

## No Money, No Work

Just because someone is Jewish, Mother said, doesn't mean he's nice. I shouldn't be telling you this, because there are enough people out there saying bad things about us, but not all Jews are nice. I should know. I worked for a few of them. When it came time to pay me, some were short of money. One wanted me to be a volunteer. I'd have told him off, but he was a Rabbi. I had to be respectful. He didn't understand that if a woman has a family she's already not getting paid for the work she's doing.

—Hal Sirowitz

## Queer Inheritances: Tracing Lesbian, Jewish, and Poetic Lineages in Adrienne Rich

Joshua S. Jacobs

*Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, exmatriate Southerner, split at the root—that I will never bring them whole.*

—Adrienne Rich, "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity"

When Adrienne Rich wrote "Split at the Root" in 1982 for the Jewish lesbian anthology *Nice Jewish Girls*, her life and career were going through radical change.<sup>1</sup> Since the publication of her first book in 1951, Rich had been a celebrated American poet: first praised in academic circles for her early work, she was then claimed as a major poetic voice of the women's movement after her controversial 1973 volume *Diving Into the Wreck*. With her 1980 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich's position as the preeminent poet-commentator on lesbian feminism seemed established. But the "lesbian continuum" that Rich proposed in "Compulsory Heterosexuality," while immediately influential in the lives and thinking of many, did not correspond to any equivalent coherence of identity in her life or work. Within the same span of years in the 1970s, Rich asserted herself as Jewish after a completely assimilated childhood, and as a lesbian after eighteen years of marriage and motherhood with a non-observant Jewish man. "Becoming" a lesbian and a Jew was Rich's birth into a tense interconnection of identities, with its basis in the juncture of lesbian feminism and Jewish tradition: for Rich, her own "split root" became the basis for understanding all the lives she observed as continuous weavings from their varied communities, and from each person's place in the social and political contexts of their time.

For her readers, Rich's attention to identities enmeshed in shifting American contexts has meant she is difficult to claim as a poet wholly of one community or another. Her poems most often give Jewish and gay readers visions of themselves among others. Rich locates the traditions of gay and Jewish life not in private celebration or ritual, but in the persistence of

connection within these communities across our century's violence and change, as in this reflection on the Holocaust in "Sources":

The place where all tracks end  
 is the place where history was meant to stop  
 but does not stop where thinking  
 was meant to stop but does not stop  
 where the pattern was meant to give way at last  
but only  
 becomes a different pattern  
terrible, threadbare  
 strained familiar ongoing<sup>2</sup>

Rich's poetry of this period is driven by her felt responsibility to bear witness to others' lives, and to suggest possible connections among those who are isolated by violence or political divisions. This central motivation stems perhaps from her own entry into Jewishness and lesbianism, after a life in which claiming those connections was explicitly prohibited within her family and by society as a whole; in "Split at the Root," Rich describes her new life as "a moving into accountability, enlarging the range of accountability" [BBP 123]. In this essay, I trace Rich's evolving placement of Jewish and lesbian identities within an "enlarged" historical and social context in her poetry.

Rich engaged with these traditions in her own life as her poetry assumed an ever-expanding burden of witnessing; as a result, the evocation of lesbian love and Jewish faith in her poetry of the 1980s is sometimes overshadowed by the historical forces of violence and social rupture against which she struggles. By the later 1980s, Rich began to situate her work within a lineage of American poetry of witness, including major gay and/or Jewish writers such as Walt Whitman and Muriel Rukeyser. It is within this most recent period, I'll argue, that Rich's sense of poetic language as an ongoing force in our lives has provided an overall coherence for her sense of lesbian and Jewish experience. More generally, Rich's explicit self-placement within a poetic lineage has been taken up by younger Jewish, gay, and other readers, in whose lives we can see Rich's poetry act as a powerful inheritance for their own self-understandings.

In "Split at the Root," Rich, looking back at the contradictory directions in her own life, writes that "[t]here is no purity...we can't wait for the undamaged to make our connections for us; we can't wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous" [BBP 123]. This statement reflects the conflicts within American feminism as lesbians, women of color, and Jews asserted their particular roles in the women's movement. We can also see in Rich's words her engagement with Jewish traditions of community and repentance, which she would directly address in "Yom Kippur 1984." Yet her first three major poems

on Jewish or lesbian life showed the difficulty of responding to both of these "new" identities at the same time. In her first works on lesbian life, "Twenty-One Love Poems" (1974-76), Rich portrays lesbian existence as engaged with both the cruelty and the imperiled pleasures of the world: after setting a scene of pornographic movies and run-down neighborhoods in Manhattan, Rich asserts that

We need to grasp our lives inseparable  
 from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces,  
 and the red begonia perilously flashing  
 from a tenement sill six stories high,

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>3</sup>

This impassioned encounter between women, and with their lushly impure environment, characterizes this poem's exploration of the contexts for lesbian community. With particularly stirring language, Rich refuses to name her love as a miracle, or to stop living when the relationship ends:

If I could let you know—  
 two women together is a work  
 nothing in civilization has made simple,  
 two people together is a work  
 heroic in its ordinariness [DCL 35]

For Rich, lesbian existence is an instance of heroism in ordinary life. She regards the sexual bond between women as outside the laws and events of society, even outside the plane of the poem: in "The Floating Poem (Unnumbered)," she evokes her and her lover's bodies together in the present, saying "whatever happens, this is" [DCL 32].

Another factor that informed Rich's life at this time, but which saw no mention in "Love Poems," was her Jewish identity. As she notes in "Split at the Root," her first lesbian relationship, depicted in "Love Poems," was with a Jewish woman. This omission in "Love Poems" suggests that Rich understood lesbian and Jewish experience as occurring on two distinct levels, even if in the same person. In "Love Poems," Rich's visions of lesbian love as "heroically ordinary" or "outside the law" operate on an essentially metaphorical level: despite the specific New York setting, the relationship is not depicted via actual events or by either woman's life-work external to the interaction of bodies and words. By contrast, Rich's engagement with her Jewishness, which we first see detailed in "Sources" (1981-2), is bound up with the actuality of her

relationships with her father and husband and with the work of historical memory spurred by the Holocaust. This precursor to "Split at the Root" is framed by Rich's return to Vermont after sixteen years, to the area where she spent summers with her husband and sons, and where her husband traveled in 1970 to take his own life. Rich's tenuous history in this Yankee region is the occasion for thinking of her unaccounted-for sources in the Jewish faith of her father's Southern family, and in the European Jewry that was dying during her childhood in Baltimore.

"Sources" serves as a memorial, a poem in which Rich's "powerful, womanly lens" enables her to parse her father's Jewish suffering from his patriarchal abuses, and to converse with him and her husband after their unreconciled deaths. But Rich's powerful vision seems oddly isolated by these encounters: she explains this state of assurance in solitude, saying to herself that it is "Because you grew up in a castle of air/ disjunctured//Because without a faith/ you are faithful" [YNL 26]. When Rich writes, "The Jews I've felt rooted among/ are those who were turned to smoke" [YNL 18], we might ask whether a middle ground is possible between the vibrant lesbian connection of "Love Poems," grounded in an abstracted field of social and historical strains, and the historically specific—but dead—Jewish community of "Sources."

In "Contradictions: Tracking Poems," the third major poem sequence of Rich's initial encounter with Jewishness and lesbian existence, she puts forth the experience of the body as a common basis for exploring both of these identities. Written at a time when Rich was invested in such global causes as the Sandinista government in Nicaragua and in the continuing fight to stop violence against women, the connections "Contradictions" offers are primarily the shared experiences of physical pain. As with "Sources," Jewish life is largely defined here by deaths in the Holocaust, and also by the observance of Yom Kippur; however, Rich integrates Jewish existence more fully into her larger witnessing purview by suggesting a global solidarity of atonement and resolute life:

Night over the great and the little worlds  
of Brooklyn the shredded communities  
in Chicago Argentina Poland  
in Holyoke Massachusetts Amsterdam Manchester England  
Night falls the day of atonement begins  
in how many divided hearts how many defiant lives  
Toronto Managua St. Johnsbury  
and the great and the little worlds of the women [YNL 92]

This expansion of accountability does not allow for much consolidation of identity—or any kind of sheltering—but leads her to find patterns of division in the hearts of Jews, gays and lesbians, Americans, and those in other places.

Within this witnessing practice, Rich's sexual connection with her lover is not defined as separate, as it is in "The Floating Poem (Unnumbered)"; instead, Rich's evocation of hot physical love in wintertime is locked between a vision of "My country stuck fast in history/ wedged in the ice" and a woman's narrative of being beaten by her husband.

The landscape of social injustice and physical pain in "Contradictions" is Rich's attempt to take on everything, and to risk incoherence in order to represent the confluent paths of many different peoples' pain. In her rendering of the places European Jews were torn from during the Holocaust, Rich illuminates a range of ordinary lives, and through her apostrophic address to "You," strains to bring these lives into connection with her contemporaries:

You: air-driven: reft from the tuber-bitten soil  
that was your portion from the torched-out village  
the Marxist study group the Zionist cell  
café or cheder Zaddik or Freudian straight or gay  
woman or man O you  
stripped bared appalled  
stretched to mere spirit yet still physical  
your irreplaceable knowledge lost  
at the mud-slick bottom of the world

You: air-driven: reft: are yet our teachers  
trying to help us in sleep  
trying to help us wake [DCL 108]

These lives and histories that remain after torture give some detail to the "ongoing pattern" of Jewish life after the Holocaust. Rich connects Jews to the broader life with which she engages from a lesbian-feminist perspective, however affected this life is by the numbers of the dead in the camps.

What allows this feeling of broader connection is Rich's expansive listing of different strands of identity within the Jewish community, a poetic strategy that has its counterpart in secular American poetry in Walt Whitman. Whitman's "Song of Myself" and other works portrayed an American nation comprised by a vast array of such listed races, professions, and places. In these poems, Whitman portrays himself as the frank fellow who moves "among black folks as well as white,/ Kanuck, Tuckahoe, Congressman, Cuff," and in so moving—and writing—unites these groups into a national community.<sup>4</sup> Whitman is also of course the foremost American poet of male homoerotic love and comradeship, and as with Rich, this eroticism informed all his nation-making visions of community. Around the time of Rich's "Contradictions," she enters a period of concerted engagement with her American poetic influences, which will transform her work in poetry and prose in the 1990s. In her most

direct poem on Jewish and gay life in America, "Yom Kippur 1984," we see this influence in a continued use of Whitmanian listing, long-lined evocations of varied Americans; however, in the poem's consideration of Jews and others as imperiled strangers in American society, Rich presents situations she believes "our society has to reckon with as Whitman himself did not."<sup>5</sup>

"Yom Kippur 1984" begins with an epigraph from Leviticus 23, in which Jews are enjoined to "afflict [their] soul throughout this day, [or they] shall be cut off from [their] people." The first lines ask whether a Jew or a queer woman or man can choose such solitude for her/himself, and throughout Rich wonders whether it is possible to "drift from the center, draw [toward] edges" when the responses to a nonconformist Jew or woman are so often violent. As with her vision of a global "observance" of Yom Kippur in "Contradictions," here Rich addresses Jewish, gay and lesbian, and Black Americans who all risk the traditional Jewish openness to the Stranger.<sup>6</sup> In contemporary America, Rich suggests here, this openness can mean not only rejection from one's own community, but violence when one is the Stranger among society at large:

To love the Stranger, to love solitude—am I writing merely about  
 privilege  
 about drifting from the center, drawn to edges,  
 a privilege we can't afford in the world that is,  
 who are hated as being of our kind: faggot kicked into the icy  
 river, woman dragged from her stalled car  
 into the mist-struck mountains, used and hacked to death  
 young scholar shot at the university gates on a summer evening  
 walk, his prizes and studies nothing, nothing  
 availing his Blackness  
 Jew deluded that she's escaped the tribe, the laws of her exclusion,  
 the men too holy to touch her hand; Jew who has  
 turned her back  
 on *midrash* and *mitzvah* (yet wears the *chai* on a thong between  
 her breasts) hiking alone  
 found with a swastika carved in her back at the foot of the cliffs  
 (did she die as queer or as Jew?) [YNL 77]

These scenes of violence describe a Jewish lesbian in a contemporary context, whose internal conflict over her place in either community is made as vivid as the brutal circumstances of her death. While Rich's poetry of this period frequently construes "the world as it is" as unchangeable, or overwhelming our efforts toward change, the Jewish woman in this poem anticipates its quasi-apocalyptic final vision of a new world. This vision evokes a community created in the coming-together of marginalized lives from different groups, a new grouping that Rich makes relevant in terms of gender roles and in the context of contemporary Jewish politics:

when our souls crash together, Arab and Jew, howling our  
 loneliness within the tribes  
 when the refugee child and the exile's child re-open the blasted and  
 forbidden city  
 when we who refuse to be women and men as women and men  
 are chartered, tell our stories of solitude spent in  
 multitude  
 in that world as it may be, newborn and haunted, what will  
 solitude mean? [YNL 78]

Rich's vision of redefined communal identities in the "world as it may be," despite its bleak and destructive milieu, coincides with a further shift in her life that would make her Jewish and lesbian-feminist agendas more integrally connected. In 1990 Rich helped launch *Bridges: A Journal for Jewish Feminists and Our Friends*, which gave her and others a forum for the kind of Jewish feminism articulated through specific, local issues that had motivated Rich's poetry. The magazine has given much attention to the lives of lesbians within Jewish traditions, and also to Jewish feminist perspectives on broader social and political issues.<sup>7</sup> *Bridges* was linked at its inception to New Jewish Agenda, whose advocacy in support of the Israeli-Palestinian peace movement was already incorporated into Rich's vision of "the world as it may be" in "Yom Kippur 1984." A Jewish approach to contemporary social and political crises became a primary influence on Rich's work in *Bridges* and in her own writing. This added to the influence of the civil rights movement and writings of radical Black American activists, which had affected much of Rich's work in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>8</sup>

Beyond guiding Rich's choices of themes, this Jewish approach to feminism and its contexts coincided with her affirming her own place within an American poetic lineage. This focused canon begins with Whitman, but since 1990 Rich has worked most intensively with the precedent of Muriel Rukeyser, a Jewish lesbian poet and writer of startling range who was the featured subject of *Bridges'* first issue. Rich takes the latter poet as a model for inquiring, fearless engagement with American life and its violence. Rukeyser asserted that her poetry of witnessing was motivated by these identities: "My themes and the use I have made of them have depended on my life as a poet, as a woman, as an American, and as 'a Jew.'"<sup>9</sup> So when Rich makes explicit connections to Whitman, Hart Crane, and Rukeyser in her 1991 poem "An Atlas of the Difficult World," she does so to create a sense of community across time within an American poetic tradition, and a community whose sense of responsibility to others is grounded in a sense of queer and/or Jewish identity. Rich makes this community-through-poetry more explicit in her 1993 prose work *What Is Found There*, which is devoted in large part to finding this

communal, responsible poetry at work in writers emerging in our time. By focusing her readers' attention on such younger poets as Irena Klepfisz, a lesbian American poet whose "continuing labor with Jewish meaning" takes place in Yiddish and English, Rich asserts that the inherited, varied, queer power of poetic language creates the possibility for social change in the present:

I see the life of North American poetry at the end of the century as a pulsing, racing convergence of tributaries—regional, ethnic, racial, social, sexual—that, rising from lost or long-blocked springs, intersect and infuse each other while reaching back to the strengths of their origins.<sup>10</sup>

Younger Jews, queers, and others have taken Rich's own work up in turn as they search for community and identity. Mark Horn's "The Stonewall Shabbat Seder," celebrated in June 1996 as part of Gay Pride Week in New York City, is a compendium of literary reflections on Jewish and queer life, traditional prayers from the Passover service, and historical narratives of persecution and resistance by queers and Jews in the modern world. Along with poems by Allen Ginsberg, the other major gay Jewish-American poet of our century, Rich's work is incorporated into the congregation's responsive prayer. The words of "Yom Kippur 1984," which combine violence and the promise of a varied community beyond violence, are evoked in a section of the service meant to reflect the 1980s and the advent of AIDS.

All Together:

What is a Jew in solitude?

What is a woman in solitude, a queer woman or man?

Leader:

when we who refuse to be women or men as women and men are chartered,

tell our stories of solitude spent in multitude

in that world as it may be, newborn and haunted, what will solitude mean?<sup>11</sup>

The communal, responsive utterance of this poem's painful visions does not efface the pain, but it does suggest that an understanding of poetry within multiple, intersecting communities (of poets, of Jews, of gay and lesbian readers) makes the poet's solitary work with poetic language more powerful. Rich's poetic discovery of this communal strength, as she explicitly positions her recent work on a continuum from Whitman and Rukeyser through future poets, echoes in the Stonewall Seder's ceremony of "The Fifth (Empty) Cup: Filling the Cup of The Generations." This moment in the service creates a literal bond between the oldest celebrant's wine and that in the cups of "the youngest people who identify themselves as queer, [charging them] to accept the responsibility of carrying on the celebration, the struggle, and the sanctification" into the future.

To read "Yom Kippur 1984"—with its powerfully apocalyptic final images—in the context of the Stonewall Seder's culminating, traditionally Jewish mandate to preserve queer Jewish culture is to appreciate an essential reworking and adaptation of canonical narratives, which is no less necessary for Horn's use of Rich than it was for her own engagement with Whitman. In her 1983 poem "North American Time," Rich wrote, "poetry never stood a chance/ of standing outside history" [YNL 33], suggesting that a poet's intended meanings are always altered by successive histories and readers. No doubt Rich would approve of the newly defined circumstance of her poem in this ceremony of celebration and memory; however, Rich's insistent view of poetry as an art form moving within the violent changes of its moment likely means that she will never write a poem with the full, assured promise of the future to serve as the conclusion to any ceremony, Jewish or lesbian. In her recent poem "Eastern War Time," Rich concludes a sweeping survey of Jewish life in America and abroad, with a section beginning "Memory says: Want to do right? Don't count on me." We then read an entirely Whitmanian catalog, in which Rich gives first-person voice to the memory of Jewish lives across this century's struggles, from the Holocaust to the struggle for civil rights in the American South. I conclude with these final lines from "Eastern War Time," whose focus on the Women in Black peace activists and the poet's responsibility to "do right" shows how Rich always brings new questions and crises to bear on her varied inheritances; to the extent that we read "your poem" as "our poem," as gay men, lesbians, and Jews, we cannot stand outside history.

I have dreamed of Zion I've dreamed of world revolution  
 I have dreamed my children could live at last like others  
 I have walked the children of others through ranks of hatred  
 I'm a corpse dredged from a canal in Berlin  
 a river in Mississippi I'm a woman standing  
 with other women dressed in black  
 on the streets of Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem  
 there is spit on my sleeve there are phonecalls in the night  
 I am a woman standing in line for gasmasks  
 I stand on a road in Ramallah with naked face listening  
 I am standing here in your poem unsatisfied  
 lifting my smoky mirror

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Evelyn Torton Beck, ed., *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*, Revised and Updated (Boston: Beacon, 1989). In this essay I cite from Rich's prose collection *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (New York: Norton, 1986). All further references in the text as BBP.
- <sup>2</sup>Rich, *Your Native Land, Your Life* (New York: Norton, 1986), p. 20. All further references in the text as YNL.
- <sup>3</sup>Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language* (New York: Norton, 1978), p. 25. All further references in the text as DCL.
- <sup>4</sup>Rich, *Complete Poetry and Collected Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 193.
- <sup>5</sup>See "The Genesis of 'Yom Kippur 1984,'" in Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi, eds., *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, 2nd edition (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 257.
- <sup>6</sup>Many readers will note that Rich's representation of the self among Others coincides with the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas. I discuss this connection at length in my dissertation, "Ethics and Witnessing in Adrienne Rich's Poetry." [EDITORS' NOTE: For more on Levinas see Michelle Sieff, "Responsibility, the Other, and Postmodern Jewish Identity: Lessons From South Africa," *Response* 64 (Summer 1995), pp. 32–39.]
- <sup>7</sup>*Bridges*, in a state of financial crisis since its inception, can be subscribed to or receive donations at P.O. Box 24839, Eugene, OR 97402. The *Bridges* Jewish Feminist List, an online discussion group, can be subscribed to at <listproc@shamash.nysernet.org>
- <sup>8</sup>Rich discusses her encounter with Black politics and literature during the 1950s and 1960s in "Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet," BBP, pp. 167–87.
- <sup>9</sup>Quoted in Rich's Introduction to *A Muriel Rukeyser Reader*, ed. Jan Heller Levi (New York: Norton, 1994), p. xiv.
- <sup>10</sup>Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: Norton, 1993), p. 144, 130.
- <sup>11</sup>"Congregation B'nai Jeshurun: The Stonewall Sabbath Seder," written and edited by Mark Horn. Many thanks to Caitlin Bromberg for telling me about this ceremony and making a copy of it available to me.

## Tuesday

David Erlich

I like them in the dark without touching. In the light I'm always disappointed.

The neighbors look at each other with suspicion. Not at me. I'm clean. A regular student. Just the way they'd want their son to be, red knapsack over one shoulder, a nice neighborly smile, not too many girls to mess with his head and waste precious time he needs to put into his degree.

The eucalyptus trees plunge darkness into deeper darkness. I like boys in that kind of darkness. The call of birds in the air; they have the gift of compassion.

The neighbors hate each other. Me they love. I pay the maintenance fee on time. I carry up the old people's groceries. I baby-sit when they ask because the baby-sitter's sick. They let me watch their little girl.

Darkness within darkness, like a tiger within the skin of a lion, and in the middle of the park, one bright light attracts mosquitoes and keeps people away. When they ask me where I've been, I tell them I went out to get some air. I went out for a bit. I dropped by some friends. I always prepare answers, as if at any moment I could be stopped and asked where were you and what did you do, and even when I go to the store, I make up a good answer, for example, I just went out to get some milk, as if milk were allowed and ice cream forbidden, and they could even show up and ask me that.

Last week someone posted a notice by the mailboxes, "Looking for an apartment in this building," with a telephone number printed on eleven strips. There are only nine apartments in the building. Maybe the Lutzmanns need more than one strip, because they don't speak to each other, and still there'd be an extra strip.

On Tuesday, a strip was missing. The neighbors worried. Who wants to move out of the building. They hate each other, but they're connected by some mysterious neighbors' pact, stuck one beside the other all these years, and now they're worried and angry because someone wants to move.

It's all in your head, the radio announced. I turned it off.

There's no beauty in loneliness. Whichever way you look, there's no beauty in it. If you look up from the floor below you see a mystery. If you look down

Translated from the Hebrew by E. Arnon and Naomi Seidman.