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**Adrienne Rich:
Keywords For The Future**

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*Alla nonna Ursula,
alla sua pazienza che non ho ereditato
e alla sua caparbia da cui ho imparato.*

Abstract

This thesis is a study of Adrienne Rich: American feminist thinker, poet, critic, and public intellectual. It argues that Rich represents an outstanding model of the conjunction of poetic and political discourses in contemporary American modernity. The study isolates four important cornerstones of her work: the concept of re-vision, the idea of historical amnesia and its consequences, her critique of heterosexuality, and the intimacy of poetry and politics. The different chapters expand on and contextualize these four thematic clusters in a wider historical and political overview of the decades, between the 1970s and 1990s, when Rich wrote and acted as a charismatic public intellectual.

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Introduction

This thesis analyses the public figure of Adrienne Rich, who was an American feminist thinker, poet, critic, and intellectual. Through her artistic work and her activism, she distinguished herself as an outstanding model of the conjunction of poetic and political discourses in contemporary American modernity. I choose to isolate some of the most important cornerstones of her work through the four chapters that compose this thesis: the concept of re-vision, the idea of historical amnesia and its consequences, her critique of heterosexuality, and the intimacy of poetry and politics. These different topics will be expanded and contextualized in a wider historical and political overview of the decades between the 1970s and 1990s. Nevertheless, even if Rich's work belongs to the previous century, it finds its roots in our past, present, and future. These four thematic clusters touch upon different problems and questions that are still actual in our time and worthy of consideration. What animated me in my search was the need to, as a woman, uncover the reasons why women have always been depicted as so inherently different and inferior to men, due to their appearance, body, personality, disposition, attitude, and sexuality. I personally grew up with the certainty that women are naturally inclined to confront and turn against each other because it is in their mischievous, irrational, and capricious nature, opposed to the grounded, rational and responsible male temperament. This thesis, following Rich's research and belief, aims to trace back the reasons for our silent submission, in order to react to a sense of imprisonment with a greater awareness of our potential as women.

The first chapter introduces Adrienne Rich and the literary production of her feminist militant period of the 1970s. She began her career as a poet, but then she rediscovered herself as a writer when she approached the feminist movement and became part of it. After this brief introduction, I explain the concept of re-vision that she introduced in her second collection of essays *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose*. This complex concept implies the review of old literary texts in order to unveil all the stereotyped assumptions that are hidden behind the conventional structure of language. Consequently, I analyze her skeptical perspective on language and its complex relation to gender not only in her essays and speeches, but also in her poems, by providing a close reading of her poem "Diving Into The Wreck" and the other contemporary poems throughout the chapter. In this sense, she believed that men, as the dominant group had produced language, thought, and reality. For this reason, she dismantles the common belief about the objectivity of science and scholarship in her work, especially the unbiased portrayals given by the images of women that have been passed on through literature, like the myth of the special woman and its tokenism. After this long study about

the pernicious consequences of female tokenism and how it has always succeeded in keeping women separated, I will conclude the first chapter with her desire to reclaim a female common history that can remind women of their shared struggles against patriarchy and drive them to establish a new powerful bonding.

In the second chapter, I highlight the importance of the awareness of a common history. Here, I will deepen the theme by analyzing her concept of historical amnesia and its consequences. Rich has always believed in the necessity of revise the whole history in order to recover the female tradition that has been erased. She recognizes indeed history as an incorrect version of the events that has always relegated the struggles of women at the edges of its records, making them feel alone both in the present and in the past. In her opinion, feminist scholarship should recover what she defines as “herstory”, by looking and reconsidering ages and movements of social change in terms of the liberation and repression of women’s potential. In this respect, I delve into the different topics that she discusses in her essay “Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life”; for example, the imperative to assimilate and the idea of being socially “twice-born” for American women, how historical amnesia and nostalgia provide a misleading narrative of history, and the difference between feminist history and women’s history. Moreover, switching to poetry, I analyze different stanzas of the poem “Heroines” that celebrates the lives of nineteenth-century women and depicts the many inequities that ruled their lives – and are still ruling women’s lives. Again, Rich is able to deal with the same theme in a different literary genre, giving to her words the immense interpretative power that only poetical language can have. Nevertheless, I will end the chapter with a conclusion that she reached through her development in feminist thinking during the 1980s: women will finally understand how unequal privilege kept them separated despite their condition of shared oppression if they pay attention not only to patriarchal misogyny, but also to the chauvinism of race, ethnicity, class, and heterosexuality. She maintains that women need to recognize the racism and homophobia that they carry unconsciously within themselves in order to create a resilient community. In this sense, Rich describes feminism as a political and spiritual starting point from which people could start to examine their own racism and homophobia.

In the third chapter, I discuss Rich’s idea on the impelling need for a new female bonding, built on the confidence that a common history can provide. This female bonding, in her opinion, should be capable of outclassing all the different types of chauvinism that I listed in the previous chapter, especially the one that concerns the institution of heterosexuality. In this respect, I explain how Rich began to speak about lesbianism as both a political and personal issue in 1976, when she came out as a lesbian. From that moment on, lesbian desire and sexuality appeared as recurring themes in her writing. Moreover, in the speeches that I mention in my study, she also expresses her concerns

about the new-right political movements in the United States and their messages in the 1980s. With an eye on the contemporary political situation of her country, she wrote one of her most famous socio-political essays: “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. In this text, she openly challenges the erasure of lesbian existence from scholarly feminist literature and encourages heterosexual feminists to read heterosexuality as a political institution that disempowers women. I analyze her whole essay throughout the chapter, by deepening every aspect that needed to be investigated, such as the intersection between compulsory heterosexuality and economics, the international female slavery and the rape paradigm, and the notions of “lesbian existence” and “lesbian continuum”. By pondering all the different forms and layers of compulsory heterosexuality, she cleverly demonstrates the incalculable damage that this institution made throughout history and it is still making today. As she describes, it can keep all women – even heterosexual women – psychologically trapped in a condition that completely distorts their feelings and experiences. In this respect, she maintains that the total absence of choice is the great acknowledge reality within this oppressive institution. For this reason, she almost beseeches her audience to take a feminist political stance and rediscover the history of female resistance; in this way, women might relate to a female-identified experience and develop a wider and more conscious woman identification. At the end of the chapter, I will conclude with Rich’s belief that only a courageous understanding of the politics, economy, and cultural propaganda of heterosexuality will free women from the power that men have always wielded over them.

Considering the ardent political tones that concluded the previous chapter, in the fourth, and last chapter, I describe Rich’s role as a public intellectual and her talent to render her ideas, images, and concepts into different literary genres, especially through poetry. Her particular command of language and words allowed her to reach the widest possible audience and build a multifaced political commitment that made her the charismatic public intellectual that everyone knows. Rich wanted to address and involve wider audiences. Moreover, she has never recognized herself in the radical dichotomy that divided women and patriarchy into two opposite poles in the revolutionary climate of second-wave feminism. This choice permitted her to establish herself as a spokesperson for the collective, even for other different groups or minorities that belonged to a different race, ethnicity, and sexuality. In this respect, I analyze the final part of the poem “XIII (Dedications)”, in which she directly addresses her audience and manages to gather all of them together, despite the most disparate differences that seem to distance them. In sum, the conjunction of poetry and politics has always been fundamental in her thinking, even if she evolved in her role as a feminist activist throughout her life. She believed that poetical language could enter into the consciousness of its readers and, at the same time, elude the capitalistic marketing and commodification that were poisoning her country through

her immense subversive power. In this sense, her personal way to combine poetry and politics helped her to demonstrate that the personal, political, and poetical are deeply interconnected and, as a consequence, inseparable. This belief loudly emerges in the poem “What Kind of Times Are These”, which reveals a particular affinity with the famous slogan “The Personal is Political”. My close reading of the poem discloses indeed Rich’s criticism on the exclusion of everyday life in political discussion, which is relegated to the government and empowered people. Through this analysis, I conclude by explaining how political poetry is essential in order to not only expose societal shortcomings, but also establish new possibilities of bonding among people.

Re-vision: Adrienne Rich's Linguistic Turn

In this first chapter, I will introduce Adrienne Rich and her feminist literary production, in particular her first militant period of the 1970s. By explaining her concept of re-vision, I will analyze her skeptical perspective on language and its relation to gender. In this sense, she dismantles the common belief about the objectivity of science and scholarship and the unbiased portrayals given by the images of women that have been passed on through literature, especially the myth of the special woman and its tokenism. Then, I will conclude with her desire to reclaim a female common history that can remind women of their shared struggles against the patriarchy and drive them to establish a new powerful bonding.

Adrienne Rich was a well-established poet who began her poetic career in 1951, with the publication of her first collection of poems *A Change of World*. All the poems included in this collection, which appears as formally exact and decorous in its structure, belong to her first experiencing period, in which she wrote exclusively about her personal struggles as a woman. The need for freedom in her poems is indeed straightforward, but in this first collection this impelling necessity concerns only her, not a wider and collective dimension. Only in the late 1960s and 1970s, her work would become increasingly radical in both its free-verse form and feminist and political content. Rich's metamorphosis in her poetics was described by Carol Muske in an article for the *New York Times Book Review*, in which she maintained that Rich "began as poet-ingenue, polite copyist of Yeats and Auden, wife and mother. She has progressed in life (and in her poems, which remains intimately tied to her life's truth) from young widow and disenchanted formalist, to spiritual and rhetorical convalescent, to feminist leader, lesbian separatist, and doyenne of a newly-defined female literature" (Muske 1985)¹. In fact, a few years later after the publication of her first collections of poems, she rediscovered herself as a writer when she approached the feminist movement and became part of it. From that moment on, her literary production became completely dedicated to the awakening of female consciousness towards male oppression. In fact, she actively extolled the consciousness-raising of early feminism: a form of activism that spread in the late 1960s, in which feminists attempted to quest themselves and the political, cultural, and social context in which they lived through the authentic and dialogic relationship between women. For this reason, the most thriving period in Rich's literary work was during the 1970s.

¹ Carol Muske, "Lingua Materna: The Speech of Female History," *New York Times Book Review* (January 20, 1985).

1.1. The concept of re-vision

She published *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose* in 1979, her second non-fiction book that collects different essays and speeches that the author wrote and presented throughout the 1970s. This decade witnessed one of the larger social movements of the history of the United States: second-wave feminism. This period of fervent feminist activity began in the early 1960s and its subversive ideas quickly spread across the Western world intending to increase equality for women, by gaining more than just enfranchisement. In fact, whereas first-wave feminism's purpose had been to obtain voting rights in order to affirm the mere existence of women in the 19th-century society, second-wave feminism wanted to make a further step and achieve the right of self-determination in order to let women finally choose for themselves. In that rebellious context, the slogan 'The Personal is Political' emerged with the aim to identify women's cultural and political inequalities as inextricably linked and encouraged women to reflect on how their personal lives have always reflected sexist power structures, even if they were not able to notice it until that moment². For this reason, Rich names this revolutionary period "a time of awakening consciousness" (Rich 1979, 34)³ in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as a Re-Vision". She wrote it in 1971 for the first public event of the Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession, in which she was invited with other women to talk on "The Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century", and it discusses different concepts that women writers need to be aware of in order to overcome the patriarchal sense of literary aesthetics and history. At the center of this essay, she introduces the concept of re-vision, which she defines as "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich 1979, 35).

Rich emphasizes the need for re-visioning old texts with a new outlook as something necessary – "an act of survival" (Rich 1979, 35) – that might help women to identify the stereotyped assumptions that are hidden behind the conventional structures of language. This process does not imply to erase or bypass old writings that belong to the tradition of the past, but just to break their unwholesome hold over women. The recognition of the countless flaws in the constructs of language through the critical procedure of re-vision opens the possibility for a new and fresh vision of language, capable of subverting the patriarchal tyranny of thought. Here indeed, like in many other of her essays, Rich describes language as a powerful vehicle for the perpetuation of woman's subordination.

² See Evans for a deepened analysis on second-wave feminism.

³ Quote from *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979). Hereafter, all page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text and will belong to this book.

Language, as a social construction, is more than just a communication tool and a vehicle for ideas, because it shapes the world that surrounds us: it controls literature, history, knowledge, thought, and as a consequence, reality. There is not any objective reality that exists independent of language.

Due to its importance, Rich's feminist activism drove her reflections upon language to indissolubly tie with the idea of gender. Moreover, language's relation to gender was at the center of different discussions during second-wave feminism. One of the main criticisms against the patriarchal system, as the feminist Dale Spender claimed in her book *Man Made Language*, was that men, as the dominant group, have produced language, thought, and reality⁴. The male monopoly over language is, according to Spender, "one of the means by which males have ensured their own primacy, and consequently have ensured the invisibility or 'other' nature of females, and this primacy is perpetuated while women continue to use, unchanged, the language which we have inherited" (Spender 1980, 12)⁵. Following this idea, Rich thought that the ability to recognize in language the improper assumptions in which women have been unfairly and unconsciously drenched from time immemorial would incite a revolution in the concept of sexual identity. In fact, as she herself writes in her essay, a new critical way of reading and interpreting old texts would encourage women to act on "how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us, how the very act of naming has been until now a male prerogative, and how we can begin to see and name – and therefore live – afresh" (Rich 1979, 35). This "drive to self-knowledge" (Rich 1979, 35) implies not just a personal search for identity, but also a concrete and collective stance against the self-destructiveness of the male-dominated society.

1.2. "Diving into The Wreck"

Therefore, the desire for a new vision of language shaped Rich's poetry of the 1970s. "Diving into The Wreck" emerges as an emblematic poem of this turn because in its lines Rich expresses, through the use of poetical language, the urgent need of re-visioning language and history. This peculiar movement of the concept of re-vision from one literary genre to another – from an essay to a poem – will be discussed and deepened in the last chapter. However, the whole poem, which was written in 1973, can be interpreted as an extended metaphor about the historical oppression and erasure of women. In these lines, she tries to rework the content of the myth by writing a poem in

⁴ See Saul and Hornsby for a deepened analysis about the feminist criticism of language during second-wave feminism.

⁵ Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

which the hero belongs to both the sexes, the quest is a critique of the old myths, and the treasure is self-knowledge – that can be reached only through the act of criticism.

First having read the book of myths,
and loaded the camera,
and checked the edge of the knife-blade,
I put on
the body-armor of black rubber
the absurd flippers
the grave and awkward mask.
I am having to do this
not like Cousteau with his
assiduous team
aboard the sun-flooded schooner
but here alone.⁶

The poem opens with a description of the speaker's preparation for a dive into the ocean. The reference to "the book of myths" is upfront: from the very first line, the reader's attention is directed to the crucial notion of the myth. The word 'myth', according to the Oxford English Dictionary, could signify not only an ancient story that concerns the early history of people or explains a natural or social phenomenon, but also a commonly believed idea that is completely false. However, even in the first meaning, myths are described as stories; a story, by definition, does not necessarily correspond to reality. In the poem, "the book of myths" symbolizes all the narratives that have shaped the wreck that the diver is going to explore. In this sense, the wreck might represent symbolically the oppression of women throughout history and its myth the historical narrative that has shaped gender roles in patriarchal society. The speaker's preparations for the descent involve objects – "knife-blade" and "body-armor" – that suggest that the quest would be inherently dangerous, but nevertheless all she/he would find should be recorded by the "camera". The last lines of the first stanza emphasize the loneliness of the speaker by setting up a contrast with the companionship of the famous marine explorer Jacques Cousteau, who was always surrounded by his hard-working team of assistants during his exploring activities. Unlike the French scientist, the speaking "I" – whose sex is not declared yet – is alone in the dive and cannot rely on any kind of help or support.

⁶ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1973).

There is a ladder.
The ladder is always there
hanging innocently
close to the side of the schooner.
We know what it is for,
we who have used it.
Otherwise
it is a piece of maritime floss
some sundry equipment.

The second stanza is entirely dedicated to the figure of the “ladder”, which hangs on the side of the boat. The speaker stands at the rails of the schooner, looking at the staircase that hangs “innocently” and pondering over it. In these lines, the diver involves the reader by using the word “we” for the first time: the path she/he is about to undertake through those stairs has already been experienced by others before her/him. In this solitary dive, the speaker feels less lonely by invoking the memory of “who have used it”. This is a metaphor that goes beyond the physical ladder and might imply a journey, a doorway, or an invitation. Depending on who is looking at it, the stairway to the depth of the sea can be interpreted as a gateway into a new world, into a new way of looking at things, but also as an ordinary and meaningless object like a “piece of maritime floss”.

I go down.
Rung after rung and still
the oxygen immerses me
the blue light
the clear atoms
of our human air.
I go down.
My flippers cripple me,
I crawl like an insect down the ladder
and there is no one
to tell me when the ocean
will begin.

In these lines, the speaker is experiencing the crucial moment of the immersion by descending the ladder. The poem’s form draws the reader’s eye downwards, like in a dive; this is particularly clear

in this third stanza, where the short lines mimic the diver's transition into the depths of the ocean. Interestingly here the verb 'immerse', which is usually related to a liquid, is combined with the word 'oxygen': this particular word choice describes the diver as if she/he is swimming in the air. It is possible to perceive a sense of safety in "the clear atoms of human air", which emphasizes the contrast between human dependence on air and the forthcoming submersion in the water. Since humans need to breathe in order to survive, it will be difficult to get accustomed to this new condition despite the proper precautions. In fact, even her/his equipment now appears as inadequate: the "flippers cripple" and make the speaker "crawl like an insect". At the end of the stanza, the speaker's loneliness is once again stressed.

First the air is blue and then
it is bluer and then green and then
black I am blacking out and yet
my mask is powerful
it pumps my blood with power
the sea is another story
the sea is not a question of power
I have to learn alone
to turn my body without force
in the deep element.

The absence of punctuation – except for the last line – in this fourth stanza creates an unrestrained atmosphere which is similar to the narrative technique of the stream of consciousness. In these lines, the reader is allowed to experience the rush of the immersion into the water side by side with the diver. The first impression is to "blacking out": the light fades away as the speaker goes deeper, from "blue" to "bluer" and from "green" to "black". The alliteration here suddenly hastens the rhythm of the poem, by creating a sense of breathlessness which fits with the frightening transition from the surface world to the ocean depths. But then, the "powerful" mask fills her/his lungs with air and the diver, with more clarity of mind, realizes that the early moment of panic was only a part of the difficult transitional process that is required to get into this new world, beyond the surface of things. In this process, any particular strength would not be necessary because "the sea is not a question of power"; only the ability to adapt would be indispensable in order to learn how to move "in the deep element". However, at the end of the stanza for the third time, the emphasis is on the solitude that never abandons the speaking 'I'. This particular insistence on her/his condition reveals that loneliness is one of the major themes of the poem.

And now: it is easy to forget
what I came for
among so many who have always
lived here
swaying their crenellated fans
between the reefs
and besides
you breathe differently down here.

In this stanza, the speaker feels more comfortable and confident with the surroundings, to the extent of forgetting the reason why she/he “came for”. The description of this underwater world and its creatures provides a rich and beautiful imagery of what, in the previous stanza, appeared as dark and dangerous. Moreover, no hint of loneliness threatens the last lines, in which Rich chooses to accentuate the fact that in this new world everything is different, even the most basic things have changed: “you breathe differently down here”.

I came to explore the wreck.
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.
I stroke the beam of my lamp
slowly along the flank
of something more permanent
than fish or weed

In the sixth stanza, the diver finally reaches the wreck. Here, she/he explores the metaphorical ship in order to bear witness to both “the damage that was done” and “the treasures that prevail”. Words may offer guidance and a sense of purpose, but they are not enough: it is necessary to experience something firsthand in order to truly understand its meaning. The wreck implies a complex symbolism that can be read in different ways; however, the wreck represents the mere truth, which might be spoiled by those who intended to harm it and misinterpreted by those who wanted to corrupt it, but still the only authentic and reliable version. For this reason, the wreck symbolizes an immeasurable treasure. In fact, the speaker uses words like “stroke” and “flank” to describe her/his gentle movements around the wreck, as if it embodies a living thing that requires to be treated with kindness

and care. In the next stanza, she/he would even recognize a “drowned face” in the damaged beams of this precious wreckage.

the thing I came for:
the wreck and not the story of the wreck
the thing itself and not the myth
the drowned face always staring
toward the sun
the evidence of damage
worn by salt and sway into this threadbare beauty
the ribs of the disaster
curving their assertion
among the tentative haunters.

Again, the speaker remarks the reason why she/he embarked on this adventure: the “thing itself and not the myth”. The diver, by scrutinizing the wreck, is not dealing with the stereotypes, the myths, or the stories that she/he read in the “book of myths” before the plunge, but with the real tragedy of women’s history. In order to uncover the truth, she/he has to look for what is factual and tangible, not the story that men wrote about women. In these lines, the symbolism is as powerful as the tacit statement: the common belief about the objectivity of history is false. It is necessary to re-vision the whole past in order to realize the seriousness of the damage inflicted to women’s history. In fact, in the wreck, the signs of this corruption are clear in its injured flanks, which show off the “ribs” of this delicate creature. However, even if the sides of the wreck have been eaten by the forces of the sea, there are strong beams that keep the skeleton of the ship stable in its “assertion”. For this reason, despite the deterioration, the speaker finds a “threadbare beauty” in what appears as an imperishable frame, which preserves the sunken boat from total decay. The wreck is not a disaster: the diver can explore it and seek out evidence of a history that has been unwritten and left to rot at the bottom of the ocean.

This is the place.
And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair
streams black, the merman in his armored body.
We circle silently
about the wreck

we dive into the hold.

I am she: I am he

At this point of the poem, by reading the first words of this stanza, is possible to infer one of the key ideas of the whole composition: the importance of the personal experience. In fact, Rich wanted to demonstrate the importance to witness firsthand something and not to settle for other's impressions or interpretations. "This is the place. And I am here": in order to contrast the old and preconceived historical and cultural narratives created by the patriarchy, is necessary to return to the original ones that men misinterpreted according to their pleasure – in order to shape and strengthen their favorable position – and start to re-vision them. Interestingly here, the speaker finally describes herself/himself as both a woman and a man, a "mermaid" and a "merman", that together "circle silently". Rich here pushes her speaker at the boundaries of what the social construction of gender is, by making her/him unfit for the narrow ideas of femininity and masculinity. This is a clear hint to the hidden queer history – an entire world that has been erased by the patriarchal march of history – and Rich's deep interest to uncover it. Furthermore, the androgynous nature of the diver might suggest "not an original unity but the common bond of incompleteness, loss, and disrepair share by all the selves" (Templeton 1994, 45)⁷.

whose drowned face sleeps with open eyes
whose breasts still bear the stress
whose silver, copper, vermeil cargo lies
obscurely inside barrels
half-wedged and left to rot
we are the half-destroyed instruments
that once held to a course
the water-eaten log
the fouled compass

By reading the last line of the previous stanza with the first of this one, the reader attains a disquieting description that depicts the androgynous diver as a living dead who is becoming one with the dead people – "the half-destroyed instrument" – on the wreck. Nevertheless, there is some treasure in this scene of total disaster, but it is "left to rot" like every other damaged object.

⁷ Alice Templeton, *The Dream and the Dialogue: Adrienne Rich's Feminist Poetics* (University of Tennessee Press, 1994).

We are, I am, you are
by cowardice or courage
the one who find our way
back to this scene
carrying a knife, a camera
a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

In the last stanza of the poem, the speaker moves away from the wreck and broadly describes the scene. Suddenly she/he becomes everyone: “We are, I am, you are”. Everyone is “the one” who, like the diver, can find her/his way “back to this scene”, by carrying the same objects that opened the poem. Everyone is a victim and a survivor of the disaster of the wreck because, ultimately, this sunken ship concerns all: “it is the life of one woman, the source of success and failures; it is the history of all women submerged in a patriarchal culture; it is the source of myths about male and female sexuality which shape our lives and roles today” (McDaniel 1978)⁸. Moreover, the last lines stress the deceitful nature of the “book of myths” in which “our names do not appear”. Here, it is possible to perceive Rich’s anger about all the narratives that have been silenced and excluded from the human experience. For this reason, she offers to her readers the hope that something can be done – and has to be. In conclusion, the stories that have been concealed and misinterpreted in the culturally validated frames of the obsolete myths can be rescued and reinterpreted through the aware and critical process of re-vision. This landmark poem and its speaker aims to directly involve the reader and drive her – or him – to reflect on these thorny themes and take action. Here Rich is not only a poet, but she also assumes the role of the public intellectual: through the intimacy of her poetical language, she is addressing with discretion to a wider collective dimension from which she expects a reaction.

1.3. The myth of the special woman

In several public speeches, Rich remarks that women need to be aware of the fact that they are living in a world in which knowledge and power have always been handle and controlled by men – even if they are born with this supremacy, it does not belong to them by birthright. In this respect, even a privileged education has to be questioned and challenged because it does not provide any

⁸ Judith McDaniel, *Reconstituting the World: The Poetry and Vision of Adrienne Rich* (Spinsters, Ink., 1978).

objective reality, “nor an accurate picture of the past, nor a group of rigorously tested observations about human behavior” (Rich 1979, 232) in its teaching. As she explains in “What Does a Woman Need to Know?”, the commencement address she gave at the Smith College in Massachusetts in 1979, neutrality does not exist in culture. She dismantles the common belief about the objectivity of science and scholarship, as she already did in her poetry by demonstrating the unreliability of the “book of myths”, by asserting that the ideology of education has always been controlled by white man supremacy. In her opinion, everything women are allowed to learn is a construct of male subjectivity, based on their restricted view of the world. More specifically, “how men have perceived and organized their experience, their history, their ideas of social relationships, good and evil, sickness and health, etc” (Rich 1979, 232). For this reason, she suggests not to passively receive an education, but rather to claim one – which literally means “to take as the rightful owner; to assert in the face of possible contradictions” (Rich 1979, 231) – by studying the patterns of established scholarship with a keen outsider’s eye that might help to grasp what has been left out or silenced. According to Rich, education represents a privilege, but women who can take advantage of it have not to give up to the knowledge of the unprivileged, the awareness that women have always been viewed – and still are – as existing, not in their own right but in the service of men. In this sense, women who had the privilege of literacy should re-educate themselves independently, in the attempt to dismantle all the false beliefs that their culture tries to instill them. The more apparently harmless sentences can hide the most poisonous assumptions, which might represent the bedrocks of our patriarchal culture. The false messages, affirming that women are not interested in power or learning because of a psychological need to serve men and produce children or that the woman’s experience is not central in the human experience, have to be recognized, criticized, and reported through the same tool that created them and gave them so much power: language.

The myths and images of women that have been passed on through literature as objective and unbiased portrayals, had an important influence on its protagonists and in their perception of themselves. As products of a culture, these distorted representations encourage the creation of incorrect stereotypes that nourished the ideal “image of Woman in books written by men” (Rich 1979, 39) that negates everything a woman is about. In this speech, she deepened the discourse about the myth of the special woman, a concept that she had already introduced in 1971’s essay “When We Dead Awaken”. This myth concerns the false portion of power that masculine society offers only to a few women who emerge as specials, by following a false criterion of merit based on the idea of ‘thinking like a man’. Rich affirms that power has always been associated with the use of force, rape, war, and wealth; as something ruthless and oppressive that acts only in its interest, by despising and exploiting who does not possess it – women, children, and old people. Consequently, men have been

historically designed as the only depositories of power in a patriarchal society. Because of this supremacy, they control its release in society through the forms of knowledge, expertise, decision making, and access to tools, as well as the most basic need of food, shelter, health care, and literacy. This type of concession is what Rich recognizes as ‘female tokenism’: the “power withheld from the vast majority of women is offered to a few, so that it appears that any ‘truly qualified’ woman can gain access to leadership, recognition, and reward; hence, that justice based on merit actually prevails.” (Rich 1986, 6)⁹. But the apparent privilege of power is bestowed only to the ones who do not use it against its owners. As long as the special women’s words or actions do not threaten men’s privileges and help to maintain things as they are, by recognizing their distinguished affinity to the male way of thinking and behavior, they can keep exercising their limited portion of illusory power. The problem is that, in this way, the token woman is encouraged to identify herself as better than the other women – “as exceptionally talented and deserving” (Rich 1986, 6) – and to separate herself from the wider female condition. Consequently, even if this privileged condition seems to offer her the possibility to influence and change the course of events from an inside position, it blurs her outsider’s vision as a woman. The outsider’s eye, which binds her to other women, allows her to develop a critical point of view towards the patriarchal culture that “denies women wholeness” (Rich 1986, 2) with such a commitment; therefore, it represents the only real source of power on which she can rely and the only instrument that might support her action of re-vision.

For this reason, according to Rich, it is impossible for women to become real insiders in the institutions that are conceived by masculine consciousness because “when we allow ourselves to believe we are, we lose touch with parts of ourselves defined as unacceptable by that consciousness” (Rich 1986, 7). As she explains in her essay “Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women” in 1976, a token woman cannot share the power she receives with other women because her male ‘mentor’ grants her only an illusion of the power that has been “stolen, in any case, from the mass of women, over centuries, by men” (Rich 1979, 210)¹⁰ and not the keys to master it. He might tenderly open the doors of the common world of men to his chosen one, but the price she has to pay in order to obtain this privilege is splitting herself off from the common life of women and denying her female heritage and identity. As Rich claimed: “tokenism essentially demands that the token deny her identification with women as a group, especially with women less privileged than she” (Rich 1986, 6)¹¹. Following this idea, the token woman is lead to disregard women who were not considered as worthy as her, because they represent what she has escaped or desired to flee, as well as ordinary

⁹ Quote from *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1986). Hereafter, all page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text and will belong to this book.

¹⁰ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1979).

¹¹ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1986).

women are led to disregard – if not resent – the special one because they considered her more beautiful and intelligent than them. For this reason, women experience a strong feeling of isolation and incomprehension: they have been raised to compete against each other from an early age, without any common tradition to rely on and identify with.

1.4. Women's lies and silences

The problem of speech and language continues to be primary in the notes she wrote in 1975 and published as a pamphlet the year after, with the title *Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying*. By analyzing the difference between the two notions of honor in both the male and female perspective, Rich emphasizes the fact that the quality of honesty in women has always been recognized and rewarded only if related to men – “virginity, chastity, and fidelity to a husband” (Rich 1979, 186)¹². In this sense, the patriarchal culture has always depicted women as whimsical and deceitful beings, innately prone to lie to others. Therefore, it rewards the ones who lived up to those expectations, as long as they do not betray or damage the creators of this unfounded stereotype. This scheme has always encouraged women to play the role of liars in different contexts – in particular with their own bodies and feelings – depending on what men needed to hear or wanted to see. For example, it drives women to become complicit, as Rich claimed, of “the lie of the happy marriage” (Rich 1979, 189): they are able to carry out, side by side with men, the patriarchal charade of a well-lived life until the desperation takes them in court to report rapes or beatings. This is the reason why, in the struggle for survival, women have been forced to tell lies in order to adapt to a culture that approves only the male experience.

The effort to avoid lies and speak honestly would be the first necessary step to reinforce women's communication network, on which depends the survival of the whole feminist movement. As Rich wrote in her essay: “when a woman tells the truth she is creating the possibility of more truth around her” (Rich 1979, 191). Nevertheless, Rich explains that truth cannot be identified easily, but like “the pattern of the carpet [...] when we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet” (Rich 1979, 187). The truth has to be sought through the complexities that compose it, but it is still possible to unveil it with a keen eye that conducts the re-vision of the pattern. By following this idea, lies only attempt to simplify the tangled design of reality, but they are instruments that have not the power to

¹² Quote from *On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1979). Hereafter, all page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text and will belong to this book.

unravel any knot. They are only reassuring excuses that allow people to stay on the surface of thorny issues without going further because they are afraid of what they might exhume from their twists.

Even if women rarely admit it, Rich argues, there are many different ways of lying, which can also imply the use of the most innocuous silence. In this sense, there are many myths about the loquacity, triviality, and irrationality of women's speech that have always encouraged women to choose silence over words. As Spender explained in her masterpiece: "the talkativeness of women has been gauged in comparison not with men but with silence. Women have not been judged on the grounds of whether they talk more than men, but of whether they talk more than silent women" (Spender 1980, 41)¹³. This harmful tendency is the obvious consequence of the convenience that silence represents for women. However, according to Rich, silence might imply not only comfort, but also fear: she explains this double nature through the poetical language in the ninth of her "Twenty-One Love Poems", written between 1974 and 1977.

Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live
I want to see raised dripping and brought into the sun.
It's not my own face I see there, but other faces,
Even your face at another age.¹⁴

In the opening stanza, silence becomes symbolically "a pond", which appears as the restricted version of the deep ocean in "Diving into the Wreck". In both cases, the pond and the ocean are places where dead things live. Moreover, even in these disquieting lines, the reader finds not only sunken objects, but the speaker's face submerged by the water. Like the androgynous diver, the speaker is described as a living dead. This metaphorical image explains how silence works: like water, it buries and hides your thoughts, but at the same time it keeps them safe and alive.

In the poem she wrote in 1978 "Cartographies of Silence", included in the collection *The Dream of a Common Language*, Rich does not describe silence as an absence, but as a presence with its history and form, that can also be planned and executed. By using these words, she indirectly asserts that the ones who have been silenced have their own history and will have the possibility to speak in the future, even if their speeches are currently unheard. Despite this, in the first two stanzas, the lie that structures a conversation – a relationship or a whole life – takes the form of a silence whose power appears as insurmountable.

A conversation begins

¹³ Dale Spender, *Man Made Language* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980).

¹⁴ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

with a lie. And each
Speaker of the so-called common language feels
The ice-floe split, the drift apart
As if powerless, as if up against a force of nature
[...]
The loneliness of the liar
Living in the formal network of the lie
Twisting the dials to drown the terror
Beneath the unsaid word¹⁵

As it is possible to infer from these lines, the silence of potential speakers is able to perpetuate a lie that creates a huge void among its speakers.

The problem is that silence casts a shadow on people because the refusal to speak does not hide just the desire to avoid the strictures of conventional discourse but might signify the negative act of intentional withholding¹⁶. As Michelle Cliff argues in her article “Notes on Speechlessness”, there is a strong correlation between speechlessness and powerlessness, as long as the former maintains the latter. For this reason, the powerful are dedicated to keeping the powerless silent: speechless is an implosive process that begins with the inability to speak, but then it develops into the inability to act. Therefore, this process involves both self-denial and self-annihilation because the consequences are always at the expense of the self. The real effects of speechlessness are against the one who does not want – or cannot – speak, even if it seems to affect only those who try to approach the speechless person¹⁷.

Despite the option of silence, women might decide to resist confrontation by denying that they were lying and using other excuses that involve forgetfulness, privacy, and the protection of someone else. This kind of language, as Rich explains, implies hazardous consequences because it justifies and normalizes the action of lying to others. In fact, once they get accustomed to it, women might not even plan or invent their loopholes, by not thinking of what they are doing in a calculated way. Lying is a dangerous way to dealing with life and its tangles, a weapon that might be unconsciously carried over into the most intimate relationships. Lies do not merely alienate women from others, but it engenders the greatest loneliness of all, by cutting them off from themselves. She claims that “to lie habitually is to lose contact with the unconscious. It is like taking sleeping pills, which confer sleep but blot out dreaming. The unconscious wants the truth. It ceases to speak to those who want

¹⁵ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

¹⁶ See Diehl for a deepen analysis of the poem “Cartographies of Silence” and the collection in which it is included.

¹⁷ See Cliff for a deepen analysis about the consequences of speechlessness.

something else more than truth” (Rich 1979, 187). For this reason, it is required a sudden change of course.

Rich insists again on the idea that people are living in a time in which women are awakening and “are only beginning to uncover our own truths” (Rich 1979, 193), the ones that patriarchal lying withheld from them or distorted through both falsehood and silence. The possibilities of truth – and, as a consequence, of life – that exists between women “are a kind of alchemy” (Rich 1979, 193), what Rich defines as the most interesting thing in life. By lying or being silent, women are constantly losing sight of these possibilities. Female truthfulness and honor have to be re-created because the culture has never suggested to them the correct perception of these two qualities. By following this idea, the future of women, according to Rich, depends on the sanity of each of them. In this sense, their sanity has always been jeopardized by the infinite refutations of their experience and instincts received by a culture based on the male experience. They should have a profound stake, which surpasses the personal, in the will of describing reality as honestly as they can, in order “not to gaslight each other” (Rich 1979, 190) by mystifying each others’ sense of truthfulness for the sake of expediency.

1.5. Women’s history

In both *What does a Woman Need to Know?* – a 1979’s lecture that was addressed to young women students – and *Taking Women Students Seriously* – another talk that was addressed to teachers at the New Jersey College that she gave a year before – Rich resolutely affirms that women’s key to their powerlessness has been not biology, but the historical ignorance about themselves that society enforced to them. Without any knowledge of their own history, women are invited to live a life without context, vulnerable to the projections of male fantasy and prescriptions of them, estranged from their own experience because education does not reflect it. She insists on the misleading concept of ‘coeducation’: whereas the content of education validates the man, it invalidates the woman. Even if they share the same classrooms and study the same books, women and men are not receiving the same education because “the bias of higher education, including the so-called sciences, is white and male, racist and sexist” (Rich 1979, 241). Rich admits that it is not easy for women to think in a male’s world, but it is important to discuss the context, by refusing to be passive in learning and insist upon critical thinking. This suggestion, she clarifies, does not imply that teachers should be training women students to ‘think like men’, but to help them to develop an acute critical sense that would allow them not to accept the hypocrisies of their world and make the connections between facts and ideas which men have left unconnected. This implies a constant critique of language that, as I already

said, shapes reality. As Wittgenstein, who was not a feminist, observed: “the limits of my language are the limits of my world” (Wittgenstein 1961)¹⁸. By considering this sentence, Rich wanted to highlight the importance of “listening and watching in art and literature, in the social sciences, in all the descriptions we are given of the world, for the silences, the absences, the nameless, the unspoken, the encoded – for there we will find the true knowledge of women” (Rich 1979, 245). This is what the concept of re-vision is all about. Even if women’s privileges are precarious under the load of patriarchy, they can be justified if they help to change the lives of women whose potential beings continue to be thwarted and silenced.

Interestingly, in the 1978’s lecture, she provides the answer to the question that gave the title to the speech she would make the following year: what a woman needs to know is “the knowledge of her own history, her much-politicized biology, an awareness of the creative work of other women of the past, the skills and crafts and techniques and powers exercised by women in different times and cultures, a knowledge of women’s rebellions and organized movements against our oppression and how they have been routed and diminished” (Rich 1979, 240).

¹⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Logico-Tractatus Philosophicus* (London: Routledge, 1961).

Historical Amnesia

At the end of the previous chapter, we discussed the importance of the awareness of a common history. In this chapter, I will deepen the discourse by analyzing Rich's concept of historical amnesia and its consequences. To summarize, she has always believed in the necessity of revision the whole history in order to recover the female tradition that men have deliberately hidden. Nevertheless, I will conclude with a deduction that she inferred from her development in feminist thinking during the 1980s: women will finally understand how unequal privilege kept them separated if they pay attention not only to patriarchal misogyny, but also to the chauvinism of race, ethnicity, class, and heterosexuality.

History has always been at the center of Rich's discourse. By questioning the objectivity of science and scholarship, she began a crusade against history's honesty in her early prose writings. In fact, she recognizes history as an incorrect version of the events that has always relegated the struggles of women at the edges of its records. In 1976, Rich argues that women's thought and action, at the moment in which they have taken the form of difference or rebellion, have "repeatedly been obliterated, or subsumed under human history, which means the publicity of the public realm created and controlled by men" (Rich 1979, 204)¹⁹. The patriarchal defense mechanism of omitting woman's experience from history creates, in her opinion, a lack of the "sense of continuity, historical validation, and community" (Rich 1979, 204) that should support and help women. These shortcomings force them to face their travails in a condition of spiritual isolation because they feel alone both in the present and in the past, due to the ignorance about their place in any female tradition. According to Rich, women "need concrete artifacts, the work of hands, written words to read, images to look at, a dialogue with brave and imaginative women who came before us" (Rich 1979, 205) in order to conceive and imagine a future for themselves. In what she describes as "the false name of love, motherhood, natural law" (Rich 1979, 205), which cannot be trusted because they have not been defined by the same people to whom they are applied, "women in patriarchy have been withheld from building a common world, except in enclaves, or through coded messages" (Rich 1979, 205).

¹⁹ Quote from *On Lies, Secrets and Silences* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979). Hereafter, all page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text and will belong to this book.

2.1. A “herstory” to recover

This crusade against history’s reliability would be expanded in 1983 with “Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life”, the lecture that Rich prepared for Scripps College in Claremont and dedicated to Joan Kelly, a famous feminist historian that had died the previous year. In this speech, Rich describes history as the version of the events that is “told by the conqueror, the dominator”, who is well-acquainted with his power and knows how to master it to his advantage. The male oppressor, by manipulating history, is able to justify and protect the depositaries of power as the sole and deserving heirs of the privileged position of dominance. Moreover, by making women invisible or distorting their experience and culture, he can prove that they are inherently unfit for power. This ability to falsify history at will represents just another of the many forms of the extended control that men exercise. The seriousness of the problem does not involve the resilience of history which renders it easy to manipulate, but the strong male oppression that afflicts women’s lives and history. In this sense, a group of people who has been deprived of its own history is unable to conceive a future: “the valor and the wave rings, the visions and defeated of those who went before us” (Rich 1986, 141)²⁰ constitute a precious resource of knowledge for a community of women who need to know where they came from. As the historian Lerone Bennett affirms: “we are more in chaos without an history, than we are without a future” (Rich 1986, 153). By following this idea, Rich mentions in her essay another famous Jewish and lesbian feminist like her: Joan Nestle. Nestle argues that a woman needs to know that she is not accidental in history and that her culture has changed and is evolved over the centuries. According to her, there is a “herstory” to recover, which is “filled with individual lives, community struggles, and customs of language, dress and behavior [...] – the story of a people” (Nestle 1983)²¹. In this sense, Rich in her poem “Not Somewhere Else, But Here” explores the effects of the past on the present, in order to discover its historical implications on the lives of women today. Once again, Rich expresses through a discreet poetical language what she proclaims in her public speeches, in order to reach not only the ears but also the hearts of her readers. However, her ability to render the same idea in different literary genres will be discussed and deepened in the fourth and last chapter.

Shall it be said

I am not alone

Spilt love

²⁰ Quote from *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1986). Hereafter, all page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text and will belong to this book.

²¹ Joan Nestle, “Living with Herstory,” *The Body Politic* (September 1983).

Seeking its level
Flooding other lives
That must be lived
Not somewhere else
But here
Seeing through blood
Nothing is lost²²

In these last lines, out of despair and destruction comes possibility. The speaking “I” and her sentence “I am not alone” directly involve other lives, other experiences, and other loves. The love shared between women has been “split”; but despite the overturning, it both submerges and connects all other female lives that hitherto stood at the bottom, left to dry. This is a kind of love that “must be lived”, that should upset each woman’s life like a huge wave that overcomes everything it encounters. Nothing has been lost, it was just hidden through the blood of this enormous love that was just waiting to be overturned. Now it is time to dig and recover it.

However, the revolutionary way of reinterpreting history through a feminist viewpoint, as Joan Kelly argues, cannot be described as a “compensatory history” that runs parallel to the accepted view of history as male dominated. In her opinion, a feminist scholarship in history implies to look and reconsider ages and movements of social change in terms of the liberation and repression of women’s potential. After this crucial passage – that Rich might define as an act of re-vision – in which it becomes possible to recognize women as part of humanity in the fullest sense, history takes on a wholly different meaning from the normally accepted one. According to Kelly, what emerges from this analysis “is a fairly regular pattern of relative loss of status for women in those periods of so-called progressive change” (Kelly 1976)²³. Moreover, she insists that these historical moments of economic, political, and cultural improvements in which women have been minimized or excluded, represent the starting point to look for the reasons for the advance of one sex and the oppression of the other. In other words, Kelly believes that feminist historiography might help to unsettle the accepted evaluations of historical periods, by debunking the erroneous assumption that the history of women is the same as the history of men and that significant turning points in history have the same impact on both sexes.

In order to recover the hidden “herstory”, according to Rich, women have to oppose two similar and strong pressures in the American culture: the imperative to assimilate and the idea of

²² Adrienne Cecile Rich, “Not Somewhere Else, But Here,” *Sinister Wisdom* 5 (Whole Women Press, Winter 1978): 3.

²³ Joan Kelly, “The Social Relation of the Sexes: Methodological Implications of Women’s History,” *Signs* 1.4 (Summer 1976).

being socially “twice-born”. The first one concerns the immigrant tendency to assimilate – the most extreme form of acculturation – which implies, both in anthropology and sociology, the process whereby individuals or groups of differing ethnic heritage are absorbed by the dominant culture of society. Women in a patriarchal society, as Rich argues, are driven to experience this process as well: they try to adopt a different appearance and behavior because they perceive their own as not good enough and unfit for the environment that surrounds them, by giving up not only their common history, but also to their own bodies. In this way, the pressure to assimilate and reflect the expectations imposed by society prompts women to be ashamed of who they are. Due to this tendency, Rich herself writes: “those who can pass are cheated of the chance to define themselves and to make mutually respectful and strengthening alliances with other self-defining people” (Rich 1986, 142)²⁴. In other words, once they bend to the imperative to assimilate, women unconsciously repulse any potential relationship with each other because they do not want to jeopardize their trivial achievements as token women. Consequently, women strengthen patriarchal chauvinism by accepting a philosophy of history in which they must be assimilated into the male universal in order to adapt to a world that seems to belong to men by right. Rich believes that women should not try to decode their own past through a male point of view because it would be a disheartening attempt that might lead to the deceitful belief that women do not share any past or history. If they start believing it, as she states in her essay, women are doomed to live their lives “unanchored, drifting in response to a veering wind of myth and bias” (Rich 1986, 142). The second one involves the typical American pattern of the frontier: the escape from an old identity and an unsatisfactory life full of burdens, complications, and contradictions. According to Rich, even women’s communities comply with this old pattern, but their longing to be twice-born and escape from the complexities that continuity implies hides a fair amount of self-hatred. In fact, in the moment in which a woman decides to erase her personal history, she becomes “less dimensional” (Rich 1986, 143) and loses a tradition that could have helped her to gain awareness about her underprivileged condition. The decision to abruptly dissociate herself from who she has been might prove to be a dangerous move because too much of herself has to be deleted in the process. Rich argues that finding a balance between what to change and what to preserve could be a painful and difficult experience, but it represents a deeply instructive process that women – and not only – should embrace.

Consequently, the essence of Rich’s argument is that the whole history has to be revisited. It is necessary, in her opinion, that white men start questioning the text that has been handed down from father and son, what she herself defines as “the dominator’s version” (Rich 1986, 144). White men

²⁴ Quote from *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1986). Hereafter, all page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text and will belong to this book.

indeed, as the group that has dominated this planet from the very beginning, wrote a history that does not reflect impartially the course of the events. History should be objective and devoid of any bias or bigotry; it cannot be a summary of the tales about their best moments but has to include moments of both oppression towards others and self-injury. According to Rich, it is impossible that a society built on a single-sex perspective, dominated by racist prejudices and based on the profit ideology might boast a history that does not report the countless abuses of the white male power. She insists on the fact that “white men need a history that does not simply “include” peoples of color and white women, but that shows the process by which the arrogance of hierarchy and the celebration of violence have reached a point of destructiveness almost out of control” (Rich 1986, 144). In sum, what she requires is to turn history upside down: every single episode that includes women or people of different races needs to be pinpointed, examined, and then rewritten. All these passages have to be conducted rigorously from a different perspective, which should come from one of the interested parties.

2.2. Historical amnesia

In the following lines of her essay, Rich explains that every individual has a historical responsibility towards herself – or himself – to respect. History is not made by people but is made of people, who carry with them a set of behaviors and assumptions that belongs to a given time and space and depends on their sex and skin color. According to her, everyone has the opportunity to choose whether to become consciously historical about her – or his – condition or to fall into a historical amnesia and nostalgia that cannot help but provide a misleading narrative. In other words, people have the choice to opt for an honest, attentive, and usable memory, by deciding to describe and remember their experiences as accurately as possible, but they can also choose to dull their own imagination by letting it starve and plunge into a poisonous nostalgia that entails only despondency and emptiness. In this sense, Rich considers imagination as essential in order to imagine and shape a past that can turn into a possible future; its starvation indeed leads only to the discouraging longing for something too distant to touch and adjust. Nevertheless, Rich feels the urge to distinguish between inventing and “making educated guesses” (Rich 1986, 148): historians of an oppressed group should not try to conceive a lost culture using unattainable values and visions, but imagine and conjecture what has been before with criterion. Furthermore, by making this statement, Rich argues that historical responsibility implies also an active and collaborative action that has to move from a individual consciousness to a collective one. In fact, women cannot expect to fight for their silenced

voice only by breaking silences and telling their personal experiences in the private, but they should establish a united front for this cause by creating a thunderous shout.

Consequently, Rich needs to distinguish feminist history from women's history: the first one is a version of the events that is charged with feminist meaning, the second one is a narrative that is overflowing with feminist potential. In other words, the first one represents the correct version of history that is continuously analyzed and rewritten by feminist historians, whereas the second one indicates a history that could be examined and corrected from the ground up, but it just depicts a version of the events that confines itself to include women's experiences without delving into it. For this reason, feminist history boasts an effective feminist meaning while women's history holds only the potential of it. Therefore, feminist history entrusts women with the task to dive into their own past, discover and study it in order to decide what they want to preserve or what they do not want to repeat or continue. Since this reading of history requires a certain level of action and does not simply imply a detached and individual contribution, it wants to prompt women to be zealously committed to their own liberation and to ask women's questions wherever they have not been asked before. In fact, as Rich states in her essay: "as differentiated from women's history, feminist history does not perpetuate the mainstream by simply invoking women to make the mainstream appear more inclusive" (Rich 1986, 146). Nevertheless, even if the central perspective and concern remain strictly female, feminist history does not concern only women. It also takes into account men's experience, by inspecting what men have done and how they behave not only towards women, but also towards each other and the world that they believe to fully dominate. Here, by shifting the focus briefly on men and their power, Rich insists once again on their tendency to dismiss any history they did not themselves write, which they judge as "unserious, unscholarly, a fad, too "political", "merely" oral and thus unreliable" (Rich 1986, 147). However, despite their refusal to recognize any different interpretation of the events, women have been writing their own history for centuries. In fact, as Rich explains, each generation of feminists has committed itself to record every proof of the oppression of women but, despite this great responsibility, there are recurring oversights that drive women to repeat the same mistakes over the years. As a consequence of this inaccuracy, she recognizes the eroding effect of historical amnesia as one of the leading causes: it is impossible for women to build on what has been done before if they do not even know that there is something to build on. As Rich puts it, somewhat echoing the ideas of Sheila Rowbotham and Monique Wittig about feminist history, "we cannot lay claim with assurance to any motherland of the spirit, which might provide us with blueprints for a society in which women would be free, autonomous human beings" (Rich 1986, 147). Considering these assumptions, Rich does not think that recovering a common history represents a utopic attempt. She truly believes in the possibilities that women can create once they establish

together a common goal to achieve. In sum, she thinks that women need to actively engage themselves in this purpose, by fighting against the historical amnesia that makes them easily forget where they came from and what they have been through and unveiling the relations of power that keep them subjugated.

Following this concern, Rich states that man-made history has always told that women have always and everywhere been recognized as property of men and that the sole and only heroines have been the few women who “have sifted down to us through the silences of history” (Rich 1986, 148). These few women, who achieved the privileged opportunity to go down in history, have been elite women – such as Eleanor of Aquitaine or Elizabeth I – or women who belonged to an oppressive group and have been considered as exceptionally strong and smart in their actions – such as Sojourner Truth and Rosa Luxemburg –. However, in her opinion, feminists should not focus their attention on these celebrities, whose achievements have been sufficiently analyzed and brought to light but should look for the greatness and wisdom of ordinary women. By inspecting the methods by which these common women have collectively waged resistance throughout time, they might find “the astonishing continuity of women’s imagination of survival, persisting through the great and little deaths of daily life” (Rich 1986, 148).

2.3. “Heroines”

By switching again from a public speech to poetry, Adrienne Rich wrote a poem in 1980 titled “Heroines” in which she reflects and celebrates the lives of nineteenth-century women. More in general, the whole collection in which this poem is contained, *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*, aims to scour women’s history in order not to erase the suffering of women, but to wear out the appearance of silence, distortion, romance, and self-sacrifice. Here, in particular, Rich admires and praises the courage of the women who lived before her.

Exceptional

even deviant

you draw your long skirt

across the nineteenth century

Your mind

burns long after death

not like the harbor beacon

In this poem, Rich tries to uncover the plight of women of every generation through her own artistry. She does not document only their battle and injustice, but also their role in trying to overcome these inequalities. She insists on the fullest truth rather than the partiality of nostalgia about the past, with the aim to rediscover the models for courage and action needed by a movement. Moreover, despite the temporal distance, she feels herself close to her old sisters and wants to fight next to them. In the question that closes the poem, Rich realizes indeed that admiration is not enough and she needs to take action, which is exactly what she did throughout her life and still does today with the resonance of her words. By using a language that she mastered, she takes the lesson she learned from the nineteenth century and she fights for the honor of women everywhere. In this sense, what began in the attic of Emily Dickinson is still being shaped today, and for many generations of readers to come.

2.4. The chauvinism of ethnicity, race, class, and heterosexuality

To summarize, Rich deems feminist history as the only correct and fair version of the events. Nevertheless, this feminist reading of the past is not an invention or an adaptation of the facts that has been designed to counteract white male historians, but it is the narrative that has been ignored, buried, and erased over time, and now need to emerge. The history that white men provide is aimed to keep this female narrative hidden, in order to retain and protect their position of power. For this reason, she considers history a political matter. If women want to redefine the hierarchy of power that relegated them to a condition of inferiority, they need to know all the facts that have been concealed from them. In her own words, it is necessary “to know the full range and depth of how women have been controlled, the measure of anti-woman violence” (Rich 1986, 149) in order to proceed to the empowerment of women, which implies learning both the worst and the best moments of their common history. Accordingly, women do not only need to know how, when, and where they have resisted, and in what culture, communities, and periods they have had authority, but they also need to learn how unequal privilege was able to keep them separated even under a situation of shared oppression.

As a result of this reasoning, feminism demands to pay attention not only to patriarchal misogyny, but also to the chauvinism based on race, ethnicity, class, and heterosexuality. The prejudiced belief in the superiority of one’s gender, race, social class, and sexual orientation, according to Rich, has always prevented women from noticing whole female groups that might have given rise to powerful communities. She herself writes: “as long as we separate the history of white and middle-class women from the history of colored and poor women we are not only missing

powerful lines of insight, we are perpetuating our own fragmentation” (Rich 1986, 151). For this reason, in the opening address Rich wrote in 1981 for the beginning of the Feminist Studies’ class at the University of Minnesota, she argues that the next unavoidable step that feminist criticism must take – after having questioned patriarchal values and practice – is to challenge the universality of whiteness and heterosexuality. In her opinion, it is necessary for feminist critics to fully understand how culture and society work precisely to empower some and disempower others. Women, as victims of objectification in a patriarchal society, are driven to objectify other women who belong to a different race or with a different sexual orientation; in order to keep them separated and vulnerable, the first step is to turn them one against the other. Nevertheless, she believes that women need to overcome these limitations by radically rejecting a tradition that was never designed to include them all and trying to establish a powerful bonding that leads to “the release, in each other, of the yet unexplored resources and transformative power of women, so long despised, confined, and wasted” (Rich 1986, 9). In other words, the only solution to create a resilient community is to recognize the racism and homophobia that women carry unconsciously within themselves and to consider feminism as a political and spiritual starting point from which people could move to examine – rather than hide – their own racism or homophobia. In any case, according to Rich, “the consciousness of racism and homophobia does not mean simply trying to excise racist language or homophobic stereotypes (though that is a necessary beginning); it does mean working to see the field with a fresh vision, to experience whiteness and heterosexuality as relative states and not as authoritative positions” (Rich 1986, 96). This kind of awareness might be challenging at the beginning because it questions different certainties and commonplaces, but it drives women to decenter themselves and reread their own past writings with impatience.

In this sense, in the first section of *The Dream of Common Language*, Rich faces the importance of a rewritten history of women as well as a picture of lesbianism. The last long poem of this collection, “Transcendental Etude”, incorporates both these ideas.

But in fact we were always like this,
rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference.
Birth stripped our birthright from us,
tore us from a woman, from women, from ourselves
so early on
and the whole courts throbbing at our ears
like midges, told us nothing, nothing

of origins, nothing we needed
to know, nothing that could re-member us²⁶

From these lines, it is clear that a newly acquired understanding of women's "rootless, dismembered" condition can start a healing process in the history and community of women. But women, once they gain this kind of awareness, are not only equipped to begin recording their history, but also to renewing all forms of woman-to-woman relationships that have been destroyed by the patriarchy so far.

²⁶ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1984).

Compulsory Heterosexuality

In the previous chapter, the impelling need for a common history results in the necessity of a new female bonding, capable of outclassing the chauvinism of race, ethnicity, class, and heterosexuality. Here, I will focus on Rich's strong attack on the institution of heterosexuality. In particular, she expresses her concerns about the new-right political movements in the United States and their messages in the 1980s. In short, she challenges the erasure of lesbian existence from scholarly feminist literature and encourages heterosexual feminists to read heterosexuality as a political institution that disempowers women. By pondering the different forms of compulsory heterosexuality, she demonstrated the incalculable damage that this institution made throughout history and it is still making today. In the end, I will conclude with Rich's belief that only a deep understanding of the politics, economic, and cultural propaganda of heterosexuality will free women from the power that men have always wielded over them.

Adrienne Rich began to speak of lesbianism as both a political and personal issue as early as 1976, in her controversial book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, because she came out as a lesbian that year, after having three children and becoming widowed. This unexpected revelation represented for her just the fulfillment of a desire that had lain dormant through the years of her frustrating marriage. As she herself wrote: "the suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence began to stretch her limbs" (Rich)²⁷. From that year forward, lesbian desire and sexuality appeared as recurring themes in her writing, especially in the two collections of poems *The Dream of a Common Language* and *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. In particular, in the first collection, there are twenty-one poems, all gathered under the same title and directed towards one woman. In the second poem of what she entitled "Twenty-One Love Poems", Rich links together her homosexual love to the art she creates.

I wake up in your bed. I know I have been dreaming.

Much earlier, the alarm broke us from each other,

you've been at your desk for hours. I know what I dreamed: our friend the poet comes into
my room

where I've been writing for days,

²⁷ Quote taken from the article by John O'Mahoney, "Poet and Pioneer," *The Guardian* (5 Jun. 2002).

drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere,
and I want to show her one poem
which is the poem of my life. But I hesitate,
and wake. You've kissed my hair
to wake me. *I dreamed you were a poem*
I say, *a poem I wanted to show someone...*
and I laugh and fall dreaming again
of the desire to show you to everyone I love,
to move openly together
in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
which carries the feathered grass a long way down the up breathing air.²⁸

This poem unveils not only a strong bond of love between women but also the poet's fundamental connection between love and art. As I said before, when Rich declared herself a radical lesbian feminist, she began to write poems full of love and desire. In fact, through her strong positive feelings for women, she was able to reach a new definition of herself as a poet. In these lines, the poet, who is speaking through the first-person pronoun, compares the lover to a poem she wrote that describes as "the poem of my life". She wants to show it to her family and friends, but she can't. This love appears as just too complicated to explain, even if more rewarding than the heterosexual love that Rich describes in her earlier poems. Moreover, the last few lines reveal a strikingly sexual reference: this poem is not just simply a declaration of love, but also a tribute to lesbian sexuality. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties, she wants to make her lover/poem public and "move openly together". The intersection between personal and politics is an important issue for Rich, that she often faces in her political poetry with composure. She championed the fight for lesbian acceptance with all her artistic work from the very beginning of her career and, as a consequence, she made her own sexuality an issue in the literary world she took part. In a collection of thoughts about women and honor that she published in 1975, before her official coming out as a homosexual woman, she attacks society for its treatment of lesbians. She maintains that lesbians are trapped in the lies that language can build: "women's love for women has been represented almost entirely through silence and lies. The institution of heterosexuality has forced the lesbian to dissemble or be labeled a pervert, a criminal, a sick or dangerous woman, etc., etc. The lesbian, then, has often been forced to lie, like the prostitute or married woman" (Rich 1979, 190)²⁹.

²⁸ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1978).

²⁹ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *On Lies, Secrets and Silences* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1979).

3.1. Compulsory heterosexuality as a political institution

Some years later, she published one of her most groundbreaking essays, which has been repeatedly quoted in the debate about Political Lesbianism in the past few decades: “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. This socio-political essay, which was the first in which she openly addresses the theme of lesbian existence, has been originally written for the “Sexuality” issue of “Sign” in 1978, but then it was republished in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* in 1980. The reasons why she felt the need to write such an important text are explicated in the foreword: on the one hand, she wanted to challenge the erasure of lesbian existence from scholarly feminist literature, while on the other hand, she wanted to encourage heterosexual feminists to read heterosexuality as a political institution which disempowers women. In this sense, in a letter she wrote in 1980 to three Marxist-feminist activists, she explains the belief on which this essay is founded: all people think from within the boundaries of certain solipsism that is linked with racial, cultural, economic, and sexual privilege. Due to this pernicious solipsism, Rich believes that people need and must re-educate themselves in order to become conscious of its presence and open the possibility of new choices. For this reason, she openly addresses heterosexual feminists and asks them to examine their personal experience of heterosexuality with criticism and antagonism and become more open to the different resources offered by the lesbian-feminist perspective.

In the preamble of the essay, she also spells out her concerns about the political situation in the United States of that time, in which the society seemed to become increasingly conservative and have a propensity for the New Right’s message. In the 1980s, the right-wing political movements depicted women as an emotional and sexual property of men and declaimed that their autonomy or equality threaten family, religion, and state. Rich expresses her total opposition to those institutions that have always tried to control women – such as the patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, and the compulsory heterosexuality – and warns her reader of their alarming strengthening by legislation, religious fiat, media imagery, and censorship. By starting from this worrying political landscape that does not protect women against discrimination and violence, she accuses feminist-inspired institutions of not only being disinterested in the safeguard of lesbians, but also denying them any kind of help. For this reason, in her opinion, feminists need to take quickly a critical stance towards the ideology of heterocentricity and the institutions founded upon it, in order to build a bridge over the gap between lesbian and feminist, not a wall. As she herself writes: “the retreat into sameness – assimilation for those who can manage it – is the most passive and debilitating

of responses to political repression, economic insecurity, and a renewed open season on difference” (Rich 1986, 24)³⁰.

As she argues in the first part of her essay, the bias of compulsory heterosexuality is widespread in literature and social sciences, especially in feminist scholarship. She provides as exemplification the analysis of four different books, written by four feminist authors with distinct viewpoints and political orientations, in order to reveal to what extent the institution of heterosexuality is capable of influencing how lesbian experience is perceived and misinterpreted, assuming it is mentioned. In fact, interestingly in each book, heterosexuality is considered the sexual preference for women, and the idea of compulsory heterosexuality is never taken into account. The nearly total erasure of lesbian existence from most of the scholarly feminist literature is, according to her, not only an anti-lesbian stance but also an anti-feminist choice, because it can distort the experience of heterosexual women as well. By erasing lesbian existence from female history, an incalculable portion of female agency – and how it has always challenged male supremacy throughout history – is excluded and kept unavailable.

In this sense, Rich lays out a framework that Kathleen Gough developed in her essay “The Origin of The Family”, in which she lists eight features of male power in archaic and contemporary societies. Rich personally reworks each category by adding numerous methods by which male power is manifested and maintained. The eight features of male power are: “men’s ability to deny women sexuality or to force theirs upon women; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically and prevent their movement; to use them as objects in male transactions; to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society’s knowledge and cultural attainments” (Gough 1975, 69-70)³¹. Even if Gough reads these characteristics as causes of sexual inequality and not as sources of enforced heterosexuality, Rich recognizes how some practices – such as the idealization of heterosexual romance and the erasure of lesbian existence in art, literature, and film, except if perceive as exotic or perverse – helped to convince women that marriage and heterosexuality are inevitable components of their lives, even if they perceive them as unsatisfying and oppressive.

In particular, among the numerous male forces that women need to counterattack, which ranges from physical brutality to control of consciousness, Rich analyses the function of pornography and its deep influence on consciousness. This multibillion-dollar industry, according to writes in her essay, spreads sadistic and humiliating visual images that depict women as objects of sexual appetite

³⁰ Quote from *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1986). Hereafter, all page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text and will belong to this book.

³¹ Kathleen Gough, “The Origin of the Family,” *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975): 69-70.

devoid of any emotional context, individual meaning, or personality. Along the same lines, the kind of pornography that involves lesbians, which has been exclusively created for the male voyeuristic eye, depicts sensuality between women as a sexual commodity that should be consumed by men's gaze. For this reason, Rich argues that "pornography does not simply create a climate in which sex and violence are interchangeable; it widens the range of behavior considered acceptable from men in heterosexual intercourse" (Rich 1986, 40). In other words, the enforced submission and the use of brutality appear, due to the malicious messages relayed by pornography, as sexually normal if played out in heterosexual pairing. Moreover, in the same way, the affection between two women is read as nothing more than a perversion, including its erotic mutuality and respect.

In addition to this overall identification of women at the sexual service of men promoted by pornography, Rich proposes the intersection between compulsory heterosexuality and economics that Catharine A. MacKinnon faced in her book *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Sex Discrimination*. In what Rich describes as a brilliant study, MacKinnon analyses how women are segregated by gender in low-paying jobs under capitalism. According to MacKinnon's reasoning, men's control over women's sexuality and capital's control over employee's work lives represent the two main forces that drive contemporary American society. Women indeed, from their position of economic disadvantage, are forced to endure sexual harassment in order to keep their jobs, by behaving "in a complaisantly and ingratiatingly heterosexual manner" (Rich 1986, 40). But if they do not act in an accommodating way, which MacKinnon recognizes as the women's only true qualification for employment, they might be accused of being frigid or lesbian. In this sense, she argues that lesbians, in a working environment, are forced not simply to lie about their private life and pretend to be heterosexual, but also to behave like the ideal heterosexual woman who perfectly reflects the standard deferential role which is required in terms of dressing and playing the feminine. By echoing these ideas, Rich maintains that the workplace represents "the place where women have learned to accept male violation of their psychic and physical boundaries as the price of survival; where women have been educated – no less than by romantic literature or by pornography – to perceive themselves as sexual prey" (Rich 1986, 42).

Nevertheless, the workplace represents just one of the many contexts in which heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women. As Rich explains, women have resisted it everywhere, even "at the costs of physical torture, imprisonment, psychosurgery, social ostracism, and extreme poverty" (Rich 1986, 57). For this reason, compulsory heterosexuality has been defined as one of the crimes against women by the Brussels International Tribunal on Crimes against Women in 1976. Nevertheless, despite this important acknowledgment, there are many different enforced conditions under which women are still trapped, such as prostitution, marital rape, incest, wife-

beating, pornography, and many others. All these constrained circumstances shape what Kathleen Barry, a feminist sociologist who Rich mentions in her essay due to her study about the means of assuring male sexual access to women, defines as the international female slavery that rules the patriarchal society and obliges women of every race and class to live subject to men. At the center of her analysis, Barry identifies the rape paradigm – in which the total blame falls back to the victim of the sexual assault – as the leading force for the rationalization and moral acceptance of different forms of women’s enslavement. In this way, women are never recognized as victims, but they are presumed to have chosen their fate or obtained it through reckless and unchaste behavior and, as a consequence, have to embrace it passively. In other words, the rape paradigm fosters a dangerous “sexual domination perspective” in which sexual abuse and terrorism by men are recognized as something natural and inevitable. The solution to destroy this pernicious perspective of domination and replace it with a universal standard of basic freedom from gender violence, in Barry’s opinion, might be to face directly the sexual violence and domination and name it. In this way, giving a conceptual definition to this unfair male right of sexual and emotional access to women, creates a possibility for victims to find the words to define their experience and talk about it. Nevertheless, she recognizes compulsory heterosexuality as part of the problem with naming and conceptualizing female sexual slavery. Women are indeed indoctrinated with the ideology of heterosexual romance from a very young age through fairy tales, television, films, and advertising, but this universal set of beliefs has dangerous consequences, as Barry explains. On the one hand, women are led to believe that the center of sexual power is exclusively male. In this sense, a girl in her early adolescence tends to turn away from her primary relationships with girlfriends because her attention is increasingly focused on boys. Consequently, as women recede in importance in her life, her own identity assumes a secondary role and she grows into male identification, which implies a process whereby they place men above themselves “in credibility, status, and importance in most situations, regardless of the comparative quality the women may bring to the situation” (Barry 1984, 172)³². In addition to this estrangement, on the other hand, women receive the primacy and uncontrollability of the male sexual drive as a dogma. In this way, girls learn since adolescence that the male sexual drive cannot be controlled and take responsibility for its actions and, as a consequence, it becomes the natural and rational men’s conduct in adulthood.

3.2. The erasure of the lesbian possibility

³² Kathleen Barry, Charlotte Bunch, and Shirley Castley, *International Feminism: Networking against Female Sexual Slavery* (New York: International Women’s Tribute Center, 1984).

To summarize, these are different forms of compulsory heterosexuality for women, and all of them share the same objective: to assure the male right to physical, economic, and emotional access and control. One of the many methods is the attempt to render invisible the lesbian possibility. For this reason, Rich corroborates that “feminist research and theory that contribute to lesbian invisibility or marginality are actually working against the liberation and empowerment of women as a group” (Rich 1986, 50). After all, she recognizes the popular statement “most women are innately heterosexual” as a political and theoretical barrier for feminism, although it can be easily taken apart. She emphasizes the fact that lesbian experience, if it has not been totally excluded from history, it has been catalogued under disease and recognized as exceptional rather than intrinsic. In other words, if women believe that heterosexuality is the natural emotional and sensual inclination for women, lesbians become deviant individuals in a pathological condition who are emotionally and sensually deprived, or they might be banalized and defined as a kind of trend of the moment. As a consequence, the work of such women – whatever it could be – is “undervalued or seen as the bitter fruit of “penis envy” or the sublimation of repressed eroticism or the meaningless rant of a “man-hater”” (Rich 1986, 56). However, if feminists recognize the degree to which and the means whereby heterosexual preference has been imposed on women, they will be finally able to clearly see how women have always resisted, throughout history, male tyranny. Feminism, in this respect, has constantly re-emerged and re-act in every culture and period, according to Rich. For this reason, after this important realization, she maintains that it will be possible for feminists to study and fully comprehend women’s struggle against powerlessness and all their radical rebellions, even the ones that male ideologies have not considered enough revolutionary to be documented. In this way, they will discover all those behaviors, both in history and in individual biography, that heretofore have been invisible or misnamed because they represented concrete examples of radical rebellion. Moreover, by connecting these rebellions with the physical passion of women for women, she argues that is possible to discover the erotic sensuality that has been the fact that has been most violently erased from the female experience.

Even though Rich believes in this chance of redemption, she clarifies that there is any statistical documentation of the numbers of lesbians who have remained in heterosexual marriages during their lives. In this sense, heterosexual marriage and relationships have always been for lesbians an escape from their enforced condition of submission, to seek protection, and avoid discrimination. She explains that women have married because it was necessary for them “in order to survive economically, in order to have children who would not suffer economic deprivation or social ostracism, in order to remain respectable, in order to do what was expected of women, because

coming out of “abnormal” childhoods they wanted to feel “normal” and because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty and fulfillment” (Rich 1986, 59). For this reason, she asserts that a double life, characterized by the ostensible acquiescence to a set of rules established by an institution founded on male interest and prerogative, has been one of the main features of the female experience.

3.3. The “lesbian continuum”

After all these considerations about the subject, in the third part of her essay, Rich mentions the two phrases she coined in order to replace the word lesbianism, which she considers with “a clinical and limiting ring” (Rich 1986, 51). The two terms are “lesbian existence” and “lesbian continuum”. The first one is meant to suggest both the historical presence of lesbians and their continuing creation of the meaning of that existence; while the second one implies a shared woman-identified experience that does not necessarily include lesbian women, in which they are united by “the sharing of their inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, and the giving and the receiving of practical and political support” (Rich 1986, 51).

By deepening the first term, she perceives lesbian existence – as a true act of resistance that heretofore “included isolation, self-hatred, breakdown, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence” (Rich 1986, 52) – as a profoundly female experience, like motherhood, with particular kinds of oppressions, meanings, and potentialities. In this sense, she interprets lesbian sexuality as an efficacious opposition force that can be used against the alarming political landscape. In other words, she believes that sexuality should be used in the service of politics: women, all gathered together under the flow of a lesbian continuum despite their race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation, are finally able to perceive themselves as a – intrinsically female – united front and counterattack the patriarchy as a solid political force. But all this untapped potential has always been cunningly buried under the belief about the absence of any tradition, continuity, or social underpinning, in order to keep heterosexuality compulsory for women. Moreover, Rich argues that lesbians have been historically dispossessed of any political existence because they have been classified as female versions of male homosexuality. There are too many differences, in her opinion, between the two stigmatized groups – above all, women have not the economic and cultural privilege of men – and the decision to equate lesbian existence with male homosexuality represents only another means to erase female reality once again. As she herself writes: “the term gay may serve the purpose of blurring the very outlines we

need to discern, which are of crucial value for feminism and for the freedom of women as a group” (Rich 1986, 53).

3.4. The consequences of heterosexuality

In the final part of her essay, Rich emphasizes the fact that woman identification represents an inexhaustible “source of energy” (Rich 1986, 63) that has been restricted and contained under the institution of heterosexuality. In her opinion, it is impossible to calculate the loss to the power of all women to subvert the social relations of the sexes and to liberate themselves, because the lie of compulsory female heterosexuality has caused incalculable damages through its impositions. The reality and visibility that have been denied to women’s passion for women, women’s choice of women as allies or life companions have driven this kind of relationship into a profound dissimulation that led to the almost complete disintegration. Moreover, due to the fact that heterosexuality has never been presented as a preference but as “something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (Rich 1986, 50), the lie of compulsory heterosexuality afflicts not only the feminist scholarship but also every other profession, relationship, and conversation. By influencing so many fields, it keeps all women psychologically trapped in a condition that completely distorts their feelings and experiences, despite their sexual orientations. Women in fact, in order to comply with the parameters of acceptance that the lie requires, are forced to make their mind, spirit, and sexuality fit into a prescribed script. According to Rich, this issue establishes “a profound falseness, hypocrisy, and hysteria in the heterosexual dialogue, for every heterosexual relationship is lived in the queasy strobe light of that lie” (Rich 1986, 64). Given the complexity of this untruth, she recognizes different layers by analyzing different traditional perspectives that endorse it. In the Western tradition, the romantic layer argues that women are unavoidably drawn to men, while in the tradition of the social sciences, the idea of primary love between sexes is recognized as scientifically normal and the belief that women need men for social and economic protection, adult sexuality, and psychological completion is indisputable. In addition to these two, she identifies another layer that coincides with the widespread assumption that women turn to women because they hate men. In this sense, she maintains that is normal to find skepticism, caution, and righteous paranoia in a healthy woman’s response to a male-dominated culture and the deep misogyny that pervades it. Lesbian existence might wrongly appear as a refuge from male abuses, rather than as an empowering charge between women.

In conclusion, according to Rich, there is a strong and nascent feminist political stance “in the

act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality” (Rich 1986, 66). But, in order to recognize its political content, this demanding erotic choice needs to be deepened and expanded into a wider and more conscious woman identification. In this sense, she maintains that lesbian existence requires a conscious restructuring of feminist analysis and criticism when it is recognized, and not just a few token references. In the same way, the lesbian continuum needs a new delineation: the double life that both heterosexual and lesbian women were forced to lead needs to be examined to the ground, in order to reach a more exhaustive record of all the forms that it has assumed throughout history. The phrase lesbian continuum, as Rich herself declared in a letter, came from the desire to include “the greatest possible variation of female-identified experience” (Rich 1986, 73), while showing respect to lesbian existence. For this reason, feminist historians need to gather information about the organization and the preservation of the institution of heterosexuality “through female wage scale, the enforcement of middle-class women’s “leisure,” the glamorization of so-called sexual liberation, the withholding of education from women, the imagery of “high art” and popular culture, the mystification of the personal sphere, and much else” (Rich 1986, 67). Within this deleterious institution, the great acknowledged reality remains, according to her, the total absence of choice. Women indeed, deprived of the right to choose, are dependent upon the chance or luck of relationships without any collective power that might help them to define the meaning and the function of sexuality in their lives. As soon as they will begin to address directly the institution of heterosexuality itself, they will discover a history of female resistance which has always been misunderstood because of its fragmented, miscalled, and erased body. She believes that just a courageous understanding of the politics, economics, and cultural propaganda of compulsory heterosexuality will carry women beyond the diversified group situations – beyond the patriarchal chauvinism of ethnicity and class – into a new overview that might dismantle the power that men have always wielded over women, “power which has become a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control” (Rich 1986, 68).

Poetry and Politics

In the previous chapter, Rich's strong criticism of the institution of heterosexuality resulted in political tones. Here, I will describe Rich's role as a public intellectual and her talent to render her ideas and concepts into different literary genres, in order to reach the widest possible audience. Moreover, I will explain how, through her personal way to combine poetry and politics, she demonstrated that the personal, political, and poetical are inseparable. I will conclude this final chapter by explaining how political poetry is essential in order to contrast the exclusion of private realm and its everyday life matters – diminished to trivial affairs when they represent the most reliable source in order to unveil the problems that might spoil a society – and establish new possibilities of bonding among people.

As I already said in the previous chapter, the intersection between poetry and politics has always been an important issue for Rich. Even in her early collections of poems, where she translates into poetical lines her personal struggles as a heterosexual woman, the first hint of the blame on the patriarchy is clear. In these collections, despite her ostensible disinterest in the political themes that radically shaped her artistic work of the following years, her words already express the impelling need for freedom, respect, and change. But her poetic style evolved very quickly in about a decade: after her encounter with feminist activism, she started giving public speeches and writing essays about feminism and politics. As a consequence of this political commitment, she switched the focus of her writing from her personal and restricted perspective to a wider public dimension. Within a few years, she became one of America's foremost public intellectuals.

In this respect, Rich has always evolved in her role as a feminist activist throughout her life. When she joined the movement in the 1970s, feminists were fighting against the patriarchy and all its male-dominated institutions and cultural practices. Unlike the first-wave feminism that focused on removing legal obstacles to gender equality, the second-wave inflamed theoretical discussions about the origins of women's oppression and gender distinctions. In this revolutionary climate in constant turmoil, feminists developed a dichotomous thinking that drastically divided women and patriarchy into two opposite poles that cannot come into contact. But Rich, as a charismatic public intellectual, never recognized herself in such a radical and limited dichotomy: what has always really interested her were the ethical issues and questions that the consequences of patriarchy arose. According to Miriam Clark, for more than four decades, Rich resisted the most forceful form of critical opposition, like the ideological conservatism that took the shape of modernist impersonality and the post-

structuralist attacks on the subjectivity of words. In this respect, Clark maintains that: “more fully than any other American poet of the twentieth century, she has marshalled the resources of poetry to serve collective purposes, to address injustice and social suffering, and to create what Charles Altieri has described as identifications that forge community” (Clark 2009, 46)³³. For this reason, a strong sense of moral obligation and a widely shared commitment to universal human rights characterized her whole work as a public intellectual. She tried to filter all the anger and demoralization that were driving feminists in such a powerful revolution, by transforming it into a deep analysis of the society and its cultural mechanisms of power. She has never restricted herself to the inflexible positions of the feminist activism of the 1970s. For this reason, she went through a complex process of development in her critical thinking decade after decade, and the traces of this gradual evolution are clearer in her poetry rather than in her public speeches.

4.1. Rich as a public intellectual

One of the major emblematic turns of Rich’s career as a writer was indeed the fact that she abandoned a poetry in which she was the only protagonist and she started to address to an audience. In other words, she chose to start referring to other people and use their perspective in order to increase the ethical range and authority of her poetical language. This radical change is particularly evident in “XIII (Dedications)”, the final poem of her section “An Atlas of the Difficult World”, which is a selection of poems included in a collection that bears the same title, which was published in 1991. In this poem propelled by empathy, she directly addresses her readers, by proclaiming “I know you” to twelve different types of persons. Nevertheless, the “you” she uses in each line is singular and specific; she might refer to a different person – young or old, in love, grief, hope, or desperation – but each of her readers is reading the same words from within their own distinct places in a difficult world that encompasses them all. This implied difficult world belongs to the year in which this poem was published and includes all its historical events: The Gulf War, the break-up of the Soviet Union, and the rising death toll of HIV-AIDS. Due to its historical setting, “An Atlas of the Difficult World” remains today, despite all the years that have passed, a relevant map of American unsolved griefs. In addition to this, the second-person pronoun in English offers the possibility to blur the distinction between one and many. As a consequence of this stylistic choice, Rich can artfully link separated lives into a unique felt experience of a communal whole, which she easily contextualizes in a

³³ Miriam Marty Clark, “Human Rights and the Work of Lyric in Adrienne Rich”, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 38.1 (March 2009): 46.

vocation is important to the extent that it is publicly recognizable and involves both commitment and risk, boldness and vulnerability” (Said 1993, 13). Following this portrayal, Rich gave public speeches, wrote numerous essays and poems, and taught in different colleges; but what has always distinguished her from other public intellectuals, was her ability to render a given concept, thought, or image into different literary genres like poetry, addresses, and critical prose. The versatility of her writing allowed her to reach the most disparate types of audience and spread her ideas in the most effective way. Moreover, in Said’s opinion, the role of the intellectual “cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d’être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug” (Said 1993, 11). In this sense, Rich fought against not only the patriarchy, but also the chauvinism based on race, ethnicity, class, and heterosexuality through over sixty years of public introspection and examination of society. Her multifaced political commitment and constant focus on ethical issues did not make her an ordinary feminist activist, but an intellectual capable of manipulating language and taking advantage of words on behalf of the most vulnerable and defenseless. As she argues: “every real poem is the breaking of an existing silence, and the first question we might ask any poem is, *What kind of voice is breaking silence, and what kind of silence is being broken?*” (Rich 2001, 150)³⁶.

About her role as a public intellectual, she was interviewed by the Poetry Division of the Modern Language Association, that organized a series of public conversations between a poet and a group of academic critics in December 1998. This interview is included, under the title “Some Questions from the Profession” in *Arts of the Possible*, a collection of her essays and public interviews from the last decade of the twentieth century. This volume, which was published in 2001, explores the complex relationship between art and social justice, by tracing Rich’s engagement with her time and her arguments both with herself and with others. In this interview, she argues that there are two different ways that allow people to create an emphatic feeling among them when a huge difference – in ethnicity, race, class, gender, or sexuality – keeps them separated. The first one is solidarity, which represents the realization that people need to join with other people who are different from them in order to undo a set of conditions and policies that they both find intolerable and unfair, even if for different reasons. The second one is the involuntary emotional connection that people normally feel towards other human beings, in various ways and at various times. This push has the power to drive people out from old automatic affiliations and loyalties into new and difficult comradeships. Rich, in her essays, speeches, and poems, leverages these two sympathetic forces in order to reach the hearts

³⁶ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essay and Conversations* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

of her audience. Especially through poetical language, she maintains that she manages to enter into the consciousness of others because “in making poetry, or any kind of art, we’re translating into a medium – in this case, language – the contents of our consciousness” (Rich 2001, 134)³⁷. In other words, poetical language comes from the poet’s inner self and, as a consequence, it is charged with personal meaning to the uttermost. Nevertheless, due to the unlimited interpretative power of words, a poem is capable of reaching the consciousness of its readers – in the subjective way that they prefer to intuit and interpret it – and deeply influencing them. As she herself explains: “you are drawn in not because this is a description of your world, but because you begin to be reminded of your own desire and need, because the poem is not about integration and fulfillment, but about the desire for those conditions. You listen, if you do, not simply to the poem, but to a part of you reawakened by the poem” (Rich 1993, 12)³⁸. For this reason, she rejects the possibility to interpret poems as personal biographies or paraphrasable narratives. According to Rich, a poem represents the ideal connective thread between two unlike individuals, times, and cultures. Even if she acknowledges that every single poem cannot speak to everyone, she believes that poems reach many for whom they were not consciously written, sometimes in ways that the poet has never expected.

4.2. The immense subversive power of poetry

Due to its power to open new possibilities, restore numbed feelings, and recharge desire, poetry is considered by Rich as necessary as food. Nevertheless, she accuses North American white and male-dominated culture of considering poetry as a powerless pastime that has nothing to do with the political powers that “organizes us as a society, as communities within that society, as relationships within communities” (Rich 1993, xiv). As she explains in a talk she gave in 1983, there is an erroneous view of art that describes poems – and other artistic forms of expression – as the result of a supernatural inspiration or possession by universal forces. This falsely mystical opinion that recognizes art only on a transcendental plane distances poetry from questions of power and privilege and denies any artist’s relation to concrete and practical purposes. In sum, she argues that her culture encourages poets to feel alienated from the rest of the population and disheartens them by endorsing the belief that poetry is neither economically profitable nor politically effective. However, in all the countries she has been to, she had noticed that poetry has always been held indispensable and dangerous in other cultures. Then she finally understood that poetry in the United States is set aside

³⁷ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essay and Conversations* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

³⁸ Quote from *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1993). Hereafter, all page numbers will be given parenthetically in the text and will belong to this book.

and depreciated because of its recollective powers, which are capable of eluding the capitalistic marketing and commoditizing that rule a nation created in the search of wealth. More precisely, using her own words: “a poem can’t free us from the struggle for existence, but it can uncover desires and appetites buried under the accumulation emergencies of our lives, the fabricated wants and needs we have had urged on us, have accepted as our own” (Rich 1993, 13). For this reason, she argues that political poetry embodies an immense subversive power and rebellious nature that might be considered as a resource and concretely help to make a difference in her country. Nevertheless, North Americans are scared of overtly political art and openly diminish it. She explains that, from the one hand, “politics” represents for them almost a dirty world which is associated with manipulation, dishonesty, and conspiracy, while from the other hand, poetry might have the ability to persuade people emotionally of what they think they are rationally against, by reminding them of what is better left forgotten and undermining the safety they have carefully built for themselves.

To summarize, Rich’s poetic work explores issues not only of identity and sexuality, but also of politics: her ambitious poetics reflects her continuous search for social justice, her role in the anti-war movement, and her radical feminism. It was not a surprise that, when she came out as a lesbian in 1976, she became one of the leading theoreticians of the lesbian feminist movement. However, Rich represents an outstanding model of the conjunction between poetic and political discourse in contemporary American modernity. She built indeed her entire career as a public intellectual upon this particular conjunction, that she describes in her notes as totally instinctive: in *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, she explains that she has always felt an impulse, both poetic and political at its root, to enter into the order and the disorder of the world through the use of language. About this poetic urge, she affirms in an interview: “it always surprised me when people write of my work as if I had taken up the cudgels for the underprivileged or the oppressed, as a kind of missionary work. I write from absolute inner necessity, responding to my location in time and place, trying to find a language equal to that” (Rich 2001, 140-141)³⁹.

Despite the fact that she denies any “missionary” intent, what drives her poetic impulse is the need to bring to light what is not apparent or obvious and, as a consequence, to reveal all that set of lies, secrets, and silences that compose the title of her second book of selected prose. In this sense, she claims that poetry is a place where history can be kept alive in the depiction of otherwise forgotten or erased people and actions, by making open and visible what has been made obscure and unspeakable. She admits indeed that she tries to combine, in her poems, the two different kinds of poetry that Muriel Rukeyser recognized in her own work: the poetry of the “unverifiable fact”, which is originated by dreams, sexuality, and subjectivity, and the poetry of the “documentary fact”, which

³⁹ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essay and Conversations* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

concerns strikes, war, history, and scientific evolution. In the attempt not to separate dream from history, she wrote in 1974 in her notebook: “the poet today must be twice-born. She must have begun as a poet, she must have understood the suffering of the world as political, and have gone through politics, and on the other side of politics she must be reborn again as a poet” (Rich 1994, 21). Moreover, she openly questions the very definition of politics in the dictionary: in her opinion, it excludes not only the private and domestic sphere, but also all the activities that are not carried within the existing parties. Following this interpretation, politics is reduced to something that concerns only the official and public activities of the government or contests that involve people who hold a position of power in society. Rich disagrees with this commonly held belief about politics and she maintains that: “politics is the effort to find ways of humanely dealing with each other – as groups of as individuals – politics being simply process, the breaking down of barriers of oppression, tradition, culture, ignorance, fear, self-protectiveness” (Rich 1993, 24)⁴⁰. Once again, she establishes herself next to Edward Said’s thought about politics: “politics is everywhere; there can be no escape into the realms of pure art and thought or, for that matter, into the realm of disinterested objectivity or transcendental theory” (Said 1993, 21)⁴¹.

Even if she praises the enormous subversive potential of words, she admits to being engrossed in the study of silence and its different forms. She believes that the poet’s aim is not only to work on what is actually there – tangible subjects and predictable sources – but also on what is missing and has been rendered unspeakable and, as a consequence, unthinkable. In other words, she recognizes the compelling necessity to discover what cannot be found or talk about what cannot be even pronounced. In her opinion, poetry and other forms of art develop through apparently invisible holes in reality, in which the stories of women and other marginalized subjects have been silenced and erased. In the lecture she gave in April 1997 at the University of Massachusetts and published as an essay entitled “Arts of the Possible” inside a prose collection that carries the same title, she maintains that “the impulse to create begins – often terribly and fearfully – in a tunnel of silence” (Rich 2001, 150). In this respect, Rich represents the bearer of a sophisticated vision of the language: she was one of the first feminist activists to affirm that silence might actually imply words, while all the other activists that belonged to the second-wave feminism claimed noise, din, and uproar. In this context, however, she recognizes a different form of silence that she abhors, which is the one that is due to a desired displacement of necessary words. This pernicious type of silence, in which language is intentionally prevented because it needed to be there, represents the dead silence of destroyed evidence and questions forbidden to be asked. According to Rich, it is exactly amid this silence of

⁴⁰ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1993).

⁴¹ Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (Vintage Books, New York, 1993).

displacement that poetical language is able to live and labor in all its grandeur and, as a consequence, also a potential political vision.

4.3. “What Kind of Times Are These”

For this reason, Rich has always firmly contested any idea that rejected the conjunction between poetry and politics, by claiming that art in general cannot be detached from the political climate in which it has been conceived and created. Her political activism within poetry is undeniably clear in the lines of “What Kind of Times Are These”. This poem, written in 1991, summarizes her opinion on the dichotomy between poetry and politics, in which she interprets the two as complementary sides that are not only compatible, but also highly interdependent. In this way, the analysis of the poem reveals a particular affinity with the famous stance of the personal as being inherently political that belonged to second-wave feminism.

There's a place between two stands of trees where the grass grows uphill
and the old revolutionary road breaks off into shadows
near a meeting-house abandoned by the persecuted
who disappeared into those shadows.⁴²

In these first lines, the covert speaker introduces a dark and isolated scenery, by describing a mysterious place that seems to be located inside a forest at the fringe of civilization. What emerges in the shadows is an “old revolutionary road” where once some supposed revolutionaries used to pass. Furthermore, in this shadowy setting, the “persecuted” used to secretly meet inside a house, now abandoned. Interestingly, it is not clear in the last line whether the shadows helped the subversive group to better hide during their meeting or assisted the unknown forces that persecuted them on the sly.

I've walked there picking mushrooms at the edge of dread, but don't be fooled
this isn't a Russian poem, this is not somewhere else but here,
our country moving closer to its own truth and dread,
its own ways of making people disappear.

⁴² Adrienne Cecile Rich, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950-2001* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2002).

In this stanza, the speaker discloses herself as a poet. In the first line, she refers to herself as the speaking “I” and reveals to her readers that she has already visited the place. This little detail implies that she was a witness of the revolutionaries’ actions and, with some probability, even one of their active allies. In addition to this assumption, the poet stresses the fact that “our country” is moving closer to its truth and dread: here Rich is clearly referring to the American white male-dominated culture, that makes disappear those who have the courage to speak up against it.

I won't tell you where the place is, the dark mesh of the woods
meeting the unmarked strip of light—
ghost-ridden crossroads, leafmold paradise:
I know already who wants to buy it, sell it, make it disappear.

In the third stanza, the poet expresses her refusal to specify the location of the place, even if she provides further details about it. Despite the “ghost-ridden” roads that she describes as full of decayed leaves, the landscape represents a “paradise” for those who love and nurture nature. Unfortunately, the poet knows the people who want to spoil its uncorrupted essence, by transforming this pure environment into a material commodity.

And I won't tell you where it is, so why do I tell you
anything? Because you still listen, because in times like these
to have you listen at all, it's necessary
to talk about trees.

In the last stanza, the speaker explains to her readers why she is talking about trees at all, by addressing them once again and posing them as the main matter of her writing: “because you still listen”. Here Rich is calling attention to the interactive potential of poetry that allows the poet to directly get in touch with the reader. In this way, her readers are not purely indulging in the fictional world she has built through her poem, but they are invited to actively listen and understand what she has to say. Moreover, in these last lines, there is – like in the title – a clear reference to Bertolt Brecht’s poem “An die Nachgeborenen” (“To Those Who Follow in Our Wake”), which was published almost half a century before the contemporary poem by Rich. In this poem, Brecht writes:

What times are these, in which
A conversation about trees is almost a crime

For in doing so we maintain our silence about so much wrongdoing!⁴³

The speaker in Brecht's poem laments that, in time like these, any conversation that concerns innocuous banalities amounts to the intentional silence that has been established in order to conceal the din of the misdeeds and sufferings of the world. Rich picks up Brecht's ironic question, but she firmly opposes his idea and suggests to her readers to be vocal and outspoken as "it's necessary to talk about trees". In this sense, Rich seems to imply that the superficial hooks that a poem about nature can offer may serve to catch her readers' attention and make them more receptive to a discussion about more profound and complex topics. This interpretation of the poem appears as consistent with Rich's political affiliations and stances, especially with her renowned criticism on the exclusion of everyday life in political discussions, which are always "reduced to government, to contests between the empowered, or to petty in-group squabbles" (Rich 1993, 24)⁴⁴. What Brecht's speaker saw as a disinterested disengagement, is interpreted by Rich's speaker as an actual devotion to matters that have been underestimated and overlooked. In her opinion, the political seeps into the personal and is reflected by everyday occurrences. Once again, she seems to stumble upon her own idea of revision: the trees belong to all the ostensibly natural banalities which need to be located and scrutinized in order to follow in the footsteps of the revolutionaries. In this sense, the speaker does not reveal where this mysterious wooded place is because she wants to encourage the addressee to actively search for it within her own reach: the readers must locate the trees and talk about them if they want to learn more about their country's own problems and "own ways to making people disappear". Moreover, the speaker and her words hold implications about the objective of political poetry, by establishing "talking about trees" as her main goal in the poem. In this way, Rich demonstrates that the goal of political poets is not to produce artistic propaganda, but to describe their own world and attempt to identify the sources of their own fear, grief, and anger. She believes that the most private concerns tend to be neglected or omitted by the public eye, but when they reflect the system in which all people find themselves and recognize their experience as something shared, they deserved to be discussed and deconstructed. In poetry, in sum, poets and readers can discover a space to reflect on those seemingly lower problems without them being shrugged off in favor of topics that their oppressors believe to be more worthy of discussion.

This conclusion demonstrates how closely poetry is tied to politics: every possible concern of a poet, despite how private it might appear, is somehow tied to and influenced by the surroundings and, as a consequence, to the politics that determined these surroundings. For this reason, Rich

⁴³ Bertolt Brecht, *Svendborger Gedichte* (Bibliothek Suhrkamp, 1979).

⁴⁴ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1993).

maintains that poetry represents a place where seemingly insignificant problems that belong to the private realm can find an audience, in which “the myths and obsessions of gender, the myths and the obsessions of race, the violent exercise of power in these relationships could be identified, their territories could be mapped” (Rich 1986, 176)⁴⁵. Consequently, it is the important task of every poetical poet to protect the poetic language from the abstract and bitter influences of the political content, even if she states that poetry can “account for itself politically, consciously situate itself amid political conditions, without sacrificing intensity of language” (Rich 1986, 174)⁴⁶. Through her poetry, Rich spent her whole life demonstrating that the poetic of a poem cannot be compromised by any topical choice. Even the most practical things in everyday life, in her opinion, can become intellectually engaging in poetry and help to expose shortcomings and drive people to think about them. She argues in her notes that the very objective of political poetry is not to “tell you who or when to kill, what and when to burn, or even how to theorize. It reminds you [...] where and when and how you are living and might live – it is a wick of desire” (Rich 1993, 241)⁴⁷. In conclusion, the appeal that Rich makes through her poetry is intrinsically political, but she does not incite revenge or reclaim the space that has been taken to her, as to many others, by force. Rich, with her touching poetical language, tries to encourage her readers to make themselves heard and to talk to each other, in order to outline common needs and to identify the forces that frustrate them, that might help them to create a “collective imagining of change and a sense of collective hope” (Rich 2001, 153).

⁴⁵ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1986).

⁴⁶ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1986).

⁴⁷ Adrienne Cecile Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1993).

Conclusion

This thesis develops a study of four thematic clusters of Adrienne Rich's literary and political work, in a wider historical and political overview of the decades in which she was more committed in her role as a public intellectual. Together the four chapters amplify the finding of my study of Rich, and that is, that women need to strengthen their female bonding in order to establish a resilient sense of community, able to resist and oppose patriarchy. In this respect, her intellectual work has always attempted to encourage the creation of a strong female community and, as a consequence, her political tone became increasingly pronounced over the years. Starting from this premise, she built her whole public career – that involved poetry, addresses, and critical prose – upon the assumption that the personal, political, and poetical are deeply interconnected and, as a consequence, inseparable. In particular, the final chapter ends with Rich's conclusion that political poetry is essential in order to bring everyday life in the political contemporary discussion and establish new possibilities of bonding among people, due to the unlimited interpretative power of its words. For this reason, she considered poetry as necessary as food and believed that a poem could be interpreted as an ideal connective thread between two unlike individuals, times, and culture. By keeping this in mind, it is easy to read in all her poems an implicit encouragement to her reader to grasp all those feelings that she describes as normal, fair, worthy, and widely shared by other people and use them in order to establish a bond among them.

In conclusion, as I already said before, this analysis of the public figure of Rich and her feminist thinking seems to always return circularly to the same closure: the impelling need to strengthen the primeval female bonding that has always tied women together in order to give origin to a powerful and resilient community of women and, at the same time, beyond women. In this sense, Rich took charge of an important ethical task: as a public intellectual whose attention was directed exclusively to the audience and its needs, she tried her whole life to bring people together despite their ethnicity, race, sexuality, class, and gender. For this reason, she should be considered a thinker of community, rather than just a thinker of women. She has always believed in the possibility of breaking down barriers and establishing powerful bonds among people and, consequently, she sought ways to conceive this wider – if not limitless – sense of female community throughout her life. Nevertheless, the establishing of a strong female community in a society, in her opinion, can positively influence the relationships among not only women, but also people. Moreover, it is essential in order to ensure feminist survival because female support networks encourage activism and help feminists to maintain their commitment in the hostile environment of patriarchy. Patriarchy,

according to Rich, represents a pernicious social system that poisons all its members, even its supposedly primary beneficiaries: men. The submission does not concern indeed only women, but also men, who are forced to adapt to different toxic stereotypes that misrepresent them as socially dominant. For this reason, women's liberation not only empowers women, but also free men from the constrictions imposed by traditional gender roles. However, an adverse political atmosphere in which patriarchy might bloom, is supported by the antifeminism of the right or lack of support from men on the left, or maybe even by the homophobia and racism of straight and white women in the women's movement. Obviously, in feminist communities, racism, ethnocentricity, classism, and homophobia strongly restrict what the group can accomplish externally and deeply threaten the group internally. For this reason, it is necessary to preserve the concept of diversity and intersectionality in women's movements in order to assure the success of feminist politics. The solidarity that contributes to the community's political success is indeed composed of all the similarities of family backgrounds, race, political commitment, educational experiences, and sexuality that bond women together. All these shades compose the collective dimension that Rich invokes through her poetry and speeches, which offers a cultural space where women can establish a discourse, an exchange, a relationship. This opportunity, in her opinion, needs to be reclaimed because it has always been there: women's communities have survived in the cracks of patriarchy, have pushed against the borders, and even done the hammering to create and widen them. In this respect, women should be proud of their history, because they have always found a way to use their traditional roles and practices for the sake of their liberation and, as a consequence, their shared female experience represents a long-standing commitment to something far richer than the patriarchy. As I interpreted Rich's thought, I understand that women do not need to eradicate the differences among them in order to reach a sense of solidarity or arrange their fight against patriarchal oppression by relying only on their shared oppression. There is a wealth of experience, culture, and ideas that women can and have to share with one another, rather than the uncontrolled and impetuous anti-male sentiment that only feeds the hatred against men. The recovery of the invaluable tradition that has always bond them together throughout history – united by shared interests and belief, in their appreciation for diversity, in their struggle to end sexist oppression, and in political solidarity – will allow women to establish what Rich recalls, mentions or suggests in every poem or speech: an ideal community of the future in which women will finally be free to think about themselves as sisters.

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