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Sheila Fiona Black
The University of Montana

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"A Cleft of Light": The Divided Female Subject
In Adrienne Rich’s
"Twenty-One Love Poems"

by
Sheila Fiona Black
B.A. Barnard College, Columbia University 1983
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
The University of Montana
1998

Approved by:

Chairperson
Dean, Graduate School

12-15-98
Date
"A Cleft of Light": The Divided Female Subject in Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems." (64 pp.)

Director: Robert Baker

Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" is perhaps the first sequence of overtly lesbian love poems by a major American poet in our literature. Although the poems are not actually sonnets, "Twenty-One Love Poems" strongly evokes a sonnet sequence. Clearly, Rich intends to position her sequence within the sonnet tradition or within the framework of traditional discourses of romance. In this thesis I look at "Twenty-One Love Poems" in light of the history of epideictic or praise poetry—in particular, Shakespeare's sonnet sequence—in order to address the following issues:

a) How does Rich use and/or revise the epideictic tradition and the broader tradition of romantic discourses?

b) What does her use of these traditions suggest about how she envisions both female subjectivity and feminist poetics?

c) How does she reinflect the Shakespearean poetic self—generally considered the precursor of the poetic voice of the modern lyric—in her attempt to create a new woman-centered subjectivity?

Rich once said that she saw her poetry as "making the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem become the same person" (Altieri, 178). What gives added urgency to this project is that she must contend with the fact that women—especially lesbian women—have not been allowed a true voice in traditional discourses. Therefore, part of Rich's task is to give voice to the persistent ghostliness of female history. By examining her work in light of the traditions of poetic and romantic discourses, I argue that Rich's importance arises out of the way she both uses and re-imagines conventional poetic forms in order to carry out this idealistic process of self-creation. In doing so, she not only creates a new model of female subjectivity, but revivifies the lyric poetic self in ways that are significant for all of us.
Since its publication over twenty years ago, Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" has been a cause celebre. The sequence has been seen as an important milestone in the women's liberation movement, the first such sequence of overtly lesbian love poems by a major American poet. While the poems that make up "Twenty-One Love Poems" are not actually sonnets, they strongly evoke a sonnet sequence, placing Rich's story of her passion for another woman squarely in the canon of Western love poetry. Perhaps because of Rich's position as a public, politically committed figure, critical reception of the sequence has often dwelt on its meaning as a positive political statement. To use one example, in her essay, "'Reconstituting the World' The Poetry and Vision of Adrienne Rich," Judith McDaniel describes "Twenty-One Love Poems" as follows:

The strength in these poems is the discovery of the self in another, the range of knowing and identification that seems most possible in same-sex love: the encounter of another's pain, for example, leaves the poet knowing "I was talking to my own soul." Out of that sharing grows the ability to choose solitude 'without loneliness' (26).

While this sense of a joyous discovery of the possibilities of love between women is certainly an important aspect of "Twenty-One Love Poems," the sequence as a whole is not as idealistic or celebratory as McDaniel's comments would seem to imply. Instead of being a simple affirmation of the love
between two women, "Twenty-One Love Poems" is, on the contrary, an often painful examination of the problems between the two protagonists who are, through most of the sequence in the process of parting.

In telling their story, the sequence moves from modern-day Manhattan (Poems I-V) to a series of imagined "natural" landscapes (Poems VI-XIII), followed by glimpses of Rich and her lover in real natural settings (Poems XIV, XV), in which is interposed THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED, which functions as a floating poem of desire without fixed time or place. In Poems XVI-XX Rich and her lover return to Manhattan where their relationship ends. Poem XXI, the final poem, again describes an imagined landscape, but one that is neither altogether natural nor manmade, and in this vision Rich appears alone.

By moving her reader through these various settings, Rich explores the love affair from a variety of angles, seeking through her and her lover's bond to re-write or re-vise history and to recover in a buried female past evidence of similar bonds between women. At the same time, Rich resists idealizing her and her lover's same-sex bond. Instead she appears determined to chart its every fault line. Although their love affair fails in large part because their passion
stands in opposition to the male-dominated world around them, Rich makes clear that this does not, in her view, make the two women any less responsible for what happens between them. As Rich said in a 1977 interview, she feels her lovers have no choice but to place themselves in the context of the larger world:

One thing I was trying to do in 'Twenty-One Love Poems' was constantly relate the lovers to a larger world. You're never just in bed together in a private space; you can't be. There is a hostile and envious world out there, acutely threatened by women's love for each other. Women who are lovers have to recognize that—in the sense that I was trying to express in 'From An Old House in America': 'I cannot not now lie down/....with a lover who imagines/we are not in danger. (Bulkin, "Interview," 2:57)

As a result of Rich’s emphasis on the unyielding facts of this world, "Twenty-One Love Poems" becomes a statement of love that is more searching than emphatic. In many ways the sequence charts a classic romantic movement from innocence to experience. As Margaret Dickie observes in her book Stein, Bishop, & Rich, the positive political statement made by "Twenty-One Love Poems," is somewhat at odds with the sequence's emotional tenor:

As a political gesture, Rich's coming out has provided powerful support for lesbian poetry, inspiring women writers to celebrate the generative love of women for women, but in her own poetry it has opened up reserves of
uncertainty and pain (148).
Not only does "Twenty-One Love Poems" dwell on two lovers who are splitting up, but in contrast with Rich, the speaking poet, her lover is often characterized as absent and silent. While the sequence apparently celebrates a speaking of oneself as a woman and lesbian, it at the same time deals with the difficulty of speaking and the reality of female suppression and silence, creating a poem which explores the intersection of the personal and the political in rigorous, complex, and often surprising ways.

In her 1973 essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich writes that "the physical passion of woman for woman...has been, precisely, the most violently erased fact of female experience" (Rich, Secrets 57). In "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich aims to combat this violent erasure. Her predicament is that she must do so while using discourses of the past--discourses in which women have been denied their own subjectivity, their place as speaking subjects.

In the poem "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," Rich declares: "This is the oppressor's language/yet I need it to talk to you." This paradox is one of the central conflicts of the "Twenty-One Love Poems," particularly since Rich must also consider the ways in which the very category of "woman"
has been shaped by pre-existing discourses. Early in the sequence, Rich declares: "No one has imagined us," implying that she must contend not only with the fact that women (and especially lesbians) have been silenced, but also with the traces of that silence—with a reality that, because it has not been expressed in language, refuses to be expressed in language, or with the fact that the experience of her lovers has never been translated into discourse.

Although Rich clearly intends "Twenty-One Love Poems" to be a coming out, a making public of her passion for another woman, her deeper concerns are the problems involved in articulating this passion, and how a failure to articulate love can become a failure to love. This dilemma while acute for all women, is particularly so for lesbians, who have historically been rendered invisible. Thus Rich’s sequence seeks to make palpable the reality of both female subjectivity and lesbian existence and asks what sort of language would be adequate to render this suppressed experience, how this "ghostly" female presence can be traced into a historical discourse which has covered it with a veil of silence?

These questions force Rich to tackle the issue of poetic form. In telling the story of her love affair with another woman, Rich plainly wants to "universalize" what has been a
silenced, marginal voice in traditional discourses. Her evocation of a sonnet sequence suggests she intends to do so through a revision of traditional forms. Some critics, notably Helen Vendler (368-87) and Marjorie Perloff, have criticized Rich for claiming radical aims while using utterly conventional poetic forms, or, in Perloff’s words, reproducing “an establishment style that undermines her assertions” (132).

Rich acknowledged this criticism in a 1991 interview, saying:

I guess what I’m searching for always is a way of staying linked to the past, pulling out of it whatever you can use, and continuing to move on. And I’m not sure that a new textual form creates—it certainly doesn’t create—a new consciousness. It can equally well be said that a new consciousness doesn’t necessarily create a new form either (Montenegro, 270).

As this quote suggests, in a landscape shaped by post-modern notions of language and of the self, Rich’s emphasis on a humanist speaker and her unwillingness to completely divorce herself from poetic tradition can make her appear an example of the very traditions she seeks to overthrow. In his book *Self and Sensibility in American Poetry* Charles Altieri argues that this traditionalism is inescapable for Rich: "since the core of Rich’s politics is a quite traditional notion of self and will, she must use a straightforward style" (231). However, it is legitimate to ask whether Rich truly manages to bring into discourse new realms of experience, and if so, how.
In other words, are her utopian feminist ideals able to coexist with her romantic humanism and her reliance on established poetic forms?

In this essay, I intend to approach these issues by briefly looking at "Twenty-One Love Poems" in terms of the historical "form" of the sonnet sequence. I will look specifically at Shakespeare's sonnet sequence--in many ways the archetype of the form--particularly as regards its conception of the poetic self. How is Rich using, reacting to, and revising this tradition? I also wish to address a doubt many critics have expressed of Rich--whether by so addressing her poetry to the concerns of women her poetry has become too ideologically based, or, whether, as critics such as Altieri suggest, her project demands and deserves a universal audience.

In considering these points, I would like to note that one much overlooked feature of Rich's poetry is the degree to which it is about the possibilities of language. As Rich herself said in a 1977 interview, "Poetry is, among other things, a criticism of language" (Bulkin, 178). While Rich does not overtly experiment with language as such, one of the most important aspects of her poetry is her continual questioning of what language can and cannot do, can and cannot
be. It is this questioning that provides much of the emotional urgency of "Twenty-One Love Poems," and is also the arena where Rich most actively grapples with the dilemmas traditional patriarchal discourses pose for all women.

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In his book Shakespeare's Perjured Eye, Joel Fineman asserts that Shakespeare in his sonnet sequence—in many ways the archetype of the form—invents the poetics of "heterosexuality," or of sexual difference. Analyzing Shakespeare's sequence in light of the tradition of epideictic or praise poetry, Fineman explains that in the standard epideictic poem—for example, the sonnets of Dante or Petrarch:

The rhetoricity of praise is reflexively reflective....characteristically comparing itself to mirror and to lamp, praise will be itself the demonstration of the things it speaks. Nowhere is the specular correspondence, simulation, and eventual identification of language and ideal, of speaking and spoken, more regularly or more consistently developed (13).

For Fineman this near perfect correspondence of sight and ideal is the key characteristic of the Renaissance epideictic tradition. In the early sonnets of Shakespeare's sequence—those addressed to the fair young man—the young man is presented as desirable because he is worthy of being desired. He is the poet's ideal vision of himself, or as Fineman puts it, "Lover and beloved are visually 'fair' (idein 'to see'),
generically 'kind' (eidos, 'form'), and epistemologically 'true' (oidia, 'knowledge')" (14). Thus, in these sonnets visionary language is used to evoke a love that represents at its apogee a perfect mirroring of self and ideal.

Yet, according to Fineman, the latter half of Shakespeare's sequence--the so-called Dark Lady Sonnets--represents a radical rupture of this tradition. Unlike the poet's desire for the fair young man, which is at base a desire for an idealized self, his desire for the dark lady is a desire for that which is radically "other" to the self:

With her "insufficiency" and with her "unkindness" the lady introduces a fundamental heterogeneity into the tradition of erotic homogeneity. She is not, therefore, a simple alternative to that tradition, for a something other to its comprehensive sameness, as an instance of alternative alterity, she is also its undoing" (21).

The dark lady undoes the poet's previous desire for an idealized sameness precisely by evoking the fairness of the young man in being its opposite. The double-edged impact the lady makes on the poet--being at once herself and an ever-present evocation of the lost ideal of "fairness"--is at the heart of the desire she creates:

The very present and the very presence of the lady ...effectively will situate the poetics of ideal visionary presence in a retrospective past, marking it as something which exists "now" only as an imaginary ideal after which the poet lusts (24).
As his pun on "present" and "presence" suggests, in undoing the poet's ideal of the fair young man, the lady creates what Fineman terms "the aftermath of an ideal past" (25). The desire she gives birth to in the poet signals a falling-away from an ideal vision, a rupture of wholeness. His desire for her is furthermore only intensified by being attached to this sense of loss.

The divisiveness of this new desire ultimately resides not only in the "alterity" of the lady, but in the awareness she opens up in poet of the split between language and vision. As Fineman puts it, in the sonnets "linguistic difference predicates sexual difference" (18). Because of this, Fineman gives Shakespeare credit for inventing along with a new kind of desire, a new kind of poetic subjectivity—a voice which is increasingly conscious of its own inner dividedness:

Accordingly, because the poet identifies himself with this retrospective identify, both a space and a time will open up within the poet for subjective introspection...the subject of Shakespeare's sonnets experiences himself as his difference from himself. His identity is an identity of ruptured identification...(25).

Observing how Shakespeare repeatedly puns on his own name ("Will") in the Dark Lady sonnets, Fineman states that this divided self "is precipitated when the deictic and epideictic 'I' and 'eye' of a traditional poetics find themselves at odds
with their poet's 'Will' (26). The pun Shakespeare makes on his name, a pun Fineman terms "the gift" (27) of language to Shakespeare, underlines the presence of the "self" as first and foremost a feature of language:

....The 'Will,' to which the poet gives voice in the dark lady sonnets is a fixed and stable designation that identifies the poet's individual and individuated self, and does so, moreover regardless of who speaks it... Naming himself, therefore, the poet to himself becomes a 'he,'...a person elsewhere from and different from his first and second person (291).

Not only does this naming rupture the poet's sense of having a whole self, of the self as a fixed point, but this rupture is confirmed and reconfirmed by the very act of speaking:

...this 'Will' which breaks the person of the poet cannot itself be broken. It cannot be broken because poetry itself--as a theme, as a metaphor, as an image, as an idea, as a word, and also as a practice--necessarily participates in this Shakespearean legacy. Whatever might be different from Shakespeare's poetry of verbal difference would therefore have to find, outside language, another name. Excessive to language, such a hypothetical successor to the Shakespearean would not only be extraliterary, but, in addition outside history (291).

Fineman argues that the Shakespearean subject cannot be transcended because the rupture of this poetic self is sealed precisely by the self's efforts to affirm itself in language. According to Fineman, this fragmented Shakespearean self is
"the only kind of literary subject that survives in the aftermath of the poetry of praise" (43). A prototype of the "modern" literary subject, formed after the failure of pure idealism, the Shakespearean literary self is conscious of verbally "representing" rather than recording a transparent visionary presence.

The benefits of this type of poetic subjectivity are that it can powerfully communicate the pathos of its fractured identity by drawing on the "fracturing" nature of language. The innate structure of language reflects the condition of the speaker—a mimesis of rupture, loss, absence. The negative side is that this pathos, while powerful, risks becoming solipsistic. The speaker is able to reflect ironically on his or her condition, but is unable to bring these reflection actively to bear on his or her sense of embittered fragmentation.

While Fineman's analysis of Shakespeare's sonnet sequence may seem far removed from Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems," his story of how Shakespeare reacts to the praise tradition provides a useful angle from which to consider Rich's "sonnets" to her lover.

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Fineman argues that Shakespeare's sonnet sequence moves
from a poetics of erotic homogeneity, signaled by a visionary language, to an erotic and linguistic heterogeneity. Therefore, one might imagine that Rich in her same-sex bond would return to the visionary poetic tradition expressed in the sonnets to the fair young man. However, Rich, unlike Shakespeare, must contend with situating herself and her lover in a tradition in which women have been at best muse and at worst dark lady. Fineman notes of the dark lady of the sonnets that "in a formula whose lusty misogyny is recognizably Shakespearean, we can say that in Shakespeare's sonnets the difference between man and woman is woman herself" (138). Unfortunately, this "formula" is hardly unique to Shakespeare, but has been a major definition of "woman" from the Bible on. Rich's same sex lovers are thus initially defined by their shared otherness, their shared sense of radical alterity to the conventional "masculine" subject. Their love is therefore less "a mirroring of self and idealized self" than the bonding of two outsiders seeking through their passion a means of declaring full subjectivity.

If Shakespeare sets himself up as "mirror and lamp of his ideal" (17), Rich's use of mirroring and mirror imagery in describing her lover has a more tentative, searching quality.

In the early part of the sequence, Rich explores and
praises her lover's similar body as a means of uncovering a more expansive vision of what it means to be "woman." Boldly asserting in Poem I "No one has imagined us," she seizes on her and her lover's passion as a means of accessing a new discursive ideal vision of woman.

In Poem II, she tells her lover "I dreamed you were a poem, /...a poem I wanted to show someone," conceiving of her lover as "the one poem/which is the poem of my life," or the text that will tell the truth of Rich's experiences as a woman. And in Poem III, she describes her lover's eyes as "everlasting, the green spark/of the blue eyed grass of early summer/the green-blue wild cress washed by the spring." By repeatedly stressing the colors blue and green--colors of daylight, of the natural world of grass, water, and sky--Rich creates a picture of her lover as an untamed, unspoiled landscape in contrast to the "rancid" metallic civilizations made by men.

Here and elsewhere, in praising her lover, Rich employs standard epideictic tropes--images reminiscent of Shakespeare's celebrations of the beauty of the fair young man. However, in contrast to the classic epideictic model, Rich's celebrations of her lover do not so much reflect a narcissistic idealized self-image as chart a quest to discover
a more general image of an ideal female self.

In Poem VI, for example, Rich describes her lover's hands as "hands precisely equal to my own," saying:

....Such hands could turn
the unborn child rightways in the birth canal
or pilot the exploratory rescue ship
through icebergs, or piece together
the fine, needle-like shreds of a great krater-cup
bearing on its sides
figures of ecstatic woman striding
to the sibyl's den.

In celebrating the possible actions of her lover's hands, Rich imaginatively discovers (or rediscovers) her own capacities and, by extension, those of all women. Rich's description of her lover's body becomes a vehicle through which she compresses the distance between herself and her lover, between herself and all women.

By retrieving a buried—or at least unwritten—feminine past of wise-women and midwives ("Such hands could turn/the unborn child rightways in the birth canal") and placing women in new and often traditionally male positions ("or pilot the exploratory rescue ship through icebergs"), Rich seeks to create a new praise poetry of women that simultaneously exists in the present and refigures the presence of woman in historical discourses. With the image of "figures of ecstatic women striding/to the sibyl's den," she reinflects the classic trope of the Sibyl as a revitalized feminist prophet who will
provide women with new access to their own buried resources.

This visionary aspect of the sequence is further developed through Rich's speculative ventures into a variety of feminist utopias. In Poem XI she places herself and her lover in a feminized landscape of volcanoes—a reference to the imagery of Emily Dickinson—where she casts them in the Adam-like role of naming or renaming the world: "never failing to note the small jewel-like flower/unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her." In Poem XIII, she envisions a country where she and her lover can be free together, one where "rules break like a thermometer" and there are "no language/no laws."

These poems seek to inscribe their idealized vision of woman through their sheer assertiveness, or by demonstrating the force of Rich's poetic will. In Poem XI she achieves this effect by emphasizing the urgency of her desire: "I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain/ ...I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path." And in Poem XIII she gives her idealized vision weight by expressing it in a series of simple declarative sentences: "We're out in a country that has no language/...we're chasing the raven... /we're driving through the desert."

In this "utopian" part of the sequence, Rich is able,
through her lover's body, to recover and revise her image of her own body. In these poems she, like Shakespeare, can be said to approach her lover as a "mirror and a lamp" but a "mirror and a lamp" with visionary and redemptive qualities, which lead her both to a vision of a repressed female past and to a new expansive sense of women's potential resources. Yet tellingly these utopian visions are merely speculative and do not remotely reflect the conditions of the world as it is.

The exception is FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED. Here Rich captures the kernel of her connection with her lover in a scene that is every bit as ideal as those of her speculative utopias. Deliberately revising the traditional stance of the epideictic sonateer, Rich chooses not to describe her lover as an object of vision, but instead shows her in action, reciprocating the poet's gestures, making their love-making a transcendent dance of equals:

Your travelled generous thighs
between which my whole face has come and come -
the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has found there -
the live insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth -
Your touch on me, firm, protective, searching me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers reaching where I had been waiting years for you in my rose-wet cave, whatever happens, this is.

Through the metonymies of her lover's "travelled, generous thighs," "live insatiate...nipples" and "strong
tongue and slender fingers," Rich paints a portrait of her lover in motion. The two women are both in motion here—"coming," "dancing," "touching," and "reaching." The physicality of the poem is its text. As Craig Werner says: "The highly erotic lovemaking in 'THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED' provides an emblem of a process of communication denied by received languages" (95).

In inscribing her and her lover’s lovemaking in language, Rich brings the buried eroticism between women into focus. While the poem’s placement in the sequence seems significant, by labeling it "FLOATING POEM" Rich underlines the way in which this experience—the heart of her connection with her lover—floats above and/or lies outside all preconceived discourses, especially the received discourses of romance. By the final present tense declaration "This is," Rich seeks to seal the experience in language, to stretch the envelope of discourse by including this act which has previously been denied in language.

Yet despite Rich’s best intentions, the tone of "FLOATING POEM" is nevertheless somewhat elegiac, representing in Margaret Dickie’s words: "a peculiar hollowing out of the present happening, an obsessive attachment to the future, a denial of the present or perhaps an eagerness to haunt the
present with the future" (152). Although Rich successfully captures the ecstatic nature of the moment, in inscribing it in language, she also inscribes its loss—suggesting the difficulties posed in preserving such ideal moments in life as it is lived day by day.

Although "FLOATING POEM" is more "real" than Rich's speculative utopias, it, too, indicates that despite how strongly Rich asserts her ideal vision of herself and her lover—her ideal of "woman"—problems arise when she attempts to live by this ideal in the world as it is.

In Poem IV, for instance, Rich describes how in the course of a normal day, "the early light of spring/flash[ing] off ordinary walls," an old man calls her "hysterical" for asking him to hold the elevator. And in Poem V, she recognizes that the books in her own apartment "could crack open/to the thick jaws, the bulging eyes of monsters." Her relationship with her lover, too, becomes problematic when set against the backdrop of ordinary life.

In the early part of the sequence, Rich's lover's body has a representative value, allowing Rich to retrieve female truths which have been suppressed. Yet as her relationship with her lover develops, Rich finds not only the truth of the silenced female body in her lover, but also the fact of that
silencing, the truth of silence. Even as she paints her lover in greens and blues, the sunny tones of an idealized nature, she becomes increasingly haunted by the obverse image of woman as night, darkness—woman as the unspoken and the unspeakable. The "mirror" into which Rich and her lover must stare is not only the pregnant surface in which Rich, casting herself as sibyl, can envisage an alternative female history, but also the written histories in which she and her lover, she and all women, have been denied. As Rich says in Poem V, their absence in these histories means that in seeking their own reflections, they encounter a void:

...and we still have to stare into the absence of men who would not, women who could not, speak to our life—this still unexcavated hole called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.

With the image of the "still unexcavated hole," Rich creates a trope for this absence which possesses a physical dimension and yet evokes the body of woman as constituting a true "other"—the unrecorded and ghostly presence that makes the world as it is "this half-world."

Rich makes clear that the problem is not simply the silencing of women—especially lesbian women—but the fact that the very language she would use to rupture that silence has been used against them and indeed has been created around
the assumption of their otherness, their insufficiency. Rich says with the particular anguish of a woman whose means of expression are words: "Once open the books, you have to face the underside of everything you’ve loved-/the rack and pincers held in readiness, the gag" (Poem V). The love Rich refers to here is not so much her passion for her lover as her love for the world of discourse, her passion for language itself. And her recognition that inherited discourses stand against her and her lover, forces her into an extended questioning of how to direct her own use of discourse, particularly as regards the formation of a self.

In her book, *Fashioning the Female Subject The Intertextual Networking of Dickinson, Moore, and Rich*, Sabine Sielke describes the central debate in feminist theory over the creation of a female subject as follows:

> While feminist literary criticism has focused on the assertion of a female self in women’s writing, poststructuralist feminist theory, by contrast, has foregrounded the constitution and, even more so, the subversion of subjectivity in language (6)

On the one hand, we have the presumption that there is an essential feminine which needs only to express itself in language, and, on the other, the notion that to construct a feminine presence requires the creation of a new kind of language. In both cases, however, female subjectivity is
presumed not to exist in language as it is.

In "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich devotes considerable energy in trying to evoke precisely such a whole female self by simultaneously attempting to constitute a lost female-centered history and to constitute a new female subject in language. In her essay "Secrets and Lies," Rich writes:

> Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images...whatever is misnamed as something else...whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language - this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable. (Rich, Secrets, 199)

Rich combats this "unspeakable" aspect of woman in "Twenty-One Love Poems" both through her speculative ventures into imagined utopias and by repeatedly tracing her lover's body in language. Yet when Rich seeks to put her idealized vision of woman into action—to have it function in the world as it is—she comes up against the reality of woman as the unspeakable.

In Poem IX, addressing her lover, Rich writes:

> 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....

The "still unexcavated hole," or the symbol of the degree to which the world gives Rich and her lover no "true" reflection of themselves, is refigured here as her lover's silence. This silence is not a complete void, but rather a suggestive
opacity, a space in which Rich can envisage the "drowned things" or, figuratively, the lost histories of woman and the buried physical passion between woman.

In a twist on the "mirror/lamp" relationship of the poet and the fair young man in Shakespeare's Sonnets, Rich does not describe her lover as a mirror of herself, nor as an idealized version of herself, but rather as a way to see into this lost female past. Rich does not see herself in her lover's silence ("It's not my own face I see there..."), but the faces of other women. What she seeks and needs is not so much an idealized self image as images of women which form a history and a community of which she can be part.

Unlike the Shakespearean model, in which a "whole" self is initially assumed, Rich begins from the perspective of having no self-image with which to identify herself—even retrospectively. Instead she has only a "hole," an absence that stands in for the ideal of selfhood. In the mirror-like "pond" of her lover's silence, then, Rich glimpses not a completed "whole" self, but instead the conditions that might allow for the birth of a fully realized subjectivity. More immediately, she also glimpses the pain of the loss women (and most critically, lesbians) have suffered due to their repression in historical discourses:
Whatever's lost there is needed by both of us — a watch of old gold, a water-blurred fever chart, a key... Even the silt and pebbles of the bottom deserve their glint of recognition... (Poem IX)

Rich implies that to be fully able to assume a self, she and her lover need a history that is theirs. They need a way of keeping track of the passage of time ("a watch of old gold"), of charting the events and disasters which have shaped them ("a fever chart"), and of controlling their space (a "key"), both by opening up new spaces and locking up those of value. They also need a voice with which to tell their stories, weave their own histories.

Rich further intimates that while women may be able to obtain the tools they need to assume control of the present, a full recovery of what has been lost is impossible. As the words "Whatever's lost there" indicate, the list of "things drowned" can only be speculative at best. Also, any item recovered will have been buried under water, or metaphorically covered by silence. The "water-blurred fever chart," for instance, even if it exists, can probably not be read.

By using the image of a "pond" as a metaphor for her lover's silence, Rich both evokes the lost voices of woman in the past and the presence of her lover's silence in the present. Just as Shakespeare's dark lady, in her difference from the fair young man, generates a retrospective desire for
an ideal she by her very presence undoes, Rich's lover in her silence summons the very voices, the very presences, of women that have been suppressed in our discourses. As Rich suggests throughout the sequence, this suppression and consequent loss of presence has been particularly virulent for lesbian woman. Thus, Rich's lover becomes both a symbol of this loss and a victim of it, and her silence at once an evocation of a "ghostly" lesbian presence and a sign of the continual "ghosting" of lesbians.

If Shakespeare is haunted in his later sonnets by a sense of a lost ideal whole self, Rich is haunted by a history of silence which can perhaps be ruptured, but can never be filled. Only by conjuring this silenced past up in negative terms—as the ghostly presence of what has been made absent—can Rich find any means of recovering it at all.

Margaret Dickie has commented on this ghostly quality of "Twenty-One Love Poems:"

The haunting in "Twenty-One Love Poems" as well as the haunting of it bespeaks the tradition of silence in which, Rich believes, women poets have belonged. It suggests, too, that when the woman whose erotic feelings have been silenced by heterosexuality escapes from its strictures, she discovers that she is not only haunted by that history, but also haunted by a ghostliness that that history can neither contain nor suppress. She speaks in the silences of her own voice (153).

As Dickie implies, in "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich cannot
avoid associating "vision" with "silence." In her lover's body and in her lover's refusal to speak, Rich sees glimmerings of the suppressed histories of all women. Yet what her lover's silent presence ultimately represents is the degree to which these histories are irreclaimable. In light of conventional representations of women, representations in which they have "never been imagined," the mirror Rich and her lover begin with is indeed a "still unexcavated hole." In this context, Rich's lover's silence, the "pond where drowned things live," is perhaps their truest mirror image.

Yet while Rich praises her lover for making "the unnameable/nameable for others, even for me," her refusal to speak ultimately pushes Rich into confronting the problem of silence as a stance and of denoting female (and especially lesbian) presence primarily through a kind of Keatsean negativity. Her lover's silence may help Rich gain imaginative access to a new vision of woman, but it is also a barrier to her and all woman in their quest for subjectivity:

> I fear this silence, this inarticulate life. I'm waiting for a wind that will gently open this sheeted water for once, and show me what I can do for you, (Poem IX)

Like the earlier "pond," the image of "sheeted water" suggests a mirror, but one that is utterly clouded, unreadable. In
this image, silence becomes representative of the concealed or "closeted" stance lesbians have been forced to occupy in traditional discourses. As Rich's lover cannot, or will not, express her desires, even Rich cannot hope to satisfy them. And while her lover's silence may to some degree signal a positive "otherness," her presence as an alternative to conventional representations of woman remains undeveloped. Her silence ultimately glosses over her individuality, making it impossible for Rich to fully know her.

In Poem XII Rich sketches out the various dilemmas created by her lover's lack of a voice:

Sleeping, turning in turn like planets
rotating in their midnight meadow:
a touch is enough to let us know
We're not alone in the universe, even in sleep
the dream ghosts of two worlds
walking their ghost towns, almost address each other.
I've wakened to your muttered words
spoken light or -dark years away
as if my own voice had spoken.
But we have different voices, even in sleep,
and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different
and the past echoing in our bloodstreams
is freighted with different language, different meanings-
though in any chronicle of the world we share
it could be written with new meaning
we were two lovers of one gender,
we were two woman of one generation.

Rich tells us how her and her lover's bodies mirror each other: "turning in turn like planets/rotating in their midnight meadow." This sameness gives them security, allows
them to realize their "otherness" is shared ("a touch is
even to let us know /we're not alone in the universe"). Yet
the simple recognition that they are the same in being "other"
is not enough to pull them into a fully realized selfhood.
Instead, Rich describes them as flickering presences, halfway
between being and vanishing: "Two dream-ghosts of two
worlds/walking their ghost towns."

Rich's repetition of "two" in the poem at once binds her
and her lover together and marks how they are apart. Like the
planets to which she compares them, they both possess the same
general shape, but are separate and distinct. They are
simultaneously two bodies on a bed, capable of touching, and
two planets, separated by miles of unknown and perhaps
unknowable space. The fact that they "almost address each
other" suggests the possibility of a dialogue, a common
language, becoming a bridge between them. Yet this dialogue
remains speculative.

Rich wishes to speak to the woman she loves, but can only
hear her "muttered words" across the miles that separate them
"as if my own voice had spoken." As this line implies, in the
absence of dialogue the tendency is to cast the love object in
purely narcissistic terms as a double of the self. Yet this
doubling, which is the ideal of love as expressed by visionary
language, is problematic precisely because in making the two lovers one it denies the ways in which they are themselves, and so different from all others. As Rich puts it: "But we have different voice, even in sleep/and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different."

By weaving together evocations of similarity and difference throughout the poem, Rich reveals her desire to steer a path between erotic homogeneity and erotic difference. Fineman argues that in Shakespeare divided desire leads to a divided and/or decentered self. Yet as "woman," Rich begins with a self that is decentered, voiceless. In her lover's same sex body, Rich initially sees the promise of the creation and/or retrieval of a whole self that is distinctively female—a self that has never been traced into discourse. Yet this ideal collapses before the entrenched power of female silence. More specifically, while the silence of Rich's lover evokes a certain "truth" of female experience, it ultimately causes Rich and her lover to repeat the patterns of traditional romantic discourses.

If, as Fineman suggests, Shakespeare's sonnet sequence "moves from the unity of folie a deux to the duality of menage a trois" (21), then we might interpret Rich in her sonnet sequence as ultimately unwilling to settle for either. This
seems to place Rich at an impasse as far as the resolution both of her love affair and of the possibilities of creating a truly female-centered subjectivity.

In the last image Rich gives us of her lover, glimpsed again in a "mirror" of water, she has become a kind of Ophelia figure: "a woman/I loved, drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat/and choking her like hair" (Poem XX). By associating silence with fear, Rich underlines the degree to which her lover's inability to speak has been determined by a homophobic world in which she as lesbian is not merely "other" but taboo. Through her silence Rich's lover has been transformed into a passive symbol rather than an active agent of her fate—not herself, not an individuated character, but a "hurt expressive head/turning aside from pain." Her refusal to engage in a dialogue with Rich means her head is "dragged down deeper" where, Rich tells us, "it cannot hear me/and soon I shall know I was talking to my own soul."

The failure of dialogue, the failure to assume a voice, is what drowns Rich's lover and what makes her become for the poet merely a mirror of herself as victim. Because her lover fails to speak for herself, Rich, in trying to speak to her, is reduced to "speaking" to "her own soul"—a kind of solipsism by default, a relationship which mimics yet also
paradoxically collapses the narcissistic ideal of the
traditional praise poem.

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For many critics the failure of Rich's love affair--the
final image of her lover "drowning"--is the emotional heart of
the sequence. Sabine Sielke, for instance, asserts that "Rich,
who ... insisted that women need to repossess their bodies as
'the grounds from which to speak with authority as women,' in
her own poems eventually accepts the female body as a locus of
silence and disempowerment" (8). And Margaret Dickie claims
that while Rich has succeeded in expressing the "strange
vitality" (154) of the passion of woman for woman, the
sequence's ultimate effect is at odds with Rich's stated
political aims:

The denial of visibility, the ghosting of woman's
passion for women has one meaning in the cultural
criticism of Rich's prose; it has almost the
opposite meaning in her poetry where ghosting is a
way of possession, a new understanding of what it
means to possess. But the ghosting of woman's
passion for woman also calls up the melancholy
that is at the base of women's longing for the
woman's body. Not the site of generativity, the
body desired by the speaker in Rich's poems is
often mutilated and in pain (155).

Dickie finds this ghostliness and melancholy even in
FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED, which, with its vivid assertion of
woman's erotic passion for woman, would seem to represent a
triumphant bringing into language of what had been outside it.

Dickie powerfully captures the mournful, elegiac tenor of "Twenty-One Love poems." Yet while Rich certainly wishes to evoke the pain of woman and the persistent "ghostliness" of female history, she also desires to combat the tragedy of that history. Indeed, Rich expressly warns her lover, and by implication her readers, not to read the affair as yet another tragic romance, declaring, "Tristan und Isolde is scarcely the story, /woman at least should know the difference between love and death" (Poem XVIII). Her lover's silence may ultimately be read as "tragic" by Rich, but it pushes her into critically considering the problems of discourse for women and ways around these problems.

In her 1971 essay, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich wrote:

Re-vision--the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction--is for woman more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of our refusal of the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. (Rich, On Lies 35)

By repeatedly stressing that she is viewing her and her lover's story in terms of the history of all women, Rich signals that it is precisely such a "re-vision" she intends in
"Twenty-One Love Poems." Obviously such a "re-vision" must consist of more than simply depicting her love affair in traditional "lyrical" terms. While what Dickie describes as "the obsessive transformation of the body into the ghost, of the real world into dreams" (152), is one way Rich attempts to inscribe both her own love story and the unspoken lives of women in discourse, she also pursues other strategies.

As we have noted, for Shakespeare, the dark lady, or "woman" in her primal guise, is the undoing of his self, the mirror that robs from him his ideal self. However, for the dark lady and her descendants the problem is that the male self has not only robbed her of the right to speak as her own subject, but has also created a discourse in which she must perennially stand as the "other." Woman is the object of speech, a figure spoken about, but her own voice is never heard, and in her purest guise she is often taken to represent "the unspeakable."

For certain post-structuralist philosophers, most notably Derrida, this extreme polarity between "man" and "woman" is not merely the creation of poets, but a constitutive strand of Western metaphysics. Barbara Johnson explains in her introduction to Dissemination:

Western thought, according to Derrida...has always been structured in terms of dichotomies or
polarities: good versus evil, being vs nothingness, presence vs absence...man vs woman. These polar opposites do not, however, stand as equal and independent entities. The second term in each pair is considered the negative, corrupt, undesirable version of the first, a fall away from it....(6)

Rich, too, perceives discourse as to some extent structured around such fundamental oppositions. To speak is problematic because language often substitutes one thing for another, making it possible to ignore the truth of being "woman", to resign oneself to the intolerable:

And how I have used rivers, how I have used wars to escape writing of the worst thing of all— not the crimes of others, not even our own death, but the failure to want our freedom passionately enough so that blighted elms, sick rivers, massacres would seem mere emblems of that desecration of ourselves? (Poem VII)

Because speech is marked so that "woman" is always the lesser term, to enter it is to collaborate in a lesser subjectivity and, consequently, in the "desecration" of the female self.

Because of this, Rich views even her poetic past as something of a masquerade: "I see myself years back at Sunion, /Philoctetes /in woman's form" (Poem VIII). The Greek hero Philoctetes has always represented the ideal of the artist as wounded outsider—the non-ideological or purely literary artist. Yet this ideal is suspect, for Rich. In
speaking as "Philoctetes," she is speaking as a woman wearing the mask of a man, accepting a voice that has been sanctioned by male-dominated discourses.

Thus, it is not enough for Rich to simply tell the story of her passion for another woman, because as Joanne-Fiet Deihl comments forthrightly in her book *Woman Poets and the American Sublime*:

...helpful as sexual truth-telling may be... it does not resolve the problem these poems so starkly articulate: the difficulty of reinventing names for experience, of placing the female self at the center of the mimetic process (148).

To be born into language as it is, such a central complete female self seems to demand the creation of an appropriative self, a taking possession in language that means--at least in language--"woman" becoming more like "man." Rich's predicament is that becoming "man," or the universal "one," inevitably means denying or failing to sufficiently account for the real existence of "difference," both in- and outside the self. As Rich writes in her essay "Blood, Bread, and Poetry":

The difficulty of saying I - a phrase from the East German novelist Christa Wolf. But once having said it, as we realize the necessity to go further, isn't there a difficulty of saying "we?" You cannot speak for me. I cannot speak for us. Two thoughts: there is no liberation that only knows how to say "I." There is no collective moment that speaks for each of us (*Blood* 224).
While Rich is speaking here of women as a class, the point she makes about the danger of similarity being made to denote sameness applies equally--and perhaps even more urgently--to the relationship between herself and her lover. Throughout "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich expresses a resistance to Western dualisms, to relations rigidly defined in terms of "one" or "two," "self" or "other." For Rich to be the same means inevitably to erase one or the other, with both personal and political consequences.

Aware of the dangers of simply mimicking traditional discourses, Rich, as did Shakespeare upon the failure of the traditional poetics of praise, responds by inventing a discourse that is in some sense hollowed out. In Shakespeare this hollowness takes the form of the speaker's anguished consciousness of the distance between his vision and his speech, between what he admires and what he desires (Fineman, 16). For Rich this hollowness is in the space between speech and silence--between what words can recover and what they cannot. Tracing "woman" as the presence haunting our historical discourses, Rich creates simultaneously a sense of loss and of possibility.

More significantly, she strives to avoid constructing a
speaker who merely mirrors the traditional masculine "I" of praise poetry. As Margaret Dickie comments of "Twenty-One Love Poems": "the woman speaker, without presuming to take on appropriative power, possesses the world nonetheless by haunting it, by being herself haunted. She possesses and is possessed" (153). While this ghostly speaker resembles the broken literary self of Fineman's Shakespeare, her subjectivity is not asserted around a nostalgic ideal of wholeness in which self and other are both rigidly defined. Instead she changes in response to an ever-changing and never fully accessible sense of her own history of being other, reinfecting discourses by her haunting of them, her sense of their incompleteness. Because the silenced, buried, and lost past of women is a space which cannot be filled, it is in the "still unexcavated hole," the clouded mirror of female silence, that Rich's speaker must at least partly locate her discourse.

Yet while such strategies seem to allow Rich to revise traditional discourses of love, or as Dickie puts it, to "hollow out the old names and render ghostly both center and circumference" (153), they also keep Rich in the passive, tragic role from which she so wishes to break loose.

As Charles Altieri points out, "commitment to her ideas
is a key feature of Rich's poems....The project then is primarily ethical, a matter of ethos" (167). This concern for ethics—or for the practical consequences of what words do—is ultimately what drives Rich's consideration of her love affair, and, in particular, the critiques she makes of both her speech and her lover's silence.

In his essay "Philoctetes Radicalized," Kevin McGuirk says that when Rich wonders if she is using her lover in her writings:

[her] questions...exemplify as well as question, the problematic at the heart of romantic lyric, for although they literally direct themselves to an addressee they remain "rhetorical" (in the conventional sense) impelling a monologue forward rather than initiating a dialogue. They thus verge upon using their addressee as "prop" themselves, exerting, in effect an ideological force upon her. Nevertheless, in articulating a problematic, they raise it into critical view (71).

As McGuirk implies, one of the sources of drama in "Twenty-One Love poems" is whether Rich can successfully refigure past discourses, or whether—and to what degree—she will fall into the modalities of traditional lyric romance. In the example cited above, for instance, we must ask whether Rich's lover has indeed become merely a "prop" for the poet, and if not, why not. As McGuirk later puts it, by raising the questions she does Rich asks herself, "is this natural, spontaneous (and
therefore innocent) song, or is it a ruse that serves only to establish my identity?" (72).

One corollary question is how language can be made if not innocent at least more open to a genuine recognition of otherness—a vision of a world beyond the self. As Rich writes in Poem XI, how can she find in language "that detail outside ourselves that brings us to ourselves, was here before us, knew we would come, and sees beyond us."

Although Rich rigorously considers how language is marked by the metaphysical constructs that have oppressed women (and, indeed, all categories marked as "other"), she clearly believes that using language is also one of the only ways women can effectively "rewrite" their history of oppression in the present. As Rich says in Poem XVIII, among other things, language has the power of making "the story of our lives" become "our lives":

You're telling the story of your life
for once, a tremor breaks the surface of your words.
The story of our lives becomes our lives.
Now you're in fugue across what some I'm sure Victorian poet called the salt estranging sea.

As Rich observes somewhat irritably, one consequence of her lover's silence is that when she finally does speak she can only mimic and/or repeat past discourses.

Like Shakespeare in his sonnet sequence, Rich is driven,
through the failure of her passion, to confront the essential
duality of language— the paradox that language, being the
place where subjectivity is asserted, is also, consequently,
the place where the self becomes alienated from the rest, the
"other." Furthermore, for women— and most acutely lesbian
woman— language is often the place in which the self is
evaded, denied, and even erased.

In the last lines of "Cartographies of Silence," another
poem in The Dream of a Common Language, Rich writes:

> If from time to time I envy
> the pure annunciation to the eye

> the visio beatifica
> if from time to time I long to turn

> like the Eleusinian hierophant
> holding up a simple ear of grain

> for return to the concrete and everlasting world
> what in fact I keep choosing

> are these words, these whispers, conversations
> from which time after time the truth breaks moist
> and green.

With a direct nod at the epideictic tradition, Rich admits
that she occasionally submits to a nostalgia for a truly
visionary language— a perfect correspondence of sight and idea
or "the pure annunciation to the eye." Yet, unlike
Shakespeare, for whom this ideal is close, immediate, the loss
of something still almost within reach, for Rich such
visionary language is presented as an old, impossibly distant, even mythic ideal—a relic from the time of Eleusis.

While Rich may long for a world of visionary sameness and certainty, what she chooses to live in—the only kind of world open to her as "other"—is the multiplicity offered by a living language: "these words, whispers, conversations/from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green." Indeed, for Rich it is the very relativity and changeability of language—the moistness and greenness of language as organic form—that gives discourse its ability to communicate "truth," at least sporadically. It is also this changeability that makes language a far more attractive option than her lover's static silence.

In her essay "Homo Sum," Monique Wittig writes of the concept of dialectical opposites:

> From terms whose function had been to sort out, to classify, to make measurement possible... they were translated into a metaphysical dimension... Furthermore the evaluative and ethical terms (right, male, light, good) of the tabulation of opposites... modified the meaning of technical terms like "One." Everything that was "good" belonged to the series of the One (as Being). Everything that was "many" (different) belonged to the series of the "bad" (51).

Wittig terms this a "dialecticizing of the dialectic," and her notion of how dialectical oppositions moved from being practical concepts to "metaphysical" ones is helpful in
understanding how to read Rich's project in "Twenty-One Love Poems."

Like Wittig, Rich is a humanist in that she believes a self can be constituted in language. Furthermore, Rich wishes as a poet of experience to have at her disposal the means of measurement, a discourse which allows her to make ethical and evaluative decisions. Yet she simultaneously wishes to "deconstruct," or undo and/or revise the oppositional structure of Western metaphysics—the calculations, for example, by which "man" is the supreme good, and "woman" his corrupt, lesser version.

However, as I have already pointed out, Rich's concept of self and will is fairly conventional. For instance, when Rich declares to her lover, "If I cling to circumstances I could feel/not responsible. Only she who says/she did not choose, is the loser in the end" (Poem XV), she is presenting quite an orthodox view of the humanist self as a creature of free will. Despite her awareness of how history has placed woman in the role of "other," Rich's concept of "otherness" does not involve an abdication of free will, or of an enounced speaker as such.

Thus, we can conceive of Rich's project in "Twenty-One Love Poems" as tempering a conventional humanism with the
strategies of a post-modern historicism. While the aims of Rich's poetic self appear quite traditional, she is keenly aware of the difficulties of speaking without distorting her aims and/or ideals. In order to present a compelling revision of the historical discourses which have shaped her, Rich in "historicist" fashion mimics and/or reproduces the forms of these discourses while attempting at the same time to "re­vise" and reimagine them. For instance, she invokes a sonnet sequence, but is careful not to make her poems actual sonnets.

This tension between Rich's ideas and her practice is a large source of the drama and pathos of the sequence. Rich envisions a utopian feminism, but is honest enough to describe in detail how her own love affair fails in many of the same ways that love affairs have generally failed from the Renaissance invention of romantic love on. What is interesting is that Rich, while admitting the "ordinariness" of this failure, nevertheless continues to assert her ideals. In many senses the core of the poem is Rich's attempt to, as Craig Werner observes, "accept responsibility for the painful collapse of what had seemed an ideal relationship without surrendering her expansive sense of integrity" (94).

If we return again to a comparison of Rich's "sonnet"
sequence with Shakespeare’s as viewed by Joel Fineman, we can see more clearly how Rich uses this experience to reinflect the traditional lyric discourses of romantic love, specifically as regards the creation of a poetic self.

As we have seen, Fineman discusses Shakespeare’s naming of himself in his sonnet sequence as signalling the emergence of a divided poetic self. A similar act of self-naming takes place in Rich’s "Twenty-One Love Poems":

I feel estrangement, yes. As I’ve felt dawn pushing toward daybreak. Something: a cleft of light - Close between anger and grief, a space opens where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder (Poem XVIII).

It occurs at the moment of crisis in the sequence when Rich hearing her lover speak "for once" apprehends once and for all the difference between her lover and herself. In naming herself, Rich recognizes herself as being apart from, alienated from all that is "other." Yet this "estrangement," while clearly painful, is not described in wholly negative terms, but also, as the words "dawn pushing toward daybreak" suggest, in terms of a new dawn—a kind of revelation, a potential birth or rebirth.

This positive aspect of Rich’s "estrangement" is strengthened by the phrase which follows—"a cleft of light." In "Homo Sum," Wittig discusses how "light" in the history of
Western philosophy is invariably associated with "being" or with "the one" (51). Yet here Rich associates "light" with a cleft, a physical sign of division, a literal trope of difference. The phrase has a distinctly feminine cast, conjuring up images of birth—light emerging from darkness, life emerging from a "cleft" or a wound. Unlike the traditional epideictic images of birth as entirely positive, here birth is plainly aligned with anger, grief, and loss. Indeed, "estrangement" is put forth as a condition of being born.

As Shakespeare in naming himself "Will" set up a difference between the poet's self and his "I," or universal self, Rich in these lines signals that she is speaking not as the "I" of traditional lyric poetry, but as an "I" who is also "Adrienne," the product of a certain history.

In "Philoctetes Radicalized" Kevin McGuirk describes Rich's self-naming as follows:

In naming herself...the poet becomes a third person, someone who is called Adrienne, and thus radically compromises her position as transcendent "I."....Rich acknowledges in effect, a double position: she is inescapably transcendent "I" and a person with a name given by history; hers is an act of recognition, specifically that "I" is ideological (81).

According to McGuirk, in naming herself "Adrienne," Rich at once acknowledges her inescapable role as lyric "I" in the
poems and recognizes that this role is never entirely a question of "innocent song" (to reuse McGuirk’s phrase) but is always shaped by the particular history and, thus, ideology of the poet, in her case the "Adrienne." For McGuirk, Rich’s self-naming represents an attempt to reform the ideal of the artist who positions herself above ideology, the artist of "pure lyric pathos" represented by Philoctetes.

In light of McGuirk’s thesis, the reasons behind Rich’s criticisms of traditional pathos throughout the sequence become clearer. Rich’s self-naming is a way of making her readers see that all art has an ideological element, and one of her criticisms of past literary discourses is that this ideological function has been disguised. Pathos, for Rich, is particularly suspect because it claims to speak to a part of the self untouched by ideology. Therefore, in repudiating this conventional image of the artist of pure pathos—"Well that’s finished. The woman who cherished/her suffering is dead. I am her descendant" (Poem VIII)—Rich implies that both as a poet and a woman she must question the degree to which a valorization of pathos has contributed to her position - to her and to other women’s willingness to stay in the role of victimized "other."

More pointedly, as far her love affair is concerned, Rich
puts forth the notion that the form of the "tragic romance" has to no small extent been created by the gulf enshrined in language between self and other—a gulf that is, as in the case of Shakespeare and his dark lady, so absolute, so unsurpassable that it fundamentally challenges the self and can only be resolved through total merging (love) or total annihilation (death). In both cases "two" become as "one" and difference is viewed as the corruption of wholeness.

When Rich's lover says to her, "The more I live the more I think/two people together are a miracle" (Poem XVIII), she is essentially reiterating this idea. And when Rich responds, "Am I speaking coldly when I tell you in a dream/or in this poem, There are no miracles," she is expressing her opposition to this pathos-driven vision of romantic love.

In challenging the way "self" and "other" have been historically interpreted around an ideal of "oneness" or "wholeness," Rich calls into question many of the traditional aesthetic assumptions of lyric poetry. Our conceptions of tragedy and romance, for instance, seem to depend on the reification of such fundamental oppositions both in and outside the self. Even our concept of pathos is built on a sense of opposition between self and other, raising the question of whether undoing such oppositions also means
undoing our whole system of aesthetics. For Rich, of course, the issue is just the opposite—namely, how can woman adhere to the aesthetic values of the past when these values have been used to deny and suppress the truth of women’s lives?

Such a refiguring of the aesthetics of poetry is what Rich commits herself to when she tells her lover she plans "to go on from here.../fighting the temptation to make a career of pain" (Poem VIII). And in "Transcendental Etude," the penultimate poem of The Dream of a Common Language, Rich explicitly states that the emergence of a truly female subject will demand such an aesthetic revolution: "a whole new poetry beginning here."

On the evidence of "Twenty-One Love Poems," what is new about this "new poetry" is less its form or its sense of the relation between self and self, self and other, than how these relations are interpreted.

As Fineman demonstrates, for Shakespeare the emergence of a divisive desire and his consequent understanding of himself as a divided subject is "unkind," a source of tremendous psychic pain. For Rich, the self, while similarly divided, is perceived very differently. Indeed, her project in the "Twenty-one Love Poems" can be seen in part as redeeming not only woman from the curse of difference, but difference from
difference.

Shakespeare, in naming his dark lady the very essence of dividedness or difference, condemns her as "foul," "false," "black," "a fiend." The divisions the dark lady creates in the poet are seen as equally negative. Under her influence the poet comes to see himself as "sickly," "frantic-mad," "a madman," "past reason hunted," and "twice foresworn" (Sonnets 130-146).

Rich in her sequence also describes her lover as composed of opposing values and qualities. Her lover's silence makes the "unnameable, nameable." Her eyes are at once "everlasting" and a "green spark"--the very apotheosis of the temporary, the perishable and organic. Her mouth is both "generous," and "delicate," a place where "grief and laughter sleep together" (Poem IX; Poem III; Poem XVI).

Yet if her lover is a representation of difference and otherness, Rich herself is equally so. Like the dark lady, Rich associates herself with absence, the confounding of wholeness--referring to herself variously as "unmendable wounds," "Philoctetes in woman's form," "a dream-ghost," and "a cleft of light" (Poems V, VIII, XII, XXI).

Yet in Rich's lexicon, this dividedness, while linked with absence, ghostliness, and darkness, is equally tied to
images of presence, birth, and light. The conventional metaphysical oppositions of Western metaphysics are thus woven together in the body of "woman," which as portrayed by Rich becomes simultaneously a locus of silence, darkness, and death, and of discourse, light, and generativity.

Rich’s purpose in blurring these conventional Western dualisms can be seen most clearly in the way she describes the forces at work in the lives of herself and her lover. In Poem II, Rich says that she and her lover long 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," describing opposing forces as working in sync—being part of the same process. And later, in Poem XVII, she imagines a tape-recorder "listening" in on them:

Merely a notion that the tape-recorder
should have caught some ghost of us: that tape-recorder
not merely played but should have listened to us,
and could instruct those after us:
this we were, this is how we tried to love,
and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
and these are the forces we had ranged within us,
within us and against us, against us and within us.

This image of this tape-recorder becomes, for Rich, a kind of thought experiment pushing up against the limitations of language. By expressly stating that this tape-recorder—an impersonal instrument that might have recorded her and her lover accurately—is "merely a notion," Rich implicitly
acknowledges that the ideal of experience being captured in words purely, without any ideological slant, is an impossible dream of language. The mere act of translating life into words changes the present moment, at once preserving and reinterpreting it.

Nevertheless, in proposing her tape-recorder, Rich tries to replace the notion of a self shaped by the binaries of self and other, presence and absence, good and bad, with that of a self formed by what might be termed a field of forces "within us and against us, against us and within us" (Poem XVII)

For Rich, this vision of the self as both arising out of and representing in itself a site of difference is key to a genuine revision of the discourse of love and, as such, is vital to the survival of women, and to establishing a lesbian subjectivity. As she tells her lover in Poem XIX, this project involves not only a certain "coldness" toward the life of the emotions and the aesthetic principles of the past, but a willingness to accept love as a process, a work in progress:

If I could let you know -
two woman together is a work
nothing in civilization has made simple
two people together is a work
heroic in its ordinariness
the slow-picked halting traverse of a pitch
where the fiercest attention becomes routine
- look at the faces of those who have chosen it.

To exist in a world where difference is everywhere, to
avoid placing difference in a hierarchy of reified values, requires the "fiercest attention," a willingness to continually reconsider and reinterpret experience. As Rich by naming herself limits her claim to be articulating a transcendent "I," she also suggests by her valorization of the mind’s continuous "fierce attention," her resistance to a dialectical process that conceives of itself as moving toward a revelation of absolute value. Rather than tracing a dialectic in the Hegelian sense, "Twenty-One Love Poems" demonstrates the everyday workings of the mind. Rich celebrates the mind’s power to continually reflect on and illuminate experience, to create value, even if expressing this power means, as Rich says in "Transcendental Etude," the continual "cutting away of an old force...rooted to an old ground."

In the last poem of the sequence, Rich articulates most clearly her vision of this new female subjectivity. Once again casting the poem as a foray into an imaginary setting, Rich attempts to envision a landscape that will articulate her ideal of woman:

The dark lintels, the blue and foreign stones of the great round rippled by stone implements the midsummer night light rising from beneath the horizon - when I said "a cleft of light" I meant this (Poem XXI)
In these lines Rich mingles images of nature" and "culture," ("blue and foreign stones/...rippled by stone implements"), "light" and "dark" ("midsummer night light"). The scene is night but a midsummer night in the "great round," with "light rising from beneath," conjuring up the image of a woman giving birth. Furthermore, by repeating the phrase "a cleft of light," Rich takes on the traditional notion of woman as wounded, divided, cut (the name of the female genitalia or "cunt") and reconstitutes this "cleft" into a division of light, a division that is in itself a form of ideal vision and/or knowledge, and, as such, an alternative to the ideal of unity or "oneness."

In the circle of "blue and foreign stones," Rich combines the familiar (a circle--the simplest of geometric shapes) and the strange ("blue and foreign stones") to form a structure that is at once home-like and a still uncharted territory. With the image of stones arranged in a circle, she maps a space in which divisions and differences are not denied, but are somehow incorporated into and sustained by the whole:

And this is not Stonehenge
simply nor any place but the mind
casting back to where her solitude,
shared, could be chosen without loneliness
not easily nor without pains to stake out
the circle, the heavy shadows, the great light.
I choose to be a figure in that light
half-blotted by darkness, something moving
across the space, the color of stone
greeting the moon, yet more than stone,
a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw
this circle. (Poem XXI)

By naming "Stonehenge," Rich places her ideal of woman in
a speculative pre-history before the imposition of patriarchal
discourses carved up the metaphysical landscape into light and
dark, man and woman, good and evil. Further defining the place
as "not Stonehenge/simply nor any place but the mind/casting
back to where her solitude/shared, could be chosen without
loneliness," Rich turns the landscape itself into a trope for
the processes of a kind of universal mind. This mind is not
only named as feminine, but is "other" to the tradition of
mind--or reason--in its embrace of itself as divided between
light and dark, nature and culture, familiarity and
strangeness. Only in this space where opposing strands can co-
exist freely can the mind's "solitude"--which appears here as
an unavoidable condition of subjectivity--be truly shared.

This ideal of discourse is one that is not easily arrived
at, but as Rich implies ("not without pains") represents a
hard "labor," a continuous process of giving birth through
discourse to new stances, new spaces, a continuous "staking
out" of the circle. In declaring, "I choose to be a figure in
that light," Rich announces herself as a fully realized
subject. Yet she preserves the ghostliness which has suffused her portrait of her lover and herself, depicting herself in the next breath as a flickering presence: "half-blotted by darkness, something moving/across that space...."

Bringing the poem full circle, Rich shows us herself composing the landscape we are reading. And in telling us that she is "the color of stone/greeting the moon. Yet more than stone:/ a woman," she intimates that to be "woman" (or perhaps human) is to be more than nature, a surplus of nature, to be goddess-like in creating a space for oneself. While her lover at the end of the sequence remains inaccessible, a ghostly presence that evokes the buried, unspeakable wounds of women, Rich chooses, in effect, to birth herself as a subject. Aware that in speaking the self one becomes split from the self—that words divide the self from the world in space and in time—she nevertheless chooses the "estrangement" of existing in language. She chooses to conceive of herself as a project within language, as an act of composition.

Rich's conception of the formation of the self in language as an ongoing project demanding full use of the self's resources is the distinctive feature of her sequence. As many critics have pointed out, Rich's lover in "Twenty-One Love Poems" often seems less a real foil to Rich than a prop
in her quest to understand her own subjectivity and capabilities. Yet clearly for Rich examining herself in light of her lover—examining, in particular, herself vis-a-vis issues of gender and romance—is key to any understanding of self. As Shakespeare in his sonnet sequence pays great attention to himself as speaker and to his impulses toward self-creation and self-understanding, Rich, too, often seems primarily concerned in her sequence with arriving at a workable definition of a new female poetic subjectivity.

While a great distance separates Rich from Shakespeare, the problems raised by the poetic subjectivity of linguistic difference haunt much of modern poetry. To take one example, Altieri, describing a poet writing in what he terms "the dominant scenic mode" of contemporary American poetry, observes:

The speaking voice offers a delicate recording instrument, but only by becoming, on the dramatic level of the poem, a precious and passive witness dominated by the scene. (53)

While on the surface this description seems worlds away from the vigorous ironies of Shakespeare’s sonnets, both types of poetic subjectivity share the problem of an essentially passive vision of the self. Indeed, one could say the vital sense of despair and loss that animates Shakespeare has given way to a meeker and milder evocation of loss wherein grace,
precision, and subtlety of representation are the most (and even only) significant qualities.

For Rich this passivity is clearly a major "problem" with much modern (male) poetry. In "When We Dead Awaken," she states:

To the eye of a feminist, the work of Western male poets now writing reveals a deep, fatalistic pessimism as to the possibilities of change, whether societal or personal, along with a familiar and threadbare use of women (and nature) as redemptive on the one hand, threatening on the other. (Rich, On Lies 176)

As this quote suggests, activating the poetic self shaped by a poetry of verbal difference is one of the most important ways in which Rich defines her vision of a new female poetics. And if she can be seen as revising the epideictic tradition as filtered through Shakespeare, she does so through her challenge to the impotence of the lyric self. While she does not—as Fineman suggests any successor to the Shakespearean must—create a poetry that is "extraliterary" and "outside history" (291), she certainly reconfigures the poetic speaker's relation to literature and to history.

In "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich's resistance to a tragic reading of her love affair, her valorization of process, and her acceptance of fragmentation in herself and her lover represent substantial challenges to the aesthetic ideals of
romantic love as expressed in the Western literary tradition. The "shapeliness" of structure—the way, for instance, a tragic love affair always ends in death or in inconsolable loss—the veering toward, or looking back upon an absolute set of ideals, the insistence on pathos—all these are the aesthetic principles of lyric romance which Rich seeks to revise, thus at the same time redefining the purposes of poetry. Yet perhaps the reason her poetry is so compelling is that despite her stated resistance to traditional lyric pathos, her evocation of her own experience is deeply felt and often deeply painful, creating one of the major sources of energy in Rich’s work: her struggle to sustain her ideals in the face of her experience.

Moreover, the visionary aspects of Rich’s poetry are balanced by a tough, almost classically American pragmatism, a desire to see results. As Altieri writes: "Rich wants poems to test what language can achieve in a world made of more (or less) than pure texts" (168). In "Twenty-One Love Poems," this testing takes apparently contradictory forms. On the one hand it leads Rich to speculate on (and thus create) in language the us who have "never been imagined"—fearlessly voyaging through imagined female pasts and futures. On the other, it leads Rich to emphasize dailiness, the processes of ordinary
life, as shown by her insistence on living with her lover in
the world as it is: "I told you from the first I wanted daily
life/this island of Manhattan was island enough for me" (Poem
XIX).

In Rich's world the ideal and the ordinary, self and
other, must be allowed to exist side by side. Her poetry
moves away from aesthetic tidiness because it enacts the drama
of her evolution as she responds to the world as she lives in
it. Again, Altieri puts this well, declaring that in her work
Rich "develops a sense of process emphasizing the connection
between composition and constructing a responsible self"
(168). As the adjective "responsible" indicates, Rich harkens
back to a humanist tradition in that she assumes that a better
self can be constructed. Indeed, the narrative of "Twenty-One
Love Poems," can be seen as testing and ultimately affirming
the proposition that there is value in the project of "making
the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem become
the same person" (Altieri, 178).

Within this framework, Rich criticizes the aesthetic
values and discourses of the past in terms of how as a woman
they do or do not help her uncover a self, help her live in
the world as it is. For her, then, the aesthetics of her
discourse is a question of ideology, and her project is in
part to find new aesthetic values to suit her ideologies. She expresses this idea most clearly in the famous last section of "Transcendental Etude." Describing a woman creating a piece of "art" by pulling together "bits of yarn," "small rainbow colored shells," "skeins of milkweed," and other scraps, Rich says:

Such a composition has nothing to do with eternity the striving for greatness, brilliance - only with the musings of a mind one with her body, experienced fingers quietly pushing dark against bright, silk against roughness, pulling the tenants of a life together with no mere will for mastery, only care for the many-lived, unending forms in which she finds herself.

This aesthetics of difference, "many-lived, unending forms," is at the core of Rich's response to the difficulties of her "romance," the difficulties of being "woman" in light of history. Embracing difference, a dynamism within herself, allows Rich both to place to herself in history—or, as McGuirk points out, to radicalize the self by acknowledging that the self is always ideological—and to create a self with sufficient agility to avoid the traps of reification that have denatured patriarchal history. Through her responsiveness, Rich seeks to short-circuit the impulse to define a metaphysics of absolutes, which in suppressing and/or denying difference, can only end in brutality or in a paralysing
awareness of its failure to be truly universal.

In Adrienne Rich and Lesbian/Feminist Poetry Catherine Stimpson writes:

Rich has wonderfully escaped the nets she fears ....We must live in an Einsteinian world of flux and chance that has neither "center nor circumference." We must work and wish for a world, not as it is, but as it might be.Yet, we must respond to time present as it presents and represents itself. Because errors and lapses can stain our responses, we must abandon dreams of purity, of final cures, of a process with an end." (259)

Stimpson’s remarks may appear to idealize Rich’s project. However, the way Rich attempts to realize her ideal of a responsible self is precisely through what Stimpson terms an ability to "respond to time present."

Because for Rich this process of self-definition is structured around the question of "woman," or of gender, many critics, as I noted in my introduction, have dismissed her as an overly "polemical" poet. However, by focusing on the degree to which "Twenty-One Love Poems" deals with writing, discourse, and poetics, I have demonstrated that Rich sees questions of gender and identity as being also questions of language. For Rich gender is the point of tension around which our most significant questions of identity revolve. In activating the poetics of verbal difference through her vision of "woman," Rich makes her poetry a ground upon which identity
is formed and tested—a process Altieri terms "self-reflection as action" (30).

In *Gender Trouble* Judith Butler envisions a world in which gender identifies are no longer organized around a binary of male and female, saying:

> If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old. Cultural configurations of sex and gender might then proliferate or, rather their present proliferation might then become articulable within the discourses that establish intelligible cultural life, confounding the very binarism of sex, and exposing its fundamental unnaturalness (149).

While Rich in "Twenty-One Love Poems" seems to be doing the exact opposite—seeking to establish the essential naturalness of her love for another woman—the woman-centered discourse Rich reaches for is one in which, as in Butler’s vision of gender, "binaries are confounded" and fragmentation embraced. Rich makes clear that the division of "self" and "other," even in a same-sex bond, can be bridged only by the vigilance of the self toward the other, by the self’s willingness to continually reflect on its relation to all that is outside it. It is her conception of this alert, responsible, and responsive self that gives her project a universal
significance.

If Shakespearean subjectivity can be seen as the wedge which opened up identity to the resonating hollowness and differences of language, Rich seeks in an almost Nietzschean fashion (though the notoriously misogynist philosopher and Rich may seen an odd match indeed) to set the self in motion around these differences, so that the self becomes a force, a power engaged in continually creating itself and bridging with the energy of its will what gulfs it can. As Nietzsche in his notion of the "overman" envisioned a process by which the self would act moment by moment to compose a life as if it were a work of art, Rich in *The Dream of a Common Language* conceives of composing a poem as corollary to composing a self. The value of her poetic art is thus seen as being the degree to which it is a mimesis of her project of an idealistic self-creation.

Altieri says of this project of Rich's:

> Distance in time cannot be bridged, but it can make us celebrate what bridges distance in space. Discourse becomes this poet's paradigm for accepting things as they are without resigning herself to what we have made of them. If she can at once accept and criticize her own stances by risking the divisions of self-consciousness, she has every right to hope society can pursue that same endless, tauntingly gradual process of self-revision (190).

If Shakespeare's sonnet sequence marks the creation of
the "modern" divided self, the self in thrall to its own resonant hollowness, Rich assumes that self and revises it in terms of a sense of community. By stressing, through her examination of her own experience, the impossibility of proclaiming a universal point of view, Rich attempts to create a genuine dialogue between the personal and the political, self and other. In her vision of division without conflict she seeks to redeem the Shakespearean subject from its compulsion to see its metaphors as evidence of its fall from grace, replacing the notion of a "oneness" we were once part of and lost, with the notion of a universal woman born into and as "a cleft of light."
Works Cited


