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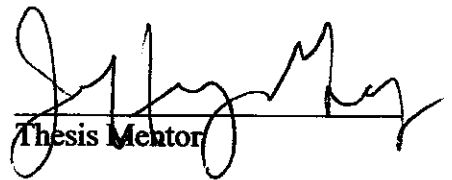
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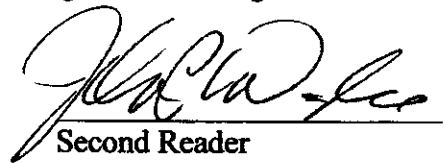
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Master of Arts
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5/5/09



Thesis Mentor



Second Reader

Michael Collins

Thesis Abstract

5/5/09

The Unearthing of the Body in Adrienne Rich's Poetics

Adrienne Rich has said her poetry is a “long, continuing process” and is to be placed “in a historical continuity, not above or outside history” (Rich, Blood 533). “Rape,” written in 1972, is an example of the silencing nature of pain associated with violent male hegemony. The reader takes away from the poem its horrific subject matter, but also the image of a suffering and silenced body. “The body’s” place in Rich’s later poems is an answer to this muteness, and she begins to achieve this response in the sequence “Twenty-One Love Poems,” which is most relevant to my argument, and different than “Rape,” in its open-ended nature. “Twenty-One” consists of twenty-two poems (one unnumbered) published between 1974 and 1976. In “Twenty-One,” the narrator privileges the intense, personal nature of writing over the love affair. In “Contradictions: Tracking Poems,” written between 1983 and 1985, Rich is able to find a more concrete answer to the difficult question of how does one write “through the body”? Something as abstract and akin to women as hysteria becomes more manageable and is realized as something that does not have to prevent ways to connect through language. In other words, Rich learns and wants us to learn from her suffering, something Elaine Scarry describes as being absent of expression. I will look at Elaine Scarry’s The Body in Pain, specifically focusing on how writing about pain is conducive to achieving an embodied effect in poetry.

In gender specific health magazines, such as *Men's Journal*, it is common to find a section titled "Mind and Body." This suggests that when we think of our general well-being, the mind and the body coexist—in order for the body to function at a high level, the mind must also be properly conditioned. This has not always been the case. In Western philosophical traditions there has been a tendency to distinguish the human body "from, and often opposing it to, the soul (or spirit or mind)" (Farley 112). This conflict reflects an attempt by early Western people to understand their place in the world in relation to an evolving society. In this effort, the body became associated with nature, motherhood, sexuality, the animal world and sin, realms that did not have a place in the growing order established by both man and man's belief in a deity.

Peter Brown's *The Body and Society* describes how in early Christianity the body was problematic and needed to be contained. While the roles associated with the human body, such as its link to sexuality and its ability to harbor sin, were not always gender-specific issues, Brown argues that women were associated with the negative connotations of the body. Women were seen primarily as child-bearers in early Western thought: "The mere fact of physical birth, for instance, did not make a Roman child a person. Its father must lift it from the floor. If not, the little bundle of ensouled matter, as much a fetus as if it were still in its mother's womb, must wait for others to collect it from a place outside the father's house" (28). In order for the infant to enter God's world, it must be pulled away from the mother and her bodily connotations. The father would then start the child away from the body towards the spirit.

It was the husband's duty to maintain a quiet authority in the household where the women were willing to assume a secondary role for the benefit of the family:

We meet such women on the sarcophagi of Italy and Asia Minor in the second and third centuries. In them, the wife was shown standing attentively, or sitting, in front of her husband, as he raised his right hand to make a point, while in his left hand he displayed the scroll which represented the superior literary culture on which he based his claim to outright dominance, in society at large as in his marriage. (Brown 13)

The male's possession of the scroll represents his responsibilities of literacy and lawmaking, linking him with reason and logic. The term that associates reason with speech is "logos," and it refers to the first principle upon which all understanding of language is based. It is difficult not to associate "logos" with Brown's account of the husband attending to language, handling the scroll with his wife beneath him. This man, described by Brown, sees language and his control over his wife as his responsibilities. Brown references Plutarch's *Advice on Marriage*, ca. 100 A.D.: "As a result of his tact and quiet authority, Eurydice would be 'knit in goodwill to him,' as the pliant body hung upon the all-controlling, discreet soul" (Plutarch qtd in Brown 13). Here, Eurydice is Pollianus's wife. As Plutarch records, the opposition of the soul and the body began in the household. The woman was associated with the body, while her husband was powerful and discreet. The point here is that society needed to organize itself around these contradictory functions in order to progress. Part of this progression was the beginning of what Brown refers to above as "the superior literary culture."

The resulting influence of humankind on language has lasted, and the question is how does one counter language's embedded place in history? Traditionally, the language of poetry unwittingly enforces the imbalances we have discussed, but in the second half

of the twentieth century the role of women in poetry and in criticism began to be questioned. An effective way for women to take ownership of their place in history was to disrupt the tradition of disembodied writing, or to untangle language's alliance with a male-oriented society.

In the Foreword to her collection of poems The Fact of a Doorframe, Adrienne Rich says, "A poet cannot refuse language, choose another medium. But the poet can refuse the language given him or her, bend and torque it into an instrument for connection instead of dominance and apartheid" (xvi). Seeing language as "given to her" implies a lack of choice regarding her participation in tradition. In other words, Rich understands that language predates us, but also that it must be associated with history's foibles, triumphs and disasters. One must exert pressures on language in order to challenge its domineering role. This notion of biased language was not always seen as an impediment to Rich's writing.

Rich's earliest poems, such as "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" and "At a Bach Concert" from her 1951 collection A Change of World show little resistance to patriarchal language. They are in line with New Criticism, the movement, initiated in the 1920s and 1930s, that enshrines complex literary values, which do not include political or personal writing. Rich reflects on her youth and the anthologized poems she read: "I still believed that poets were inspired by some transcendent authority and spoke from some extraordinary height. I thought the capacity to hook syllables together in a way that heated the blood was a sign of a universal vision" (Rich, "Blood" 524). The idea of poetry as universal was something she initially accepted, but the tendency to embrace poetry's tradition was exactly what she began to contend with. Speaking of poets who

came of age when Rich did in the 1950s and 1960s, David Kalstone writes, “And whether a beginning poet fell under the influence of Eliot’s ironic elegies or Steven’s high rhapsodies or W.C. Williams’s homemade documentaries, he was prepared to think of a poem as something ‘other,’ something objective, free of quirks of the personal” (7). We will see how Adrienne Rich, at first accepting this paradigm, vehemently redefined what poets ought to consider when writing. What she finds, in her movement away from tradition, is a more contingent approach where each poem is not an object transfixed in time.

Rich discusses dating her poems by year: “I did this because I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself” (“Blood” 532). An example of dating her poems is seen in her 1968 collection Ghazals: Homage to Ghalib; she begins each section with a date, such as (7/12/68) rather than as a postscript. Lucy Collins says in her article “*The Contingent World of Adrienne Rich’s Twenty-One Love Poems*,” “To privilege the poem as process over the poem as object is to alter the focus from an inward movement seeking a central interpretative scheme to an outward motion where meaning becomes contingent, provisional; even accidental” (144). Rich’s poetry became an expression of her movement in everyday life, and her writing a progression toward subjectivity. In her 1983 article “Blood, Bread and Poetry,” she addresses the legacy of poetry she faced:

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 transcendent plane. This view of literature has dominated literary criticism in England and America for

nearly a century. In the fifties and early sixties there was much shaking of heads if an artist was found ‘meddling in politics’; art was mystical and universal but the artist was also, apparently, irresponsible and emotional, and politically naïve. (531)

Her frustration with the idea of the poet existing on a higher plane, outside of or distanced from what she may have been most concerned with, is evident. She is looking back in “Blood, Bread” and we can see the desire she had to escape from the new critical mode and dicta such as “the poem’s text should be read as separate from the poet’s everyday life in the world” (533). The personal was looked down on by modernists, but in the face of this establishment, Rich became increasingly aware of her process of writing. In the following passage she discusses the 1960s and her belief that the personal was political:

That statement was necessary because, in other political movements of that decade, the power relation of men to women, the question of women’s roles and men’s roles, had been dismissed—often contemptuously—as the sphere of personal life. Sex itself was not seen as political. Except for interracial sex. Women were now talking about domination, not just in terms of economic exploitation, militarism, colonialism, imperialism, but within the family, in marriage, in childbearing, in the heterosexual act itself. (“Blood” 535)

To be clear, Rich’s contention that women were talking about domination reflects women’s awareness of their subjugation as pointed out above. As Rich says, the roles of women had been dismissed and were seen as belonging to one’s personal life. Also, she

saw sex as something potentially political, but as she says above, any mention of sex was not considered relevant to politics. Personal expressions, such as writing about sex were not in line with tradition.

This movement towards subjectivity, or to writing that accepted the personal is relevant to Rich's prose and criticism of the 1970s and 1980s. As we will see, in her 1976 book Of Woman Born, she turns to psychoanalytic criticism as an example of how the ancient ideals of Peter Brown's study of "the body" are seen in modern thought, specifically in the alliance of man, culture and language. Of Woman Born addresses motherhood, but also the male oriented ideals of psychoanalytical criticism. If one understands Rich's approach to Freud, Rich's reasons for privileging the body in her poetry become more concrete.

Rich argues the ultimate patriarchal nature of the Oedipus complex, claiming it conditions the boy for entry "into the male world, the world of patriarchal law and order" (Rich, Of Woman 197). Rich focuses mainly on the male child to elucidate his privileged place in society, while she describes the female child as being left to contemplate her disadvantage or lack of a penis. In contrast to Freud's link of the child's acceptance by the father and into civilization, Rich states a woman can be that third person who steps in, and this person's physicality, among other traits, do not have to be given up by the child (Of Woman 199). The child's relationship with the body, beginning in the womb, can have a place in his life even though the child has to learn that "the mother's breast, her face, her body's warmth" does not belong solely to him (Rich, Of Woman 198). Rich's discusses how Freud's jargon is narrow in scope:

A penis, a breast, obviously have imaginative implications beyond their biological existence (just as an eye, an ear, the lungs, the vulva, or any other part of the body which we inhabit intellectually and sensually). Yet these implications go unexplored; the density and resonance of the physical image gets lost in the abstract reductiveness of the jargon. (Of Woman 201).

Of Woman Born gives the reader of Rich's poems an understanding of what she is writing against or about. As she says, "the physical image gets lost" (Of Woman 201). She is arguing that Freud's theories do not necessitate the involvement of the physical nature of the woman or the mother and fall in line with the traditional mind-body split.

Leaving the discussion of Freud, she says, "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 284). Her claim is that the above qualities, many in line with the personal, have not begun or are just beginning to happen in 1976. In Jane Gallop's 1988 book, titled after Rich's above quote: Thinking Through the Body, Gallop says, "Rich's 'so cruelly' may remind us that if we think physically rather than metaphysically, if we think the mind-body split *through the body*, it becomes an image of shocking violence" (1). In order to repossess the body, Rich and Gallop are arguing that the incongruity must be confronted physically, as violence effectively describes the relegation of the human body. They want to move past the transcendental discussion that traditionally has exalted the soul and spirit while ignoring the body.

Gallop calls on Roland Barthes as someone whose post-structuralist ideas are more grounded in the body and less scientific than those of his counterparts. The first chapter of Thinking Through the Body: “The Bodily Enigma,” discusses Barthes’s influence on Gallop: “He had already passed out of his scientific stance (structuralism) into something that seemed softer, more subjective, more bodily. The Barthes of the seventies authorized my own push out of objective scholarly discourse into something more embodied” (11). Barthes’s recognition of “the body” is important to our discussion. He defines the plural body:

‘Which body? We have several.’ I have a digestive body, I have a nauseated body, a third body which is migrainous, so on: sensual, muscular (writer’s cramp), humoral, and especially: *emotive*: which is moved, stirred, depressed, or exalted or intimidated, without anything of the sort being apparent. (Roland Barthes 60-1)

The plurality of the body, while problematic for Barthes and also for Rich, is still capable of proliferating. Jane Gallop says, “the body calls out for interpretation,” and she posits, “[by] ‘body’ I mean here: perceivable givens that the human being knows as ‘hers’ without knowing their significance to her” (13). Gallop is arguing that these givens call out for interpretation. Her comment is fitting with our discussion on Freud which is largely based on the significance of our being. The question is what is the meaning of these givens mentioned by Gallop? Gallop is arguing, in line with Rich, that these givens have been essentially glazed over. The father’s place is one of power and “demands separation of ideas from desire, a disembodied mind” (21). Gallop is pointing to historic male hegemony where desire and embodiment are left out of the equation. She is

countering the relegation of emotion and body to women, and objective thinking and critiquing to men. Rich's insight into what Barthes' calls "the monument of psychoanalysis" (Pleasure 58) provides a backdrop for her poetry and enhances her argument that language and culture go hand in hand.

From the above discussion of criticism it can be concluded that we and the world around us are in some way embodied. For the title of this essay on the poetic body, I have used the word—unearthed—to describe the desired effect of much of Adrienne Rich's work. Rich would argue that the body's relegation began with its affiliation with the Earth. Beginning around 1968 with Rich's "Leaflets," the image of "the body" is discussed as something abstract and earthly.

"Leaflets," broken up into five sections, focuses on the narrator who is passing on a leaflet of a political nature. Rich mentions Che Guevara and dead Jewish terrorists, fueling the poem's intensity. But as the poem ends, it seems that the leaflet is not as important as the tears cried and the actual physicality of the person passing on the leaflet and the person receiving it. Section Five reads:

What else does it come down to
 but handing on scraps of paper
 little figurines or phials
 no stronger than the dry clay they are baked in
 yet more than dry clay or paper
 because the imagination crouches in them.
 If we needed fire to remind us
 that all true images

were scooped out of the mud

where our bodies curse and flounder (Rich, The Fact 62)

“Leaflets” poignantly aligns the human body, in all its muddiness, with language; the leaflet itself originates in the body. All images originate from the beginnings of humankind where we can find our body “[cursing] and [floundering].” I have mentioned this poem as one of the first examples of locating our “bodies” In the Earth. Many of Rich’s poems from 1968 onward, recognize the body’s earthly origins, and attempt to unearth them, and as Gallop says, interpret them.

In what follows, I will focus on a poem and two sequences of Rich’s in chronological order. She has said her poetry is a “long, continuing process” and is to be placed “in a historical continuity, not above or outside history” (Rich, Blood 533). Her own tradition allows the reader to connect meaning from poem to poem, year to year. The first poem, “Rape,” written in 1972, is an example of the silencing nature of pain associated with violent male hegemony. The reader takes away from the poem its horrific subject matter, but also the image of a suffering and silenced body. It asks us and perhaps asked Rich, what can be done about this silence that comes along with a body in pain? I will then begin to argue that Rich’s method of attempting to interpret “the body’s” place in her later poems is an answer to this muteness. She begins to achieve this in the sequence “Twenty-One Love Poems,” which is most relevant to my argument, and different than “Rape,” in its open-ended nature. “Twenty-One” consists of twenty-two poems (one unnumbered) published between 1974 and 1976. In the sequence, the embodied nature of physical love and physical suffering attempts to transgress the

couple's existence in the city where the narrator and her lover dwell. In "Twenty-One," the narrator privileges the intense, personal nature of writing over the love affair. It is telling that Rich mentions her physical pain in "Twenty-One" which is a sequence of love poems; she can't avoid her pain and pain becomes another example of the body as transgressive. As we see in "Contradictions: Tracking Poems," descriptions of Rich's own battle with Rheumatoid Arthritis lead to poems more personal than those of "Twenty-One." In "Contradictions: Tracking Poems," written between 1983 and 1985, Rich is able to find a more concrete answer to the difficult question of how does one write "through the body"? Something as abstract and akin to women as hysteria, becomes more manageable and realized as a way to connect through language. In other words, Rich learns and wants us to learn from her suffering, something Elaine Scarry describes as being absent of expression. I will look at Elaine Scarry's The Body in Pain, specifically focusing on how writing about pain is conducive to achieving an embodied effect in poetry.

Scarry situates pain as belonging to the person and as something that person is unable to fully capture in language. She says, "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). By associating this personal experience with infancy—before language is learned—Scarry locates pain as something pre-oedipal and problematic. Before looking at Rich's own physical pain, we will look at the very nature of human suffering, specifically the role it plays between two people.

Pain not only manifests itself in illness and bodily suffering, but also in the concept of torture. Scarry's first chapter "The Structure of Torture" looks at the actual setting of person-to-person interrogation where torture is the main method of expressing one's power over the victim. The key distinguishable difference between the victim and the interrogator is not only that the latter is free of physical pain, but also free "of the pain originating in the organized body so near to him" (Scarry 36). This is an example again of a binary where the advantage belongs to one and not to the other. An interrogation of a victim and the struggle for power between the person in distress and the person in power is evident in Rich's 1972 poem "Rape." The subject of the poem is not literally tortured by the investigator in the poem, but she can be imagined in a kind of torture chamber where a struggle for power takes place. The poem begins:

There is a cop who is both prowler and father:
 he comes from your block, grew up with your brothers,
 had certain ideals.
 You hardly know him in his boots and silver badge,
 on horseback, one hand touching his gun. (Rich, Fact 105)

After reading the title, the reader likely expects the poem to depict the incident, but the opening begins with a police officer described as a "prowler and father," handling "his gun" (Rich, Fact 105). He is someone familiar, but the image of the officer handling his gun yields both a phallic and violent image. The situation can be associated to Rich's and Gallop's acknowledgement of the process of "thinking through the body" as something violent. The fourth stanza helps the reader see what the subject is looking at:

And you see his blue eyes, the blue eyes of all the family

whom you used to know, grow narrow and glisten,
 his hand types out the details
 and he wants them all
 but the hysteria in your voice pleases him best. (Rich, Fact 106)

This description of the interrogator leads the reader to question why his eyes are glistening. It shows the subject's fear of this man who represents sexuality as he is perhaps aroused and can be seen as a threat similar to the actual rapist. The notion that her "hysteria" pleases him reinforces the tense situation where the woman who has been raped continues to suffer. There is no mention of a feeling of safety or relief felt on the subject's behalf, and she is now still experiencing the violent act of rape. The notion of the officer as "pleased" by her hysteria provokes sympathy and empathy for the victim.

As we discuss more of Rich's poems, the word—hysterical—surfaces and is relevant to her investigation of the female relationship to the human body. Helene Cixous says, "the great hysterics have lost speech" and "they are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body" (49). Hysteria, as Rich might agree with Cixous, can be seen as the inability to speak. In this way, the human body can be seen as problematic and hysteria is one way it attempts to express itself, although as Cixous says, man cannot hear the body.

The reader gets the sense that the woman in "Rape" feels like a prisoner and forgets that she has done nothing wrong. Her pain increases in the face of the police officer, while the interrogator possibly gains from his lacking any pain. This difference, according to Scarry, proves that the unavoidable pain is in this case solely possessed by the woman. Scarry says:

The direct equation, 'the larger the prisoner's pain, the larger the torturers world' is mediated by the middle term, 'the prisoner's absence of world': the larger the prisoner's pain (the smaller the prisoner's world and therefore, by comparison) the larger the torturer's world. (37)

If we were to discuss the ways in which Rich's poems transgress her position through the body, "Rape" would be an example of the body being silenced. As the passage above states, her world is absent and her ability to speak and produce language has been destroyed. The body is vacant and only able to express itself through hysteria. What the reader takes away from the poem is not only that she is cornered by the interrogator, but also the great sense of silence that results from a situation where there is no dialogue between the subject and interrogator. We are presented with inner thoughts such as, "your details sound like a portrait of your confessor, / will you swallow, will you deny them, will you lie your way home?" (Rich, Fact 106). Granted Rich may be the voice addressing the "you" or subject of the poem, but she privileges the reader to the inner thoughts of the woman. These closing two lines again depict the police officer as someone who could fit the description of the rapist. The question of whether or not she will swallow can be an explicit sexual reference in line with the poem's imagery or it may speak to the possibility that she will not tell the details of the crime. In other words, just to get out of the interrogation room, she would deny the events of the crime.

Rich's still later poems are more subjective than "Rape" in their self-consciousness as a process of writing. The later works seem to display an awareness of their importance in rescuing the body from history. In "Rape" she knows that women are victimized, but she doesn't have a solution to the problem. The situation is telling

because it proves the difficulty of effectively writing poems that challenge patriarchy while working with a manmade lexicon. This is why her writing became a contingent process; it allowed her to exist outside of tradition. Through this process, she trades in the usefulness of silence for “writing” as a vehicle for her personal ethics. Rich’s ultimate goal to connect through language is similar to Jane Gallop’s and Rich’s own need to replace the Father.

In “Twenty-One Love Poems,” published shortly after “Rape,” we see patriarchy in the sequence’s urban setting. Poem I begins:

Wherever in this city, screens flicker
with pornography, with science-fiction vampires,
victimized hirelings bending to the lash,
we also have to walk . . . if simply as we walk
through the rainsoaked garbage, the tabloid cruelties
of our own neighborhoods. (Rich, Fact 143)

The city is associated with dominance, and we can assume that it is equated to hegemony. But it is no different than “our own neighborhoods” characterized by the written word of tabloids where language has the ability to falsify the facts or misrepresent them. Just as Gallop wants to replace the father not by avoiding the symbolic, but by finding a place to exist within it, Rich intends to do the same:

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. (Rich, Fact 143)

The image of trees blazing through “sulfuric air” establishes the location of this first poem of the sequence. The “we” is women or specifically Rich and her lover. The narrator wants to continue to grow like a tree despite her scars. Instead of going around or feeling out of place in the grizzled characteristics of the city, she wants to stay there—she and her lover one with their animal passion. But following the order of the sequence, we turn to Poem II where Rich places emphasis on writing: “*I dreamed you were a poem. / . . . a poem I wanted to show someone*” (The Fact 144). Rich hints at the fact that her life as a writer takes precedence or at least must be a part of their love. Speaking of this union between her lover and the poem, Lucy Collins says, “she accords the experience, and the woman, importance as creative inspiration” (152). In this sense, it is a love poem, but it is also Rich’s admission that as a writer she is independent of their love. This reminds the reader, early in the sequence, that she may be having trouble, perhaps as she is actually writing the poems, with the actual act of describing two people. Poem II lets us know that for the purposes of confronting hegemony, and fighting silence, and making “the body” recognizable, the process of writing presides over the relationship which tries to exist at the heart of the sequence.

Throughout “Twenty-One” the direction of the poems moves from an acceptance of the environment where the narrator and her lover live to a less compliant relationship with the city. The poems move from “we” to “I” and then back to “we,” creating a disharmony between the narrator and the “you” of the poem who usually refers to the woman that the narrator is involved with. Poem IV begins:

I come home from you through the early light of spring
flashing off ordinary walls, the Pez Dorado,

the Discount Wares, the shoe-store I'm lugging my sack
of groceries, I dash for the elevator
where a man, taut, elderly, carefully composed
lets the door almost close on me. —*For god's sake hold it!*

I croak at him.—*Hysterical*,—he breathes my way. (Rich, Fact, 145)

The above lines start off as peaceful and soothing—“the early light of spring”—but then the action of the poem turns into something more turbulent. We get the sense that the metaphorical city and time are immutable oppositions to the body. Rich once wrote in her 1958-60 poem “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” that “Time is male” (The Fact 20). While we know the narrator wants to exist in the city, budding like a sycamore, we see in the above poem the difficulties she encounters. Running to catch the elevator with a bag of groceries, she is ignored by a man who does not hold the door open for her. The word—*hysterical*—appears in this poem, and tracing its function through these poems helps understand the problems the narrator of “Twenty-one” confronts, despite her willingness to connect with the city.

As we see in Poem IV, she describes herself as *hysterical*; she cannot be heard. In “Twenty-One,” it proves to be difficult for a woman in the city to exist as anything but *hysterical*. As the sequence progresses, the idea of living in this city with another person or partner, becomes increasingly problematic. What is also a problem for Rich is her physical pain. Her mention of it in “Twenty-One” may not necessarily belong in a collection of love poems, but it does foreshadow its presence in her work that follows “Twenty-One.” The themes of love and pain seem to mesh as Poem VIII is one of many “love poems,” but this one focuses on her poetics:

The woman who cherished
 her suffering is dead. I am her descendant.
 I love the scar-tissue she handed on to me,
 but I want to go from here with you
 fighting the temptation to make a career of pain. (147)

She is examining herself, while acknowledging she is not willing to silently accept pain. The above poem lays out the many inconsistencies in how Rich intends to “go from here.” She wants to move away from silence, but at the same time, she does not want “to make a career of pain.” It can be concluded that she wants to fight pain with her words, while she worries about what that means.

Rich does acknowledge the importance of relating with one another as human beings, on an intimate level, but relationships do not satisfy her need to find a language that connects rather than limits. In order to challenge the father or patriarchal civilization through Rich’s writing, the two people must also acknowledge individuality. In poem XII, she says:

But we have different voices, even in sleep
 and our bodies, so alike are yet so different
 and the past echoing through our blood streams
 is freighted with different language, different meaning—
 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. (Rich, Fact 149)

Rich is focusing on their natural biological differences, gaps that cannot be bridged. But the quest for language seems to be overriding the relationship of the two women.

“Different” is repeated four times in the above lines from Poem XII, and initially it may seem that a relationship between two women does not have any place in the “language” mentioned above. But, conversely, she may be equating their differences—that of her and her lover—to the possibility of writing “with new meaning” (Fact, Rich 149). She is acknowledging the possibility for a new tradition, one where poems marked by gender are not seen as anomalies. This is Rich’s struggle. She is charting undiscovered territory and as we will see, exploring the body through “love poems” proves insufficient.

Throughout the sequence, Rich vividly expresses the sexual relationship of the two women. The most sexual of the “Twenty-One” poems is placed outside of the numbered sequence, between poems XIV and XV and titled “(The Floating Poem, Unnumbered).” Celebrating their physical love for one another, the poem finishes:

your touch on me, firm, protective, searching
 me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
 reaching where I had been waiting years for you
 in my rose-wet cave whatever happens, this is. (Rich, Fact 150)

The words “this is” binds the sex-act to the present, but it is an anomaly. The poem immortalizes the relationship of Rich and her lover, but it stands alone. The explicit descriptions of lesbian love show the transgressive potential of the body in this poem. But “The Floating Poem” may only momentarily escape the confines of time and the city, and it does not have a place in her work or process and as a result is unnumbered. She is able to celebrate her sexuality with the shocking graphic nature of the poem, but much of the

rest of the numbered poems point to the need to challenge language not with love, but with poems.

The closing poem of, XXI, leads us out of the love poems and on to new ground. It is no longer the ambiguous “you” that can mean the reader or her lover, but rather the singular “I.” The poem and sequence closes:

I choose to be a figure in that light,
 half-blotted by darkness, something moving
 across that space, the color of stone
 greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
 a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle” (Rich, The Fact
 154)

While still a love poem, as a part of this sequence she sees the writing process as something outside of love. The concept of a circle is akin to our understanding of femininity and the body, more so than the linear notion of fact and reason. She is announcing, perhaps to us and her lover that she will go forth and continue to write poems. Again, it is written in the first-person, and leaves the reader with questions about her love and the physicality she shares with the other woman of the poem. We have mentioned Roland Barthes as a thinker who wrote around the same time as Rich’s move to subjective writing. His investigation of love and writing may help the reader empathize with Rich’s inability to write twenty-two poems about love even if that was her initial intention. Barthes says in A Lover’s Discourse, “The lover’s solitude is not a solitude of person (love confides, speaks, tells itself), it is a solitude of system: I am alone in making a system out of it” (453). He continues, “A difficult paradox: I can be understood by

everyone (love comes from books, its dialect is a common one), but I can be heard (received ‘prophetically’) only by subjects who have *exactly and right now* the same language I have” (A Lover’s 453). Rich tries to share the process of writing with her lover, but as Barthes says, the problem of solitude is not one of person, but rather of system and the inability to share the “exact” language. As we will see in “Contradictions: Tracking Poems,” another person cannot become an object for one’s pain as pain is a personal experience. It is through the attention Rich pays to her physical pain, in its inexpressible nature, that she is able to fully see the body’s world as something palpable.

She begins “Contradictions” with the oppression and unpredictable nature of the winter, not with gritty and graphic descriptions of her physical pain. Poem One begins, the worst moment of winter can come in April / when the peepers are stubbornly still” (83). Similar to how “Twenty-One” includes time and the poem’s setting as impediments to the action of the sequence, Rich starts “Contradictions” in the month of January. The winter is a time that makes it more difficult to handle “everything that tries us” (Rich, Your Native 83). It is a time when a body in pain may be more at risk and will “plod on without conviction” (Rich, Your Native 83) But she understands the implications of January and instructs us not to be fooled by the “soft grey afternoons” because it is a season of contradictions where “the worst moment of winter can come in April” (Rich, Your Native 83). Unlike “Twenty-One” this opening poem shows a parallel relationship between the body in pain and the environment she is faced with. Yes, her pain may increase in the winter, but she is able to recognize the nature of her surroundings.

The first few poems of “Contradictions” are more universal than the poems that follow; in Three, sex is a celebration of “the pleasures of winter” (Rich, Your Native 85).

The inconsistent nature of the sequence continues in poems Four and Five of “Contradictions,” which focus on a crime resulting in a life sentence in prison. Poem Four is written in italics and the reader can conclude the narrator is not Rich. The poem speaks of a case of domestic violence: “He slammed his hand across my face and I / let him do that until I stopped letting him do it / so I’m in for life” (Rich, Your Native 86). The subject of the poem presumably is serving a life sentence for her crime of self-defense. Poem Five reads:

She is carrying my madness and I dread her
 avoid her when I can
 She walks along I.S. 93 howling
 In her bare feet
 She is number 63754II
 in a cellblock in Arkansas (Rich, Your Native 86)

Rich is comparing her life to that of the woman in Poem Four who killed a man. Rich says, “and I dread what she is paying for that is mine” (Rich, Your Native 87). In other words, Rich may be addressing her own violent nature and that it could very well be her in jail for life. Rich concludes, asking, “What am I hiding / O sister of nausea of broken ribs of isolation / what is this freedom I protect how is it mine” (Rich, Your Native 87). This question is central to the poems that follow in “Contradictions;” her attempt to take ownership of this freedom begins in trying to understand her pain. Through expressing her physicality she finds freedom in pain’s manifestation in poetry. We see in Poem Five how the sequence shifts to a more personal experience.

Rich answers these questions of freedom in a letter to herself in Poem Six and responds in another letter in Poem Seven. When asked what she plans to do with the rest of her life she answers in Poem Seven:

I feel signified by pain
 from my breastbone through my left shoulder down
 through my elbow into my wrist is a thread of pain
 I am typing this instead of writing by hand
 because my wrist on the right side
 blooms and rushes with pain
 like a neon bulb. (Rich, Your Native 89)

This is very straightforward non-poetic description of her arthritic pain, and it is suiting that it is a letter. She is detailing the facts and answering her own letter, talking to herself. On its own this poem would not offer very much, but seen as part of an answer to the question of whether one's embodiment is a personal experience it seems clear that in "Contradictions" she is going at it on her own. Jeanne Perreault says, "Her assertion, 'I feel signified by pain,' in 'Contradictions,' is only one of many examples of self-disclosure, but for me it charges this long poem with a quickened subjectivity that takes us into the heart of Rich's ethical poetics" (87). Again, the shocking nature of the non-poetic language propels us into the opportunities for discovery that follow. In feeling "signified by pain," Rich is avoiding being signified by anything else—anything outside of her. She is locking the pain up in all of its discomfort. The prosody of Poem Seven has the effect of captivating the reader because of its plainness and allows us to see pain as something that limits language. An investigation of the nature of one's physical pain

elucidates this poem and those that follow where similar allusions are made to her afflicted body.

Scarry deems an “object” as “an extension of, and expression of, the state: the rain expresses his longing, the berries his hunger, and the night his fear” (162). She continues, “But nothing expresses his p in” (162). The concept that pain does not have an object speaks to its silenced nature. It cannot be expressed, and Scarry concludes how the senses of vision and hearing are generally concerned with their object as opposed to their bodily location. Vision and hearing are the senses most commonly “invoked by poets as the sensory analogues for the imagination” (165). Scarry continues:

Through them, one seems to become disembodied, either because one seems to have been transported hundreds of feet beyond the edges of the body out into the external world, or instead because the images of the objects from the external world have themselves been carried into the interior of the body as perceptual content, and seem to reside there, displacing the dense mater of the body itself. (165)

This helps understand what follows in “Contradictions” where pain has a place to exist only in the poems Rich creates. This prevents pain from moving away from the body to an empty space. In other words, we will see in “Contradictions” how Rich is increasingly alone with her pain. Poem Eleven reads:

I came out of the hospital like a woman
 who’d watched a massacre
 not knowing how to tell
 my adhesions the lingering infections

from the pain on the streets (Rich, Your Native 93)

The above poem starts with the inability to objectify her physical pain. She had endured treatments in the hospital that perhaps left her still in discomfort. She again mentions the environment around her, but she mentions and is aware of the pejorative nature of the streets where presumably there is some unrest. She is in a difficult state. Rich goes on:

and my own

unhoused spirit trying to find a home

Was it then or another day

in what order did it happen (Rich, Your Native 93)

Her spirit is evicted from her body. Scarry says, “But it is especially appropriate that the very state in which he is utterly objectless is also of all states the one that, by its aversiveness, makes most pressing the urge to move out and away from the body” (162). Rich’s subject of the above poem is “trying to find a home.” It is an urge to move out and away from the body, but this is not possible as pain does not have an object. But through the writing process, Rich is exploring the problem and not ignoring the body.

In “Contradictions” Rich seems to confront patriarchy and she does so through her overt control of her surroundings—the pain in the streets, the brutality of winter. She is no longer as fooled and helpless as she was in “Twenty-One.” Poem eighteen from “Contradictions” locates the fractured body in the world:

The problem, unstated till now, is how

to live in a damaged body

in a world where pain is meant to be gagged

uncured un-grieved-over The problem is

to connect, without hysteria, the pain
 of any one's body with the pain of the body's world
 filled with creatures filled with dread
 misshapen so yet the best we have
 our raft among the abstract worlds
 and how I longed to live on this earth
 walking her boundaries never counting the cost (Rich, Your Native 100)

She recognizes the difficult nature of living in a body in pain without "hysteria." The difference between how we have previously discovered hysteria and how it functions in Poem Eighteen lies in its depiction as something that might be avoidable. Before, hysteria went hand in hand with everyday life, as in "Twenty-One" when she is hysterical as she asks someone to hold open the door for her. Now, she is able to consider discovering her body's pain without hysteria or she is able to distance herself from this hysteria. But, the reference to "the body's world" encourages the reader to consider what is "the body's world." She describes the dread associated with this body's world, and it seems in line with how she continuously sees "the body." It is filled with darkness and creatures, but it is a "boundary" she wants to explore. And she wants to do so without "counting the cost." The body's world is something that has been effectively overlooked by history, and through language and through pain, Rich is visiting this inchoate source. She sees language as a way to connect with the body, not to move away from it. But, she does acknowledge that it is not easy to make connections between one's body and the body's world.

It is fitting to finish with Poem Twenty-nine from “Contradictions” and to attempt to distinguish this poem from those before it. The second section of the poem reads:

You for whom I write this
 in the night hours when the wrecked cartilage
 sifts round the mystical jointure of the bones
 when the insect of detritus crawls
 from shoulder to elbow to wristbone
 remember: the body’s pain and the pain on the streets
 are not the same but you can learn
 from the edges that blur O you who love clear edges
 more than anything watch the edges that blur (Rich, Your Native 111)

This poem is more poetic than earlier poems where her physical suffering was listed, talked about. Now, bones are “mystical” and she describes the nature of arthritis as “the insect of detritus” or debris, running through her body. She is demonstrative in this closing poem as she is throughout “Contradictions.” Her voice is enforced by her writing, and she finds resolution in the declaration that the pain in the streets is different from hers. She intends for the reader to understand that the pain is entirely hers, but she encourages us to learn from the “edges that blur.” The concept of blurred edges calls to mind an image of circles touching one another without completely connecting. One circle is the one Rich declares she would draw at the end of “Twenty-One.”—her work. The other circle is the pain on the streets or the body’s world or at least a part of the body’s world. These two circles brush into one another, and she encourages those who prefer clear edges to watch as these multiple worlds connect. It is true they are connecting, and

although she does acknowledge the problematic nature of the body, she has successfully unearthed “the body”

Seeing “the body” in history as locked in the Earth is advantageous to Rich’s process in that “the body” is palpable, corporeal and lasting. Rich attempts to give a contrite reflection of the body’s function, and in attempting to interpret “the body” she is able to make connections between problems and situations. The silence in “Rape” finds a new voice in Poem Four of “Contradictions” where someone is put away for life for fighting back against abuse. Poem Four, in a very serious manner, addresses the potential violence involved with “thinking through body.” The characteristics of “the body” in antiquity evoke the beginnings of this impossible situation, and the fact that the ethos of early societies still carries over into modern thinking speaks of the tediousness of healing the gap between our understanding of “the body” and a world that often seems complete and bound to history. The body’s world of “Leaflets” reminds us of the abstract degraded “body” in Peter Brown’s book, but Rich guides one to find in one’s personal life a place for that world full of misshapen creatures from which we emanate.

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