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SANTA CRUZ

**“THIS POEM WHICH IS NOT YOUR LANGUAGE”
JEWISHNESS, TRANSLATION, AND THE HISTORICAL PHILOSOPHY
OF ADRIENNE RICH,
1968-1991**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

LITERATURE

by

Hannah Edber

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ABSTRACT

“This Poem Which is Not Your Language”

Jewishness, Translation, and the Historical Philosophy of Adrienne Rich,

1968-1991

Hannah Edber

The long and prolific career of lesbian feminist poet Adrienne Rich has been evaluated by readers and critics for the significant stylistic shifts that accompanied Rich’s increasing political awareness, radicalism, and calls to action in both poetry and prose. Rich’s Jewish life, however, has been relatively understudied. This essay argues that Rich’s Jewish engagement played a critical part in developing her historical philosophy: one that rejects the universal while reaching beyond the particular, embraces an oppositional Jewish history while refusing Jewish suffering as proprietary, and demands a critical evaluation of the complicated inheritance of Holocaust memory and its role in assimilating Jewish life into mainstream U.S. national consciousness. Questions of history raised by Rich’s mid-career turn to her Jewishness—what I call her Jewish era, the 1980s—also bring to the surface the impossibility of her own desire to translate one historical moment into the next. In two parts, I examine how Rich’s Jewishness and translational experiments shaped a resistance poetics based in Jewish messianism, feminist critique, and queer embodiment to imagine new possibilities for reading and writing the past, present, and future.

INTRODUCTION

“her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine”
-from “For Ethel Rosenberg,” 1981

Reflections and Investments in Adrienne Rich

When I started this project two years ago, I had just completed my fifth year working in Bay Area public schools. I was feeling wrung out by my immersion in institutions of entrenched inequality and the ethical complexities of teaching low-income students of color as a white, private-school-educated, middle-class person. My work as a teacher also submerged and surfaced, at various intervals, other identities and histories of mine: queer, woman, Jewish, granddaughter of Holocaust survivors, feminist. Teaching, especially teaching history, called on the complicated legacies of each of these identities and demanded I interrogate my own inheritance, and my desire to find a language to voice my resistance to the assimilationism that is both demanded by schools (and other public institutions) and central to expanding and collapsing historical space between my family’s success in this country and the devastation they suffered in another time and place.

The work of Adrienne Rich, a feminist lesbian poet, essayist, and teacher who who wrote and published prolifically between 1951 until her death in 2012, grabbed me in this moment of my life. I had read “Diving into the Wreck” as an undergraduate, but I had had no idea how fervently Rich delved into the issues that occupied my inner life--largely because I had not known how deeply Rich engaged with questions of Jewishness and history, nor the significance of the historical context

of the moment during which she most explicitly wrestled with these themes: the U.S. 1980s.

It is difficult to find a critical or popular essay on Rich's work that does not mention the shift in tone and style that splits her early-career work from that of her mid and later career, and most often this shift is attributed to Rich's increasingly radical politicization and what we would today call her intersectional feminism: a feminism that attempts to account for experiences of privilege and violence that are mediated by differences in race, class, sexuality, and other experienced realities.¹ In this two-part essay, I argue that Rich's stylistic and political evolutions can also be attributed to her increasing engagement in Jewish heritage and identity, and the shifting significance of this category over the six decades of her career. Rich's writing and thinking about Jewishness is directly informed by her experiences as a radical feminist lesbian, and Jewishness also reshapes what these categories mean to Rich's political life. The writing of Rich's Jewish era, which I date to the decades of the 1980s-90s, traces themes of exclusion, inclusion, privilege, and oppression through Jewish history, and grapples with historical patterns that reflect the absorption of the particular into the universal--so that Rich's 1980 critique of "compulsory heterosexuality" (in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence") is echoed in her historical analysis of Jewish assimilation in the U.S., and the resulting complicity of U.S. Jews in white privilege and violence. Rich's Jewish

¹ The term "intersectionality" was coined by critical race scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and further developed in her 1991 essay, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 (1991): 1240.

engagement enriches her calls for solidarities across difference while simultaneously demanding that differences of race, class, and gender--and differences of time, space, and “the location of the poet”--be recognized in radical struggle.² The result of this engagement is a philosophy of history that reaches beyond the particular without embodying the universal, that models comparative and traveling memory, and that explores the relationships between language and history.

Rich has often been referred to, passingly, as a Jewish writer, but much of the academic and popular treatment of her work and her life fail to fully contend with the historical significance of this category at the moment of her writing. To fully understand what Jewishness meant to her life and to her writing, we must understand it as an unstable category, subject to historical conditions and to the work of Rich’s own historicizing project. By the time Rich began writing about her Jewish life, in the early 1980s, Jewishness in the United States had been relatively recently absorbed into the American mainstream.³ Racially, socially, and economically, Jewish people represented the successful “model minority” who could not only assimilate, but excel within the modern project of post-World War Two nation-building.⁴ The inclusion of

² Rich, Adrienne. “Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet (1984)”. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selecting Prose 1979:1985*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1986.

³ Until the end of World War II, Jewish exclusion had historically been almost, or actually, a requirement of establishing a nation-state. The eighteenth and nineteenth century, for example, saw European nation-states excluding or expelling Jews as a condition for entrance into the European polity; the “Jewish question” followed well into the twentieth century, with Hitler’s Holocaust and Stalin’s treatment of Soviet Jewry as the most obvious examples. In the United States, too, Jews were typically confined to the status of racial, social, and economic underclass until about the middle of the twentieth century.

⁴ “Burgeoning economic growth, increasing popular acceptance of religious and cultural pluralism, the high education achievements of native-born Jews, and an overpowering desire on the part of many

the Jewish figure in the project of the American “melting pot” could be read as a fidelity to American principles of liberty and equality;⁵ in the aftermath of the Holocaust, the incorporation of the Jew into mainstream America also signified the successful defeat of Nazism and the need for vigilance against its cousin, Communism.⁶

Canonized American Jewish writing of this period--authors such as Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Bernard Malamud--reflect the assimilated life, largely through a male consciousness, and a concern for the particulars of American space and place.⁷ Rich’s writing during and after her Jewish era--both her poetry and her

Jews to ‘make it’ in America all contributed during these decades to a spectacular rise of American Jews to positions of authority and respect within the general American community” according to historians Jonathan D. Sarna and Jonathan Golden. See also Peter Novick *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Court, 1999); Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); and Richard Alba, *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2003), among others.

⁵ Goldstein describes the rise in Jewish performance of colonial-era traditions around Jewish and national holidays at this historical moment; Novick notes the inclusion of the Holocaust memorial along Boston’s Freedom Trail.

⁶ Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism* (1961), merged Nazism and Stalin’s Communism under the same heading (totalitarianism) and sparked an understanding of the dangers of fascist regimes that linked the horror of the past and the fear of a (Communist) future. Arendt’s *Origins* reflected the anxiety of spatial expanse that was so much a question of the time: “Evidence that totalitarian governments aspire to conquer the globe and bring all countries on earth under their domination can be found repeatedly in Nazi and Bolshevik literature,” she writes, pointing to both the concern for a new world order understood in spatial terms, and the evidence for these concerns embedded in texts of the regimes (415). In so doing, Arendt foregrounds an act of reading between the lines as one of attaining a global political consciousness, a project taken up by both the International Human Rights Committee and, as I argue, Rich’s insistence on *re*-reading history and space as volatile texts, subject to the bend of nationalist politics and expansion.

⁷ Philip Roth received his first National Book Award for his 1959 novella *Goodbye, Columbus* (New York: Random House, 1959), which describes a love affair between two secular Jews, a librarian and an English major, in New York City and upstate New York; his first novel, *Letting Go* (New York: Random House, 1961), revolves around ambivalent and/or secular Jewish masculinity in the academic (and prototypically American) worlds of Iowa, Detroit, Chicago, and New York. Saul Bellow’s work, including *Herzog* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), holds various meditations on the novels Martha’s

prose--reflect a more planetary concern for space and human suffering, and her Jewishness informs this concern by continually invoking the images, vocabulary, and scenes from a particular history of Jewish exclusion and oppression. Rich continually turns to the trauma of the Holocaust to interrupt narratives of Jewish assimilation and forgetfulness--as though to jar herself and her readers awake to the dangers of staying silent in the changing faces of old dangers: American imperialism, capitalism, racism, homophobia, and misogyny. Rich uses these memories to remind herself and us to refuse to become fully emerged in the complacent and complicit majority. Rich's Jewish era, which I will describe as unique for its departure in tone, style, and historical philosophy, calls for Jewish Americans to draw on a collective history of oppression which simultaneously takes stock of the resources of the present--including the complicated vantage points of racial privilege and less visible difference--to stand with those suffering in this planetary moment.

The historical moment of Rich's Jewish writing is doubly haunted: by traumas of the past as well as by the temptation to succumb to the historical tendency to assimilate for the sake of safety and survival. Themes of resistance, passing, and resistance-as-passing occupy her work of this period, tracing a history of survival "by chance or by choice." Rich's speakers take on multiple voices and move back and forth between past and present, reflecting the conviction, as expressed in her 1983

Vineyard and Chicago settings, and a Jewishness that functions generally to convey a sense of alienation and otherness that is taken to be part of the modern condition. Meanwhile, Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer* (1966) centers on the false imprisonment of a Jew in Tsarist Russia. Here, the danger of Jewish otherness is dislocated from the North American continent and transposed to another (notably Russian) national context.

poem “North American Time,” that “poetry never stood a chance/of standing outside of history.” The relationship between poetry and history also reflects a philosophy that history is experienced through our relationships--to the historical and poetic collectivities we conjure as a means to a “common language” that is both ancient and new, and reborn in the acts of writing and reading, separately and together.⁸

The 1981 *New York Times* review of Rich’s *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far* concludes by arguing against defining the “labels” that might “cordon her off.” (The specific labels the author mentioned are “feminist” and “lesbian,” the exclusion of “Jewish” telling for the critical tendency to miss this aspect in reading Rich.) The article calls Rich “a self-consciously American poet” who is “revising history to suit her needs,” in order to “speak plainly about our lives.” What this review misreads is that Rich’s Jewish exploration, among her other overlapping and intersecting identities, inform her deep explorations about what it means to not only be an “American” in the moment of her writing, but also one whose lives might count as “our lives” in history. In asking these questions, Rich anticipates this current moment--spring 2017--that so urgently exposes the ways identity “labels” produce life and death in this country, and always have.^{9 10}

⁸ For more on the feminist methodology of imagining collective histories, see Joan Wallach Scott’s *The Fantasy of Feminist History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁹ As it happens, I am typing these words on the first day of Passover, a holiday that centers on the re-telling of the Biblical story of the Israelites’ enslavement in Egypt, redemption by God, and journey to the Promised Land. For its themes of oppression and liberation (in addition to the troubling significance of the State of Israel to Jewish life and global politics in the last 70 years), Passover has been taken up by leftist, queer, and radical Jews as an opportunity to gather *as Jews* to acknowledge the intersections of historical oppression and lived privilege and to imagine ways to position themselves toward freedom for all people now. “We confront the parts of the Exodus story that lend themselves to exceptionalism, separate us from our fellow human beings, deny the many allies we

In asking questions about her Jewish identity and inheritance, Rich is not just adding another “label” to examine but is interrogating how Jewishness has informed living and breathing in the past, present, and future. As she writes in her 1985 prose collection *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, “As a woman, as a feminist, as a Jew, as a lesbian, I am pursued by questions of historical process, of historical responsibility, questions of historical consciousness and ignorance and what these have to do with power” (137). In her Jewish era, Rich is thinking about Jewish experience through a feminism that insists on particularity, and difference, in the face of a universalism that seeks to digest difference to various political ends.

Holocaust memory in the United States is particularly suited to an examination and critique of how particularity/difference is absorbed into universalism for the sake of a human rights discourse that casts both Jewish suffering and U.S. humanitarianism as exemplary and proprietary. Michael Rothberg has described the way Holocaust memory in the U.S. has created a template for atrocity against which other events are measured (524), a discourse that “activates a universalizing framework of recognition...[which] serves not so much to acknowledge difference as to *translate* difference back into a reduced vision of sameness” (539) (emphasis

have had throughout history, accept revenge as a form of justice, and use our own suffering to justify the displacement and dispossession of the Palestinian people,” reads the Haggadah, or guide to the Passover seder, published by the International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network.

¹⁰ Rich also wrote frequently and explicitly about her own refusal of universalism in both writing and politics. Her essay “When We Dead Awaken,” published in the prose volume *Lies, Secrets, and Silences* (1979) famously details her life as a young reader and writer, taught to strive for the universalist truths of the white male poets, and sense of liberation as she grew more deeply aware of the particular experiences of her own world, as a woman and lesbian, and the politics of failing to merge with the worlds housed in the works of those authors. Rich’s feminist rejection of a universal human experience highlights the particular ways she is compelled to read and re-read Jewish history through the interweaving histories of her own identities.

mine). In this essay, I expand on Rothberg's thinking about this process as translational by discussing the ways Rich turns to translation to describe the emotional and linguistic process of attempting, and failing, to connect both other historical moments and the experiences of other people. Rothberg's work turns to historical examples, such as Du Bois's observations of the Warsaw Ghetto ruins in 1949, of "now almost-forgotten understanding[s] of the Shoah in which its specificity was grasped at the same time its potential links to other histories of racism were now in view" (528). Adrienne Rich's poetic and expository explorations of Jewishness strive to hold difference and solidarity without "translat[ing] the work of comparison into the assertion of equation," which Rothberg describes as typical of more recent endeavors to politicize Holocaust memory (Rothberg 532).

Rich's investment in critiquing the deployment of Holocaust memory for nationalistic purposes aligns with much of her work to denounce universalism generally. The post-Holocaust decades represent a strange and pivotal moment in American history: absorbing Jewish particularity into the national framework while simultaneously using the so-called lessons of the Holocaust to expand U.S. global power and a discourse of universal human rights and protections the United States was to help protect. One major lesson we are tasked to remember is that the United States is and will continue to be the geographical, political, and moral Other to the conditions that allowed the Holocaust to happen. Peter Novick quotes one official at the Washington Holocaust Museum who remarked that "When America is at its best, the Holocaust is impossible in the United States" (240). The United States is

imagined as the location where American mythology (freedom, plurality, and good government) forecloses the possibility of “the Holocaust” (the extremes of hatred, intolerance, and bad government). Holocaust lessons are thus about American place, but there are also about American time: the placement of a Holocaust memorial along Boston’s Freedom Trail places it in a series of events that inevitably made way for American Freedom. The memorial’s location alongside other sites on the Freedom Trail renders the Holocaust equivalent with minor Revolutionary War skirmishes, and the visitor to the Trail prevails upon both by way of a winding forest path that further naturalizes the procession towards American values in place and time.

While representing American exceptionalism--for housing, protecting, and absorbing the historically exceptional and now universalized Jewish people (made to stand in for past, present, and future sufferers of oppression and exclusion)--Holocaust memory also embeds a fantasy of universality in the common vulnerability of human life. Dramatizing the memory of this debasement, rendering it as object within a nation-making discourse, allows the fantasy of universalism, and the racism and sexism embedded in it, to consume the politics of remembrance.

As Part I of this essay will explore, Jewishness grants Rich access to history in a way that allows her to explore race, gender, and sexuality across time and in the terms of life and death that deflate any argument that identity groups are as superficial as “labels.” In Part 2, I will describe the way Rich draws on translation as a literal act and as a metaphor to describe the desire to reach the other in language, the ongoing

failure of this project, and the ways in which this relational philosophy reflects a Jewish messianism that is part of Rich's writerly inheritance. The relationship she traces between history and poetry, which she describes as reciprocally indebted, echoes the Benjaminian language of translation that informs her ongoing interest in translation as a means to understanding--and to explore the limits of understanding--not just the contemporary but the historical other. Rich's Jewishness takes on an additional significance in her lifelong project of mapping the possibilities for solidarities across difference, and in maintaining a connection to a history of oppression in order to translate memory of the past into understanding of the oppressed other in the present.

While her prose outlines Rich's historical philosophies, her poetry is the site of the experiment of the other--the desire to understand the other in the terms of the self, and the perennial failure to do so.¹¹ In the same book of essays mentioned above, Rich wrote:

I had begun dating each of my poems by year. I did this because I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself; I knew my life was changing, and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long, continuing process. It seems to me now that this was an oblique political statement--a rejection of the dominant critical idea that the poem's text should be read as separate from the poet's everyday life in the world. It was a declaration that placed poetry in a historical continuity, not above or outside history. (*Blood, Bread, and Poetry* 180)

¹¹ J. Halberstam might also argue that this failure also codes the project as a distinctly queer rejection of teleological histories and relationships. See *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

Rich's poetry traces a history of her own process as a writer committed to divesting from universalities, from finalities, and from privileged positions that might sequester her--and members of the historical collectivities she imagines through her writing--from human connection: what she calls "Love, our subject" in the 1972 poem "Translations."

Last year, a new edition of Rich's collected work was published, edited by Claudia Rankine, a poet whose work has been instrumental to awakening a U.S audience to racial aggression, legacies of racial violence, and the labor of absorbing history into the body through language.¹² The publication of this collection reflects the ways Rich's poetry speaks to the "flashes of danger" Walter Benjamin wrote about in his 1940 essay "Thesis on the Philosophy of History." These are the moments that must be seized and examined as they reverberate through history--not to "recognize it 'the way it really was,'" as Benjamin writes, or to "rewrite it to fit her purposes," as that *New York Times* review accused Rich of doing. Benjamin argues that these flashes must instead be mobilized to recognize "the same threat...of becoming a tool of the ruling classes" (255). In this moment that has uncovered, for a broader population, the requirement to declare Black Lives Matter, to insist that non-normative genders and sexualities must remain political (and to shield their oppositional traditions from what Benjamin termed the "conformism that is about to overpower" them, if neoliberal and assimilationist desires for recognition and protection at the ever-strengthening hands of the state), and to decry the election of a

¹² See: *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2004) and *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014)

racist, xenophobic, misogynist sexual assailant to the office of the President of the United States, Rich's poetic vision encapsulates the desire to reach from the present to the future, to recognize ourselves in battles that have already been fought, in hearts that have been broken before ours. Her work also describes the limits of translating the present into the terms of the past, and the past into the present, and the particular pain of finding oneself alone and grasping for connection. In her Jewish era, Rich captures the ongoing reaching that binds us to each other, as the Jewish saying goes, "now and in our time."

PART 1

“Leading Away from the Familiar”:¹

Adrienne Rich’s Oppositional Jewish Poetics, 1982-1991

“What is a Jew in solitude?
What is a woman in solitude, a queer woman or man?
...
in a world as it may be, newborn and haunted, what will
solitude mean?”
-Adrienne Rich, from “Yom Kippur 1984”

“Memory says: Want to do right? Don’t count on me.”
-from “Eastern War Time,” 1990

Beginning an exploration of her Jewish identity after the establishment of Jewish assimilation in the United States, Rich synthesized gender politics and radicalism into a new literary Jewishness that is unique in its concern for planetary suffering.² Her Jewish era, as I will call it, spans from 1968 to the early 1990s and emerges as a new American Jewish poetic and politics that resists assimilation and reinscribes Jewishness as a voice that is critical of the state (both the U.S. and Israel) and its violence absorption and eradication of its dissidents. Against the backdrop of the mid-twentieth century shift in Jewish life in the U.S., Rich’s Jewishness, considered in works such as her essay “Split at the Root” (1982) and poetic volumes

¹ From Rich’s 1982 poem “Sources.”

² I am borrowing from Gayatri Spivak’s 2003 *Death of a Discipline*, in which she offers the term to as a remedy to what Christian Moraru has called the “epistemologically patronizing and analytically confusing proximity of ‘global,’” and the “protracted crisis” this term bring to the discipline of comparative literature. I am using this term here to signal Rich’s increasing interest, during and after the 1980s, for human suffering through space and time and her simultaneous refusal to universalize human experience, her investment in particularizing pain, and her use of history to better understand and express the locus of suffering as conditional and mediated by national, racial, and economic positionality.

Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems (1986) and *Atlas of a Difficult World* (1991), sparks her radical concern for nationalized and globalized space. Critical considerations of Rich's Jewishness to date typically tack it to her mentions of Israel, limit it to a brief autobiographical note, or wave it away as an unresolved paradox of her life.³ Critic Albert Gelpi, for example, has commented that "Rich's Jewishness... poses the problem of identity most acutely. What is it for a woman, a radical feminist and a lesbian, to be a Jew? Can she separate Jewish culture, Jewish history from traditional Jewish faith?" (400). In this essay, I push this line of questioning further, to ask what Rich *as* radical lesbian feminist *does* to renew Jewishness as an oppositional political stance--and one that grants access to a planetary concern for suffering and for justice, that plumbs Jewish history and a Jewish collective imaginary to "dislodge the past of its certainties" and thus make new futures possible, as feminist historian Joan Scott has written. Resisting the historical moment's insistence on nationalization and assimilation, Adrienne Rich's Jewish era rewrites Jewishness as a category that problematizes community, solitude, and belonging, and as an identity that insists in the ethics of refusing the nation and its memory. Rich's poetry reflects an elastic sense of self, identity, time, and space that continually shifted over the six decades of her published writing--from her earliest volume, *A*

³ See Susan Sherman, "Rich Roots, New Routes," *Women's Review of Books* (1985): 3-5 and Wendy Zierler, "Your Promised Land, Your Life: American Jewish Women Writers Reflect on Zion," *Shofar* 16.4 (1998): 90-107. More recently, Rebecca Albert and Laura Levitt have also used Rich's "Split at the Root" to think through the legacy of Jewish fathers and their daughters and the patrilineal inheritance of traditional Judaism itself, in their "Jewish Feminists and Their Fathers: An Introduction," *Bridges* 14.1 (2012): 1-10. A typical note on Rich's Jewishness, such as the one provided by the Jewish Women's Archive, celebrates the Jewish tradition of social justice as a natural genesis for Rich's statements of solidarity with black liberation movements.

Change in World (1951) to her last, *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* (2010), published two years before her death in Santa Cruz, CA.

Before her Jewish era, Rich's work gravitated toward the tight, enclosed spaces that reflect the boundaries of gendered experience. "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" (1951), for example, describes a woman's embroidered or woven tigers that "prance across a screen" and that "will go on prancing, proud and unafraid" after the woman's death. Despite "the massive weight of Uncle's wedding band" and "the ordeals she was mastered by," the woman artisan in this poem gives life to the wild beasts that resist the flattening of their "screen," or the woman's confining fear of "men beneath the tree." The poem's evenly rhythmic lines in three orderly stanzas suggest the potential for creative freedom within the confines of oppressively domestic space and time.

Subsequent works repeat and trouble themes of enclosed spaces, and the movement of bodies within intimate relationships and within the nation. In "Prospective Immigrants Please Note" (1962), from *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law*, Rich's speaker considers the liminal space and time of a particularly American immigrant experience. "Either you will/go through this door/or you will not go through" the poem begins, its tight and narrow form describing a sense of the limited, tentative space and time of the uncertain body on the threshold of the nation.

Necessities of Life (1966) deepens an exploration of queer relationships positioned against a hostile country. One poem from the volume, "Like This Together" (1965), confines the lovers by the machine of modernity, and vulnerable to the treachery of

the landscape: “Wind rocks the car./We sit parked by the river,/silence between our teeth.” The question of silence, as a safeguard and as a weapon, a choice and a condition of survival, surface over and over again in Rich’s earlier work; one effect of her Jewish era will be a critical, and crucial, re-examination of these silences through her experience of Jewishness.

Rich’s work of the 1970s at times considers history in the national context, and at other times reads the past as mythic, timeless, and murky in its origins.⁴ The movement from one treatment to the other accompanies Rich’s intensifying experiments with “the commons” and the possible sites of womanly freedom and experience outside the oppressive bounds of a patriarchal national history.⁵ In 1974’s “An Old House in America,” for example, history is an external force, imagined from within the quiet confines of a lonely house within the nation. In this poem, families are boxed-in from the cold, breathing close together; the sequestering of (female) domestic life is a matter of life and death, breath itself a finite resource. Equally looming is the solitude of the speaker within this house, within the nation, outside of history: the seventh section of the poem begins “I am an American woman:/I turn that over” and ends “Most of the time, in my sex, I was alone.”

⁴ For more on mythic time and a 1970s feminist reading of its possibilities, see Rachel Blau DuPlessis’s “The Critique of Consciousness and Myth in Levertov, Rich, and Rukeyser,” published in volume 3, No. ½ of *Feminist Studies*, Autumn 1975.

⁵ The commons was an occupation of Rich’s writing during the two decades that preceded her Jewish era. Critic Stephen Voynce describes it as “both carefully and inextricably linked to ‘work’ and ‘building’,” the “familiar, the ordinary, and the demotic” and “a synonym for community” (191). I want to expand Voynce’s consideration of the commons by pointing to its genesis in the *failure* of traditional historical narratives to generate a space or time for the kind of collaborative feminist project Rich’s poetry envisions. Her work on the commons, in my reading, bridges her earlier and later (Jewish) work by centering on the problematics of history, memory, time, and the nation.

The insufferable conditions of enduring time and the nation as a woman serve to contradict the mythical time-space Rich explores in an earlier work, “5:30 A.M.” (from 1969’s *Leaflets*). Here, the speaker posits a mythical, transhistorical connection to womanhood that exists outside of the precarity of clock-time and the ever-shifting dangers it measures and prescribes. “Birds and periodic blood./Old recapitulations,” the poem begins. Then:

The fox, panting, fire-eyed,
gone to earth in my chest.
How beautiful we are,
she and I, with our auburn
pelts, our trails of blood,
our miracle escapes
our whiplash panic flogging us on
to new miracles!

Here, the naming of a specific clock time in the title is a foil to the ahistorical knowledge housed by the natural and animal world: by opening with a soulless, mechanized measuring system of modernity, Rich throws into relief the timeless wisdom of the animal in the poem. This animal, by merging with the speaker’s body, and thus the speaker’s self, can communicate what is obfuscated by the onward ticking of the clock: the hunted, doomed nature of their shared femininity. As 5:30 A.M. will turn to 5:31 A.M., and so on, the speaker/animal’s temporary existence will necessarily be ended by the inherently oppressive forces of masculinized time. In the next line the fox and the speaker are imagined as separate entities again, both marked by the “trails of blood” that announce their parallel or shared perilous conditions (the “periodic blood” announcing vulnerabilities to predators and signifying menstruation). The speaker locks the bleeding in cyclical rhythmic time, fusing it to

the natural cycles of the timeless earth; this bleeding, and the crack of panic, is also the source of the speaker/fox's strength and survival. Later in the poem, the speaker will refuse "the pills/for bleeding, pills for panic" and turn to her instinct to feel, at the level of the female body, the experience of pain that is a requirement of her survival. An interrogation of the source of this pain will resurface, alongside a new consideration of history, during Rich's Jewish era, one and a half decades later.

Rich's Jewish era ushers in a renewed historical approach that considers the self--the woman self, the queer self, and the Jewish self--embedded in complex relationships to the dates, figures, and headlines of history. Her use of Holocaust memory, and memories of herself encountering Holocaust memory, dramatizes this shift, and colors it with vibrant moral urgency. The first of Rich's poems to consider the stakes of post-World War Two Jewish memory in the United States, "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" (1968),⁶ published in *The Will to Change*, introduces a critique of Holocaust memory for its obfuscating of global suffering and the still-living oppressors who continue to write the nation's history.⁷ In five numbered parts, Rich collages prose-style first-person anecdotes, work from her

⁶ In the United States, the year 1968 saw violent attacks on leaders of the Black Panther Party by the police; the My Lai massacre in Vietnam; student anti-war protests squashed by police and military officers; the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; as well as various movements for national independence around the globe.

⁷ As opposed to the positioning of the United States as the leader of a world which would "never again" see a Holocaust, and the temporal separation between the destruction of the Jews in Europe in the 1940s and the contemporary persecution of various groups--including Jews during the U.S. McCarthy era just a decade later. This rhetorical use of national remembrance to separate past from presence is described by political philosopher Bob Meister as "the past [that] is evil so long as the evil is in the past" (Meister 200).

students in the Open Admissions Program at City College of New York, and verse stanzas, exploding the scope of the poem to treat both the distant past and the imagined future, the intimacy of relationships and the expanse of space. Urgently addressing the immediacy of the historical moment, the poem anticipates Rich's Jewish era by refusing a Jewish identity and Jewish memory that neglects worlded suffering.

The first section of the poem provides the background for the problematic of the title. "My neighbor, a scientist and art-collector," it begins, "telephones me in a state of violent emotion." After recounting how the neighbor's son and the speaker's son burned a mathematics textbook in the backyard, the neighbor forbids the speaker's son from visiting for a week and keeps his own son indoors during that time. The neighbor is quoted: "'The burning of a book,' he says, 'arouses terrible sensations in me, memories of Hitler; there are few things that upset me so much as the idea of burning a book.'" This neighbor, whose description as a "scientist and art-collector" positions him as one who might clinically observe, document, and preserve dominant culture, is "violent" in his fear. The destruction of books--a textbook, specifically--is terrifying to him both for its role in the destruction of written culture, and posits culture as something that is written and preserved. Traumatized or blinded by the refusal to see history repeat itself in the burning of a book, the neighbor also refuses to acknowledge other ways it might repeat itself: in his "violent fear," for example, or in his own decree that the bodies of children must be sequestered and controlled. The scientist horrified by the ruining of a mathematics textbook is,

perhaps, also rattled by the “terrible sensations”--the affective reactions that cannot be registered by intellectual cognition alone.

The section continues with a turn to verse, which describes a sense of history that complicates the sanctity of the recorded word. “Back there:” the verse begins, shifting to a time and place far away from the contemporary, quotidian, and compressed time of the phone call:

Back there: the library, walled
with green Britannicas
Looking again
in Dürer’s *Complete Works*
for MELANCHOLIA, the baffled woman.

In the nameless, timeless era of this stanza, encyclopedias (named for the empire whose knowledge they house) form the wall of the library’s structure and its function: to control and distribute a very specific kind of knowledge. “Looking again,” the speaker is looping time, repeating it through her act of gazing, or searching through the books, and refusing to shut it in the past.

This section treats the figure of woman, and memory itself, as objects who have been locked in the static chamber of history in the library. Dürer’s *Complete Works* “personify melancholy as a woman,”⁸ while the all-caps “MELANCHOLIA” suggests the Freudian definition of the response to loss that, because it is not fully understood, is registered and trapped in the unconscious mind as a pathological response to grief. If the “baffled woman” has been frozen in time, so too has the

⁸ According to a note in the Norton edition.

memory of the Holocaust, housed and sequestered by the foreboding, walled stacks of the library. The stanzas continue:

and they take the book away
because I dream of her too often

love and fear in a house
knowledge of the oppressor
I know it hurts to burn

Love and fear are powerful, conflicting, and governing emotions--animated, here, as the inhabitants of a domestic space--that might describe the experience of yearning for and fearing text, history, grief, and the forces that have come to house them. The houses of Rich's earlier poems, which often separate the speakers from the wider world, are invoked here in a meter that rocks the speaker out of books, out of dreams, and out of the reach of "they" who take them both away. The last line, anchored by steady and searing iambs, commits to the destructive necessity of the burning of the house, the oppressor, and the love and fear of his knowledge. This stanza also invokes Audre Lorde's statement that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us to temporarily beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (27).⁹ Here, the sanctification of memory--and Holocaust memory in particular--is positioned as a tool of the

⁹ The relationship between Rich and Lorde is most often recognized by Rich's inclusion of Lorde, and of Alice Walker, in her acceptance of the 1974 National Book Award for *Diving into the Wreck*, which the three accepted "in the name of all women whose voices have gone and still go unheard in a patriarchal world." The same year also saw the acceptance of the same award by Allen Ginsberg for *The Fall of America: Poems of These States*, which celebrates and denigrates the notably masculine American literary impulse in the tradition of Whitman. Claudia Rankine, the American poet who edited the collection works of Rich published just last year, has written that "both poets were able to question their own everyday practices of collusion with the very systems that oppressed them" ("Adrienne Rich's Poetic Transformations" 3) and that in doing so Rich was brought "closer to the ethical lives of her readers even as she wrote poems that at times lost patience with our culture's inability to change alongside them" (5).

oppressor, preventing a confrontation with contemporary Jewish complicity in structures of power (and of race specifically, as we will soon see), as Jewish inclusion in these structures as a reward of history for past pain and suffering. Rich paints this view of history as a melancholy that cannot be released in the ongoing present.

The poem's third section, an excerpt from Rich's student's writing, clarifies the stakes of remembering the "past as evil" and the "evil as past." "*People suffer highly in poverty,*" the section begins. "*Some of the suffering are: a child did not had dinner last night: a child steal because he did not have money to buy it: to hear a mother say she do not have money to buy food for her children...*" Suffering experienced by children, and the contemporary circumstances that have created that suffering, exist in the immediate moment and cannot be resolved; the non-standard English of the passage, and the italics that indicate a shift in focalization, suggest that this suffering is that kind that will not or cannot be understood by the narratives of dominant text, memory, or culture. The poem thus turns to other voices--voices which have been silenced, edged out, and marginalized--to speak for themselves. Here, the speaker picks up Jewish memory in post-World War Two culture in order to set it down, refusing Jewish identity and memory that neglects the suffering of others. "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children" quivers with quiet anger of the deployment of the Holocaust toward a nationalism that willfully forgets suffering caused by U.S. institutions, and demands that institutionalized Holocaust memory must be critiqued, not sanctified, if American Jews are to act in solidarity with marginalized people in this moment.

“Split at the Root,” Rich’s 1982 autobiographical essay, deepens this engagement with issues of nation, identity, history, and belonging by positioning Rich herself in an intimate encounter with Holocaust memory as it has been presented by the nation.¹⁰ The essay, which I argue is the locus of Rich’s Jewish period, is itself a series of memories, etched within a discourse of U.S. historical motifs. Rich opens the essay with a reflection of her own work: “In a long poem written in 1960, when I was thirty-one years old, I described myself as ‘Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew,/Yankee nor Rebel.’ I was still trying to have it both ways: to be neither/nor...” (224). Rich thus posits her first movement to reclaim her Jewishness as an act of choosing a side--though we will see that the figure of the Jew, for Rich and for the nation, elides a stable definition within the American twentieth century.¹¹ In her essay’s reflections of her poetic account of herself as a Jew, Rich rethinks her Jewishness as linked inextricably to the significance of the Jewish figure as national outsider. To embrace this figure in the historical moment of the 1980s--after winning the National Book Award, in 1974, and arguably becoming a figure of the national imaginary herself--is to claim a subjectivity in the nation’s history that resists

¹⁰ As Ernest Renan, French philosopher and historian (and noted anti-Semite), wrote in his 1882 essay “What is Nation?,” the nation is connected by “the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together” (Renan 83). “Where national memories are concerned,” he continued, “griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort” (Renan 83). One hundred years after Renan, Rich’s period of Jewish exploration is set against the backdrop of the nationalizing and universalizing force of Jewish memory in America.

¹¹ Posing the argument for her Jewishness in these terms, however, is a way to reconcile with her patrilineal Jewish heritage: “My mother is a gentile. In Jewish law I cannot count myself a Jew. If it is true that ‘we think back through our mothers if we are women’ (Virginia Woolf)--and I myself have affirmed this--then even according to lesbian theory, I cannot (or need not?) count myself a Jew” (Rich 225).

assimilation and demands a reading of history outside of the state's memorializing machine.

The essay goes on to describe the pivotal moment of Rich's encounter with nationalized Holocaust memory as a formative experience of her Jewishness. The memory itself is introduced by the year. "Sometime in 1946," having read in the newspaper that a movie theater in her hometown of Baltimore would be showing newsreels of Allied liberation of Nazi camps, Rich heads to the showing without telling her parents.

Alone, I went downtown after school one afternoon and watched the stark, blurry, but unmistakable newsreels. When I try to go back and touch the pulse of the girl of sixteen, growing up in many ways so precocious and so ignorant, I am overwhelmed by a memory of despair, a sense of inevitability... It came to me that every one of those piles of corpses, mountains of shoes and clothing had contained, simply, individuals... Writing this now, I feel belated rage that I... had to figure out by myself what this did mean for me. That I had never been taught about resistance, only about passing. (228)

The contents of the newsreel are conspicuously absent from the passage at its beginning, but an American reader in the twentieth century surely must know what is contained in the "stark" and "blurry" footage: the skeletal bodies, the hollowed eyes...

Feeling both "alone" and "overwhelmed," lost in the crowd of the theater in the city, Rich experiences the horror of the camps, unsure, as she says later, whether the bodies she saw in the newsreel were "them" or "us." The moment of hesitancy here, before the image of the "piles of corpses" enter the passage, creates in its absence a sense of the baffling and silencing horror--for the victims themselves, and

for Rich's ambivalent sense of belonging. Her initiation into Jewishness complicates her earlier exploration of "the commons." In this account of Rich's Jewish era, the collaborative, positive site of the commons is scrambled by the speaker's unsettling sense of having been flattened by the experience of distinctly American viewership (the city of Baltimore, the Allied troops, the theater). The clothing that once "contained" people simultaneously underscore the individual who has been emptied out of history.¹²

"Split at the Root" describes the person watching the newsreels in gendered and embodied terms, and recasts an origin story for Rich's interest in language and the political project of un-silencing: she wants to feel the young girl's pulse, and to find the language to inscribe the rebellion in its beat. The instinct to ask questions about her position, within the audience, as a Jew (whose community would be shown within the "stark and blurry footage") *and* as an American poise her to critique the homogenizing force of this kind of nationalized collective memory.

"What I remember," she writes, "were the films and having questions that I could not even phrase, such as *Are those men and women 'them' or 'us'?* To be able to ask even the child's astonished question *Why do they hate us so?* means knowing how to say "we" (229). In the era of Rich's work that considers historical and contemporary

¹² By 1982, Jewish memory of the Holocaust had been fully undertaken as a project of the U.S. national imaginary, and issues of audience and witness had been central to this project. Novick points to NBC's 1978 miniseries *Holocaust* as "without a doubt the most important moment in the entry of the Holocaust into general American consciousness," adding that the viewing of the program--a fictionalized account of one family's journey through ghettos, camps, and post-war Europe--was a "public ritual" (209, 233). This homogenized viewership/nation is regulated by the ethics of mourning and remembrance as they are mediated by the state. Rich's ambivalent induction into this community of Jews, Americans, and American Jews is engaged with her need to resist its homogenizing triangulation.

Jewish positionality, the “we” in question will be strenuously interrogated. In attempting to divest from Jewish complicity in U.S. exceptionalism, Rich will also examine her own investments in the positions of oppression and privilege, exclusion and belonging, occupied by herself and her Jewish family across space and time.

Alongside her essay “Split at the Root,”¹³ Rich’s twenty-three-part multi-focal prose-poem hybrid “Sources” (written in the same year) probes questions of “resistance,” “passing,” and the stakes of contemporary Jewishness. This poem realizes the need for “writing as revision” to reconcile the present with the past. Shifting vocalities register tentative or painful drawing back into the past that the speaker has been eager, perhaps, to forget. In prose sections throughout the poem, “Sources” integrates aspects of Rich’s autobiographical account by addressing the speaker’s Jewish father and husband, while the poem’s free verse stanzas recall spaces and figures of Rich’s earlier work. This poem radically deviates from Rich’s prior poems, however, in its consideration of Jewish identity as a “source” that must be encountered, interrogated, animated, and integrated into the speaker’s most honest engagement with the contemporary moment of worlded suffering.¹⁴ In so

¹³ Published in *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986)

¹⁴ On the distance, and possibility, of poetry vs. that of autobiography, Rich once quoted the poet Muriel Rukeyser, who said, “Breathe in experience, breathe out poetry.” Rich’s 1987 essay “On the Genesis of Yom Kippur 1984” explained the “sense of transmutation” that comes with creating poetry out of life experience: “something has to happen between the breathing in of experience and the breathing out of poetry. It has been transformed, not only into words but into something new” (253). The poetic consideration of the essay’s themes of identity, community, “passing,” and “resistance” allow a radical literary, textual, and interpretive spaciousness that resists the hard definitions we may be more compelled to provide in autobiographical or factual accounts.

doing, “Sources” imagines radical possibilities for re-instating Jewishness as a category that might resist contemporary projects of statehood and nationality.

The first two sections of the poem recollect places, figures, and patterns that shape the speaker’s alienated sense of space and time. “Sixteen years” the poem begins, recalling, as Albert Gelpi has pointed out, the “imaginative matrix” of the house in 1974’s “From an Old House in America” (Gelpi 397). The first stanza sketches the shapes of the familiar landscape, the “rusting car,” “collapsed sugar-house,” the “new young wife,” suggesting the anachronistic limitations of a woman trapped in the decaying rubble of a time that has passed. The spacing in this first stanza suggest the rapid movement of the scene through the windows of a car, or through the misshapen lens of memory, and the lines lists the names we might imagine decorate the roads, houses, or mailboxes. “No names of mine,” the speaker concludes, registering her estrangement from this crumbling scene.

The first line in the next stanza references another earlier poem, Rich’s 1967 “5:30 A.M.”; we are thus engaged in the work of revisitation, or recollection, and a retracing of the various ways the speaker has yearned to identify with her world:

The vixen I met at twilight on Rought 5
south of Willoughby: long dead. She was an omen
to me, surviving, herding her cubs
in the silvery bend of the road
in nineteen sixty-five

The creature here--a fox who shared “periodic blood” and “old recapitulations” two decades before--is remembered for her connection to the speaker, for her survival, and for her motherhood; this figure is diminished through time and space, left on the

movement, a reluctant venturing back into the “eternal forms”--a wary turn toward Jewishness as a fraught, but critical, source of these forms.

The third section, however, does not answer why, when, or how, but rather asks another question: “From *where?* the voice asks coldly.”

Old things. . .
*From where does your strength come, you Southern Jew?
split at the root, raised in a castle of air?*

The old things are now named, specifically, coldly, and the gauntlet is suddenly thrown. The new direction of the journey: the fusing of the broken self, the grounding of an imaginary shelter, and the encountering of the Jewish self rooted in the American South. “*With whom do you believe your lot is cast?/From where does your strength come?*” the voice asks again, in the fourth section.

The acerbic tone of these questions of inclusion and belonging, which had been asked with compassion for the childhood self in “Split at the Root,” points to a critique of the Jewish exchange of assimilation for racial privilege, especially significant in the charged American South. The issue of “where” is a critical one in the space of the poem, and in the work that “Sources” does to re-write and re-contextualize Jewish history in the twentieth century.¹⁵ In his *Strangers in the Land: Blacks, Jews, Post-Holocaust America* (2005) Eric Sundquist outlines how the religious and cultural sanctification of the Holocaust in America contributed to a

¹⁵ As Rich explores in her poetry, Jewish communal identity has long been occupied by concerns of space and place--places of oppression, diasporic scattering, and the messianic promise of liberation through the reclamation of land. This was realized, some would say, by the 1948 creation of the State of Israel.

growing divide between Jews and blacks. A sense of Jewish protection for the tender relationship to the Holocaust and the loss in Europe--a consciousness raised at a moment coinciding with the sudden catapulting of Jews into white American middle class experience by way of several social factors, including the G.I. Bill--caused some insular protectiveness, a huddling around the images, the guilt, the testimony of the survivors. As Jews huddled together in the aftermath of the Holocaust, a “...catastrophic suffering, the survival of genocide... [as] their only source of moral authority” (437), a possible reason for (his reading of) the erosion to black-Jewish solidarity.¹⁶

In Sundquist’s analysis, the state of belonging in the United States diminished Jewish solidarity with certain black activist critique--specifically, that of America as a nation inherently racist, exclusionary, and impossible to change. Jews “reset the course of American liberalism--its promise that all could belong to the nation, as well as the seeming demise of the idea of one nation to which all could belong” (527). Section III of Rich’s “Sources” historicizes a moment of Jewish oppression in the American South, aligning the vulnerability of Jewish otherness with that of black

¹⁶ Additionally, Sundquist points to The Six-Day War in Israel, wherein Israel captured the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights, and fortified both Israeli military might and a triumphant rebuttal of a critique of Jews as marching, unarmed, towards the gas chambers of Europe. A new view of Israel as a possible aggressor arguably shifted a Jewish collective identity from the “moral authority” of Holocaust survival to a new protectiveness about the necessity of Jewish armament in Israel. That the discussion of the ethical issue of Jewish armament took place only in relation to discourse around Israel underscores both a sense of Jewish security in the United States and a sense that American Jewish community extended to Israel#. Meanwhile, the discourse of black armament, coupled with that of a return to Africa, speaks to the question of not only black safety in the United States, but black belonging.

folks.¹⁷ The question of “where” cannot be answered by describing a lineage of “these, surely,/Protestant separatists, Jew-baiters, nightriders/who fired in Irasburg in nineteen-sixty-eight/on a black family newly settled in these hills”; but that moment of shared experience is lodged in the past. “*With whom do you believe your lot is cast?/From where does your strength come?*” the poem rephrases and repeats at the beginning of Section IV. “I think somehow,/somewhere/every poem of mine must repeat those questions.” These questions of belonging, of strength, of alienation, and of survival are not satisfied by the answers of the past; like Jewishness itself, they are questions that evade stable answers. Instead, they must be re-cast with every poem, and with every era.¹⁸

Section V re-considers the United States, and specifically the Southern United States, as a critical location for the shifting stakes of assimilation (what Rich would call “passing” in the essay “Split at the Root”) and survival. This line of recollection, like the essay, revisits Holocaust memory in the United States and its place within the U.S. national imaginary.

All during World War II
I told myself I had some special destiny:
there had to be a reason
I was not living in a bombed-out house
or cellar hiding out with rats

¹⁷ For further discussion of Jewish assimilation in the United States after World War II, and subsequent effects on whiteness, race relations, and U.S. neo-liberalism, see Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America* (Rutgers University Press, 1998).

¹⁸ Section IV ends: “in the beginning we grasp whatever we can/to survive.” The “in the beginning” evokes a textually Jewish genesis to questions of survival; the first line of the Book of Genesis itself is “In the beginning...” The phrasing of the question in terms of “lots” also alludes to several Jewish texts and liturgies, including the story of Purim (which turns on themes of infiltrating authority for Jewish liberation and survival) and the Yom Kippur service.

there had to be a reason
I was growing up safe, American
with sugar rationed in a Mason jar

These lines chronicle the deployment of American nationalism in the wake of the Holocaust as a bastion of democratic comfort and safety (the sweet sugar, the rations that denote the communal sacrifice of wartime, the Mason jar both a folksy relic of farm life and a nod to the secretive fraternal order of the Masons).¹⁹ Against the backdrop of World War II, the speaker imagined a “reason” for her “special destiny,” but the moment of consciousness through which we hear her now shifts and blurs the spatiotemporal landscape. We are told of the spaces that had not housed her at that time. But from where, in space and time, does she address us now?

The next lines destabilize the speaker’s position. Split at the root, she must encounter not just her Jewish and gentile parentage, but the price of survival and passing--the mask of white skin--that absorbs her into the “social christian” project of post-World War II America.

split at the root white-skinned social christian
neither gentile nor Jew

These stanzas anticipate the poem’s problematizing of a “chosen people,” and Rich’s call to examine a Jewish “special destiny” in the context of a newly Americanized post-war Jewry. For a person who “refuses to be a seeker of cures,” nationalization imperils an oppositional identity, posited at the beginning of the poem as a critical

¹⁹ This group also included the founding fathers and a persecuted group of Nazi Germany.

piece to survival in a hostile world. “In the beginning we grasp whatever we can,” ends Section VI, echoing across a now-distant time and space. The poem also asks: If we are no longer at “the beginning,” what is our responsibility to this moment? How do we face history to carve out the future we desire?

If the first sections of “Sources” describe the urgent requirement to turn away from what “Split at the Root” called “passing,” the last sections turn reflect a struggle to teach *oneself* “about resistance.” This task is most explicitly explored through a visceral and embodied appraisal of Israel, Zionism, and Jewish nationalism in the Middle East. Section XVI begins:

The Jews I’ve felt rooted among
are those who were turned to smoke

These lines invoke both the loss of the Jewish people, the need to refigure the Jew as the perennial subject of state persecution in the context of the shifting geopolitical landscape, and the significance of the loss of this anti-nationalist stance to the speaker. The stanza continues, addressing a second person reminiscent of Rich’s father in “Split at the Root”:

yet dying you followed the Six Day War
with desperate attention
and this summer I lie awake at dawn

sweating the Middle East through my brain
wearing the star of David

on a thin chain at my breastbone

The first mention of Israel does not name the nation, but makes its presence known through the naming of the 1967 war that expanded its borders and its recognition in

U.S. consciousness.²⁰ A nation conceived of Holocaust memory, deputized for war, troubles the “thin chain” of Jewishness worn around the speaker’s neck. Awake between night and morning, caught between the desire for heritage and the pain of witnessing the suffering of others, the speaker is trapped in another liminal state that refuses to ground her anywhere but her body. She “sweats” the Middle East (the entire region, not just the State of Israel) through her “brain,” suggesting a process that is more visceral than intellectual; the image of her “breastbone” abandons the language of the “safe, American” life and joins the poem’s circulating shadows of bodies damaged by violence, war, and neglect. As I will discuss later, Rich’s Jewish writing lingers on this liminal state and refuses the clear boundaries of “then” and “now” to open new possibilities for reading the reverberations of the past in the present.

Finally, Section XIX identifies with the project--explored in Rich’s earlier works--of building new life, but turns fully away from Jewish nationalism as a “cure” for suffering. “I think of the women who sailed to Palestine/years before I was born--*halutzot*, pioneers/believing in new life.” These women pioneers (in Hebrew, *halutzot*), “excitable” and “sharp of tongue” revisit, or anticipate, the

²⁰ The Six Day War (June 6-11, 1967) saw Israel’s defeat of Syria, Jordan, and Egypt and its taking of the Gaza Strip, the land west of the Jordan River, the Old City of Jerusalem, and the Golan Heights in Syria. This war also inspired a new era of Jewish iconography. Far from the images of the pale *shtetl* scholar or the photos of the gaunt and dying victims of the concentration camps, the Six Day War saw a rebranding of the Israeli Jew as a militarized action figure hero for democracy and freedom, vanquishing the oppressive desert and his Muslim foes. Amy Kaplan has described the mass popularity of Leon Uri’s 1958 novel *Exodus*, and its movie adaptation in 1960 (starring Paul Newman) toward this end. Describing the rise of Israel in favorable American consciousness during the late 1960s, Kaplan also points to the rise of McCarthyism, and a distrust of all decolonialist movements--including the Palestinians’--for potentially housing communist sympathies.

speaker's own sense of dread at having been, in Section II, "turned on" by a "violent master:"

that the life she gives her life to
shall not turn on her

that the life she gives her life to
shall want an end to suffering

Zion by itself is not enough

Juxtaposing "suffering" at the end of one line with "Zion" at the beginning of the next points to the disaster of exercising strength through the acquisition of land. The repetition of the strength that turns on the female subject connotes the dual project of new Jewish nationalisms in the U.S. and in Israel, and the soul-damaging cost of giving up the oppositional self.

"Sources" envisions the recommencement of radical oppositionality in the project of claiming herself as a Jewish woman, "here and in other tracts of the globe," unrested in nation, in the familiar, or in the known. "I have wished I could rest among the beautiful and common weeds," the end of the last section of "Sources" begins. "But there is no finite knowing, no such rest. Innocent birds, deserts, morning-glories, point to choices, leading away from the familiar. When I speak of suffering I don't mean anesthesia. I mean knowing the world...as a powerful and womanly series of choices: and here I write the words, in their fullness: powerful; womanly." These "choices," specifically the choice to "lead away from the familiar" and the "finite," will lead Rich to a new oppositional understanding of the world, its texts, and its unstable landscape.

“Yom Kippur 1984,” part of *Your Native Land, Your Life*, commits to the revolutionary possibilities of refusing a landed collectivity, and uses Jewish expression to re-inscribe Rich’s earlier commitment to the rewriting of history.^{21 22} “What is a Jew in solitude?” the poem begins, before defining what solitude might mean in terms of what it does not:

The glassy, concrete octagon suspended from the cliffs
with its electric gate, its perfected privacy
is not what I mean
the pick-up with a gun parked at a turn-out in Utah or the Golan
Heights
is not what I mean
the poet’s tower facing the western ocean, acres of forest planted to
the east, the woman reading in the cabin, her
attack dog suddenly risen
is not what I mean

The hard geometry of a structure hangs precariously, crackling against intruders; the car with the gun or at the Israeli/Syria border; the poet whose insulating “tower” faces toward the ocean but away from Jerusalem--the speaker acknowledges, and

²¹ *The Will to Change* (1971), for example, includes poems such as “Diving into the Wreck” (1972), which ends with “a book of myths/in which/our names do not appear,” and “A Valediction Forbidding Mourning” (1970), an overwriting of John Donne’s poem by the same name. In “The Burning of Paper Instead of Children,” which is included in the volume, the speaker lists texts whose very titles (“the crocodiles in Herodotus/the Book of the Dead/the *Trial of Jeanne d’Arc*) allude to ancient dangers and the braving of a perilous history for the hope of liberation. The poem concludes that “knowledge of the oppressor/this the oppressor’s language/yet I need it to talk to you.” This line takes up several themes of the previous decades, including survival’s requirement for knowing and speaking the language of the oppressor and the perennial project of connecting to others in ways previously unvoiced and therefore impossible.

²² Yom Kippur, the Jewish Day of Atonement, is considered the holiest day of the year and the chance to reflect on harms the individual has committed against the self, against God, but largely against others. It is a day of personal reflection and a commitment to perpetual spiritual renewal, traditionally experienced in the context of a day-long religious service within the synagogue. The holiday’s structure, which features the individual’s critique of herself as a member of the community, is reflected by the poem’s content, which plays with the potential--or refusal--of immersion within a collectivity.

refuses, the guarded, armed, and isolated figure within spaces, or creatures (the attack dog; the planted forest) that have been bent to human will. She recognizes her past self within this view of solitude, however:

Three thousand miles from what I once called home
I open a book searching for some lines I remember
about flowers, something to bind me to this coast as lilacs in the
dooryard once
bound me back there--yes, lupines on a burnt mountainside,
something that bloomed and faded and was written down
in the poet's book, forever:
Opening the poet's book
I find the hatred in the poet's heart...

Ideas of home, and nature--once bound together in Rich's work--are alienated and rejected by the distance of time and space together. Through this retrospective, "a" book that the speaker turns is then "the poet's book," whose content ("lupines on a burnt mountainside") and function have both faded and been permanently inscribed within the speaker's history. She is looking to be "bound" to the coast, to the country, but like the mountain flower destroyed in the fire, she is swept away from a place of rootedness, and a sense of history. Where Rich's earlier work found solace in the rhythms of nature, this work denaturalizes and alienates the speaker's desire for cyclical return and refuses the land, and the poetry, as a stable text.

Several stanzas later, the poem calls for solidarity--an expansion on its declaration that "any rift among you/means power to those who want to do you in"--and Jewishness alongside blackness, queerness, and womanhood as "the Stranger(s)" that are posed precariously against the dangerously looming world.

who are hated as being of our kind: faggot kicked into the icy
river, woman dragged from her stalled car

into the mist-struck mountains, used and hacked to death
young scholar shot at the university gates on a summer evening
walk, his prizes and studies nothing, nothing
availing his blackness
Jew deluded that she's escaped the tribe, the laws of her exclusion...
...hiking alone...
(did she die as a queer or as a Jew?)

The sense of guarded preparedness in the earlier stanza is revisited, the promise of violence made real for the intruders of the "world that is." The mountains are struck, or petrified, by an obfuscating mist; the summer evening is placidly unobservant of the scholar's accomplishments, or his demise; and the "foot of the hills" in which the Jewish woman "found with a swastika carved in her back at the foot of the hills" have kicked aside the woman along with her attackers. There is no refuge to be found in the promise of land.

The poem calls instead for the daring to destroy the false sense of landed security by finding strength in Biblical tales of destruction and renewal. The final stanza repeats the refrain of the first:

What is a Jew in solitude?
What is a woman in solitude, a queer woman or a man?
When winter flood-tides wrench the tower from the rock,
crumble the prophet's headland, and the farms slide
into the sea
when leviathan is endangered and Jonah becomes revenger
when center and edges are crushed together, the extremities
crushed together on which the world was founded
when our souls crash together, Arab and Jew, howling our
loneliness within the tribes
when the refugee child and the exile's child re-open the blasted
and forbidden city
when we refuse to be women and men as women and men
are chartered, tell our stories of solitude spent in multitude
in that world as it may be, newborn and haunted, what will
solitude mean?

The stanza calls not just for the destruction of land, but the destruction of its institutions--the tower on the rock, the university, the octagonal fortress. It is a demand not for inclusion in the "world that is" as it is populated by its icy rivers, "barbed-wire and searchlights," but for a totally evacuated landscape and the chance for a new beginning, an implosion of the "extremities crushed together on which the world was founded." The souls of the "Arab and Jew," each of whom could be described by the following line's "refugee child" or "exile's child," move the stanza's concern from the mythical time of the biblical cities to the contemporary urgency and drama of Israeli land. It is these children who might take the first human action of the stanza, by "re-opening" the destroyed city; the next possible action will be by the "women and men" who might "refuse" authoritative mobilization ("chartering") of their gendered bodies.

Like the poet's book, permanently locked in "bloomed and faded" text, or the ashes of lupines on a burnt mountainside, the world itself, once (re)born, will be haunted by memories of its past life. This construction echoes the poem's call to act, to rewrite history, and to recontextualize land against history as it has long been inscribed. Who will Jonah avenge? The God that has sent him out, tracked him down, and trapped him in the belly of a beast? Or the sea itself, which caused his shipwreck?²³ The "leviathan"²⁴ connotes both the sea creature that swallowed Jonah

²³ The story of Jonah, itself featured in both the Hebrew bible and the Koran, is read aloud to the community during Yom Kippur; its themes of repentance and the requirement for corrective action are central to the holiday.

²⁴ According to the original Hebrew, actually a fish

in his moment of refusing to reach out to the sinners of another nation, but also the title of Thomas Hobbes' theory on the social contract, which argues for the rule of an absolute sovereign. The leviathan "endangered" demands an end to captive decision-making and the dismissal of sovereign power.²⁵ "Yom Kippur 1984" calls for a new Jewish agenda, deeply rooted in American text, that refuses to accept that history might justify the suffering of others.

By the end of the twentieth century, the work of Adrienne Rich's Jewish era lent itself to poems of intense, sweeping, lockjawed urgency. From "An Atlas of a Difficult World" (1991):

... In the classroom
eight-year-old faces are grey. The teacher knows which
have not broken fast that day,
remembers the Black Panthers spooning cereal.

Grey-faced children are bound by the spatial (the government-run classroom) and the temporal (childhood within the confines of this space). The quotidian breakfast-making of the Black Panthers punches through history, through the teacher's memory, dramatizing the need that still exists, the hunger that has not been satisfied, the failure of state and bureaucracy to care for its children. The ahistorical vision of

²⁵ Literary texts themselves are recast in the scope of this poem. The "multitudes" the speaker rejects time and again allude to Walt Whitman's definitive "I contain multitudes" statement, itself written in a proud surveyal of the American continent. On her own inner life, the speaker contends: "If a cloud knew loneliness and fear, I would be that cloud"--a reference to William Wordsworth's "I wander lonely as a cloud" and a statement of very human alienation and a resistance to the concept of a self reflected in the natural world. "The grey Pacific unrolling/its scrolls of surf" posits nature as a text--a potentially ancient text--that she who finds herself "drifting from the center" must regard as a palimpsest produced by power, to be read with caution.

common experience, central to Rich's work in the early 1970s, is sharpened by the naming of specific times, places, and people to "include us all in the responsibility for self and society" (Gelpi 400). Even more so, Rich's later work opens the category of Jewishness in the second half of the twentieth century as one that might be instrumental for conceiving of self, memory, and revolutionary acts unbound by the nation. Articulating Jewishness, queerness, and womanness as inseparable ways of being, Rich reanimates Jewishness as a voice of the critical outsider. "There is something more than food, humor, a turn of phrase, a gesture of the hands: there is something more," Rich writes in "Sources." "It still outlives."

PART II

“if I dare imagine her surviving”: Translating History with Adrienne Rich

“One of the way to get around the confines of one’s ‘identity’ as one produces expository prose is to work at someone else’s title, as one works with language that belongs to many others. This, after all, is one of the seductions of translating... Language is not everything. It is only a vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries.”

-Gayatri Spivak, *“The Politics of Translation”* (312-313)

“to our life--this still unexcavated hole called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.”

-Adrienne Rich, *“Twenty-One Love Poems”*

Resisting assimilation is at the core of Adrienne Rich’s historical project. At a moment of Jewish absorption into--and contribution to the definition of--the U.S. cultural, political, and socio-economic mainstream, Rich aimed the multidirectional pieces of her individual identity toward the examination of a collective resistance through historical interrogation and interpretation. “As a woman, as a feminist, as a Jew, as a lesbian, I am pursued by questions of historical process, of historical responsibility, questions of historical consciousness and ignorance and what these have to do with power,” she stated in a lecture given at Scripps College in 1983 (137). As we have seen, Rich’s Jewish engagement and exploration in the 1980s shifted her description of historical connection from one rooted in female biology and the common experience of a feminine universal¹ to a focus on specific moments in time and place. Her insistence on capturing these spatiotemporal beats reflects Rich’s desire to enter into a reciprocal relationship with history-- to “not just integrate its

¹ For more on Rich’s thoughts on the poetic universal ascribed to the canonical poets she admired in her youth, see her essay “When We Dead Awaken,” published in *Lies, Secrets, and Silences* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1979).

meaning into your life, but to integrate your personal life into history,” as she said before a reading of her 1980 poem “For Ethel Rosenberg.” This desired relationship is negotiated, as ever, through language, and through the translational requirements of intimacy with a historical and linguistic other.

The urge or impulse to translate human historical events and figures into the terms of the present mirrors the use of translation to uncover a human experience that transcends language--that speaks to something universally shared across time, as equally possible in this moment as in the last one. We see this thinking in arguments along all points of the political spectrum, from leftist anti-Zionists decrying Israeli occupation of Gaza by comparing Israeli soldiers to the Nazis enforcing death and squalor in the Warsaw Ghetto, to right-wing Jews and non-Jews insisting on the requirement for a Jewish homeland in Israel as a preventative measure against history “repeating itself” and once again rendering diasporic Jews subjects of oppression for their landless precarity. (I also have also observed this inclination to flatten history in light of the Holocaust in the anecdote of a Jewish American who, recalling his travels across Europe by train last summer, remarked in awe-struck tones that had he been in Europe seventy years ago, he would be taking a “very different” journey by train.) All of these lines of thinking disregard both the spatial and temporal specifics of the Holocaust (while playing on the very real trauma, and reverberating intergenerational effects of the events in Europe) in a way that also diminishes our specific and personal investments in Holocaust memory and the ways these investments are mediated by our political and positional realities.

Since the inclusion of Holocaust witness testimony in U.S. national historical projects, memories of the Holocaust are deployed to warn, advise, or indicate something about human experience that flattens the specifics of our shifting political and positional realities and the ways these realities are shaped by time and place. Debarati Sanyal, building on Michael Rothberg's notion of "multidirectional memory" in her *Memory and Complicity: Migrations of Holocaust Remembrance* (2015), argues that we must think about Holocaust memory as mobile across time and place but also that it is unethical to think of ourselves as outside "our sometimes contradictory position within the historical fabric of a given moment, as victims, as perpetrators, accomplices, bystanders, witnesses, or spectators (1). She goes on to comment that "the Holocaust's unmooring from its historical occurrence, its *movement* across space and time, is the condition of its relevance for other histories of violation and victimization...[l]iterature demands the practice of what...we might call a multidirectional *ethics* whose solidarities emerge from a sustained reflection on complicity" (4-9).

Literature adds the dimension of language to the ethics of examining history in its specific time and space. Translation theories have wrestled with the ethics of how "bad translation" might be doing violence to the original text, or whether, as Benjamin argues, translation ensures the "continuing life" of the original *because* it is subject to the shifts in meaning and significance (as well as changes in time and space) (76). What cannot be translated, either from one language to the next or from one historical moment to the next--also allows for potentially transformative

interpretations of what Derrida calls “the remainder.” This “excess that eludes” an exactly reproductional discourse, writes feminist historian Joan Scott, “is where the radical potential might lie, where the kernel of nonsense is the subject--the excess that escapes the law” (12). Rich’s work on both memory and translation, subjects that are highly present during her Jewish era, restlessly returns to specific sites of memory (as discussed in the first section’s treatment of the house in “Old House in America” and in “Sources”), and to the ways examining the narrative, emotional, and political remainders of national myth-making can unrest new and urgent possibilities for writing history.

“Open the book of tales you knew by heart,” opens Rich’s 1988 poem, “Living Memory,” published in a volume titled *Time’s Power*, “begin driving the old roads again/repeating the old sentences, which have changed/ minutely from the wordings you remembered.” Here, the changes in language open memory’s tense, infusing it with the concerns of the present, with the concerns of the self. “The villages are shut/for the night, the woods are open/and soon you arrive at a crossroads/where late, late in time you recognize/part of yourself is buried,” ends the first stanza. Unburying the dormant self is here a critical operation of language and of unresting memory--not from historical specifics, but from foreclosed possibilities of the future self and community. “Your memories crouched, foreshortened in our text,” the poem continues, “Pages torn New words crowding the old.”

Rich anticipates more recent conversations about the nature of cultural and collective memory as a “process, rather than [a] site,” as Susannah Radstone has

described it, and one that “constructs the past *in the present*” (110-111). While the post-World War II emphasis on witness testimony often understands memory as a faithful transmission (or translation) of one moment to the next, and interprets memory as evidence of universalist and humanist truths, Radstone follows memory theorists Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer by writing that the “unspeakability of Holocaust testimony” in particular has “contributed to the view of the Holocaust as a unique and incomparable event, and to the appropriation of the suffering of Holocaust victims by ‘nationalist and identity politics’” (119). Instead, Radstone insists that we look beyond the idea that memory transmission may exceed language and speak to universal and transhistorical experiences, and that we locate our geographical (and political) position as we receive history through memory.

Rich’s translational writing attempts to attend to these specifics, as we have seen in scenes within “Split at the Root” that describe both the memory transmitted and the specific location, spatial and temporal, of the self encountering that memory. While Radstone, Sanyal, and Rothberg all follow a Benjaminian tradition of resisting the teleological “beads on a string” historicizing practice he critiques in “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” I am looking to Benjamin’s translational philosophy, expressed in his “Task of the Translator,” to draw attention to the historian/poet’s impossible desire to understand the terms of the past *through* the terms of the present. This is helpful for thinking about translation as history—for the lines we might trace from one utterance to the next, and for the ways both language and history owe their survival to the changes they undergo as a result of the storyteller’s particular time,

place, and investments. Translation of language and of experience signals Rich's acknowledgement of the specificity of the poet's location for political accountability (in fact, Rich's 1983 essay "Blood, Bread, and Poetry" is subtitled "The Location of the Poet" and argues for making clear the distinction of spatial, temporal, and linguistic differences between liberation movements in the first and third worlds). Yet Rich is also thinking about history as a translational project that must be attempted yet is bound to fail, about the ongoing process of reaching from one moment to the next, and about the radical possibilities for the historical, political, and affective remainders that elide translation from one the past into the present.

Where her expository pieces, like the above lecture ("Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life") posit the possibility of imagining a historical collective where the self is merged with the other, Rich's poetry explores and defines the limits of this possibility. The tension between wanting to connect--a desire often stated in amorous, bodily, and erotic terms--and the inability to do so describes the shape of historical engagement that emerges in the space between Rich's prose and her poetry. Translation, in Rich's expository work, acknowledges the necessity of this connection across difference, and renders the boundaries of the self permeable, its borders permeable, in a way that broadens possibilities for absorbing knowledge from another body, time, or place. But the multivalent voices of Rich's poetry--a space where she actually tests the merging of multiple voices, moments, bodies, and places on the page--complicate and often refuse translation, and instead highlight the ongoing process, and the ongoing desire, that defines human collectivity. This is what Rich

calls, in her “Twenty-One Love Poems” (1974), the “civilization” that is the “act of translation, this half-world.”

In outlining the anti-assimilationist project of “Resisting Amnesia,” and in stating clearly the historical particularities of her own positionality (notably the significance of the Holocaust), Rich carves space for the historical stories and experiences of others, notably black, indigenous, and “third world” people. She imagines herself, a Jewish lesbian feminist, reclaiming in some moments a shared experience of historical solidarity through a rejection of history as it has been told through a history of, by, and for white straight men. Rich insists that a woman’s relationship to this history is felt, and absorbed, through the body. “To assimilate means to give up not only your history but your body, to adopt an alien appearance because your own is not good enough” she writes in the early moments of “Resisting Amnesia.” “Through this imperative, 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” (142). By holding onto the particularities of bodily experience and refusing to surrender the physical body to the demands of a society that would digest particularities into the universal.²

Instead, “in a society which has brought the entire planet to the brink of having no future,” Rich urges feminist historians and poets to tilt their bodies toward an ongoing present, to embody a “not yet” space that continually allows for the

² “To see patterns, connections, which the false assimilation of liberal humanism obscures,” as she writes here (146). Elsewhere, Rich details her journey as a writer, and a woman writer, in terms of learning to resist the idea that literature must capture something of a universal experience--indeed, that there is anything of a universal experience to capture--in *Lies, Secrets, and Silence* (1968).

possibility of a collective hope-as-resistance. “Our theory, scholarship, and teaching must continue to refer back to the flesh, blood, violence, sexuality, anger, the bread put on the table by the single mother and how it gets there, the body of the woman aging, the pregnant body, the body running, the body limping, the hands of the lesbian touching another lesbian’s face... the particularity and commonality of this vast turbulence of female becoming, which is continually being erased or generalized” (154-155). In this essay, as elsewhere in her prose, Rich imagines sharing a temporality with other women through the bodily experiences she details above. Her poetry, however, reflects her attempts to further enter into history not just through imagined shared bodily experiences but through an exchange of language that strives, but eventually fails, to immerse the self in the time, place, and experience of another.

Rich outlines a relationship between poetry, history, and memory in terms that echo and anticipate translational theories of both Walter Benjamin and Jacques Derrida. In “Resisting Amnesia,” Rich writes that as a poet she would be “unfaithful to my own trade if I did not recognize the debt that poetry owes to the historical impulse of oral tradition... to assist memory...to keep alive the memory of a people... [W]e can speak also of the debt that history owes to poets” (137-138). Derrida’s “What is Relevant Translation?” poses the relationship between the original text and its translation in economic terms (interestingly, Rich also refers to poetry as “her trade”) and points to continuous and ongoing temporality that is opened by the unpaid debt from one text to another, from one language to another, from one moment to the

one that came before it (366). He points to the intimacy of this relationship and the deferred action which “summons to translation” the “very threshold of all reading-writing. Hence the infinity of the loss, the insolvent debt” (366). The ongoing work of historical memory in the shaping of a collective arguably finds its roots in Jewish messianism, a tradition called on by Benjamin’s theories of translation that refer to the ongoing drive to uncover what he calls the “kernel” of pure language. This “kernel” refers to the spiritual essence that transcends language and that is housed in the ongoing work of human connection, to what we are always moving toward but will never reach in this life. For Benjamin, translations are about survival and connection (what he calls a “natural connection” and a “vital connection”) and the awareness of the history of this relationship that can and must be tracked through language (76).

Benjamin poses the survivability of text and language through necessary change (echoed in the very titles of some of Rich’s poetic volumes, such as Rich’s 1970 collection *The Will to Change*), and shares the conditional tense of his articulation of this historical process with Rich’s historical prose and poetry. Benjamin writes, in “The Task of the Translator” (1921), “But **if** languages grow in this way until they reach the messianic end of history, **then** it is translation that is ignited by the eternal continuing life of the works and the endless revival of languages... how present it might be in the knowledge of this distance” (78) (my emphasis). The if/then construction is a consistent feature of Rich’s historical and translational prose and poetry, as well: it’s the “right to conjecture” in “Resisting

Amnesia,” the repetition of “I would” and “I could” in her 1998 poem “The Art of Translation,” and the “if I dare” in “For Ethel Rosenberg” (two poems I will discuss later in this section). This conditional construction re-opens history as a collective and linguistic task, rooted in both Jewish spiritual tradition and what Joan Wallach Scott calls the feminist “restless critical operation” to read the past in a way that disrupts the certainties of the present and future (34).

Rich’s poetry attempts to blur the boundaries of the self by taking on the historical language of the other. For this reason, among others, it is useful to think about Rich’s historical philosophy through theories of translation. One, translation unsettles the familiar, making language and meaning strange in the productive way that allows the translator (as well as the critic and the historian)³ to imagine new possibilities--through language--for thinking about the self in relationship to the other, the past in relationship to the present. Two, the particular temporality inhabited by the reader (or, to borrow from Spivak, the “reader as translator”) who embarks on a project of making knowable what can never be quite known, a project of foreclosed knowledge that resists certainty and opens *possibilities* for new futures. Finally, the particular ache of a failure to communicate--a thread that runs through the decades of Rich’s poetry--is figured, through translation, not just as a failure of language to connect bodies across difference, but a problem of time and of history as well:

³ As Benjamin writes, “all translation is merely a preliminary way of coming to terms with the foreignness of languages to each other” (78).

predetermined failure to understand the past through the terms of the present, and vice versa.

In Rich's body of work, translation signals the desire to communicate, the impulse to connect across difference through language, and the impossibility of inhabiting another's experience. Most consistently, translation is used to describe the desire to connect with history, and the yearning and failure to assimilate the terms of the past into those of the present, to blur and then re-define the lines between "self" and "other," "past" and "present." Translation holds open what Spivak calls an aporia, or a historical withholding;⁴ it is this space of unrequited desire, between what Derrida calls the "summons to translation at the very threshold of all reading-writing" that preserves the "kernel" of difference that allows for the survival of the other/past separately from the self/present.⁵

Rich's two overtly titled translation poems, "Translations" (1972) from *Diving into the Wreck* and "The Art of Translation," examine these gaps in communication and history in terms of language and love. "Translations" opens: "You show me the poems of some woman/my age, or younger/translated from your language" and

⁴ In writing about Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Spivak explores the nature of the story that cannot be passed on through terms of translation and mistranslation: "If the situation [a failure to communicate between the Sethe, who has escaped slavery, and her daughter, who was raised in freedom]...provokes the question as to whether it is the birth or death of translation, here the author represents with violence a certain life-in-death, a death-in-birth of a story that is not to translate or pass on...an aporia, and yet it is passed on, with the mark of untranslatibility... Contrast this to the confidence in accessibility in the house of power, where history is waiting to be restored" (Spivak 325). For Spivak, a failure to translate also marks a historical moment as inaccessible and thereby guarded from being plundered or put to use by those who would willfully misinterpret the figures and facts of history to justify the conditions of the present. We will see the paradoxes and possibilities of "life-in-death" and "death-in-birth" in Rich's poem "For Ethel Rosenberg," which I will discuss in detail a little later.

⁵ "The Task of the Translator" 81.

continues by remarking, in the second and third stanzas, that “certain words” indicate “she’s a woman of my time//obsessed//with Love, our subject.” The disparate and vague figures in the poem--”you,” “me,” and “some woman”--are brought together by a stiff and formalized Love, object of study, whose distance is illustrated by the series of similes that follow, including “We’ve trained it like ivy to our walls” and “Watching it through binoculars as if/it were a helicopter.”

When the speaker of the poem begins to imagine the woman who wrote the translated poems, she focuses her lens on her attempt and failure to communicate across time, space, and gender: “trying to make a call/from a phonebooth//The phone rings unanswered/in a man’s bedroom.” The desire to connect, the murmur of intimacy in the closed spaces of the phone booth and the bedroom--spaces whose privacy and intimacy are ruptured (the public nature of the phone booth, the room that contains no one who responds) is part of a process of mistranslation that places the speaker and the woman in the poem in separate historical spheres, as well. Where at first the speaker identifies the poet as “a woman of my time” because of the “certain words” like “enemy,” “oven,” and “sorrow,” at the end of the poem the speaker alienates the woman from a shared moment because the tangled communication wires have frustrated and obliterated the original message. The woman “will in her own time/light her own way to sorrow//ignorant of the fact that this way of grief/is shared, unnecessary/and political.” In translation, Rich merges the political failure of communication and language with a spiritual, Benjaminian faith in the “kernel of pure language” that is embodied but unintelligible. In a 2008 reading at Harvard

University, Rich commented that poetry is “itself an act of translation from the inchoate mind into words and communication,” and that “none of us speaks or reads all the languages we need to hear from and the cultures we need to hear from.” Merging a hope for connection across difference with the desire to preserve that difference, Rich’s translation theory reflects the Jewish and feminist intellectual traditions she is also bending toward the historical moment of her writing, speaking, and thinking.

Recuperating her Jewish experiences and identity through a newly developing historical lens, Rich attempts to retrospectively translate her own life through terms understood by and through her life as a Jewish lesbian and her Holocaust inheritance: resistance and passing⁶. She moves to reconcile her various experiences of identity, each conceived at separate moments in her life and in history (as demonstrated, for example, by the uses of years and historical markers in “Split at the Root”) by gathering her various selves and her multiple pasts into a single, simultaneous, and multidirectional political awareness that aims to align her politics and poetry (and her politics *through* poetry) with all oppressed groups but with black people in the United States in particular.

Rich’s speech-turned-essay, “Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life” opens by noting that the month and the day hold special and overlapping significances: the 15th of February marks both Black History Month and the birthday

⁶ In “Split at the Root,” she remembers with bitterness that she “had never been taught about resistance, only about passing” (107); elsewhere, she considers passing as a strategy for survival, and thus a form of resistance.

of Susan B. Anthony, a woman who, writes Rich, “was finally unable to bring the struggles against sexism and racism definitively together” despite her anti-slavery stance (137). For Rich, Anthony’s vision for was curbed by “the blinders set on her vision by her whiteness” which limited her ideals to citizenship and inclusion in “the liberal values of the American Revolution” (137). As long as white women in America refuse to interrogate their relationships to race, as long as they are caught up in winning what people of color are necessarily excluded from--first class citizenship, inclusion, belonging--they are shunning the possibilities for the kind of liberation that might finally unburden them from legacies of destruction that is both their racial and their gendered inheritance. Rich describes Anthony’s failure as “our continuing disadvantage”--a collective burden, a seeping of history into the present moment whose impossibilities trace the outlines of a collective not yet imaginable.

“Resisting Amnesia,” which we might understand as Rich’s manifesto on feminist history, argues that reading and writing the gendered, raced, and sexual self are critical for reading and writing the history of a collective.⁷ Here she writes:

I start from the assumption that history is neither just a field of professionalization nor a “hobby” to be pursued through book clubs or antiquarian societies. As a woman, as a feminist, as a Jew, as a lesbian, I am pursued by questions of historical process, of historical responsibility, questions of historical consciousness and ignorance and what they have to do with power.

Rich reads history as a process of understanding power, and not a stagnant byproduct of the academy (the book clubs and antiquarian societies connote the gendered

⁷ Or imagining participation in a collective bound by political positionalities and mobilized across time and space, as Joan Scott has described in her *Fantasy of Feminist History*.

offshoots of establishment knowledge production). The structure of the sentence that provides the descriptions of herself, each term separated from the other by “as,” suggests an accumulation of lenses that increasingly sharpen the focus of the poet-historian on the now-time, the time that demands action and responsibility in the face of various and changing relationships to power.

The lines that follow the above tie the act of writing and the creation of poetry to this historical process:

And, as a poet, I would be **unfaithful** to my trade if I did not recognize the **debt** that poetry owes to the historical impulse of oral tradition...the first purpose of a poem being to keep alive the memory of a people...So we can speak of the debt that history owes to poets, not only in terms of how memory is passed on orally and a heritage transmitted, but in terms of how written poetry has kept history alive. (137-138) (Emphasis mine)

The process of examining history and the self through questions of faithfulness and debt echos the Benjaminian “task of the translator,” that figure who is tasked with the work of ensuring the “afterlife” and “survival” of a text (two terms that also resonate throughout Rich’s poetry, as we will see elsewhere in this essay). There is something about poetry in particular that communicates “besides a message,” something “incomprehensible” and “secret” (Benjamin 75) that is incommunicable by any other form. But if Anthony was “finally unable” to approach both sex and race together, Rich reads new possibilities. In reading, writing, and speaking this failure, Rich opens its productive potential to center the ongoing work of history in the construction of a feminist collectivity across both time and space.

“Resisting Amnesia” makes transparent the work of thinking, feeling, and experiencing history through identity, and to imagine the ways that solidarities are made possible by imagining the terms of the present as historical and ongoing, past and present. For Rich--first a woman, then a lesbian, then a feminist, then a Jew-- history is experienced through each identity’s refraction of the present. And since Rich herself historicizes the accumulation or amalgamation of each category to her own sense of herself, she is weaving herself into the “book of myths/in which/our names do not appear.”

Rich’s invocation of Anthony is consistent with a gesture throughout her work to self-consciously experience the past through the present--to translate, as she expressed in her 1980 poem “For Ethel Rosenberg,” figures of history into her “own terms.” This poem imagines a relationship to history through a relationship to language and the gendered and sexualized Jewish female body. Registering multivalent voices with italics, quotations, and spacing--from excerpts of the legal language used to indict her to the narrator’s imagined communication with the poem’s subject--“For Ethel Rosenberg” communicates the desire to connect with history without collapsing it into the present. It examines the ethics, erotics, and possibilities of making such a connection.

Thinking about this poem through the language of translation is helpful for examining the philosophy of history it lays out: one that constantly defers the absorption of what is untranslatable and unassimilatable from one historical moment to the next. This un-absorbability allows Rich and her narrator to read the past

separately from its series of repetitions and to imagine the ways we might, as Rich said in a talk about the poem, both “integrate its meaning into your life” and “integrate your personal life into history.” The poem both aims for this integration as a demand of feminist history and poses questions about the potential for this view of history, felt through the body and imagined through layers of language and genre, to collapse history into the present, to deny its survival by refusing what Naomi Seidman calls “the movement that is the necessary correlative to being alive” (10).⁸

The poem returns to the project of untangling history from its official narrative, of uncovering the lies and silences within it--especially along the lines of gender and Jewishness--and of imagining a relationship to history that is felt through the body and realized through language. This positions a study of feminist history as one that finds order and life in resistance to authoritative voice through language and literature. An epitaph that precedes (begins?) the poem summarizes the death of Ethel Rosenberg by invoking the legal language used to convict and execute her (“conspiracy to commit espionage”) and provides the exact date of the execution-- June 19, 1953--to locate the life of Ethel as it has been recorded and frozen in history--by her death. As Benjamin wrote in his “Task of the Translator,” it is the translation

⁸ Seidman’s introduction to her book, *The Translator as Double Agent* draws attention to the way translation marks the passage of time and the necessary transformations that take place over time for a text, a language, or a culture to survive history. Playing off Benjamin, Seidman notes that the requirement of change for survival necessarily changes “the original” “not because of any necessary loss or deliberate concealment, but rather because [translation] participates in the movement that is the necessary correlative of a text being alive. If we think about the study of history as a means to understand our present in terms of the past, and our past in terms of our present, we can also think about the ways we use language we translate the terms of the past into the terms of the present, and vice versa. Seidman argues that, like language, culture must move in the same direction--mutating for survival. In its fight for survival against a series of marginalizing forces, Jewish culture, Seidman writes, “emerges as a continual translation and transformation, in different languages and in different moments in time” (10).

that preserves the “afterlife” of the “original,” and “For Ethel Rosenberg” locates the potential for renewed life for Ethel as she is made new by her death and rebirth as a figure on her own terms.

The first section of “For Ethel Rosenberg” introduces (the translator’s?) questions of fidelity and betrayal through a collage of text, drawn from a variety of sources with different relationships to power and to authority.

Europe 1953:
throughout my random sleepwalk
the words

scratched on walls, on pavements
painted over railway arches
Liberez les Rosenberg!

The hybrid year/location (“Europe 1953”) that opens the poem registers both the geographic remove of the speaker and a gap between herself and the events of History in its official narrativization. The text “scratched” overhead and underfoot jars the speaker awake into a new historical architecture--one that is overwritten by the almost frantic demands of the present to mark--to deface--the narrative architecture of the past. At the same, the use of the untranslated French phrase both highlights the speaker’s alienation through the foreignness of the language⁹ and announces the gendered project of a historical and poetic project dedicated to Ethel that has yet to be undertaken. While in English we might translate *les Rosenberg* as “the Rosenbergs,” her ungrammatical French suggests the couple as a singular unit.

⁹ For more on the political implications of refusing transparency by refusing translation, see page 4 of Seidman’s introduction.

One project of the poem is to disentangle Ethel from the bounds of this martial unit, and the historical silencing of being read only through her relationships to men as a wife, mother, and sister. Echoing, in many ways, Rich's struggle to understand her Jewish self outside of being the daughter, wife, and mother to Jewish men¹⁰, the poem achieves this separation by invoking the body of Ethel in its violent demise. The electricity that kills Ethel also jolts her out of the bonds of her marital relationship that historical memory insists on--"that couple gets the chair/the volts grapple her, don't/kill her fast enough. The second line's negation--"the volts grapple her, don't"--suggests an alternative way of *reading* Ethel ("grapple" brings to mind the grappling with a difficult text or idea) and the possibility that, in not being fully understood by the terms of History, Ethel is also not fully vanquished.

What might it mean that she isn't (note the present tense) killed "fast enough"? This phrase suggests something about the survival of Ethel through language--through a reading practice with a contradictory relation to time: that carries her through time, that escapes time, and that evades the oppressive encapsulation described by the speaker in the stanza that precedes this one: "my Jewish father writing me...finely inscribed harangues." In the act of writing and in the written product itself, the speaker's father encloses her in the same terms used to stop Ethel's heart: "questions of loyalty/and punishment." Again, language, or the lack thereof, and the inadequacy of the written word are central:

¹⁰ "Like many women I knew in the fifties living under a then-unquestioned heterosexual imperative," she writes in "Split at the Root," "I married in part because I knew no better way to disconnect from my first family" (115). The revolutionary potential to disconnect and reconnect according to desire and politics is a theme echoed throughout Rich's autobiographical and historical writing of this period.

no language for this torment

mystery of that marriage
always both faces
on every front page in the world

Something so shocking so
unfathomable
It must be pushed aside

The lack of language to describe the pain of erasure, the father's willful mistranslation of his daughter using the very terms of the McCarthyist judge, adds to the confusion. (And the questions of loyalty and punishment are gendered, too, in this context--questions of marriage that bind Ethel and the speaker bodily and legally and that evaluate their morality and worth based on their success of staying within the bonds and bounds of these agreements.) Can the speaker substitute herself for Ethel in the electric chair of history? Can the speaker understand herself by imagining Ethel in her position--an experiment she will return to at the end of the poem--or does this echo the father's gesture to erase her, to mistranslate her, to refuse her life? On the printed pages of the newspaper, "both faces" suggest the faces of Ethel and her husband, but also the faces of the speaker and Ethel, the speaker and her husband, the speaker and Adrienne Rich (especially Adrienne Rich in her Jewish explorations).¹¹

In a historicizing gesture of "integrating the self into history," "For Ethel Rosenberg"

¹¹ As elsewhere, the "I" in this poem shares a good deal of biographical details with Rich, including the questioning of Jewish womanhood as it has been understood only in relation to Jewish men via the female body. For example, from the autobiographical essay "Split at the Root": "I had three sons before I was thirty, and during those years I often felt that to be a Jewish woman, a Jewish mother, was to be perceived in the Jewish family as an entirely physical being, a producer and nourisher of children...I was encountering the institution of motherhood most directly in a Jewish cultural version; and I felt rebellious, moody, defensive, unable to sort out what was Jewish from what was simply motherhood or female destiny" (Rich 235).

plunders the limits and possibilities of exchanging these faces, and these experiences, over time in the language of the printed word. The use of the faces of the newspaper also reflect something about imagining a common experience in opposition to the national narrative and the national time-space experience of the newspaper,¹² as well as the use of poetry to interject in the stream of numbing information--what she describes in her essay "Blood, Bread, and Poetry" as "trying to make vivid in poetry what seemed to have minimal effect when shown on television" (180-181). By making vivid the crises of history, poetry highlights the "flashes of danger" that Benjamin urges us to "seize," to "wrest tradition from a conformism that is about to overpower it" (255).

The last line of this first section-- "it must be pushed aside"--anticipates the contingent, uncertain, and deferred meaning of a historicizing practice that integrates the self so personally. By unresting historical events from certainty, the second section of the poem generates a sense of the present and future self that is yet undetermined, that is ever opening into possibility, but never fully arrived. Ethel's gendered silence is re-written for the potential of what she *might have* wanted, what *could have been*, and what *still might be* for the speaker.

she, actually wishing to be *an artist*

¹² We might think about the newspaper in the Benedict Andersonian sense: the publication that unites a nation in contemporaneous experience with the written word and the world. While Rich's writing in the 1970s explored concepts of "the commons"--forging a community of women, of lesbians, and of oppressed people through common experience and a "common language," the following decade expands the scope of common experience with a more worlded or planetary focus. Rich's writing consistently seeks to situate female/lesbian/Jewish experience in the United States within a context of world events and the global political climate. The newspaper in this poem signals a concern with a community of readers, a community made by readers, and the political worlds that are shaped by words.

link the speaker reads between them: the “same token,” the currency of betrayal, that connects and dooms both Ethel and the speaker in life and in death.

By separating Ethel from the compulsory coupling with her husband, Ethel’s death gives her life, and in the third section of the poem the speaker writes herself into this death and rebirth narrative. The death itself is both figurative and sensual, bodily, and visceral. “After her death/she becomes a natural prey for pornographers/her death itself a scene/her body *sizzling half-strapped whipped like a sail.*” In these lines, Ethel is flattened by an absent voice or voices--marked by the spaced-out italicized lines, which suggest the sensationalizing descriptions of a newspaper or tabloid. In surrendering Ethel’s experience to the language of these bodiless narrators, the speaker of the poem also estranges her from her own experience and renders her a figure of history, vulnerable to interpretation and invocation at the will of the present speaker. Evacuated of subjectivity, “her figure sinks into [the speaker’s] soul/a drowned statue/sealed in lead...For years it has lain there unabsorbed/first as part of that dead coupe/on the front pages of the world.”

The stanzas that follow seek to reanimate Ethel by tentatively placing her experience alongside the experience of the speaker. They follow:

I gave myself in marriage
then slowly severing drifting apart
a separate death a life unto itself

The speaker’s bodily surrender to marriage (not *my marriage* but *marriage*--the system of what Rich elsewhere calls “compulsory heterosexuality”) attempts to mirror Ethel’s silent subsumption by the murderous apparatus of public opinion and

state-sanctioned authority. A small history of the speaker's life, this stanza tells a story of another life made possible by another kind of death. The gerund tense of the "severing" and the "drifting" suggest an ongoing process, and the ongoing present, that the speaker experiences by the failure to absorb Ethel's life into her own fully. This is a critical moment in the poem because it registers the failed project of what Rich has elsewhere, in prose, described as a necessary relationship to history: the desire to embody it, to incorporate it bodily, and to enter into a reciprocal exchange with time.

The poem denies the possibility for this exchange in the scrambled tense that follows in the next stanza. After marking the end of the marriages that have lumped both speaker and her subject indivisibly with their husbands--"no longer *the Rosenbergs*"--the poem moves to a strange conditional:

till I hear how she sang
a prostitute to sleep
in the Women's House of Detention

It is difficult to know what to make of this "till," which doesn't clearly correlate to any action in the stanzas that precede or follow it. Looking to the stanza that comes before this one, it seems the speaker might be saying "I gave myself in marriage... till I hear how she sang..." as though the past-tense giving of the self in marriage was interrupted by the present-tense "I hear" with the past tense "she sang." (Whether or not the singing itself was real or imagined also remains historically ambiguous.) In all this temporal confusion and uncertainty, the poem is communicating the drive to "give oneself," first in marriage (as compelled by compulsory heterosexuality, legal

and familial expectations, etc.) and then to a tableau imagined through networks of care and the exchanges of “loyalty and punishment.” These themes, as introduced early on in the poem, are shaded by the gendered experiences suggested by this stanza: singing, prostitution, the Women’s House of Detention. The giving of the self evokes both Rich’s prose statements about what it means to merge oneself with history--to let it become part of your life, as she said in her comments before the reading of this poem, or to digest it, as she suggested in “Resisting Amnesia”¹⁴--and Spivak’s work on the erotic surrender to the text and language of the other. Here, the other is both Ethel and her historical moment.

As Spivak suggests, the erotic and the ethical are not always compatible,¹⁵ and the speaker finds that in order to allow Ethel to live, she must be left in her historical moment, with questions about her life left unanswered and unknown. Where the third section of the poem ends with questions about what Ethel *would have* done, had she lived to inhabit the moment of the speaker--“would you/have marched to take back the night/collected signatures”--the fourth section questions this impulse.

Why do I even want to call her up
to console my pain (she feels no pain at all)
why do I wish to put such questions

to ease myself (she feels no pain at all)
she finally burned to death like so many)
why all this exercise of hindsight?

¹⁴ “Historical amnesia *is* starvation of the imagination; nostalgia is the imagination’s sugar rush, leaving depression and emptiness in its wake,” she wrote in this essay. “Feminist history,” on the other hand, is “to draw strength: Memory is nutriment...” (145-146).

¹⁵ “The Politics of Translation.” *The Translation Studies Reader*, New York: Routledge, 2012.

The spaces and parentheticals in these stanzas emphasize the separation between the speaker and Ethel, placing physical distance between them, while the repetition of “she feels no pain at all” takes on the refrain of a song and marks the finality and silence of Ethel’s life. “Finally burned to death,” wedged in that line above, reminds us of the Jewish historical context, and the vanished collective that Ethel has joined in death.

The “ifs” continue in this section, and are answered finally by the speaker refusing the urge to assimilate Ethel into her terms, thereby opening new possibilities for writing and reading the past.

If I have held her at arm’s length till now
if I have still believed it was
my loyalty, my punishment at stake

if I dare imagine her surviving
I must be fair to what she must have lived through
I must allow her to be at last

political in her ways not in mine
her urgencies perhaps impervious to mine
defining revolution as she defines it

The language of these stanzas acknowledges what cannot be known by the speaker--the life Ethel “must have” lived. The historical exchange Rich outlined in her prose works is found to be impossible here, as Ethel must be impervious to the speaker and allowed to define her own revolution. These unknowns and refusals render Ethel in the present tense: she is imagined “surviving,” she “defines” revolution.

“For Ethel Rosenberg” concludes by imagining even more distinct terms for Ethel by suggesting she may not be revolutionary or even political in the way the

speaker can read. “Or, bored to the marrow of her bones/with ‘politics’” the next stanza continues:

liking her room her private life
living alone perhaps

no one you could interview
maybe filling a notebook herself
with secrets she has never told

Far from the Ethel who is imagined singing to the prostitute in prison, this Ethel is silent, illegible, and untranslatable. It is her untranslatability, however, that allows her ongoing survival. In Benjaminian terms, her spirit retains the kernel of originality that only be approached in language, and not met by it.

CODA

“turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse”
-from “Atlas of a Difficult World,” 1991

For Rich, history is understood as a process of translation, or translational failure. In language as in history, Rich reads radical potential in the untranslatable remainders--those that resist assimilation by eliding recognition by the dominant present, the “oppressor’s language.” Thinking about history as (impossible) translation also opens up the possibility of residing in the liminal spaces of time and place, of occupying multiple temporalities and simultaneous positionalities: assimilated and marginalized, rooted and scattered, spoken and silenced.

Derrida wrote that translation operates on this “economy of in-betweenness” that “permits one to say two apparently contradictory things at the same time (1. ‘Nothing is translatable’; 2. ‘Everything is translatable’)” which “confirms the experience that I suppose is common to so many of us...namely, that any given translation, whether the best or the worst, actually stands between the two...” (371). Rich’s poetic volume *Atlas of a Difficult World* gestures at the desired project of pinpointing an exact geographical and historical location--and to address a globe of suffering, as well as her own difficulties reading and writing the world and its history. This work attends most evocatively and effectively to the geographical, historical, and emotional in-between spaces. The poems themselves are populated with bays, bridges, and figures of “the internal immigrant” who is “the most homesick of all women and all men.” These poems mourn the human suffering caused by the

boundaries we erect to stave off suffering, to prevent history's violent repetition, to declare homelands in the wilderness of history: "in every flag that flies today is a cry of pain" (23). *Atlas* is dedicated to these liminal spaces, and to asking

Where are we moored?
What are the bindings?
What behooves us?

without a locatable answer.

"Dedications," one poem in the collection, dedicates the poem itself to those caught between one moment and the next, between one heartbreak and the unknown that follows:

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one intense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window

...

...I know you are reading this poem
standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean
on a grey day in early spring, faint flakes driven
across the plains' enormous spaces around you.

I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie in stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight
but you cannot leave yet.

...

while you wait for the newscast from the *intifada*

...

I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn
between bitterness and hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.

Having read this poem so many times over the course of this project, I am still unable to encounter its words without my heart catching in my chest--how real the feeling of

flight, of promise, of “not yet,” how compassionately Rich treats the moment before action is possible, before connection is possible, the moment of loss and emptiness and possibility that is so tied to hopeful projects of reading and writing history-- including the history of the feeling subject--in ways that can only be understood from within that moment and that experience.

Rich’s Jewish engagement grants her access to questions of language, translation, and history and particularly to the projects of critically returning to the stories we think we know, “writing as revision.”¹ In “Sources” (1982), Rich’s long poem that speaks most explicitly to her struggle with Jewish identity and experience, the speaker asks:

is the passion I connect with in this air
trace of the original
...
is this light a language
...
are signals also coming back
from the vast diaspora...?

In the poem’s next section, it is the “coming back after sixteen years” to “stare anew at things” that allows the speaker to “[see] what I hadn’t seen before.” The “trace of the original,” a phrase so redolent of Benjamin, looks to language to revisit history, and to the failings of language--the question that hangs throughout the passage--to resist change through time and space.

¹ This is the subtitle of Rich’s 1968 essay, “When We Dead Awaken.”

In her work on translation and history as projects of failed connection, Rich is also tapping into a Jewish messianic tradition that demands our striving toward a justice that will not be reached in our lifetimes. “Dedications” echoes this project as one of both failure, and of hope:

I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know what they are.
I know you are reading this poem listening for something, torn between
bitterness and
hope
turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.

The Jewish and translational ethics of locating the self in an ongoing project--one that requires time in the unknown and the in-between--echoes the Jewish teaching that tells us:

*You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it.*²

Reading Rich asks me to return to these teachings, and to revisit my own relationship to Jewishness as one that grants me access to questions of difference and assimilation and to the ongoing work of facing history--and ourselves.

² Pirqei Avot 2:21

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