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“For the Relief of the Body and the Reconstruction of the Mind”: Adrienne Rich’s *Metamorphoses*

Abstract: By looking at Adrienne Rich’s poetic and political transitions, this article attempts to demonstrate how her politics of location galvanized her into writing a “whole new poetry.” The source of its newness lies, however, not so much in avant-gardist formal experimentation, but rather in its rootedness in the complexities of lived corporeal experience. It is the body that emerges in Rich’s later writing as a primary form of the subject’s locatedness – the “geography closest in.” Importantly, she views the body as a site of potentiality rather than a passive surface of sociopolitical inscriptions, and refers to corporeal materiality without falling into the trap of naïve essentialism. As I argue, such conceptualization of the body makes Rich’s work particularly interesting from the neo-materialist perspective.

Keywords: corporeality, politics, tradition, locatedness, difference, voice, nomad, matter, nature-culture, neo-materialism, Adrienne Rich

Begin, we said, with the material, with matter,
mma, madre, mutter, moeder, modder, etc., etc.
– Adrienne Rich, “Notes Toward a Politics of
Location”

I want to reassert my bodily brand of materialism
and remain to the end proud to be flesh!
– Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*

In his reply to Ralph Waldo Emerson’s congratulatory letter praising *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman, the poet-prophet, regretfully observed that until then “the body of a man or woman, the main matter” had been “quite unexpressed in poems,” but concluded that “the body [was] to be expressed, and sex [was]” (*Selected Poems* 171). Although his prophecy was eventually fulfilled, the body had long been “driven to skulk out of literature” (171) and it took some time

before subsequent generations of North American poets began to “remove the veil” and transfigure what Whitman referred to as “forbidden voices / voices of sexes and lusts” (34). Surprising though it may seem, among the first explorers of that uncharted territory were the historical avant-garde women poets, whose corporeal writing constitutes, as many critics now argue, an alternative tradition to the highbrow modernist aesthetics.¹ Equally turbulent, fleshy and sensual as the quintessential American bard were also the Beat Generation poets, who came into prominence in the mid-1950s, throwing off the shackles of post-war conformity and rejecting the formalist aesthetics favored by the New Critics.

Not long before Allen Ginsberg published his legendary “Howl,” Adrienne Rich, a twenty-one-year-old Radcliffe graduate, learned that her debut poetry collection *A Change of World* (1951) had been selected for publication as part of the Yale Series of Younger Poets. Unlike the Beats, Rich diligently followed New Criticism’s strategies, winning the attention of W.H. Auden, who praised her verse for craftsmanship, impersonal tone and adherence to the rules of decorum (278). Regrettably, the story fits squarely into an all-too-familiar scenario—a renowned poet and critic champions the works of his young protégé at the Debutante’s Poetry Ball, endorsing her “capacity for detachment from the self and its emotions,” considered tantamount to the possibility of creating art as such (278). In that regard, Auden treaded in the footsteps of his modernist predecessors, Pound and Eliot, whose critical acclaim helped to pave the way for Loy’s and Moore’s “mind cry.”² It is noteworthy that in his editor’s foreword to *A Change of World*, Auden did not only express a favorable judgment of Rich’s verse, but also offered a more general observation concerning the status of poetry in the post-war world. Regardless of the undeniable lure of the “making it new” era, the postwar generations of poets should, in Auden’s view, endeavor to curb the desire to be “original” since novelty in art is necessarily preconditioned by the revolutionary spirit of the times a person lives in, and those times were gone:

1 See, for instance, Alex Goody, *Modernist Articulations: A Cultural Study of Djuna Barnes, Mina Loy and Gertrude Stein* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). For a discussion of both historical and neo-avant-garde movements, see Elizabeth Frost, *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003).

2 In the March 1918 issue of *The Little Review*, Pound famously coined the term *logopoeia*, the poetry “akin to nothing but language,” to describe the verse of two debutantes: Mina Loy and Marianne Moore. Pound regarded emotional detachment as a distinctive feature of their early works: “In the verse of Marianne Moore I detect traces of emotion; in that of Mina Loy I detect no emotion whatever.... It is a mind cry, more than a heart cry.” See Ezra Pound, “Others.” *The Little Review* (March, 1918) rpt. in *The Little Review Anthology*, ed. Margaret Anderson (New York: Hermitage House, 1953).

Radical changes and significant novelty in artistic style can only occur when there has been a radical change in human sensibility to require them. The spectacular events of the present time must not blind us to the fact that we are living not at the beginning but in the middle of a historical epoch; they are not novel but repetitions on a vastly enlarged scale and at a violently accelerated tempo of events that took place long since.... Every poet under fifty-five cherishes, I suspect, a secret grudge against Providence for not getting him born a little earlier. (277)

What therefore emerges as a desirable quality in every poet is the capacity to "follow in their [predecessors'] tradition," which should not be considered synonymous with "parrot-like imitation" (278). The poet must accept the fact that he or she happened to live and create in a transitory period and before another "crop of revolutionary artists" enters the stage, there needs to be a yet another cultural revolution (277). Not endowed with such prophetic prowess as Whitman's, Auden could not have "prophesized with his pen" that his modest and soft-spoken protégé, a "dutiful daughter" of the New Critics, would soon become one of the most radical and uncompromising poets of the postmodern era. He also could not have anticipated the extent to which such "spectacular events" as the upcoming Vietnam War, the elevated tensions of the Cold War, or the emergence of the Civil Rights and Women's Liberation Movements would influence Rich's poetic consciousness, galvanizing her to flout the New Critical doctrine and follow in Whitman's rather than the great modernists' footsteps.

In her 1993 essay, quite tellingly titled "Not How to Write Poetry, but Wherefore," Rich re-visits the works of her "Masters," admitting that she has long borne a grudge against Auden particularly because he "proclaimed such a limited scope for poetry, including [hers]" (*What Is Found* 191). Reflecting on the following lines from his 1939 elegy for Yeats: "poetry makes nothing happen; it survives / In the valley of its saying where executives / Would never want to tamper" (qtd. in Rich, *What Is Found* 192), she emphasizes that in the post-war world in which she grew up, the executives were, as a matter of fact, "increasingly tampering with everything" and "both poetry and women were being re-domesticated" (193). Although Rich was not yet familiar with the twentieth-century radical and revolutionary poetic tradition, she began to resist the idea of poetry as self-contained, dissociated from sociopolitical praxis and lacking destabilizing force. The poetry she imagined was rather "liberatory at its core"—"[not] revolution itself, but 'a way of knowing / why it must come'" (*Arts* 117).

The revolutionary mood notwithstanding, Rich's metamorphosis from "[t]he faithful drudging child / the child at the oak desk whose penmanship / hard work, style will win her prizes" to "the woman with a mission, not to win prizes / but to change the laws of history" (*Poetry and Prose* 112) was not smooth and

unproblematic. On the contrary, when looking at Rich's life and career trajectories, it can be noticed how painstakingly difficult it was for her to find, however clichéd it may sound, her distinct poetic voice. Her subsequent volume, *The Diamond Cutters* (1955), was published soon after she got married and gave birth to the first of her three sons. The poems included in the collection failed to reflect Rich's "will to change," but successfully evoked the anti-revolutionary spirit of the fifties, infused with "the feminine mystique." As Randal Jarrell interestingly observed in his review, Rich could "afford to be wild [one day]," but for the time being she "deserve[d] Shakespeare's favorite adjective, *sweet*" (129). The beginnings of Rich's metamorphosis are, however, vividly rendered in her third collection titled *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963). In this volume, referred to by Albert Gelpi as "transitional" (285), Rich changes the tone, somewhat sarcastically depicting social roles and pressures imposed on the eponymous daughter-in-law, who—feeling utterly overwhelmed and disempowered—lapses into lethargy. Looking back at her own development as a woman, Rich admits that when she was writing about "[a] young girl, thought sleeping, [but] certified dead," she described herself at that time (*Poetry and Prose* 173).

What awakened her from lethargy were the events of 1968 connected with a growing awareness that "the times they [were] a-changin'" and the cultural revolution was inevitable. Rich's "will to change" manifested itself in her active involvement in the anti-war, civil rights and feminist movements. She joined the ranks of activists who had already been grouped by Ronald Reagan under the umbrella terms "beatniks, radicals and filthy speech advocates."³ Given the circumstances, Rich started to redefine the relations between art and politics, assuming an avowedly critical stance towards modernist legacy, including its emphasis on impersonality and detachment.⁴ As Charles Altieri observes in his study of American poetry after modernism, Rich "manifestly refuses modernist ideals of impersonality so that she can take clear personal political stances and,

3 These words were used by Ronald Reagan in his 1966 campaign speech for Governor of California, in which he strongly criticized radical campus activism. He referred specifically to student protests at the University of California at Berkeley. See, for instance, Andrew L. Johns, ed., *A Companion to Ronald Reagan* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2015).

4 It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss Rich's conceptualization of modernism, but it needs to be underlined that she absorbed the idea of modernism from the New Critics and her rejection of formalist aesthetics was therefore coupled with the rejection of modernist legacy. She viewed modernism as a monolith rather than heterogeneous movement with different undercurrents, and was skeptical towards the revolutionary potential of the historical avant-garde movements. See Rich's polemics with Paul Goodman, "Format and Form," *What Is Found There. Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, 217–227.

more important, she can utilize every resource of spoken language in order to persuade her audience to share her values" (172). She also opposed a prevailing view that art and politics are "poor bedfellows" and that the poet should avoid "grind[ing] a political axe" since political writing is by definition "bad, impotent [and] lacking in breadth"—"The song is higher than the struggle, and the artist must choose between politics—here defined as earthbound factionalism, corrupt power struggles—and art, which exists on some transcendental plane" (*Arts* 52–53). What she regarded as inadequate was the definition of the word "politics" itself, trivialized by the rhetoric of the 1950s and reduced to the government and Cold War struggles: "the Red Menace, Jewish Plots, spies, malcontents conspiring to overthrow democracy, 'outside agitator' stirring up perfectly contented Black and/or working people" (52–53). Instead, she proposed a broader definition of politics understood as inseparably connected with the effort to "find ways of humanely dealing with each other" and "break down [the] barriers of oppression" (*What Is Found* 24–25). Rich's vision, which focused on the ethical and personal dimension of politics was evocatively expressed in the frequently quoted lines: "The moment when a feeling enters the body—is political. This touch is political" (24).

The reclamation of feelings, language and the body emerges as a central theme in Rich's later works, which epitomize the idea of making poetry "not *about* but *out of*" [Rich's emphasis] political experience. In contrast to the New Critics, Rich dreamed of expanding the space for poetry and making it an integral part of people's lives—as necessary as "food, shelter, health, education [or] decent working conditions" (*What Is Found* xiv). In the poem titled "Transcendental Etude" (1978), she addresses some of the problems central to the second-wave women's liberation movement: the importance of consciousness-raising and the power of female bonding. "No one ever told us we had to study our lives, / make of our lives a study/ as if learning natural history / or music" (*Poetry and Prose* 87), observes the speaker, emphasizing the value of self-knowledge as a prerequisite for change. Although "the cutting away of an old force that held [us] rooted to an old ground" (89) and "pulling back from 'rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly'" might seem frightful, it constitutes a precondition of freedom:

But there come times—perhaps this is one of them—
when we have to take ourselves more seriously or die;
when we have to pull back from incantations,
rhythms we've moved to thoughtlessly,
and disentrall ourselves... (*Poetry and Prose* 88–89)

A feeling of interconnectedness, which also encompasses the mother-daughter bond and erotic relationships between women, emerges in Rich's poetry as empowering and endowed with the potential to open up the space for "a whole

new poetry,” a poetry which would not pertain to “lofty and privileged abstraction” (*Arts* 65), but would be rooted in “the musing of [the] mind one with [the] body” (*Poetry and Prose* 90). Importantly, “a whole new,” as understood by Rich, does not stand for ‘experimental’ in terms of form (by the seventies free verse had already become a fossilized convention) or ‘innovative’ in the avant-gardist sense of the word. Consistently skeptical about the revolutionary potential of the avant-garde—somewhat reductively identified with predominately male modernist movements—Rich held the view that “what really matters is not line lengths or the way meter is handled, but the poet’s voice and concerns refusing to be circumscribed or colonized by the tradition, the tradition being just a point of takeoff” (*What Is Found* 225). Building on Paul Goodman’s form/format bifurcation, Rich argues that most traditional poetic forms, such as sonnet, might be successfully turned into new poetry, a carrier of radical consciousness, on condition that the poet manages to claim his or her personal space, “struggl[ing] not to let the form lapse into format,” which is tantamount to “broken-spirited” or “colonized” speech (*What Is Found* 218–219). The dynamics of such a struggle might produce compelling effects—“a movement, a music, of its own” (219), which manifested itself, for instance, in Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die.”⁵ For Rich “a whole new poetry” began not when she only refused to be circumscribed by what she considered a modernist tradition, but when she discovered that the point of takeoff, the ground from which she can voice her radical consciousness, the place where her “will to change” begins, is the body—the female body, the desiring body, the body in pain, the ageing body, the politicized body, the damaged body, and most importantly, *her* body. A whole new poetry began when she distanced herself from the abstract and turned to the corporeal.

In her 1983 essay *Blood, Bread and Poetry: The Location of the Poet*, Rich admitted that what she was “hungering” to do all her writing life was “[to] write directly and overtly as a woman, out of woman’s body and experience, to take women’s existence seriously as theme and source of art” (*Arts* 56). Such a confession made by a North American feminist poet might have seemed “out of line,” especially when set against the backdrop of the essentialist /constructivist dispute which shaped feminist criticism in the 1980s. Since Anglo-American gender theories had been already heavily relying on the social constructivist paradigm, which successfully counterbalanced naturalistic perspectives on the woman’s body, any references to the biological roots of the female body tended to be prematurely dismissed on the grounds of their alleged essentialism. For this exact reason, Luce Irigaray’s *écriture féminine* met with a rather frosty reception in the US. Elaine

5 Some of the modernist woman poets also turned old forms into new poetry. See, for instance, Edna St. Vincent Millay’s “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” and her sonnets.

Showalter claimed, for instance, that “simply to invoke anatomy risks a return to the crude essentialism” (17), whereas Nancy K. Miller asserted that it is in the “body of [the woman’s] writing and not the writing of [the woman’s] body” where a “woman-text” must be sought (271).⁶ More than a decade later, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank critically observed that contemporary theory, considered “a broad project that now spans humanities and extends into history and anthropology” is inherently anti-essentialist and anti-biologist: “The distance of any such accounts from a biological basis is assumed to correlate near-precisely with its potential for doing justice to difference (individual, historical and cross cultural), to contingency, to performative force and to the possibility of change” (1). Even the word “nature” itself has been frowned upon since “theory has become almost simply coextensive with the claim it’s not *natural*” (16; original emphasis).

Given the above, Rich’s conceptualization of the body as irreducible to a discursively constructed product of power relations, might have been also dismissively labeled as essentialist back in the 1980s or 90s. Nonetheless, in light of the recently observed “corporeal turn” in the humanities and the emergence of neo-materialist perspectives on the body, Rich’s corporeal writing gains in importance and originality. Moreover, given the extent to which her “politics of location” and her approach towards corporeal materiality influenced Rosi Braidotti’s theory, it might be argued that she proves to be one of the foremothers of the neo-materialist thought defined as “a method, a conceptual frame and a political stand, which refuses the linguistic paradigm, stressing instead the concrete yet complex materiality of bodies immersed in social relations of power” (Braidotti, *New Materialism* 21).

While social constructivist perspectives reinforced the nature/culture divide, moving the feminist theory away both from nature and the body, neo-materialist approaches aim at overcoming the essentialist/constructivist impasse by rethinking nature-culture as a continuum rather than unbridgeable gap (Braidotti, *Metamorphoses* ch. 2). Rich’s earliest attempts at thinking mind and matter in a non-dichotomous way are documented in the collection *Necessities of Life* (1966). In the poem titled “In the Woods,” the speaker recounts how she, in a Thoreau-like fashion, tended to turn her disembodied consciousness to Nature, contained in the image of “the old pond with the half-drowned boat” and conceived of as “ego’s Arcady,” to seek consolation:

6 For an extensive overview of the essentialist/constructivist dispute see Diane Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature & Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

My soul, my helicopter, whirled
 distantly, by old habit, over
 the old pond with the half drowned boat
 toward which it always veers
 for consolation: ego's Arcady:
 leaving the body stuck
 like a leaf against a screen. (*Poetry and Prose* 21)

Yet no consolation had been found until the day came when her body was not "[left stuck] like a leaf against a screen," but became one with her soul, "[her] helicopter," evoking feelings of interconnectedness with the world of matter, the feelings which brought the utmost joy:

this time: my soul wheeled back
 and burst into my body.
 Found! Ready or not.
 If I move now, the sun
 naked between the trees
 will melt me as I lie. (*Poetry and Prose* 21)

The body into which the speaker's soul so joyfully "bursts" emerges in Rich's later works as reducible neither to Cartesian *res extensa*, the inert mass devoid of any potentiality, nor Butler's *body that matters*, an effect of representation. It is rather conceptualized as processual and affective, close to Braidotti's idea of the body as "a transformer of flows and energies, affects, desires and imaginings," "a threshold of transformations," and "a surface of intensities" (*Nomadic Subjects* 24–25). When writing about the body, Rich the feminist focuses particularly on the female body, somewhat provocatively named by Braidotti as "a dark continent of feminist thought" (*Nomadic Subjects* 1994 180). Nevertheless, Rich's aim is not to "transcend" the female body, but to "reclaim" it, "[to] reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman" (*Arts* 65), which is evocatively rendered in her 1968 poem "Planetarium":

I am an instrument in the shape
 of a woman trying to translate pulsations
 into images for the relief of the body
 and the reconstruction of the mind. (*Poetry and Prose* 39)

Trying to embrace the complexities of lived corporeal experience, Rich encourages women to "begin... with the material, with matter, mma, madre, mutter, moeder, modder, etc., etc." (*Arts* 65). She does not shy away from speaking the physicality of the female body, its "biological grounding," its "matter." However,

when referring to “the material,” she also points to a number of variables which determine the concrete, sociopolitical positioning of the female subject, the “matter” of her existence. For Rich, just as for neo-materialist thinkers, the body constitutes “a point of overlapping between the physical, the symbolic and the sociological” (*Nomadic Subjects* 24–25). The question which permeates her works is whether the woman’s body, which as she suggested, constitutes “the terrain on which patriarchy [was] erected” (*Of Woman Born* 55), can be affirmatively refigured:

In arguing that we have by no means yet explored or understood our biological grounding, the miracle and paradox of the female body and its spiritual and political meanings, I am really asking whether women cannot begin, at last, to think through the body, to connect what has been so cruelly disorganized – our great mental capacities, hardly used, our highly developed tactile sense, our genius for close observation; our complicated, pain-enduring, multi-pleasured physicality. (*Of Woman Born* 284)

Rich’s call to “think through the body” and “connect what has been so cruelly disorganized” also corresponds to the corporeal feminist project of “refiguring the female body as positivity rather than lack ” (Grosz 61), which draws on the Spinozist account of the body as a site of unexplored capacities.⁷ Rich seems to reformulate the question posed by Spinoza focusing specifically on the female body and its affirmative capacities, its *potentia*. Her emphasis on sexual difference definitely situates her works closer to Braidotti’s theory of the embodied and sexually differentiated subjectivity rather than Butler’s perspective “beyond gender.” While for Butler sexual difference seems to constitute a “problem to overcome,” Braidotti theorizes it as “a situated corporeal location that one starts from” (*New Materialism* 29), and subcategorizes it into differences between women and men, differences among women, and differences within each real-life woman (*Nomadic Subjects* 151–158). These differences are also beautifully pictured in one of Rich’s “Love Poems” (1974–76):

7 In Spinoza’s philosophy the mind and the body are regarded as attributes of the same, infinite and indivisible substance. The body is not represented as an inert mass subjugated to the mind. On the contrary, it becomes a reservoir of unexplored potentialities. As Spinoza states in the *Ethics*, “nobody as yet has determined the limits of the body’s capabilities: that is, nobody as yet has learned from experience what the body can and cannot do, without being determined by mind, solely from the laws of its nature insofar as it is considered as corporeal.” (Spinoza, *Complete Works*. Trans. Samuel Shirley. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002, 280). For a discussion of Spinoza’s influence on corporeal feminism, see Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

But we have different voices even in sleep,
 and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different
 and the past echoing through our bloodstreams
 is freighted with different language, different meanings—
 though in any chronicle of the world we share
 it could be written with new meaning
 we were two lovers of one gender,
 we were two women of one generation. (*Common Language* 30–31)

It is worthy of note that within neo-materialist framework, a woman is not represented as a monolithic and unchanging essence, but rather as a subject-in-becoming, a nomad. The nomad, as theorized by Braidotti, stands for “[the] subject who has relinquished all idea, desire, or nostalgia for fixity. [The subject] who expresses the desire for an identity made of transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes without an essential unity” (*Nomadic Subjects* 57). Moreover, Braidotti contends that “one speaks as a woman in order to empower women [and] to activate socio-symbolic changes in their condition, [which] is a radically anti-essentialist position” (*New Materialism* 34). By the same token, Rich argues that “women need to repossess their bodies as ‘the grounds’ from which to speak with authority as women” (*Arts* 65).

Although not fixed in one place, the nomad has a “sharpened sense of territory” (*Nomadic Subjects* 65), which makes her/him cognizant of different forms of her/his own locatedness. As Braidotti emphasizes, her nomadic thought evolved from the practice of “politics of location” (*New Materialism* 22), which was developed by Rich as an alternative to identity politics assumed by U.S. radical feminist movements back in the 1970s. Regardless of her commitment to women’s liberation movement, Rich eventually became critical towards its polarizing tendencies and Western self-centeredness. Most importantly, she questioned the idea of identity politics, which regarded as universal the experience of white, middle-class, heterosexual women, locating other subject-positions in the periphery (*Blood, Bread* 219). In a self-critical tone she recounted her conference trip to Nicaragua, admitting that she “felt the absurdity of travelling to a four-year-old evolving U.S. beleaguered society, carrying in hand an agenda from U.S feminism to which that society [was expected] to answer or be written off” (157). In an attempt to de-Westernize North American feminism, Rich developed a politics, which highlighted the importance of each subject’s “location,” pertaining not only to his/her spatio-temporal situatedness, but encompassing such variables as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, age or gender.

Since Rich herself came out of the closet in the seventies, the problem which emerged as central in her writing was the locatedness of lesbians. In her landmark essay titled “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), she

critically observes that the erasure of lesbian experience also takes place within feminist movement and that “feminist research and theory that contributes to lesbian invisibility or marginality are actually working against the liberation and empowerment of women as a group” (*Blood, Bread* 50). She also objects to equating lesbian existence with male homosexuality, which shifts the attention away from the multifaceted experience of women (52), and postulates to study heterosexuality as a political institution in order to fight the systematic mystification of lesbian experience – “[a] bias of compulsory heterosexuality, through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible” (26). In an attempt to deconstruct different manifestations of compulsory heterosexuality, she draws the reader’s attention to the control of women’s consciousness through idealization of heterosexual marriage and romance. In her view, due to social and economic circumstances, women internalized the assumption that “marriage and sexual orientation toward men are inevitable—even if unsatisfying or oppressive—components of their lives” since they serve as “social and economic protect[ion]” (39). Lesbians, who might challenge the status quo, can be tolerated on condition that they assume socially acceptable heterosexual roles, as it happened in the case of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, or remain in the closet performing publicly the role of “real” heterosexual women.

Rich coins two terms that refer to what might be described as lesbian experience: *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum*. The former refers to the historical presence of lesbians and fluid meanings ascribed to it, whereas the latter is related to woman-identified experience that encompasses a wide spectrum of relations between women, ranging from intimate bonding to political solidarity. Rich points out that female nurturing relationships, which have not necessarily been homoerotic, have always been part of social reality. There have always existed women who persistently resisted oppression and refused to remain powerless regardless of the fact that heteronormative behaviors were enforced on them. Drawing on Rosalind Petchesky’s report on women and revolution, she argues that also those forms of women resistance which do not correspond to “concrete revolutionary situations” as defined in male culture (qtd. in Rich 57) should be studied as examples of radical rebellions. That includes such historical examples as the refusal of some women to have children, aided at great risk by other women, or marriage resistance (56–57).

While Rich anticipated that the concept of *lesbian continuum* might be misused and misinterpreted, she did not expect it to be considered a pamphlet replete with feminist clap-traps meant to encourage some “man-haters” to overthrow patriarchy through lesbian revolution. In “Reflections on Compulsory Heterosexuality” (1984), she explains that her aim was to problematize social

understandings of heterosexuality in the hope of contributing to future debates on sexuality and gender. Aware of the flaws of her attempt, she admits that the idea behind the concept of lesbian continuum was “to address the disconnect between heterosexually-identified and lesbian feminists,” encourage solidarity and build a non-exclusive community of women who are differently located (*Blood, Bread* 67).

Before publishing the above-discussed essays, Rich had already transfigured the “forbidden voices” of lesbian desire in the sonnet-like sequence of “Twenty-One Love Poems” published as part of *The Dream of a Common Language* (1976). Its overarching theme is an erotic relationship between “two lovers of one gender,” whose experience cannot be accommodated by the dominant discourse. The lovers are culturally invisible and deprived of the space to live and grow. Their experience remains unspeakable and unimaginable:

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. (*Common Language* 25)

Although there is no space for lesbians within the structures of heterosexual society and they are forced to exist outside the law, they still find sustenance in their nurturing relationship: “a whole new poetry begins here.” The speaker does not want to keep on “nursing, measuring [the old] wound,” and cherishing her suffering (29). Affirmatively accepting her scars, she tells her beloved one: “I want to go on from here with you / fighting the temptation to make career of pain” (29). Walking through the city, where “screens flicker with pornography, with science fiction vampires, victimized hirelings bending to the lash” (25), the lovers find shelter in each other’s embrace, which becomes their microcosm. They are “sleeping, turning in turn like planets / rotating in their midnight meadow” (30). Somewhere in the middle of the sequence, the reader comes across “(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED),” which graphically evokes the erotic experience of lesbian lovers:

Whatever happens with us, your body
will haunt mine—tender, delicate
your lovemaking, like the half-curved frond
of the fiddlehead fern in forests
just washed by sun. Your traveled, generous thighs
between which my whole face has come and come—
the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there—
the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth—
your touch on me, firm, protective, searching

me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
 reaching where I had been waiting for years for you
 in my rose-wet cave—whatever happens, this is. (*Common Language* 32)

The bracketed, unnumbered poem is “floating” outside the ordered sequence, reminding us that lesbian experience cannot be incorporated into the rigid structures of heteronormative discourse and needs a new language, a new literature. A similar theme permeates Rich’s 1976 essay “It Is the Lesbian in Us,” in which she recounts how the novelist Bertha Harris perceives the effacement of the lesbian subject in literature: “The lesbian, without literature, is without life. Sometimes pornographic, sometimes a mark of fear, sometimes a sentimental flourish, she... floats in space... without the attachment to earth where growth is composed” (qtd. in Rich *Lies, Secrets and Silence* 200). Rich’s “Twenty Love Poems” constitute one of the earliest attempts to flout the “bias of compulsory heterosexuality” and demystify lesbian experience as neither “deviant” nor “abhorrent” (*Blood, Bread* 26). What is expressed in the floating poem is passion, fondness and affection. “Whatever happens with us, your body / will haunt mine,” declares the speaker, picturing her partner’s lovemaking as “tender” and “delicate,” “like the half-curved frond / of the fiddlehead fern in forests / just washed by sun.” The imagery employed in the poem suggests harmony between lovers and pleasure they derive from caressing each other. The lover’s touch on the speaker’s body feels “firm” and “protective,” her thighs are depicted as “generous” and the “dance of [her] nipples in the [speaker’s] mouth” as “insatiate.”

In her book on Rich’s poetry and politics, Liz Yorke observes that the responses of the literary critics to Rich’s lesbian poetry were ranging from “extreme hostility” to “mere ambivalence” (3). Still, at that time she had already been awarded the National Book Award for *Diving Into the Wreck* and the reception of her works was on the whole favorable. Proving to be “the woman with a mission, not to win prizes / but to change the laws of history,” she became a star in the firmament of North American poetry, and was paradoxically showered with many prizes. It seems as if the literary establishment wanted to assimilate her work into the mainstream so that it could be contained and served as “a dish on a buffet table of ‘entertainment’” (*What Is Found* 226). But Rich was equally consistent in her refusal to be tamed and turned into a token artist. When given the National Book Award, she demanded that her co-nominees Alice Walker and Audre Lorde enter the stage with her so that they could accept the prize together “in the name of all women.” Although she remained overtly critical of the government, in 1997 she was awarded the National Medal for the Arts, a prize which she did not accept, famously declaring that “the very meaning of art, as [she] understand[s] it, is incompatible with the cynical politics of [Bill Clinton’s] administration” and

that art “means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power which holds it hostage” (*Arts* 98). Cognizant of the fact that „[p]oetry never stood a chance / of standing outside history” (*Poetry and Prose* 115), Rich accomplished her mission and during her lifetime proved that “tonight no poetry will serve.”

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