  
Yet I am of it now<sup>68</sup>

These graphic and vivid representations of the arrival of women in America all share the same unsettling qualities of pain and a compromised sense of free will. This section is the poem's most ambitious attempt to embody a dream of universal feminine identity that includes reference to the experiences of Native American and African women. While this is certainly a bold effort, it also represents what is perhaps the greatest flaw in Rich's implementation of the yearning and need for inclusivity that she discusses in "When We Dead Awaken."

In this attempt to voice marginalized feminine identities other than her own, particularly those whose class, race, and ethnicity alienates them from an inclusive notion of citizenship, Rich's ambition exceeds her authority to do so. In this section she is no longer speaking from her own experience as she had so powerfully and effectively done in the earlier section of the poem. Rather, here, she attempts to make reference to the pains and histories of a host of feminine identities with which she has no firsthand experience or understanding. While it is clear that she

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<sup>68</sup> Rich, "From an Old House in America," 66.

does this as a means of alerting her audience to the uniquely different histories of women of color, it appears in the poem as reductive and appropriative. Referencing the middle passage with an image as graphic as that of an enslaved woman chained to a corpse in the belly of a ship is perhaps intended to harness or illustrate that pain and put it on display for Rich's audience. However, this shock-value reference neglects, and it could never, capture the nuanced and profound lasting trauma of this forced migration on black women in America. This treatment seems directly relational to Rich's notion of intellectual philanthropy that she espouses in "When We Dead Awaken," through her clear attempt to foreground an experience specific to those "women whose gifts – and whose very being – continue to be thwarted and silenced."<sup>69</sup> We must understand that, regardless of Rich's intentions, there exist very distinct dangers associated with attempting to invoke racialized experience while having no understanding of what it is actually like to live in that skin and with that history.

While it is certainly indisputable that all women suffer greatly under the oppression of the patriarchy it cannot be said that all the sufferings of all women are identical. That is to say that although there exists a great deal of overlap in the hardships that women face, many women suffer in more nuanced ways as a result of factors such as race, socioeconomic status, etc. Rich was no doubt aware of this fact and this is not intended to render her theory of gynocentric communalism as an inherently flawed notion, but rather a critique of this specific attempt to enact that vision. In a 1974 poetry reading Rich stated with regard to another poem in which she attempts to embody a feminine experience that is not her own, "I'm not – I can't – This poem is not trying to speak for this woman, I could not presume to do that, I was trying to – I could

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<sup>69</sup> Rich, "When We Dead Awaken," 170.

identify with that woman in some ways and it's finding myself speaking through her persona."<sup>70</sup> However, despite these intentions I would argue that when it comes to the metaphorization of individual experiences and dealings with oppression, one cannot avoid violating the authentic experience of that individual; a fact that is made increasingly problematic as it relates to the appropriation of experiences that are specific to racial identity. Therefore, as the speaker of "From an Old House in America" moves from inhabiting the body of a pilgrim on the *Arbella* to a slave on the middle passage we see how these are posited as interchangeable elements of a singular narrative that entirely neglects the fact of the middle passage as a forced migration that relegated African men, women, and children to non-human status as chattel. In the very act of attempting to elevate the voice of black women by foregrounding this reference, Rich marginalizes that very voice. Articulating an experience that does not belong to her and that she does not suffer the lingering effects of supports the idea that in order for white people to empathize with the black experience it has to be presented to them by another white person. This effectively deprives black women of the right or the ability to tell their own story, to undergo that journey and discovery of one's own authentic voice that is elsewhere of such importance to Rich.

Although this reference is made only in passing within "From an Old House in America," and the poem itself is not centered on an examination of racial difference, it is my purpose here to urge that the very fact of this heightens the extent to which we must read it as problematic. This appropriative attempt at realizing universal feminine solidarity must be considered as an essential failure of Rich's attempt to enact this vision, although she succeeds in her earlier

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<sup>70</sup> Adrienne Rich, "1974 Reading," *PennSound*, <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Rich.php>. The poem is titled "The Alleged Murderess Walking in Her Cell" and it is about a woman who was imprisoned on charges of murder, but was pregnant at the time and through a court order was allowed to have her newborn child with her in her prison cell during the trial.

attempts in the poem. In the opening of the poem, Rich draws on her own experiences with motherhood and marriage, which invigorates that section with a forcefulness that the migration narrative lacks. Through a juxtaposition of these sections of “From an Old House in America,” it becomes clear that authenticity in rendering experience is the most powerful tool at the poet’s disposal in the aim of extending that personal experience outwards. She powerfully and successfully articulates this vision of authenticity in the poem “Origins and History of Consciousness” in the collection *The Dream of a Common Language*. In the poem, Rich describes a journey for self-understanding and self-bond that communicates not just a deep yearning for this, but also a fervent desire to use it to generate action and social change.

“Origins and History of Consciousness” excels where “From an Old House in America” does not primarily because it departs from a conflation of disparate feminine identities and instead focuses more intently on the identity and lived experiences of the speaker. The poems contained within *The Dream of a Common Language* directly confront the fundamental nature of poetry, what it is to be a woman in a world ordered by men, what it is to love, and for Rich, what it is to love another woman. The collection is divided into three sections, the first of which is simply titled “Power,” and seeks to explore the latent power of femininity as it is realized in others, in oneself, and in the still dormant power yet to be realized. The second section titled, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” explores the meaning of love, how to love in this world, and what it means for Rich to love another woman. These are poems that grieve, celebrate, and complain all while causing the reader to react and respond to what it is that they tell us about our world, and ourselves. The third and final section titled “Not Somewhere Else, But Here,” deals directly with history, reconciling history, and the effect that this has on our lives today. These are all poems that do not stand still; they traverse time and identities, their language is simple yet profound,

and at every turn they necessitate that the reader, along with the author, question everything. It is in this way that these poems act in service of Rich's theory of authenticity; in them the poet strives to represent her own identity and experience with the express intention of bringing the reader into contact with what it is to feel this way and experience these pains.

In the poem, "Origins of History and Consciousness," Rich allows us to conceive of the poet's work as being intensely personal while also stemming from some kind of crisis of being or belonging, something that makes this work not only serious but urgent. The poem also contains the visionary thesis after which the entire collection is named, the idea of something unrealized, yet to be realized, or potentially not able to be realized: "the dream of a common language."<sup>71</sup> The poem is composed of distinct sections that drift from broad political questions to personal moments, introspection, and philosophizing. The fragmented form of the poem mirrors this period of Rich's intellectual life, as she was attempting to piece together these seemingly disparate concepts into a coherent narrative. From its outset the poem delves into an exploration of the fundamental nature of poetry, and how that relates to the identity and private life of the speaker. The opening lines describe the poet's studio, "Night-life. Letters, journals, bourbon / sloshed in the glass. Poems crucified on the wall...No one lives in this room without living through some kind of crisis."<sup>72</sup> Initiating the poem in this fashion is crucial to the commentary on poetry that Rich seeks to provide throughout the piece. Here, the work of the poet is unglamorous, exhausted, and pained. While the trope of the anguished poet is certainly nothing new, the way that Rich personalizes this struggle in the final line offers a point of intervention.

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<sup>71</sup> Adrienne Rich, "Origins of History and Consciousness," *The Dream of a Common Language*, (New York: W. W. Norton 1978), 7.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid*, 7.

This line is authoritative and insists on a direct connection between some kind of lived trauma, the “crisis,” and the drive to produce poetry.

Rich continues, elaborating on the connection between the “crisis” that she discusses earlier and how this functions within the poetic tradition:

No one lives in this room  
without confronting the whiteness of the wall  
behind the poems, planks of books,  
photographs of dead heroines.  
Without contemplating last and late  
the true nature of poetry. The drive  
to connect. The dream of a common language.<sup>73</sup>

By providing this account of the poetic tradition as dominated by whiteness and littered with female corpses Rich highlights literature’s troubling past as well as the vital need to change this. Rich’s direct statement of the “whiteness of the wall” provides a far more poignant commentary on race than that of “From an Old House in America.” She does not attempt to internalize the struggles of this reality, rather she simply states it as a fact and something that cannot be ignored. By not attempting to interpret the implications of this statement, Rich leaves open the questions it creates, which begs the reader to ponder for themselves what precise effect this “whiteness” has on those whose identity does not grant them acceptance into that white space. The bluntness of the introduction “no one lives in this room,” allows Rich to state this reality of whiteness and dead heroines in a way that directly challenges not just her literary colleagues, but also the Western culture that consumes this poem. Rich recognizes that the dominance of white Eurocentric traditions in literature and society at large is not something that we are ignorant of, rather everyone that exists in this culture possesses some degree of awareness as to the forces

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid, 7.



ordering it. In the direct way that she conveys this she also forces us to recognize how in light of this awareness, silence and inaction makes us active participants in the oppression this generates. In doing so, Rich introduces a poetic imperative that is interpersonal, presenting poetry as a mode of facilitating communication and understanding between people.

This “drive to connect” is the ethos of what Rich strives for in the essay “When We Dead Awaken:” the ability to accept and recognize difference while also acknowledging a common humanity through language. In the article “Poetry and Poets in the Public Sphere,” Assaf Meydani and Nadir Tsur define this as a specific genre of political poetry that examines “the existence of the ‘self’ in the public arena.”<sup>74</sup> This examination of the “self” grants the poet power and authority to challenge existing realities and definitions of personhood by presenting the possibility of alternatives. Approaching Rich’s proposition of the common language as a “dream,” however, causes us to question whether or not this is something that *can* be realized. Rich’s positioning of this theory in direct relation to the oppressive forces of whiteness and patriarchy insinuates that these are connected to a lack of understanding rather than calculated attempts to exert social control through the marginalization of certain groups. Rich neither provides, nor does she seek to provide a template for transforming this present state of affairs; her gaze is fixed almost inextricably on the future. While this perhaps presents itself as possessing a fatalistic attitude towards present injustice, it seems a more rational expectation of the poet’s role in facilitating social change. As a form of art and not public policy, poetry is limited in the scope of tangible change it is able to effect. Rich’s version of political poetry evidenced here positions the mind as a significant, perhaps more so than public policy, location of social change. While policy changes have the ability to grant or restore legal protections, this

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<sup>74</sup> Meydani and Tsur, “Poetry and Poets in the Public Sphere,” 149.

does not necessarily mandate a change in the public consciousness that allowed for, or deliberately enacted, discriminatory policies in the first place. For instance, in a contemporary example, the legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States by no means indicates that homophobic thought is less present in the minds of the general population.

There is also the matter that as a well-established white intellectual, Rich's position in society – though tentative under patriarchy – is not so imperiled as to demand a radical transformation of the present. So too does it stand as a matter of fact that Rich seems far more concerned with conceiving of new alternatives for the future than the immediate present. This is encompassed in the dream state of the common language itself, as it presents itself as a kind of liminal thinking; it does not argue that common understanding between people is the solution to racism and patriarchy, but rather it is the constant striving towards that ideal - however untenable it may be - that creates the space for those power structures to be challenged. This also seems to establish the future as a realm with endless possibilities, one where the work of the present is certainly critical towards achieving those potentials. In the essay "Remembering the Future; or, Whatever Happened to Re-Vision," Liedeke Plate states how through re-vision "it is the future as a collective project that seems to be forgotten, relegating visions of a better world or a just society to the discourses of the particular (nineteenth-century) ideological formation."<sup>75</sup> Plate elucidates the idea that by training our gaze on the future we may enable the conception of alternatives we cannot yet fathom in our current lexicon. This is significant in the progression of Rich's writing as it indicates a shift away from the attitude towards the literary academy that she demonstrates in "When We Dead Awaken," and introduces far more vital and far more personal attention to the future position of women in that academy and in the Western world.

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<sup>75</sup> Plate, "Remembering the Future," 391.

This renewed sense of urgency presents itself once more in “Origins of History and Consciousness,” as Rich shifts to a narration of a personal moment in which the speaker experiences a fear and anxiety that is directly attributed to her identity status as a woman and a lesbian. She describes being with a lover and overhearing a mugging on the street outside her apartment, “knowing the mind of the mugger and the mugged / as any woman must who stands to survive this city, / this century, this life...”<sup>76</sup> There is vulnerability but there is also power in this “knowing” that is connected to the shared feminine experience (“as any women must”). The urgency that Rich harps on earlier in the poem surfaces once more as we see how understanding her oppressor in this instance is not only a matter of power but also of survival. Out of this, Rich establishes what will remain a recurrent theme throughout the collection while speaking to the experiences of lesbian women: adapt, find your power, or die. This sentiment only heightens the importance of striving towards the dream of a common language, which relates to Jan Montefiore’s explanation of how the yet-articulated experiences of certain marginalized identity groups relegates them to a state of non-existence “unless it can be named and articulated.”<sup>77</sup> We do not exist in an equitable society, or literary tradition, and only through uncompromising continuous effort can this be changed. In recognizing this, Rich identifies that it is therefore the duty of the poet to work towards that dream by representing their own authentically lived experiences, something that allows the possibility to realize those “beings unfathomed as yet in our roughly literal life.”<sup>78</sup>

The movement from dream to action is something that is yet to be resolved, and for the speaker of the poem this remains a largely internal struggle. She converses with herself in a

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<sup>76</sup> Rich, “Origins of History and Consciousness,” 8.

<sup>77</sup> Montefiore, *Feminism in Poetry*, 167.

<sup>78</sup> Rich, “Origins of History and Consciousness,” 9.

manner that seems to speak directly to her new – for her – inhabited identity as a lesbian stating, “these two selves who walked half a lifetime untouched.”<sup>79</sup> This line seems to offer two potential readings: the speaker either addresses these two different “selves,” or is speaking to her female lover. However, I believe that both of these possible readings operate in service of each other, each articulating the transformative effects on the speaker’s life of living within this new identity. Yet, in keeping with the forward-reaching operative of the earlier section of the poem she concludes, “I can’t call it life until we start to move / beyond this secret circle of fire...where the night becomes our inner darkness, and sleeps / like a dumb beast, head on paws, in the corner.”<sup>80</sup> The transformative effects of coming to accept this new identity also present grievances of their own, as the speaker yearns for a world in which she can move openly with her lover and without fear. In doing so, she communicates how lesbian identity and the expression of that identity is inherently political, as evidenced through the speaker’s inability to “move beyond [the] secret circle” of passion. However, there exists a distinct power in the articulation of these grievances, as the poem allows its reader an insight into the fear and trauma that accompanies this identity. This appears less intended to generate sympathy or pity, but rather functions as a means through which Rich stands to write this experience out of that state of non-existence that Montefiore describes. The following section of *The Dream of a Common Language*, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” further examines the self and its identities as a political arena, providing a valuable lens of inquiry into the dynamic functions of identity politics.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid, 8.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 9.

## The Case for Identity Politics in “Twenty-One Love Poems”

*Justice for all just ain't specific enough*

– Common, *Glory*

“Twenty-One Love Poems” is Rich’s direct attempt to name and articulate the experience of lesbian love, a process that I believe, like “Origins of History and Consciousness,” highlights how authentic representation of lived experience and personal oppression is the most effective poetic means of effecting social change. In the poems, as well as Rich’s surrounding commentary on them, there is an identifiable argument that stresses the importance of identity politics as a critical lens through which to view structures of social and economic inequality.<sup>81</sup> Rich indicates a movement towards this idea in “When We Dead Awaken” when she articulates her resistance to the idea that “poetry should be ‘universal’, which meant, of course, nonfemale.”<sup>82</sup> In this section of the essay, Rich argues that the drive to be ‘universal’ results in a stripping of the identity of the author; and she proposes a new method of writing that foregrounds, rather than marginalizes, that identity. This serves to promote the importance of identity politics by insisting, much like the above quoted line from *Glory*, that the diversity of complex human identities demands an equally diverse set of solutions capable of addressing the unique challenges posed to individual identity groups. Much like Common’s words deconstruct the over-simplified narrative of *liberty and justice for all* in the United States Pledge of Allegiance, Rich’s “Twenty-One Love Poems” subvert heteronormative narratives of love.

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<sup>81</sup> Definitions of “identity politics” are by no means universal, and this assertion is made in recognition of that, yet seeks to focus on how we might interpret Rich’s contributions to this multifaceted and emerging mode of critical inquiry.

<sup>82</sup> Rich, “When We Dead Awaken,” 175.

The poems contained within “Twenty-One Love Poems” in conjunction with Rich’s surrounding commentary illustrate the importance of identity politics as a means of articulating unique and underrepresented political realities. The term ‘identity politics’ first began appearing in scholarly journals in the late 1970s and in the following decade came to be employed as a term to describe ethnicity, studies regarding the nature of subjectivity, and efforts by status-based movements to foster and explore the identities of their members.<sup>83</sup> In her essay “Identity Politics,” Mary Bernstein describes how identity politics emerged in contrast to Marxist and neo-Marxist theory that “view[ed] class inequality as the only real source of exploitation and oppression.”<sup>84</sup> Identity politics put forth the “belief that identity...should be a fundamental focus of political work” since identity, in addition to class status, also functions as a justification for the marginalization of certain groups.<sup>85</sup> Therefore, in the process of identifying a group, such as lesbians, as marginalized, one recognizes that the active variables in the marginalization of that group is the fact of its members’ identities as ‘woman’ and ‘homosexual’. Critics of identity politics have identified this focus on the individual as “irrelevant and self-indulgent cultural activism,” a stance that rejects the belief of identity as ground upon which marginalization is predicated. This critique of identity politics is based on the very absence of an existing dialogue in the mainstream surrounding these identity groups and the unique political challenges they face. Therefore, we must understand how the silencing of voices seeking to articulate identity-specific challenges perpetuates a cycle of erasure that allows for the continuation of oppression.

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<sup>83</sup> Mary Bernstein, “Identity Politics,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 31, (2005), 47, accessed March 4, 2018, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29737711>.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid*, 49.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, 49-50.

In “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Rich attempts to provide a narrative of unarticulated lesbian existence as told from the first-person perspective of the speaker-poet<sup>86</sup> as a direct means of making visible the unique ambience of this lived identity. Rich was adamant about how she intended her poetry to be interpreted, insisting that these poems be read solely as poems that reflected a specifically woman and homosexual experience. Because this understanding was central to Rich’s intentions in the creation of the poems, she was deeply troubled by the discovery that men and heterosexuals were reading “Twenty-One Love Poems” and integrating its language into a heterosexist paradigm. She wrote about the ways people had responded to how “universal the poems were” stating that doing this was “a denial, a kind of resistance, a refusal to read and hear what I’ve actually written, to acknowledge what I am.”<sup>87</sup> For her, what she had “actually written” were poems that explored territory that was foreign to both her and her audience: the love felt between two women for each other. These were not at all intended to be ‘love poems’ in a universal sense, but poems that explored a specific kind of love that remained so absent in dominant discourses of love at this time. That Rich demands us to read these poems through the lens of identity politics asserts the importance of identity as a factor that informs, shapes, and defines one’s writing and social reality. It also promotes the understanding that poems are not produced in a vacuum, they are a direct product of the experiences our lives give us, and how those experiences are informed by our identities. In contemporary terms, if the gender of the individuals involved in a sexual relationship matters when attempting to get a marriage license, it must matter here; to insist that writing ought to be done obliquely, or must be ‘universal’, demands that it be taken out of the very context in which it is produced. It is an act of

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<sup>86</sup> Rich was adamant at this time that when she wrote in the feminine first-person, unless otherwise indicated, she was writing directly from her own experiences – something that services her emphasis on the importance of reading her works through the identity of the author.

<sup>87</sup> Sickels, *Adrienne Rich*, 89.

silencing that is violent and an injustice to the authentic value of the literary art itself. If the personal is political in other realms of life, it must be political here.

This relationship between the personal and political is evident throughout nearly all of the poems in “Twenty-One Love Poems”, and allows the poet to explore the diffuse ways in which these socio-political realities directly influence, and shape her feelings of intimacy and love. In the biography *Adrienne Rich*, Amy Sickels describes how these poems “[follow] in the tradition of Petrarch’s love poems and Shakespeare’s sonnets, in that the speaker of the poem is talking to a beloved, and the voice is romantic, intimate, and passionate.”<sup>88</sup> Composing these poems in this way acts as a direct reflection of the world in which Rich lived. By writing within this preexisting framework, Rich offers a voice of reinvention of that very form, that mode of approaching love in both the social and literary sense. It also illustrates an odd sense of confinement; that the poet is demonstrating great ambition and freedom, but both of these are limited within the confines of this form, this limited temporal voice. However, within the poems Rich writes from a perspective that is highly personal, accessible, and straightforward in language and literary devices; something that gives the poems an accessibility that more formal writing lacks. It is in this tension and in writing this new experience that Rich creates in “Twenty-One Love Poems” what Adrian Oktenberg described as a record of “two people engaged in this effort, of their gains and losses, taken at a certain point in the struggle and in their lives.”<sup>89</sup>

This essential character that Oktenberg describes is perhaps best captured in the poem “IV,” which is convoluted in its composition, yet provides great insight into the mind of the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid, 87.

<sup>89</sup> Adrian Oktenberg, “Disloyal to Civilization: The *Twenty-One Love Poems* of Adrienne Rich (1981),” In *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. by Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 332.



speaker; one that foregrounds her identity as both woman and homosexual. The poem opens describing the speaker returning home “from you”, her unnamed lover. She describes “lugging [her] sack of groceries” towards the elevator where an elderly man “lets the door almost close on [her].”<sup>90</sup> Once home, the speaker puts on a Nina Simone record, opens the mail, and notices a newspaper clipping describing a man tortured in prison, his genitals mutilated. This elaborate portrait of the speaker’s world illustrates a clear juxtaposition between the comforts of her private life and the threatening violence of the outside world. In this the speaker can return only to one single respite: her lover. In doing so, Rich illustrates how these feelings of homosexual affection are heightened and intensified by this sense of constant looming danger. This is best represented in the lines, “and my incurable anger, my unmendable wounds / break open further with tears, I am crying helplessly, / and they still control the world, and you are not in my arms.”<sup>91</sup> The poet is in touch with her anger, but unable to direct it, unable to cure it or, perhaps, even understand it. These lines follow the sensibility of the series of poems as a whole in that they break from attempts to utilize complicated literary devices or language and rather speak directly and intently to the unfiltered feelings of the speaker in that moment. This makes the poems, and therefore the emotions that they convey, accessible to the reader and free of artifice. We can understand the speaker’s anger as it is presented directly to us; and the way that Rich does not resolve this anger insists that perhaps our awareness that it is present and justified is enough.

Without discounting the very real imminent threat of violence same sex couples face today, Oktenberg’s writing illuminates the distinctly unique energy of risk and anxiety that

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<sup>90</sup> Adrienne Rich, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” *The Dream of a Common Language*, (New York: W. W. Norton, 1978).

<sup>91</sup> Rich, “Twenty-One Love Poems,” 27.

pervades these poems. Therefore, we see how the love that is articulated in this poem is defined by confusion and pain, but nonetheless offers solace and assurance. The speaker feels alienated and isolated from the world, something that makes this love both passionate and utterly urgent, almost desperate. This provides a vivid representation of what it was like to be a woman and live with a female lover at this time, fully capturing the anxiety and terror that accompanied it. It is precisely for this reason that we can understand Rich's frustration at the notion that these poems were being interpreted as 'universal'. The essential substance of the love Rich articulates is defined precisely by the fact that she presents these challenges and these responses as being specific to lesbian women and we would be wrong to think they imply otherwise. In the essay "Disloyal to Civilization": *The Twenty-One Love Poems of Adrienne Rich*," Adrian Oktenberg describes how at the time, "no man, no work of literature, no part of patriarchal culture has taken into account the possibility of two women together, loving each other."<sup>92</sup>

This atmosphere that Rich and Oktenberg force us to recognize as surrounding the poems in this series presents this uncharted space of lesbian love as dangerous, yet nonetheless offering something highly restorative. The opening poem, simply titled "I," explores the confusingly beautiful energy that is inherent in this yet-unarticulated experience of lesbian love. Much like "IV," the poem provides a representation of the city in which the two lovers exist that focuses on dark and convoluted language and imagery; the speaker observes "rainsoaked garbage...those rancid dreams, that blurt metal, those disgraces."<sup>93</sup> She goes on to conclude the poem stating,

No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,  
sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,  
dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,  
our animal passion rooted in the city.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Oktenberg, "Disloyal to Civilization," 331.

<sup>93</sup> Rich, "Twenty-One Love Poems," 25.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, 25.

Although the previous depictions of the city are dark and pessimistic, the speaker once again offers the opportunity of a redemptive future through the love that she has for her lover. Again, this love is directly shaped and influenced by the fact of it being yet-unimagined, something that emphasizes anxiety but also freedom and hope as cornerstones of this experience. This hope is further emphasized through the fact that despite all of the negativity she has described, she and her lover will still remain “exuberantly budding,” a statement that affirms their own existence as lesbian women while also affirming continued existence and growth. The contradiction between the reproductive implications of “budding” and the non-reproductive nature of homosexual relationships introduces a uniquely strange and beautiful element. It is budding that is not intended for reproduction and therefore belongs entirely to the speaker where her growth and her future is foregrounded in opposition to the prerogative of motherhood.

Linking our previous discussion of identity politics with this analysis of Rich’s poems in mind allows us to conceive of her precise contribution to this ongoing dialogue. Although the poems within “Twenty-One Love Poems” do not necessarily promote specific political actions, Rich does provide a sentimentalist claim that is based on her own personal experiences with the oppression felt because of her identity as a lesbian woman. In “Identity Politics” Bernstein describes how the NSM (new social movement) theory of the mid-late 80s views the efforts supporting identity politics as fighting “to expand freedom, not to achieve it...and focus primarily on expressing identity to seek recognition for new identities and lifestyles.”<sup>95</sup> Although not emerging as a concretely defined theory until after “Twenty-One Love Poems” was published, this approach to identity politics seems to precisely capture Rich’s creative and political project. Like Oktenberg contends, in these poems Rich provides a glimpse into the

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<sup>95</sup> Bernstein, “Identity Politics,” 54.

challenges presented to her by the mere fact of her existence as a lesbian woman, something that allows this series of poems to stand as a restorative claim to a denied existence.

It is precisely in this discussion of identity politics that we can better understand the short-comings of “From an Old House in America,” as they relate to the successes of “Origins of History and Consciousness,” and “Twenty-One Love Poems.” If the specific personal identities of the author are of such critical importance to Rich in the latter two of these three poems, then we must take them to be equally important in “From an Old House in America;” something that Rich’s reductive attempts to inhabit black feminine experience directly contradicts. As Brian Brodhead Glaser so beautifully states, “this is a poetics not only of identity but also of honesty about the difference in value that identity can have depending on the intelligent reflection of the community who recognizes it.”<sup>96</sup> This honesty is generated through Rich’s authentic poetic voice, something that gives “Origins of History and Consciousness” and “Twenty-One Love Poems” the authority to state the social and political oppression she personally experiences. However, as is articulated in her responses to heteronormative readings of “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Rich did not intend for this poetry to be individually isolationist. Rather the true power of this writing is in its ability to cultivate community through solidarity with the plights and grievances her poems convey. This record of personal experience allows readers to determine the extent to which these experiences are shared by a community of similarly identifying individuals; something that also rationalizes Rich’s emphasis on the importance of these poems being read by both women and lesbians above all others. While it may be easy to deride this approach to writing as exclusionary or being “responsible for fragmenting and hardening the

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<sup>96</sup> Glaser, “Blessing and Cursing,” 236.

boundaries between groups,” this argument withers in the face of Rich’s unrepentant authenticity in “Twenty-One Love Poems.”<sup>97</sup>

## Conclusion

One of the most fascinating and illuminating critiques of “Twenty-One Love Poems,” and, I believe, the extent of what Rich came to desire of her writing, comes from Jan Montefiore’s book *Feminism and Poetry*. She states that,

however important it is to recognize the lesbian experience which these poems meditate on, it does not follow that the language or form of the poetry is specifically female: there is nothing intrinsically gendered about free verse.<sup>98</sup>

This is so particularly poignant in reference to all of Rich’s works considered within this paper because it forces us to ask what we expect language to do, and what language is capable of doing. In “Twenty-One Love Poems,” Montefiore identifies a clear tension between these two things. Rich placed a tremendous amount of value on language, on its transformative capabilities, and in doing so we must wonder if, at times, she demands more of language than it is able to give. Her frustration with the interpretations of heterosexual and male critics, though justified, indicates what is perhaps better understood as a frustration with the limitations of the form itself. It is not as if Rich was writing in a different lesbian language illegible to the heterosexual masses. Although there exists, as I have identified, a distinct and absolutely vital queer energy within these poems, the form itself, as Montefiore states, is fundamentally open to interpretation. Though readers certainly fail to glean a great deal from this poetry if they neglect the

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<sup>97</sup> Bernstein, “Identity Politics,” 53.

<sup>98</sup> Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry*, 167.

identity politics that Rich demands we recognize, there is ultimately nothing innate to the language itself that forces this reading.

That being said, the wealth of women and queer authors and critics, myself now included, who have written extensively on the great transformative power of Rich's works in their own lives indicates that although she may not have fundamentally transformed our language; Rich has, no doubt, given us something extraordinary here. However, I believe that ultimately her works leave us with more questions than answers. Her appropriative attempt at including reference to the experience of black women in "From an Old-House in America" illustrates a great failure of that white-envelope method of inclusion. As we can see in this examination of Rich's writing, recognizing her limitations is no doubt necessary to do in order to leave open those questions she did not have the authority or the capacity to answer. This constant state of questioning that I believe Rich urges us towards is ultimately perhaps the most foundational fact of the human condition. Since the advent of human society this constant curiosity has shaped and defined the worlds that we create for ourselves, and language has been our most constant and effective means of recording and examining this human experience. It is my belief that poetry behaves as a unique usage of our language that opens our minds and our world in ways no other written form can. Much like Qur'anic scholars have remarked, it was through the cadence, rhythm, and language of The Prophet Muhammad's recitations that his followers felt the presence of God.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> I invoke this reference in full recognition of the fact that the Qur'an did not exist as a written text for many years after The Prophet Muhammad first began preaching its words; yet these elements, even as they were spoken in Arabic, comprise the essential foundation of our definitions and understandings of poetry that, I believe, justify its inclusion here.

Poetry exists as I believe Gregory Corso indicates in the epigraph to this thesis: as a permanent relic of the experiences, struggles, and conflicts of that time. Even in the example of the Qur'an, the narratives and the methods through which these temporal challenges are represented in poetry offer an alternative perspective to that of dominant discourses during those moments. Through an application of due attention to the impact of these dominant forces we stand to harness the true power of writing, like Rich's, that acts in opposition to them. Rich's writing demands that we comprehensively understand these contemporary issues in order to properly recognize, as critics, the power of the poetry that is produced within, and against, those conditions. Recognizing this power of language and of this form is crucial to understanding our own human condition and how we exist as uniquely different individuals living within a communalistic society. It is out of this knowledge that I believe we must set ourselves, as Rich urges us to do, towards an open and inclusive future that recognizes change as a constant and fundamental character of our literary tradition, and our understandings of personhood.

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