RICH'S "TWENTY-ONE LOVE POEMS" AND LESBIAN SPEECH-ACT THEORY

"WHATEVER HAPPENS, THIS IS": LESBIAN SPEECH-ACT THEORY AND ADRIENNE RICH'S "TWENTY-ONE LOVE POEMS"

By

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ABSTRACT

Throughout both her poetry and prose, Adrienne Rich acknowledges "the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self" (Blood, Bread, and Poetry 181). J.L. Austin's speech-act theory provides a means by which to read the linguistic "action" in Rich's poetry. Austin's concept of performative language defines the power of words that "do things," words whose articulation is an act of creation. By combining lesbian and speech-act theory, the linguistic challenges facing a lesbian whose experience has never been expressed in language can also be understood. This theoretical framework highlights many important themes of the "Twenty-One Love Poems," such as silence, music, and writing as living, and also helps to define a specific lesbian poetic aesthetic.

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This thesis is dedicated to Adrienne Rich, a woman who tells her truth, and creates "the possibility for more truth around her."

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout both her poetry and prose, Adrienne Rich acknowledges "the dynamic between poetry as language and poetry as a kind of action, probing, burning, stripping, placing itself in dialogue with others out beyond the individual self" (Blood, Bread, and Poetry 181). In 1974, Rich published the "Twenty-One Love Poems," her first collection of poetry with explicit lesbian content. Since their publication now almost twenty years ago, these poems have inspired an incredibly wide range of critical response, varying from complete denial of their lesbian content to complete acceptance of it. When I became interested in reading these poems , I was faced with the question of how to read them. Can Rich's language be understood as a "kind of action," as she suggests? Is there a possible connection between this poetic/linguistic action and Rich's lesbianism?

In order to answer these questions, I turned to J.L. Austin's speech-act theory. Austin's concept of performative language

investigates the power of words to "do things": to enact promises, bets, and ceremonies. As critic Sandy Petrey observes of performative language, "[t]hese words do things, they perform an action, their articulation is a creation" (Petrey 4). The theoretical framework of this thesis, then, is a fusion of lesbian theory and speech-act theory: as explicitly lesbian love poems, how can the "Twenty-One Love Poems" be understood as a uniquely lesbian linguistic act? How might the past silencing of lesbians inspire Rich's view of poetry as a "kind of action"?

Silence is, in fact, a recurrent theme in the "Twenty-one Love Poems," a force against which the lesbian must write, a "gag even the best voices have had to mumble through"(V 27) [1]. In her aptly titled "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Criticism," Bonnie Zimmerman also recognizes the necessity of lesbian experience to move from silence into language and empowerment: "Lesbian criticism begins with the establishment of the lesbian text: the creation of language out of silence"(123). Having established Rich's "Twenty-one Love Poems" as a lesbian text, my analysis will focus on its special significance as such: how does a lesbian aesthetic operate in these poems? How does Rich work against the historical silencing of lesbians? What place do these poems hold in the lesbian poetic tradition?

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[1] Subsequent references for the "Twenty-One Love Poems" will cite the page number from The Dream of a Common Language collection, preceded by the roman numeral of the poem only if necessary.

As the first explicitly lesbian collection Rich published, the "Twenty-One Love Poems" do represent a special case both in terms of the body of her poetry and critics' response to it. Some critics reading the "Twenty-one Love Poems" have been resistant to recognizing it as lesbian love poetry, and have reinforced the historical silencing of lesbian experience in a number of ways. First, in describing Rich and her experience, many avoid the word "lesbian," a significant omission, as Rich names herself quite clearly as lesbian in an article ironically titled "Invisibility in Academe": "I have been for ten years a very public and visible lesbian. I have been identified as a lesbian in print both by myself and others; I have worked in the lesbian-feminist movement" (Blood, Bread, and Poetry 199). Other critics insist upon the universality of the images of love Rich presents, working in direct opposition to Rich's text. Many critics have sought to find the "love" in the "Twenty-one Love Poems" and have found instead a lack of love or "anguish." However, still others celebrate Rich's achievement of the "Twenty-one Love Poems" as a breaking of past silences surrounding lesbian love. By showing the range of responses to the lesbian content in the poems, from re-silencing to celebration, I intend to demonstrate the need for a lesbian criticism of the "Twenty-one Love Poems" which recognizes the special place they hold, both in Rich's work and in lesbian poetry in general.

The "lesbian imperative" is a concept I have drawn out of some of the criticism of Rich's work, most notably that of Catherine

Stimpson. As a concept, the lesbian imperative acts as an excellent way to describe the motivating force behind Rich's poetic utterances: it is an imperative to break the past silence surrounding lesbians and speak their experience truthfully. Understanding the lesbian imperative inevitably leads to an appreciation of the unique challenges facing a lesbian who seeks to break silence with a language which has oppressed her.

As such, a lesbian holds a position in language which speech-act theory can help to illuminate, In his linguistic research J.L. Austin sought to define and contrast two modes of language: the constative, a descriptive mode, and the performative, a mode of language which "acts" upon the world in a specific way (hence, speech "act" theory). The performative, as Austin theorized it, is language which has the power to change reality: whether by sealing a verbal contract, completing a marriage ceremony, or making a bet, a performative utterance does more than simply describe the world, it acts upon it. However, when a lesbian begins to describe her experience, to create "language out of silence," I would argue that the distinction between performative and constative is collapsed. Words hold a performative power when they speak "the unspeakable" and describe lesbian existence and love: the articulation of past silence is a creative act which does not simply describe the world, but changes it. Lesbian critic Elizabeth Meese re-vises the speech act theorizing of Shoshana Felman to include lesbian sexuality in a section of her book (Sem)erotics, providing an excellent demonstration in itself of

the contribution lesbian theory can make to reading not only literature, but theory as well.

Using lesbian speech-act theory to read and understand the lesbian imperative in the "Twenty-one Love Poems" can also help to clarify and highlight many of the important themes. Chapter three focusses upon the images of past silence which recur in the poems, the very silence against which the poems are acting. Chapter four investigates Rich's bringing of the lesbian into language, looking specifically at images of Rich's lover as text, and references to writing as living. Music is also an important theme in the "Twenty-One Love Poems," used to represent the ebb and flow of the "harmony" in Rich's relationship with her lover. Chapter Five is a lesbian reading of the love in the "Twenty-one Love Poems," theorizing the breaking of past silence as an act of love, and placing "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" at the performative center of the poems.

Further applications for lesbian speech-act theory are possible, and the concluding chapter of this thesis explores this possibility both in the collection The Dream of a Common Language, and in Rich's most recent collection, An Atlas for the Difficult World. Finally, using lesbian speech-act theory to read selections from Daphne Marlatt's most recent collection Salvage demonstrates how this theory helps to define a specific aspect of the lesbian poetic aesthetic, while at the same time providing some excellent points of comparison with the "Twenty-one Love Poems."

CHAPTER ONE

As I have suggested, there has been a wide range of response to the "Twenty-one Love Poems," particularly in dealing with their explicit lesbian content. By providing an overview of the criticism, which is by no means intended to be all-inclusive, I hope to demonstrate, however, how even well-intentioned criticism can be heterosexist, and gloss over Rich's lesbian experience. This overview is organized according to recurrent themes, or problems, including: reading/speaking lesbian existence, insistence upon the universality of Rich's lesbian love poems, miscontruing Rich's response to heterosexism and homophobia, and finally, an inability to read any love in these love poems. By discussing these issues in relation to past criticism of the poems, I hope to establish the very real need for a criticism of them which is specifically lesbian.

One of the first problems that arises in reading criticism of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" is that critics see Rich's attempts to affirm women's and specifically, lesbian, experience as exclusionary and limiting. This is most striking in Claire Keyes's book The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich. Speaking of the collection The Dream of a Common Language, Keyes asserts

> In the middle of the collection Rich places a group of "Twenty-One Love Poems" written about her relationship with another woman. These love poems plus the overt feminism of the book as a whole heighten the "exclusion" of men, even if that is not the point, and raise the

> question of the "commonality" of a language restricted to one sex. (160)

Similarly, Keyes's repeated references to Rich's feminism, and even her "female chauvinism"(166) in a derogatory fashion reveal that Keyes believes that Rich, in attempting to speak her lesbian experience, is biased and limited. Karen Alkalay-Gut similarly reads not affirmation, but exclusion in Rich's poetry, claiming in her article "The Lesbian Imperative in Poetry" that the basic decision of lesbianism is "the decision to reject men"(209). Rich, in her own prose, contradicts this reading, claiming that "[a]nother layer of the lie [of compulsory heterosexuality] is the frequently encountered implication that women turn to women out of hatred for men" (BB&P 65).

How then do the critics reading the "Twenty-one Love Poems" speak of and to Rich as a lesbian? Many avoid using the word lesbian at all. Claire Keyes, in The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich, uses the word lesbian infrequently, and instead substitutes confusing phrases such as the following:

> While these poems are suffused deeply in womanliness and womanly love, Rich speaks to the human condition and the truths of the heart....While Rich does not necessarily include men in her considerations, she does relax her obsessiveness toward female separation. (174-75)

Here Adrienne Rich is being read as the "other." Her lesbian experience is not being named. Lesbian critic Elizabeth Meese comments on the significance of this omission:

> I say it matters when a critic avoids (a form of suppression) the word lesbian; as long as the word matters, makes a social, political or artistic difference, it matters when lesbian is spoken. (30)

In addition, Keyes pathologizes Rich for her lesbianism, as the above phrase "obsessiveness towards female separation" suggests. Other examples include the already-mentioned references to Rich's "female chauvinism" which Keyes claims gives the poem "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev" an "absurd side"(166), and also the suggestion that Rich is "obsessed" with the deaths of the women she writes about (163).

Keyes is not the only critic to avoid the word lesbian. In her article "Disloyal to Civilization: the 'Twenty-one Love Poems' of Adrienne Rich," Adrian Oktenberg describes the alternative civilization which Rich is positing in the love poems as "woman-centered, woman-identified, woman-created"(73-4). Kevin McGuirk in a much more recent 1993 article entitled "Philoctetes Radicalized: 'Twenty-one Love Poems' and the Lyric Career of Adrienne Rich" uses the phrases "woman-to-woman relationships"(72), and "women-lovers"(76), as well as Oktenberg's choice of "woman-centered" and "woman-identifed"(68). Here, however, McGuirk is careful to footnote his choice:

> These phrases "woman-centered" and "woman-identifed," appear as favored terms of positive valuation in many of the essays Rich collected in On Lies, Secrets, and Silence. (68)

Appearing in that same collection, however, are Rich's own thoughts on the avoidance of the word lesbian:

> ...the process of naming and defining is not an intellectual game, but a grasping of our experience and a key to action. The word lesbian must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence; with the closet-game, the creation of the unspeakable. (202)

Thus, to Rich, lesbian is a word which must be spoken first to acknowledge her very existence in the world, as a poet, and as a lover.

The third issue which recurs in criticism is the repeated tendency to universalize Rich's lesbian experience in the "Twenty-one Love Poems." Claire Keyes claims that

> The "Love Poems" are extraordinary not simply because they declare one woman's love for another woman, but because they transcend sex. The poems are not narrowed by the focus on lesbian love but expanded...Despite the specific focus and explicitness of poems such as these, the majority of the love poems achieve a universal significance. (170)

Rich, however, does not want these poems to be universal, but lesbian love poems. In a 1977 interview with Elly Bulkin, Rich describes her feelings after two heterosexual woman friends "wrote to [her] about reading the Twenty-one Love Poems with their male lovers, assuring [her] how 'universal' the poems were" (Werner 78):

> I found myself angered, and when I asked myself why, I realized that it was anger at having my work essentially assimilated and stripped of its meaning, 'integrated' into heterosexual romance. That kind of 'acceptance' of the book seems to me a refusal of its deepest implications....I see [it] as a denial, a kind of resistance, a refusal to read and hear what I've actually written, to acknowledge what I am. (Werner 78-9)

For Rich, the "deepest implications" of the "Twenty-one Love Poems" lie not in their artistic merits, or lyrical qualities, but in their

lesbianism. When critics praise the "universalism" of the poems as a compliment to Rich that her writing is able to transcend her lesbianism they are missing the fact that the "Twenty-one Love Poems" are about and inextricable from Rich's lesbianism.

While it is difficult for critics to deny the fact that the "Twenty-one Love Poems" are lesbian love poems, whether or not the critic acknowledges the importance of this fact for a full reading of the poems reveals many inherent assumptions. In her reading of the poems, Adrian Oktenberg privileges the fact that the two women lovers work against the attitudes of patriarchal civilization over the fact that they are lesbians:

> The meeting of lovers in the "Twenty-one Love Poems" is unique because it is on terms which are consciously antipatriarchal; lovers who are disloyal to patriarchal civilization strive to free themselves from its attitudes even in their intimate relations, even in themselves....This is what make the "Twenty-one Love Poems" new, not the fact that the lovers are women. Women have always loved each other, in literature as in life, but they have usually accepted, and done so within, patriarchal forms (79).

The distinction Oktenberg is trying to create is indeed problematic: if the fact that these two lovers are women does not define their resistance to patriarchal attitudes towards love, what does? One might ask what lesbian relationship was ever created within patriarchal forms.

Similarly, Kevin McGuirk argues against the central importance of lesbianism to the "Twenty-one Love Poems." Quoting Rich's response to universalization in the interview I have excerpted

above, McGuirk shifts the focus from Rich's lesbianism to the form of her poetry:

> ...although the lesbian content of the poem must be acknowledged,...More pertinent, I would argue, is the generally displaced rhetoric of the poems....Lyric, in short, insists that we experience the poem principally through identification. So it should not be surprising that a sympathetic, and careless, reader, invited to identify with the poems' speaker, should call the poems "universal." (79)

Adrian Oktenberg argues similarly regarding the ease of connection for the reader to these poems: "The 'Poems,' like Sappho's, become almost transparent and accessible. The result is that the reader is practically vaulted into the 'Poems'; the effect is breathtaking"(84). While McGuirk argues that it is the rhetoric of Rich's poems that allows readers to slip into a universal identification which Oktenberg believes the poems actually encourage, both critics are glossing over the difference which these poems possess because they are lesbian.

The tendency of critics to universalize can be taken as an attempt to identify with the poems while unintentionally silencing their lesbian content. However, when critics are unable to read the lesbian content of the poems, misreadings can occur which are equally or even more inaccurate. The most pervasive example of such a misreading is the repeated inability of most critics to find the "love" in the "Twenty-one Love Poems." The most dramatic example of this type is Olga Broumas's description of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" which appeared in her 1978 review of The Dream of a Common Language for Chrysalis:

> I began...expecting to read twenty-one poems about love, whatever that has come to mean in my life, but certainly something of the praiseful, the sexual, and lyric. Instead I found one long poem, in twenty-two sections, about a deep and anguished proximity of two lives. (280)

This seems a rather severe reading, to find only anguish instead of love. However, Broumas's disappointment in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" cannot simply be dismissed as a result of her heterosexism or lack of knowledge of a lesbian poetic tradition, because as a lesbian poet herself, she is part of it. In fact, the above-mentioned Jan Montefiore, in her book Feminism and Poetry refers to Broumas as "the best known lesbian poet of the erotic"(75).

Within the larger context of Broumas's review, her comment seems more sympathetic, as she does claim that of the entire collection, the love poems "embody a politics and poetics I most deeply feel"(279). However, Broumas's own poetry shows she is aware of the anguish that the forces of heterosexism cause lesbians: why then does she place the anguish she reads in Rich's poems solely within the lesbian relationship? Unfortunately, Claire Keyes has used Broumas' "anguished reading" to support her own critique of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" as a "collapse of the 'dream of a common language'"(172). Keyes quotes Broumas to confirm her heterosexist reading of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" which erases the lesbian love in Rich's love poems, and also erases Rich's hope. Keyes reads the source of the "anguish" which Broumas refers to as being "the difficulties of a loving relationship and of the 'work/ heroic in its ordinariness' of 'two people together'" (emphasis mine 172), once

again failing to recognize that the poems are about two women together. Of the final poem, XXI, she states that "it is difficult to see this poem as a love poem"(172).

Other critics respond in a similar fashion: Kevin McGuirk argues that Rich's references to "texts from the masculine tradition"(75) in the "Twenty-one Love Poems" show that she is employing

> largely negative ways of defining the lovers' life together. This is in striking contrast to the rest of a volume characterized by affirmation. It is as if here, at the center of her project, in the intimate space of "two lovers of one gender"(XII), she is most vulnerable and therefore most embattled. (75)

While McGuirk is unable to see the affirmation in Rich's love poems, Adrian Oktenberg is unable to see any success in them:

> In struggling both to imagine and to live a way of loving which breaks [the] mold, in transmuting that struggle into art through the medium of poetry, Rich has provided us with a wealth of clues and insights. That the struggle ended in failure--at least in terms of the longevity of the love relationship described in the poems--is also instructive and of use to us. (85)

While I will be dealing with the issue of affirming the love in these poems in more detail in Chapter Five, I will simply state now that even the fact that Rich is writing these poems can be read as an affirmation of her love for her lover, and probably even more significantly, of her lesbian existence.

It would be unjust at this point not to mention some of the excellent criticism that has been written on Rich's poetry, and the "Twenty-One Love Poems" in particular. Catherine Stimpson's article

""Adrienne Rich and Lesbian/Feminist Poetry" stands out as an interesting review of Rich's career as a poet and her poetry. Stimpson, as well as providing thought-provoking criticism, is not afraid to use humour to shock and amuse. Her introduction plays on Rich's own footnote to "It is the Lesbian in Us..." (OL,S, &S) in which Rich acknowledges the "intense charge of the word lesbian"(202). Stimpson begins simply and boldly:

> "Lesbian." For many, heterosexual or homosexual, the word still constricts the throat. Those "slimy" sibilants; those "nasty" nasalities. "Lesbian" makes even "feminist" sound lissome, decent, sane. (249)

"Adrienne Rich and Lesbian/Feminist Poetry" provides a solid general discussion of Rich's poetic career and the variety of responses it has evoked, repeatedly demonstrating an understanding of Rich as a lesbian poet who "refuses silence"(264). Finally, Stimpson even provides a framework for Rich's lesbian-feminist response to her lesbian imperative, a framework which will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Two.

Reading Rima Shore's review of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" is an equally affirming experience. Shore's brief article is sensitively written, touching on many chords common to this thesis. Shore recognizes the importance of "Twenty-One Love Poems" in Rich's career:

> The theme of choice is crucial in "Twenty-One Love Poems," the first book of poetry explicitly about a lesbian relationship that Adrienne Rich has published. It is full of a sense of determination. It reads sometimes like a

> dedication to that poem "which is the poem of my life." (269)

Shore can thus see the joy and the love in the "Twenty-One Love Poems." Her review provides many insights both large and small into how these poems act on the world, and how they interact with each other.

Jane Hedley, in "'Old Songs with New Words': The Achievement of Adrienne Rich's 'Twenty-one Love Poems,'" is more interested in how the "Twenty-One Love Poems" interact with poetic tradition, more specifically, the Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet traditions. While Hedley, again following Jan Montefiore's lead, tends to downplay the revolutionary potential of new (that is, lesbian) content in an old (that is, male) form, she does incorporate the fact that the "Twenty-One Love Poems" are about a "passionate lesbian relationship"(327) into her analysis. Indeed, in discussing how Rich has re-vised the form of the love sonnet to suit her lesbian experience, Hedley goes so far to say that "Rich is the first [poet] to offer a full-blown alternative to Petrarchan lovemaking"(336). The analysis that follows, especially Hedley's reading of Rich's use of metonomy over the traditional metaphor, is exciting in that it is working towards defining and affirming a specifically lesbian aesthetic in the "Twenty-One Love Poems."

As Catherine Stimpson has suggested, the unflinchingly lesbian gaze of Rich's poetry has provoked "readings that are potent, but confused, confusing, and contradictory"(249). To read Adrienne Rich is to read the poetry of (again in her own words) a "very public

and visible lesbian (BB&P 119). To deny Rich's lesbianism is, at the very least, to read against the grain, and at worst to deny the words upon the page. In contrast, the critics, such as the last few above, who not only acknowledge Rich's lesbianism but allow it to participate in their thought and analysis, produce criticism which cannot help but be all the more exciting in its new potential.

CHAPTER TWO: THE LESBIAN IMPERATIVE

Lesbian theory and criticism can both remedy the errors of past criticism (seen in Chapter One) and introduce a radical new understanding of Rich's poetry, one which not only acknowledges lesbianism, but incorporates it into the analysis. To this purpose, I have focused on defining a specific aspect of the lesbian aesthetic which I have called the "Lesbian Imperative," a term used by both Karen Alkalay-Gut and Catherine Stimpson in very different ways. The Lesbian Imperative not only clarifies our understanding of the impact of silence on the writing of lesbians today, it also invites an analysis of language which is key in my linking of lesbian theory to speech-act theory in the second half of this chapter.

Craig Werner has claimed that "part of the brilliance of 'Twenty-One Love Poems' stems from Rich's awareness of their special position in the lesbian poetic tradition" (97). However, how does one define the lesbian poetic tradition? And even more specifically, how does one define "lesbian" for the purposes of this thesis? In her now famous article for Signs, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich defines her controversial concept of the lesbian continuum which expands the definition of lesbianism beyond genital sexuality

> to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a

> rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support ...[thus] we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of lesbianism. (BB&P 51-52)

Often Rich's call for a more inclusive conception of what lesbian existence could mean both historically and in our society today has been read as downplaying the sexual nature of contemporary lesbian relationships. Rich, however, in an afterword included in the Blood, Bread, and Poetry collection, is clear in her response to these criticisms:

> What I had thought to delineate rather complexly as a continuum has begun to sound more like "life-style shopping." Lesbian continuum--the phrase--came from a desire to allow for the greatest possible variation of female-identified experience, while paying a different kind of respect to lesbian existence--the traces and knowledge of women who have made their primary erotic and emotional choices for women (73-4).

Thus, Rich's own idea of the lesbian continuum is not incompatible with a sexually-focused definition of lesbian writers and writing. While Rich does seek to expand the potential meaning of lesbianism through the lesbian continuum, the "Twenty-One Love Poems" are indeed a tribute to a lesbian existence which is both emotional and erotic.

Contemporary definitions of lesbianism need not, then, conflict with Rich's lesbian continuum. In her article "Zero Degree Deviancy: The Lesbian Novel in English," Catherine Stimpson asserts

the sexual nature of her definition of lesbianism, while at the same time acknowledging its limitations:

> My definition of the lesbian--as writer, as character, and as reader--will be conservative and severely literal. She is a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying. Of course a lesbian is more than her body, more than her flesh, but lesbianism partakes of the body, partakes of the flesh. That carnality distinguishes it from gestures of political sympathy with homosexuals and from affectionate friendships in which women enjoy each other, support each other, and commingle a sense of identity and well-being. (301)

This is simply a restatement of Rich's above quotation which sought to distinguish lesbian existence (sexual) from the lesbian continuum (a range of experience which includes the "affectionate friendships" which Stimpson refers to above). In "What Has Never Been: An Overview of Lesbian Feminist Literary Criticism" Bonnie Zimmerman addresses the issue of definition as well: she describes both Rich's and Stimpson's definitions of "lesbian" and rather than seeking to decide on one definitive position, she simply highlights the problems surrounding the issue of definition, and warns of the dangers of "reductionism" (121).

While I acknowledge with Zimmerman the possibility of definition reducing or limiting lesbian potential, I agree with Rich and Stimpson in a definition of lesbianism that is both emotional and erotic. While historical study is better served by more general definitions of lesbianism, this thesis deals with a contemporary lesbian poet, and even more important, a series of contemporary

lesbian love poems: to deny the erotic dimension of these poems in my definition of lesbian would be reductive, and would miss much of their importance. Thus, to read the "lesbian" in these love poems is not simply to read "woman-to-woman bonding" or friendship: it is to read and affirm love and sexuality shared between two women.

Having explored the definitions of "lesbian" within both Rich's own theory and that of contemporary lesbian critics, I will now turn my focus to the Lesbian Imperative, as others critics have defined it. In "The Lesbian Imperative In Poetry," Karen Alkalay-Gut seems to define the lesbian imperative as a woman poet's urgent "choice" of lesbianism: "Many women writing poetry today in America have come to the conclusion that the only way they can write as women is to reject men and write as lesbians" (209). Portraying lesbianism as an optimum subject position which women poets choose to write from after rejecting men is patently absurd, and assumes an access to voice for lesbians which historically has not existed.

Claire Keyes, too, portrays Rich's lesbianism as an idealistic platform for her poetic project:

> Feminism, as a vision of an ideal society, becomes Rich's faith. In the same manner, she embraces lesbianism. Her most intimate personal relationship becomes a reflection of her political and social idealism. Thus the life and the work of Adrienne Rich is an integrated whole. At the root of this integration is an ideology that champions the common woman. (161)

Rich, herself, in her intoduction to Blood, Bread, and Poetry, presents a far different picture, speaking of her joining the Women's Liberation movement in 1970:

> The phrase women's liberation was illuminating to me, and feminism was beginning to resonate with fresh and positive meaning. I identified myself as a radical feminist, and soon after--not as a political act but out of powerful and unmistakeable feelings--as a lesbian. (viii)

Thus, while the "lesbian imperative" sounds like a promising concept in Alkalay-Gut's article, it seems both she and Claire Keyes have located the imperative of Rich's lesbianism in the choice of a "life-style" to back up her political beliefs and poetic project. I would argue that the real lesbian imperative is to break the silence and communicate so that we may counter articles such as this which describe lesbian experience so falsely.

Some critics reading from a lesbian perspective, however, do identify what I call the lesbian imperative in their focus on the importance of breaking silence to explode myths and stereotypes. Catherine Stimpson in "Zero Degree Deviancy" takes the lesbian imperative upon herself as a critic: "We have yet to survey fully, however, the lesbian writers who worked under the double burden of a patriarchal culture and a strain in the female tradition that accepted and valued heterosexuality" (301). In "A Poetry of Survival: Unnaming and Renaming in the Poetry of Audre Lorde, Pat Parker, Sylvia Plath, and Adrienne Rich," Pamela Annas creates a poetic imperative which operates from differences, whether of sexual orientation, race, class, or gender:

> Any writer who is not "mainstream" (white, male, middle class, straight), not writing out of a sense of being the norm, is writing in tension with or writing against a context, a world, where s/he is seen wrongly or not at all. (10)

The solution which Annas suggests is also an imperative, and one which is connected to language. She speaks of

> The necessity for women to reclaim words and images, to revise the way words are put together as well as the words themselves, to review the whole tradition of poetry, to repossess and reinhabit language. (10)

Thus, through these critics, the Lesbian Imperative becomes clearer: it is an urgent need, not to choose lesbianism, but to speak it.

In her article "Adrienne Rich and Lesbian/Feminist Poetry" Catherine Stimpson quotes her colleague Alicia Ostriker who, while she seems to recognize the Lesbian Imperative as an impetus for communication, finds it narrow in focus: "I find the Lesbian Imperative offensively totalitarian and would prefer to defend human diversity as well as human liberty"(Writing Like a Woman 121). Ostriker's strategy might seem familiar by now, echoing as it does the earlier critics who objected to Rich's attempts to speak and explore her lesbian identity as rudely exclusionary of men. Stimpson herself counters this attitude when she later proclaims:

> If women are to change themselves and their social relations, if they are to liberate themselves and each other, they must revivify that lesbianism hidden or denied, feared or despised. Lesbianism is an imperative, not because Rich imposes it, but because it is a wellspring

> of identity that must be sprung if women are to claim any authentic identity at all. (256)

Thus, Stimpson provides a compelling version of the Lesbian Imperative, one which also focuses on bringing that which has been repressed to the light, allowing all women a truer identity.

Indeed, Bonnie Zimmerman, in "What has Never Been," immediately identifies the important role a lesbian's identity plays in her writing, emphasizing

> that a woman's identity is not defined only by her relation to a male world and male literary tradition (as feminist critics have demonstrated), that powerful bonds between women are a crucial factor in women's lives, and that the sexual and emotional orientation of a woman profoundly affects her consciousness and thus her creativity. (117)

As mentioned above, Zimmerman goes on to describe many of the current debates in lesbian-feminist criticism, including the difficulty of defining "lesbian." However, debates aside, she argues that "lesbian criticism begins with the establishment of the lesbian text: the creation of language out of silence"(123), echoing Stimpson's vision of the creative force of the Lesbian Imperative. While Zimmerman does acknowledge the difficulties facing the lesbian critic, the challenge holds many potential rewards:

> ...despite the problems raised by definition, silence and coding, and absence of tradition, lesbian critics have begun to develop a critical stance. Often this stance involves peering into shadows, into the spaces between words, into what has been unspoken and barely imagined. It is a perilous critical adventure with results that may violate accepted norms of traditional criticism,

> but which may also transform our notions of literary possibility. (124)

Thus, Bonnie Zimmerman acknowledges the unique position of the lesbian critic as one who can also become a part of "the creation of language out of silence" as she too responds to the lesbian imperative.

Rich's own poetry and criticism also provide a wealth of material to help clarify the lesbian imperative in poetry. In "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" Rich describes one means of enforcing compulsory heterosexuality as "the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent which rises fragmentedly into view from time to time only to become submerged again" (Blood, Bread, and Poetry 50). Invisibility means silence, and in On Lies, Secrets and Silence Rich emphasizes the connection between the two:

> Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language--this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable. (199)

Here Rich has also identified a common theme of the difficulty of the lesbian who has found a voice to speak clearly and honestly in a language which has oppressed her, or even been unwilling to acknowledge her existence. In "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," Rich clearly depicts her ambivalent relationship with

lanugage: "This is the oppressor's language/ Yet I need it to talk to you" (Fact of a Doorframe 117). How does Rich, or any lesbian poet, negotiate the tenuous relationship she has with language as she breaks her own silence?

When lesbians move from silence into language, it is not always a simple transition. Pamela Annas quotes black lesbian poet Audre Lorde: "For those of us who write, it is necessary to scrutinize not only the truth of what we speak but the truth of that language by which we speak it" (25). Annas thus recognizes the sometimes suspicious relationship lesbians have with language:

> Insofar as a woman poet accepts without question the language she is given, she is also accepting a set of patriarchal, capitalist, racist, heterosexist assumptions which are built into the language and which, at the least, deny her an identity of her own. (10)

Thus, for someone who has been silenced, accepting a voice through the "oppressor's language" is a complicated challenge.

Particularly because these poems are lesbian love poems, language presents a special problem. As Craig Werner observes, "The highly erotic lovemaking in '(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)' provides an emblem of a process of communication denied by received languages" (95). If the erotic is taboo, the lesbian erotic is even more so. In her article "'The Naked Majesty of God': Contemporary Lesbian Erotic Poetry," Caroline Halliday explores how lesbians can question and alter language to make it "fit" their experience:

> Does the language work for lesbians, re-creating, re-using words? Of critical importance in this process is the act of naming lesbian experience. We are testing language out for meanings useful to us, bending language to lesbian understanding, naming the feeling we want to describe and share.
>
> The lesbian erotic poem is not only about connections and explorations. It is also about celebration, about breaking taboos, naming what is and what is ours. (76)

Many critics have also identified the necessary transition from finding new empowerment in voice to challenging language itself.

Rima Shore's review of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" which I mentioned in Chapter One provides an excellent starting point for an analysis of how a lesbian may accept a voice in the oppressor's language, and not remain silenced:

> This would be a different book were its poems unnumbered, were it called simply Love Poems; for this poetry spills over its form, breaking the limit set by its title. There are twenty-two poems (the lines which seem most like a conventional love poem are called "THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED"). In this way the title reflects what, in an important sense, this love poetry is about--and perhaps suggests something of what love is about and what poetry is about: recognizing limits (conventions, laws, boundaries) and breaking through them. (263)

Shore has identified here, in Rich's twenty-two poems "spilling over" her title, an important dynamic operating in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" as a whole: Rich's conscious transgressing of traditional boundaries in order to create a uniquely lesbian space that stands in defiance of those boundaries, that tradition. As we will soon see, this

re-visionist dynamic will become even more important in considerations of language, because speech-act theory is so heavily dependent on the concept of convention in order for words to "act."

While Shore sees Rich's revision in her entitling and numbering of poems, Jane Hedley has explored in even more detail the relationship between Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" and the (male) Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnet tradition. Hedley recognizes immediately that the imperative behind Rich's poems is not neutral but is, in fact, the lesbian imperative:

> the drive to connect and the dream of a common language are needs and longings all poets share, but which have special urgency for a feminist and a lover of women. (325)

Hedley's focus on form parallels Shore's regarding convention; she claims that "Rich has undertaken to 're-engender' a poetic genre that has for centuries sabotaged 'the drive to connect'" (326).

Hedley argues that "Although [Rich] is by no means the first woman poet to have written a love poem sequence that is critical or revisionary, she is the first to offer a full-blown alternative to Petrarchan lovemaking"(336). The ways which Hedley identifies that Rich "re-engenders" the love poems are extremely interesting. First, Hedley investigates Rich's "figurative strategies," concluding that "Rich uses metonymy to fight 'the war of the images' on behalf of a very different attitude toward the body"(328). Rich's use of metonymy over metaphor (and the traditional Petrarchan blazon) is a choice which I will deal with in some detail in Chapter Six.

In addition, Hedley provides a history of the tradition of the love sonnet and demonstrates Rich's opposition to it in such features as time, gaze, and her use of free verse. Hedley emphasizes Rich's breaking of established convention to create a new poetic space. Language is part of this process, part of Rich's response to the lesbian imperative: "In Rich's sequence free verse works against the poetic function of language, reducing the gap between language and experience" (338). In identifying the need for such an immediacy of expression in Rich's poetry, Hedley has revealed the poetic force behind the "Twenty-One Love Poems": "Rich seems to want her language acts actually to be body acts. What she desires is for there to be no gap whatsoever between experience and language, 'words' and 'living'" (339). In responding to the lesbian imperative and breaking the silence, Rich is writing a poetry that comes alive, words that act, and thus, words that speech-act theory can complement in analysis.

Catherine Stimpson provides a very clear analysis of what she sees as Rich's role as a poetic responder to the Lesbian Imperative: that is, what "acts" Rich is attempting to accomplish with her words. First, to counter past silence about lesbians, "the prophet/witness must give speech to experience for the first time" (262). However, sometimes patriarchal culture

> has lied about lesbians. The prophet/witness must then speak truth to, and about, power. At other times, patriarchal culture has distorted or trivialized lesbians. The prophet/witness must then use and affirm '...a

> vocabulary that has been used negatively and pejoratively.'[30] She must transvalue language (262).

I would argue that in the "Twenty-one Love Poems," you may detect each of these responses, with particular emphasis on countering the silence of the past, and breaking the silence of the present. All of the above are goals that Rich sets for her words, her poetry that comes alive to speak from silence.

LESBIAN SPEECH-ACT THEORY
(or WHAT DO LESBIANS DO WITH WORDS?)

As critic Sandy Petrey suggests (2), probably the best way to introduce speech-act theory is to begin with the title of the lectures J.L. Austin gave in 1955 at Harvard: How to Do Things With Words. This is indeed the major focus of speech-act theory: what words do rather than what they describe, how words can "act" on the world. In the first half of Chapter Two I have explored and attempted to clarify the idea of the lesbian imperative as a linguistic call to action. Critics who highlight the drive of Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" to break convention both in form and language also recognize that these are poems which attempt to "act" upon the world in a way which speech-act theory can help to illuminate. Rich's poem "Images for Godard" crystallizes this attempt to "act" in a line which links her vision of poetry inextricably to change and action: "The moment of change is the only poem" (The Will to Change 49). While speech-act

theory is valuable in reading the linguistic force of the lesbian imperative, lesbian theory can also "speak" to speech-act theory in a profitable way, particularly regarding speech-act theory's conception of access to language and the conventions which govern how words can do things. The remainder of this chapter will explore both of these possibilities for reading and re-vision.

In the first chapter of her forthcoming book "Creating States: Studies in the Performative Language of John Milton and William Blake," Angela Esterhammer gives an excellent introduction to Austin's theory of performative language, beginning with its origins:

> Austin tried to account for philosophers' difficulties in analyzing certain kinds of sentences according to the logic of true-false propositions by isolating a category he called the performative. Rather than describing reality in a way that might be judged true or false, a performative utterance brings about an action or alters the condition of the speaker, the addressee, or the environment , so that the appropriate criterion for evaluating the relation of the utterance to the world is its "felicity" or success in achieving an effect. (1)

An example of a performative utterance is the best way to emphasize what is important about the performative as a category. Consider when you make a bet with someone: when you say the words "I'll bet you..." you are not simply describing an event or a thing, you are enacting the bet with the very words you speak--your words are "doing something." Other examples of performative acts include promising, baptizing, warning, or apologizing.

An important aspect of the performative is the success to which Esterhammer refers above. A performative speech act is dependent upon its conformity "to the conventions accepted by the relevant social group for the successful performance of the act" (Esterhammer 2). To return to our example of the bet, in order for your performative to be successful, your listener must hear you and agree to the conditions stated. As Austin observes,

> To bet is not, as I pointed out in passing, merely to utter the words 'I bet, &c': someone might do that all right, and yet we might still not agree that he [sic] had in fact, or at least entirely, succeeded in betting. To satisfy ourselves of this, we have only, for example, to announce our bet after the race is over. (How to Do Things with Words 13-14)

This highlights an aspect of the performative crucial for my analysis: the emphasis on linguistic and societal conventions already in place to ensure performative success. Also important is the "active" nature of the performative which connects it strongly with Rich's creative response to the lesbian imperative: "These words do things, they perform an action, their articulation is a creation" (Petrey 4).

Austin's attempts to isolate the performative category from the constative (designated by Austin as a purely descriptive mode of language, eg. "the grass is green") through grammatical and other criteria lead the reader through a "succession of red herrings, or blind alleys through which the performative-constative opposition is followed" (Esterhammer 13), yet no end is ever reached. As Esterhammer suggests, Austin's

> most successful and influential analysis of the performative derives from the identification of three perspectives from which any utterance may be considered: locution, or the phonetic act of uttering words in accordance with a certain vocabulary and grammar: illocution, or the force with which the words are uttered, which determines the type of act (promising, warning, asking, announcing) performed in saying something: and perlocution, or the effect (which may be intentional or unintentional) that the utterance produces in the addressee. This very analysis, however, leads Austin to the conclusion that all utterances, including the most classic examples of true-false propositions, manifest illocutionary or performative force. Saying "The meeting is at ten this morning" is to perform the illocutionary act of stating, just as much as saying "I call this meeting to order" is to perform the illocutionary act of declaring the meeting open. (Esterhammer 9)

That Austin was unable to isolate the performative as a pure category, and instead produced an analysis of the performative power of all linguistic acts does not deny the power of "words that do things" and the impact they may have on the world.

In fact, not realizing that Austin had already done this, one of my original intentions in this thesis was to show how Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" merge the categories of constative and performative into one, exploding the distinction. This still remains, however, an excellent way of demonstrating the performative potential of the constative. As briefly alluded to above, if the performative is a category of words that do things, then the constative is a category of words that describe things, words, or statements which could still be judged true or false. Rich's

conception of poetry, however, makes it difficult to consider any of her language as such a neutral undertaking:

> The necessity of poetry has to be stated over and over, but only to those who have reason to fear its power, or those who still believe that language is "only words" and that an old language is good enough for our descriptions of the world we are trying to transform. (On Lies, Secrets, and Silence 247)

Particularly within the context of the lesbian imperative of past silence, Rich's constative or descriptive utterances of her lesbian existence take on a new meaning, embodying the performative power in which, to echo Petrey, their "articulation is a creation," here the creation of a new lesbian space through language.

Sandy Petrey acknowledges this power that describing experience can have in a way which is especially applicable to lesbian writing: "The constative too is a performance that can have life-transforming or life-arresting effects on its audience and its referent" (41). To emphasize the "life-transforming" potential of the constative is not an exaggeration, for in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" Rich claims "...writing words like these, I'm also living" (VII 28). Recall also Jane Hedley's analysis above which stressed the urgency with which Rich needed to erase the gap between "experience and language, 'words' and 'living'" (339): lesbian speech-act theory can not only understand the origins of Rich's urgency, but also analyse linguistically the impact her words have on the world. As Bonnie Zimmerman observes, "If we have been silenced for centuries and speak an oppressor's tongue, then liberation for the

lesbian must begin with language" (127). Once again it becomes clear: for a lesbian to move from silence into language, to even name herself and describe her existence is a linguistic act with performative force--she has changed the world by speaking herself.

It is just this ability of the lesbian to challenge the limits of language and its conventions that speaks so powerfully to speech-act theory, for speech-act theory is defined by many conventions which the lesbian is outside of. In poem XIII, Rich creates a new country of lesbian feminist re-vision with "no language/no laws" (31) in which she hears music played by "women outside the law" (31). This is a powerful rendering of the lesbian's potential relationship to language and a new literary tradition. However, the obverse of the lesbian <u>tabula rasa</u> is the slate upon which society has written, where she does not appear. Speech-act theory, with its emphasis on societal conventions already in place, inevitably excludes lesbians and reinforces their invisibility.

The best example of the invisibility of "women outside the law" in speech-act theory is the classic example of the speech act used repeatedly by critics: the marriage ceremony. The first concrete example of a performative which Austin gives in <u>How to Do Things with Words</u> is as follows: " 'I do (sc. take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife)'- as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony" (5). In seeking to define more clearly the role that convention plays in the success of the performative, Sandy Petrey in fact chooses the marriage ceremony over betting to prove his point:

> Marriage, far more public and structured, normally entails a rigidly defined set of words, and in our society it always requires official inscription in compliance with strict communal protocols. Marriage thus demonstrates the collective nature of the performative with great clarity. Moreover, social enforcement of the responsibilities imposed by marriage vividly demonstrates the importance collectivities attach to the things done by the words they empower to act. Welshing on a bet with a friend doesn't ordinarily subject you to the police power of the state. Welshing on a marriage by taking a second spouse can land you in jail. (7)

I would argue that the prominence the marriage ceremony has as one of the most fundamental speech acts in society does indeed "demonstrat[e] the importance collectivities attach to the things done by the words they empower to act" as Petrey suggests. As the fundamental institution of heterosexuality, it is not surprising that marriage is enacted by speech acts which are proportionally powerful.

Where, however, does the power of the marital speech acts leave a lesbian? As Sandy Petrey observes,

> Like any other performative, the language dissolving or effecting a marriage can't be understood except in connection to its social context.
>
> That context is consequently a vital constituent of any attempt to apprehend an utterance's performative strength. (9)

The social context which has so emphatically empowered heterosexuality through convention has equally disempowered homosexuality, as the first half of this chapter has shown, to a position of silence "outside of the law." Angela Esterhammer, in her

listing of the requirements for performative felicity in the marriage ceremony, rightly suggests that it is only "successful" in a heterosexual context:

> Thus, the utterances "I will" and "I now pronounce you husband and wife" have, in North American society, the effect of enacting a marriage when, among other things, the former is spoken by a man and a woman in turn, neither of whom is presently married, and the latter by a properly ordained minister or justice of the peace. (8)

In order to truly understand the illocutionary power of "I will" and "I now pronounce you husband and wife," it must be understood that not everyone has access to the power of these words: not everyone in our social context has the equal opportunity to "do things with words." This realization is one of the most important contributions a lesbian critique of speech-act theory can provide.

I will emphasize at this point, however, that the purpose of this critique is not to point the "heterosexist" finger at unsuspecting critics, but to point to the potential for change. Sandy Petrey has suggested a number of times in Speech Acts and Literary Theory that the potential for the re-vision of convention does lie with those "outside the law.": "Because collective conventions change, societies can both do things with whatever words they choose and make words do what they've never done before" (47). This is precisely what I am arguing that Rich is doing in her "Twenty-One Love Poems," and what lesbians are doing when they answer the lesbian imperative. Petrey emphasizes the potential for re-vision in a passage which seems to echo Rich's belief in the power of poetry:

"...to transform conventions and representations is to transform society. Language bears within it all the things it does" (126). Just as lesbian criticism recognizes that lesbians must begin with language to break the silence, speech-act theory recognizes the potential for those conventions which have held them silent for so long to be re-vised and to transform society.

One encouraging example of how this has occurred within speech-act theory itself is provided by lesbian critic Elizabeth Meese's re-vision of the work of speech-act theorist Shoshana Felman. In her book The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan with J.L. Austin, or Seduction in Two Languages, Felman posits a model of the performative based on the heterosexual sex act:

> If the performative, in fact, is an event-a ritual- of desire, should we be surprised to learn that performative desire always takes as its model, rhetorically, the symbolics of sexual desire? It is not only in the Don Juan myth, it is in Austin that the speech act is modeled on a metaphorics of the "performance" of the [hetero]sexual act.
> (108)

With speech-act theory giving marriage as one of its strongest performatives, and now even the performative itself modelled on the heterosexual sex act, where does this leave a lesbian and language? Meese is quick to respond with a lesbian re-vision:

> If we follow a similar direction with respect to lesbian:desire [sic], we might expect to employ an alternative metaphorics. Patricia Parker speaks of an "erotics of prolongation" (16). What figures, vehicles, rhythms (ex)tend the passion of engagement? Perhaps the notion of caressing and exciting a text, rather than

> penetrating or being spent, might serve as the figure for the infinite coursing desire that is lesbian reading and writing. (100)

What follows now is my own vision of Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" which a fusion of lesbian and speech-act theory will help to create.

CHAPTER THREE: A LANDSCAPE OF SILENCE

Understanding the "Twenty-One Love Poems" as an answer to the lesbian imperative necessitates an investigation of how Rich depicts silence in the poems. How does Rich construct the silence against which her language is intended to act? Is it a foe? A villain? Violent? The way Rich figures the past silencing of lesbians interacts in an important way with how she will break that silence with "words that do things." In addition, the silencing of lesbians is not only a historical phenomenon, but a contemporary one: images of present silence are as important to recognize. The poignant silence that separates the two lovers across a "salt-estranging sea" is yet another level of silence that appears in the "Twenty-One Love Poems." Rich uses a variety of metaphors to represent lesbian invisibility, as well as developing the themes of music and navigation to suggest her response to that silence. Indeed, Rich constructs a backdrop of silence throughout the poems, a landscape against which her words form a stark contrast of action and life.

First, I will survey the images and metaphors Rich uses in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" to represent lesbian invisibility and silencing. In poem I, Rich portrays herself and her lover striving to recognize their separateness from the myths about women they face daily in their city: "We need to grasp our lives inseparable/ from those rancid dreams, that blurt of metal, those disgraces" (25). The

solemn, slow, and meditative tone of this poem, along with its placement as the first of the series, combine to make it a powerful invocation. What Rich is invoking becomes more apparent in the last four lines:

> No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
> sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
> dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding
> our animal passion rooted in the city. (25)

Rich is, in fact, invoking lesbian invisibility and stating that her project is a response to that past oppression. The "we" Rich is speaking for may initially seem to refer to only her and her lover , but by the final four lines, it has accumulated a wider resonance. Rich, her lover, and all lesbians need to "grasp our lives" and claim a place in the city of the world, even if the air is not wholly welcoming and even potentially scarring.

An example of Rich's complex poetic diction can help illuminate how the image of the lesbians/trees is operating in the invocation. "We want to live like trees," Rich says, "sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air." The word "blazing" contains many levels of meaning, which include "burning" or "to be bright with color." [2] These first definitions refer to the visual impact of the bright colours of the trees appearing, previously invisible, for the first time. Another meaning of "blazing," however, is more abstract: "to burst forth (with anger etc.)." Initially, Rich has captured in the

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[2] "Blazing," Webster's Encyclopaedic Dictionary, 1990 ed.

image of the lesbians/trees a powerful visual impact, and also a sense of the potentially explosive power which moving into the visible realm holds. This, however, is not all: "blazing" also has a third level of meaning which perhaps is the most relevant. Blazing was used historically by pioneers to refer to the marking of trees to be cut or burned to make new trails through forests. Thus, blazing can also refer to someone who is "a pioneer in some activity," or someone who is "proclaiming" or "spreading news far and wide" or someone who is marking a new trail where one has never existed before. Rich, of course, is doing all of the above activities, (jobs traditionally ascribed to men), and through the choice of one word, "blazing," in her invocation, has characterized the "Twenty-One Love Poems" as a pioneering series of poems which, having become visible for the first time, will spread far and wide a new reality.

Poem II also presents an image of lesbians moving against invisibility, but this time the metaphor operates not only visually, as in the appearance of the trees, but also in terms of a heaviness/lightness opposition. In a dream Rich's lover becomes a text herself, a poem which Rich is eager to share with the world:

> and I laugh and fall dreaming again
> of the desire to show you to everyone I love,
> to move openly together
> in the pull of gravity, which is not simple,
> which carries the feathered grass a long way down the
> upbreathing air. (25)

Here Rich images the now visible lesbian as a piece of feathered grass, a tenuous existence in the face of the "pull of gravity" which

represents the normalizing forces of history and silence. However, just as the trees would still "exuberantly [bud]" in caustic air, the feathered grass will not disappear, even if it is carried away from its intended destination by the gravity which counteracts the "upbreathing air." Rich has evoked many associations through the use of another natural image to represent lesbian experience.

Poem V presents a very different image of invisibility, figured in a painful absence and lack which has a presence of its own. In facing "[t]his apartment full of books," Rich is able to represent with even physical immediacy the "centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves" (27). In contrast to those unwritten, the books which <u>are</u> written contain "the underside of everything you've loved." (Again, the "you" which is being addressed in this poem is more complex than a one-to-one correspondence between "you" and Rich's lover, expanding to enclose a larger lesbian identity.) The books which are written, in fact, seem to be records of the tortures which have silenced lesbians:

> the rack and pincers held in readiness, the gag
> even the best voices have had to mumble through,
> the silence burying unwanted children--
> women, deviants, witnesses--in desert sand. (27)

The very strong link Rich makes with these images between silence, oppression, and death is a real one. The tone, which borders on sarcasm in its litany of the horrors of women's treatment in both history and literature, is an excellent example of "blazing": a

previously veiled anger is here "bursting forth" with an overwhelming proclamation of women's and lesbian reality.

The closing lines of poem V are interesting for two reasons: first, they present another metaphor for past silencing, that of archeology, which is continued in the series, and second, they present a physical representation of the silence which oppresses. Notice the strategic placement of half-lines to emphasize the gaps and spaces into which Rich must stare in order to attempt to piece together lesbian history:

> centuries of books unwritten piled behind these shelves;
> and we still have to stare into the absence
> of men who would not, women who could not, speak
> to our life--this still unexcavated hole
> called civilization, this act of translation, this half-world.
> (27)

By renaming the world "this half-world," Rich is emphasizing that the literature and history which exist do not tell the whole story, and certainly not herstory. Pamela Annas recognizes that in renaming the world the poet "brings the world, through language, into an alignment with the new self" (12), and Rich's recognition that there is still so much to dis-cover confirms this view. That Rich also refers to civilization as "this act of translation" is especially interesting in relation to speech-act theory: Rich is recognizing the linguistic dimensions of power and that the power to speak is also the power to define. In order to exist on her own terms, Rich must translate herself into a foreign discourse, revealing once again the challenges which the now-visible lesbian faces in language.

While women's and lesbian history may be buried and retain the potential for excavation, Rich presents an opposing image of burial which becomes more sinister and which is possibly permanent: burial in water, that is, drowning. This image first appears in poem IX in relation to the silence of Rich's lover: "Your silence today is a pond where drowned things live/ I want to see raised dripping and brought into the sun" (29). Here the "drowned things" are still alive, and while lost, are "needed by both of us," as Rich appeals to her lover. The lover's silence in this instance is personal, rather than historical, yet Rich's response to it could be applicable to either: "I fear this silence,/ this inarticulate life" (29).

Rather than "Diving into the Wreck" to retrieve the needed objects herself, and end her lover's silence, Rich is strangely immobile:

> ...I'm waiting
> for a wind that will gently open this sheeted water
> for once, and show me what I can do
> for you, who have often made the unnameable
> nameable for others, even for me. (29)

What wind could Rich be waiting for? The previous image of wind which appeared in poem II in the form of the upbreathing air was an undependable source of movement due to the negative force of the "pull of gravity." This wind, too, seems outside of Rich's control. Considering the importance Rich places on action in these poems and her other works, her inaction at this moment seems puzzling. Perhaps Rich's inactivity can best be read as a "gentle patience" in

which respect for her lover's autonomy will not allow her to open a very private silence with force.

The silence of the pond is not opened, and its continuation leads to Rich's confrontation with the female personification of "That conversation we were always on the edge/of having" (35), drowned in the Hudson river. While earlier in poem II her lover had become a poem, here, I would argue, silence, or lack of speech becomes a person, or a multiple personification which reflects a number of silences in Rich's past and present relationships:

> and I discern a woman
> I loved, drowning in secrets, fear wound round her throat
> and choking her like hair. (35)

Rima Shore perceptively points out the connection between this and the previous image of silence as one of unchecked progression:

> The woman who drowns in silence is, I think, to be construed as the victim of her own evasion, as if the silence (which was a 'pond where drowned things live' in poem IX) had enlarged itself into a choking river of 'polluted water.' (163)

Notice, too, that the "fear" Rich felt at "this inarticulate life" is now wound round the throat of the drowning woman. Part of the cause of the drowning is the conversation/woman's "turning aside from pain" (35), her inability to express herself or face difficult issues. The poem ends with an important twist when Rich recognizes another person in the words she never spoke: "And soon I shall know I was talking to my own soul" (35). Poem XX, as the penultimate poem of the series, presents a powerful image of the repercussions of silence

for lesbians in their love relationships, for it presents a version of silence which ultimately estranges the lovers.

The final rendering of invisibility and silence which I will analyze is a textual one: Rich's use of the dash. The dashes in "Twenty-One Love Poems" are used in very significant moments of passion, anger, or changes of thought. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the dashes in these poems are speech-act pointers: they occur at moments in which language is acting on the speaker, or the speaker is attempting to act on language.

To support this claim, one need only look closer at the two poems in the collection which contain the most dashes, poem V, and "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)," with six and five dashes respectively (the closest in any other poem is three). Poem V, as I have argued, is concerned with imaging a silence so violent and profound that it is linked with death. Thus, language breaks down as Rich attempts to translate the unspeakable, and the dashes represent these emotional clefts in expression: "and the ghosts--their hands clasped for centuries--/of artists dying in childbirth, wise-women charred at the stake" (27).

Similarly, "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" is a translation of an experience which strains language in its expression. The intense eroticism of the poem gives it status outside even the numbers of the "Twenty-One Love Poems," as Rima Shore points out. I would argue that Rich creates a poem in the image of her lover's lovemaking, one both "tender and delicate" (32). Important because

it is set apart from the others, Shore suggests this poem floats protected in a constant version of the "upbreathing air" of poem II (268), the brackets enclosing it in a loving and watchful embrace. "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" uses dashes to point to the linguistic creation of a tenderness as foreign to language as the powerful anger which erupts in poem V:

> Your traveled, generous thighs
> between which my whole face has come and come--
> the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has
> found there--
> the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth--
> (32)

The dashes here point to moments of silence, intimate moments of contemplation in which Rich must draw on all the strength she has to bring her "tender and delicate" experience to a language which does not welcome it.

MUSIC AND SILENCE PLAY TOGETHER

One of Rich's most famous evocations of women and music appears in her "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," and it is very applicable to my reading of the theme of music in "Twenty-One Love Poems":

> When to her lute Corinna sings,
> neither words nor music are her own;
> only the long hair dipping
> over her cheek, only the song
> of silk against her knee
> and these

> adjusted in reflections of an eye.
> (Fact of a Doorframe 36-37)

Not only does this section capture the issue of the "male gaze" on women, but it also questions what participation women can have in a music (and by implication, a literature) in which they have no authentic voice. Indeed, to sing another's songs and play another's music is really just another version of silence. How then, does Rich use the many references to musical tradition she makes in the "Twenty-One Love Poems?" How can Rich's use of music as a theme be read as a suggestion of her speech-act approach to breaking silence?

The first, and most obvious answer to these questions appears in poem XIII, which creates the lesbian tabula rasa landscape through which the women travel and explore:

> the music on the radio comes clear--
> neither Rosenkavalier nor Gotterdammerung
> but a woman's voice singing old songs
> with new words, with a quiet bass, a flute
> plucked and fingered by women outside the law. (31)

There are important contrasts here to the image of Corinna which suggest the goals of Rich's project: sexist male music has been left behind, and the woman is singing "old songs/with new words," and thus this music belongs to her in a way it never did to Corinna. What does Rich want to "do" with the "words" of her own songs? I would argue that she wants these words to be new in two ways, both in the sense of incorporating lesbian content in a male form, and also in the

sense of "translating" which I have referred to above: Rich recognizes that her project will also create a new language.

References to music also appear throughout the "Twenty-One Love Poems," and are used by Rich to represent the ebb and flow of her relationship with her lover. In poem III, Rich uses a musical term to portray the harmony between them: "And you, you move toward me with the same tempo" (26). Thus, initially, the lovers are in sync, and emotionally are equally drawn to the other. Later, while separated from her lover, Rich recalls a happy memory of a night together that is linked to music:

> watching red sunset through the screendoor of the cabin,
> G Minor Mozart on the tape-recorder,
> falling asleep to the music of the sea. (XVI 33)

Notice, too, that while the male musical tradition is present in the music of Mozart, it the natural "music of the sea," and not his music, which lulls them to sleep.

Music also presents two contrasting examples of re-vision. First, Rich presents an emphatic re-vision of male music which has portrayed women falsely in poem XVII. Wagner's opera Tristan und Isolde ends with the famous "Liebestodt" (or Love-death) in which Isolde sings herself to death upon discovering her beloved Tristan is dead. Rich debunks this tragedy with humour and wit:

> Tristan und Isolde is scarcely the story,
> women at least should know the difference
> between love and death. No poison cup,
> no penance. (33)

In an interesting contrast, however, the metaphor which Rich chooses to represent her progressive isolation from her lover is a musical metaphor combined with an image from a male poet, Matthew Arnold:

> Now you're in fugue across what some I'm sure
> Victorian poet called the salt estranging sea.
> Those are the words that come to mind. (XVII 34)

Instead of moving at the "same tempo," now Rich and her lover are "in fugue," a contrapuntal form associated with Bach which relies on multiple voices moving against each other to create complex harmonies. Certain critics, such as Kevin McGuirk and Jane Hedley, seem to see Rich's use of the words of a male poet as a sign of poetic weakness, or desperation, a sign that Rich "and her lover have not succeeded in changing the script or the outcome of their 'story'"(Hedley 349), as Rich had with Wagner. I am inclined to disagree, however, and see the fact that Arnold's words are the "words that come to mind" for Rich as a symptom of the reality that she lives in a world still filled with old songs and few new words. While Rich might mourn the lack of a lesbian predecessor to provide these words of estrangement for her, I think, too, she is pointing to an overlap in lesbian and heterosexual emotional life because she does not reject Arnold's words as inapplicable to her experience.

CHARTING NEW TERRITORY

In poem XIII Rich observes that "the maps they gave us were out of date/by years" (31). Considering the imagery of charting, mapping, and measuring that recurs throughout the "Twenty-One Love Poems" leads to a productive reading of the poems as Rich's own map to the new trail her words are "blazing." The most powerful evocation of this is the tape-recorder of poem XVII:

> ...Merely a notion that the tape-recorder
> should have caught some ghost of us: that tape-recorder
> not merely played but should have listened to us,
> and could instruct those after us:
> this we were, this is how we tried to love. (33-4)

The image of the tape-recorder is an image carried over directly from the preceding poem: recall the tape-recorder which played the music of Mozart in the cabin. Now, however, its ability to play and not listen is a sinister representation of the privileges of power. Rich's description of this tape-recorder claims that power as her own in one of the most potent speech acts of the "Twenty-One Love Poems": in poetry recognizing the deficiencies of the past, she is in fact creating her own tape-recorder which will ensure those that follow <u>her</u> will have some record of how "[she] tried to love."

If, as Rich suggests, civilization is a "still unexcavated hole," then there is much to be dis-covered and charted, and these activities occur throughout the "Twenty-One Love Poems." The hands of her lover (or "many hands like [them]" (28)) can take on, in Rich's mind, the exploration of new life and lands <u>and</u> the dis-covery of new herstory:

> ...Such hands could turn

> the unborn child rightways in the birth canal
> or pilot the exploratory rescue-ship
> through icebergs, or piece together
> the fine, needle-like sherds of a great krater-cup
> bearing on its sides
> figures of ecstatic women striding
> to the sibyl's den or the Eleusinian cave-- (28)

Rich's description of her own vision creates a new world of possibilities in which women have the power to chart new territory for themselves.

Other instances in which measuring instruments appear provide a paradoxical clue as to how the "Twenty-One Love Poems" will move from "no language/ no laws" to a system which does not duplicate the erasing power of the patriarchal tape-recorder. Poem IX, as I have discussed, represented Rich's lover's silence as a "pond where drowned things live":

> Whatever's lost there is needed by both of us--
> a watch of old gold, a water-blurred fever chart,
> a key.... (29)

Notice that these items are things which measure and record. The watch measures time: the fact that it is both "old" and "gold" suggests that it may hold valuable secrets of the past. The fever chart is "a chart indicating the course of a patient's fever," [3] but also, in true Rich fashion, has a secondary meaning of "the rising and falling course of conditions (as in politics or business)," suggesting that a knowledge of the past is crucial to an understanding of the future. Finally, the key is a physical record or imprint of a pattern

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[3] "Fever Chart," Webster's Third New International Dictionary, 1976 ed.

needed to unlock a literal or metaphorical door, or it could even be the key to a secret code, the key to translating lesbian experience into language. Measuring, however, is an undertaking Rich usually ascribes to male needs for control: in poem XIII she represents the lawlessness of the tabula rasa in the line "The rules break like a thermometer" (31). Thus, now, even the instrument which created Rich's "fever chart" has self-destructed, making the way for new possibilities.

Poem XV provides an excellent allegorical rendering of the challenges the lesbian faces in seeking voice through language, and thus, an appropriate conclusion to this chapter. The poem develops the theme of choice which Rima Shore rightly identifies as figuring prominently in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" as a whole (269). Rich and her lover appear to be on vacation and together face a number of challenges:

> and lying on that beach we could not stay
> because the wind drove fine sand against us
> as if it were against us
> if we tried to withstand it and we failed--
> if we drove to another place
> to sleep in each other's arms
> and the beds were narrow like prisoner's cots
> and we were tired and did not sleep together
> and this was what we found, so this is what we did--
> was the failure ours? (32-3)

The first word of the poem "If" is crucial, and is repeated throughout, emphasizing both the potential voice of the poem, and its tentative tone. While literally poem XV is about Rich and her lover, the

challenges they face can be read as an allegory for "the forces they [ie. the patriarchy] had ranged against us" and "the forces we had ranged within us"(XVII 34) both in life and in language.

Linguistically speaking, language is a beautiful beach which, while it beckons to lesbians, will not welcome them, and will appear to be "against" them. Similarly, language is structured around heterosexual thought, and thus, for two women sleeping in the same room, it will provide only words which seem "narrow like prisoner's cots" to them because it is unable to speak to their experience. Though she records some disheartening circumstances, Rich's message, both for life, and language, is clear:

> If I cling to circumstances I could feel
> not responsible. Only she who says
> she did not choose, is loser in the end. (33)

As she suggests in poem VIII, Rich feels she has moved beyond "the temptation to make a career of pain," and instead chooses empowerment. The lesbian who faces the constriction and silences of language must not "cling to [the] circumstances" it presents her with, but must challenge it for her place on the "empty" beach, and challenge it for words to describe her sleep with her lover.

Thus, while images of silence and invisibility permeate the "Twenty-One Love Poems" and create a landscape in stark contrast with the life of Rich's own vision, the tone is not one of hopelessness, but one of belief in action. Rich may view the present world as a "half-world," but she believes in the power of her words to bring to

language the silent, invisible half and chart it for those who will follow her.

CHAPTER FOUR: WRITING AS LIVING

Having discussed Rich's dis-covering of the "half-world" which she claims as her own, I will now investigate Rich's attempts to bring that world to language. As I have previously suggested, the performative force of Rich's poetry is located in her translation of silence into language. If, as Jane Hedley claims, Rich wants "there to be no gap whatsoever between experience and language, 'words' and 'living'"(339), how then does Rich depict the act of writing and speaking in the "Twenty-One Love Poems"? I want to analyze, too, the presence of Rich's lover in the "Twenty-One Love Poems": how does she participate in Rich's speech acts? Finally, to return to an important point of Chapter Three, if Rich is trying to "do things with words" without any maps, charts, or conventions in place to guide her, does she construct a new sense of convention to support her, and if so, how? Answering these questions will demonstrate more fully how Rich is using language to "act" upon the world.

Once again, the invocation provides a useful starting point for the purposes of this chapter. Rich's simile of the "blazing" trees can also suggest the source of the strength of her linguistic project:

> No one has imagined us. We want to live like trees,
> sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air,
> dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,
> our animal passion rooted in the city. (25)

The "we" is a choric, lesbian "we" which is staking a claim on being: "[w]e want to live." How the speaker(s) want to live is described by a

natural simile which contains both the positives and negatives of their hoped-for visibility. Becoming visible will mean facing the corrosive effects of the sulfuric air, a literal atmosphere which parallels the harsh climate of attitudes they will face out in the open. However, the effect of this climate on the trees is not repulsive, but is incorporated into their appearance in a positive way: the phrase "dappled with scars" suggests that the "sulfuric air" leaves an aesthetically pleasing pattern on the leaves of the blazing trees.

The ability of these trees not only to survive but to thrive in a harsh climate is a powerful figure for Rich's position in language. The trees affirm their strength by "still exuberantly budding," gaining the nutrients (i.e., carbon dioxide) for their growth from the very air which has scarred them. Like a tree which contributes oxygen to the air around it, Rich's entry into language will contribute to the atmosphere around her, making it more hospitable. Most important here is the fact that the trees remain with their "animal passion rooted in the city." Thus, the trees are able to gain sustenance from the very city which oppresses them with its "pornography," "rancid dreams," and "disgraces." This paradoxical rooting confirms that Rich intends to change her world with the very language/tradition/city which has oppressed her, drawing strength from its conventions and mores.

Poem II also contains an image which connects living and writing, this time in direct relation to Rich's lover. In the poem, Rich relates a dream:

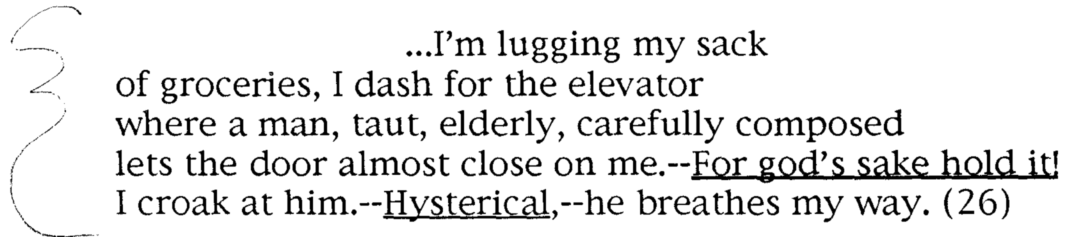
> our friend the poet comes into my room
> where I've been writing for days,
> drafts, carbons, poems are scattered everywhere,
> and I want to show her one poem
> which is the poem of my life. (25)

Here, as Hedley suggests, the gap between "words" and "living" is erased: while Rich writes poems, her life is also a poem. This reading of "poem of my life" is further clarified by the lines which follow: when Rich wakes, she tells her lover, "I dreamed you were a poem,/... A poem I wanted to show someone..."(25). Suddenly the flesh becomes word, and Rich's lover is herself poetry, the phrase "poem of my life" now suggesting that the lover is the "poem" or poetic creation dearest to Rich's heart.

The importance of poem II is precisely the slippage it creates between writing and living. What does Rich want her words to do? No less than to bring her experience, her love, and her lover to life before her reader. What Rima Shore suggests is the ambiguity as to whom the "Twenty-One Love Poems" are addressed is a positive measure of Rich's success: "Sometimes when [Rich] addresses her lover, it seems she could as well be addressing her poetry--her poetry come to life" (270). Indeed, writing, speaking out of silence, is for the lesbian, living in a very important way: she is bringing a new (lesbian) life to language and an old (oppressor's) language to life.

Poem IV presents one view of "writing as living" in the form of Rich's struggle to gain entry into the elevator. Rima Shore reads

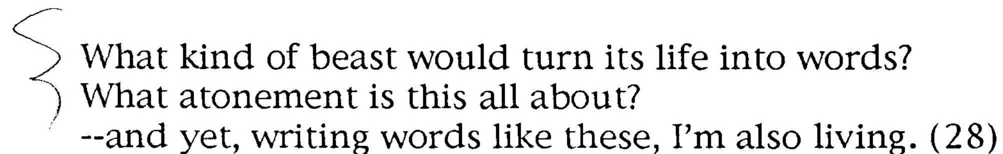
this struggle as emblematic of Rich's challenge to "establishment poetry" (264), in which she is berated by its male personification:



> ...I'm lugging my sack
> of groceries, I dash for the elevator
> where a man, taut, elderly, carefully composed
> lets the door almost close on me.--For god's sake hold it!
> I croak at him.--Hysterical,--he breathes my way. (26)

I would go even further and suggest that Rich is also depicting the difficulty inherent in a lesbian challenging both poetic tradition and language. There is no one on the elevator willing to hold the door for Rich, and she is burdened by her need for basic survival, figured in the groceries she is "lugging." Although Rich is able to gain entry onto this elevator, her success is greeted with a suitably ironic Freudian insult of "Hysterical." This insult is an example of the "sulfuric air" which dapples the trees in poem I, an acknowledgement of the continuing struggles a lesbian will face with a language which can use a word naming her own anatomy (ie, hyster, womb) against her.

In poem VII Rich questions language itself and its power dynamic when she is writing of her lover:



> What kind of beast would turn its life into words?
> What atonement is this all about?
> --and yet, writing words like these, I'm also living. (28)

While she refers to humans as "beast[s]," Rich at the same time emphasizes our separateness from other animals: the written word sets us apart, and becomes a translation, a life in and of itself.

Religion is another aspect of human life which separates us from animals, and Rich's choice of the word "atonement" invokes a Christian tradition which she is simultaneously revising. Webster's Encyclopaedic Dictionary defines "atonement" as "to make amends (for some sin, wrong, or omission)," especially in reference to Christ on the cross. While Rich may question what "sin, wrong, or omission" of humanity has created the compulsion to translate its life into language, it is a rhetorical question. Rich is quite aware of the many to whom language and history owe atonement, but realizing that language will not make amends to her, she claims it for herself. As she interrupts her train of thought, she also corrects it, recognizing that in "writing words like these" she has succeeded in bringing her experience to language and forced it to make amends: she is "living."

In poem VII, as suggested above, Rich also questions the validity of the role she allots to her lover while writing about her:

> Is all this close to the wolverines' howled signals,
> that modulated cantata of the wild?
> or when away from you I try to create you in words,
> am I simply using you, like a river or war? (28)

While Rich may acknowledge that she has life while she is writing, she questions this possibility for her lover. As Jane Hedley observes, Rich's choice of image here confirms her poetic project: "Her 'cantata' metaphor undoes the traditional opposition between art and nature: the possibility it entertains is that a poem's expression of 'the drive to connect' is immediate, like an animal's mating call"(339). Rich

thus naturalizes poetic expression as a drive which links us to animals once more: the questioning of this odd "beast" with words is resolved. Even more important, Rich defines the balance to be struck between her anxiety over "using" her lover and the imperative she must answer: "'Using you' is thus a risk that must be taken; otherwise, the poet will have failed, as she puts it, 'to want our freedom passionately enough'" (Hedley 339). Images and symbols can sometimes get in the way, being "used" to obscure the real necessity of expression. The lesbian imperative is a response to "that desecration of ourselves," an imperative which must be answered "passionately" or risk failing.

Naming is a speech act which heals "the desecration of ourselves" with new language. Pamela Annas presents a compelling analysis of The Dream of a Common Language [and thus, the "Twenty-One Love Poems"] which focuses on the act of naming:

> The poet has moved into a new world, one which the renamed self is in the process of reclaiming--picking up parts of that world, turning them over in her hands, tasting their texture, giving them names....The movement from Diving Into the Wreck to The Dream of a Common Language is a movement from hesitancy to confidence, from solitude to community--specifically to a community of women, from demythologizing to remythologizing, and from water to fire. (17-18)

Indeed, the fire is present, as Annas suggests, in the form of the volcano (a powerful symbol for "female passion and sexuality" (Annas 19)) of poem XI: "Every peak is a crater. This is the law of volcanoes,/ making them eternally and visibly female" (30). Fire is a

creative force which can forge new possibilities out of old forms. Fire is also associated with the passion which Rich calls for in poem VII above, the lack of which she mourns as a "failure." In contrast, poem XI depicts Rich and her lover exploring the sides of the volcano, "never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower/ unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her" (30 emphasis mine). Thus, female passion and sexuality, present here in the form of the volcano, will provide the fire to rename and forge a new world for lesbians: what has been hidden beneath the peak has untold depths and power.

Rich's physical placement of the potential power of language within the earth here recalls the issue of convention in lesbian speech-act theory. Rich may not have convention ("whatever we do together is pure invention" (XIII 31) to generate the force of her illocutions, yet I would argue that she grounds the authority of her speech acts on the earth itself. The "Twenty-One Love Poems" are permeated with images of nature, including the "blazing" trees, the "wolverines' howled signals" and the volcano. As Catherine Stimpson observes in "Zero Degree Deviancy," in reference to novelist Radclyffe Hall, a lesbian's use of natural imagery can contain a significant linguistic gesture:

> Seeking metaphors for their passion, Hall, like many lesbian novelists, turns to nature, both tamed and untamed: to vineyards, fruit trees, the four elements, the moon. Such standard tropes carry the implicit burden of dissolving the taint of "unnatural" actions through the cleansing power of natural language. (306)

In the "Twenty-One Love Poems," Rich uses natural language and imagery to build a new authority to support her poetic project.

As I have argued in Chapter Two, Rich's description of her lesbian experience is a significant illocutionary performance. That she chooses to define this experience in mainly natural terms is equally significant. Sandy Petrey states (as I have quoted before) in Speech Acts and Literary Theory, "[t]he constative too is a performance that can have life-transforming or life-arresting effects on its audience and its referent"(41). Indeed, Rich records both the life-transforming and -arresting effects of the power to describe: life in truth and death in lies and/or silence. By using natural images to depict the two possibilities of linguistic performance, Rich reclaims the world as her territory, as both a potential source of images, and a space for her existence.

The best example of Rich's reclamation through natural imagery appears in her description of her lover's eyes in poem III. Jane Hedley's analysis of the Petrarchan love sonnet tradition is critical here, for Rich breaks from male tradition in both language and her use of imagery to express her own feelings. As Hedley describes it, "[a] Petrarchan sonnet sequence typically includes at least one blazon, a poem in which every part of the beloved body is itemized and likened to a precious substance: her eyes are sapphires, her hair is spun gold, and so on" (342). Rich chooses a very different image and structure of thought to describe the eyes of her female lover:

> Your eyes are everlasting, the green spark
> of the blue-eyed grass of early summer,
> the green-blue wild cress washed by the spring. (26)

Most important, I would argue, is the fact that Rich's blazon begins and ends with the only part of her beloved's body which can engage in a mutual interaction and gaze: her eyes. Rich is thus stressing the mutuality of their lesbian love over the objectification of the male tradition, or as Hedley calls it, the "tendency of the conventional blazon to fetishize the object of erotic desire"(342). Also important to notice is the fact that Rich's metaphor for her lover's eyes is an "organic" transformation of the central natural image from the poem immediately preceding: the "feathered grass" which longs to "move openly" "in the pull of gravity." Thus, Rich places the "spark" or emblem of their shared lesbian existence in her lover's eyes: an "everlasting" symbol of mutuality which spans the two seasons of growth on the earth.

Rich transforms poetry and love in her revision of the traditional Petrarchan blazon, and her poetry holds within it the potential for other revisions of even greater magnitude, as seen in poem VI. The conclusion of this poem emphasizes the potential for profound change which difference holds when it approaches old, oppressive concepts in a new way:

> such hands might carry out an unavoidable violence
> with such restraint, with such a grasp
> of the range and limits of violence
> that violence ever after would be obsolete. (28)

Just as Rich is able to highlight the oppressive nature of the male tradition with her lesbian revision of the blazon, here she locates the potential for a paradoxical healing within hands which have historically been denied access to so much. This is a powerful example of the "life-transforming" potential of Rich's illocutionary performance: the audience, the world, and the referent itself is transformed. "Violence" is made obsolete, a word no longer necessary to describe the world after the transforming and healing action of the hands.

Poem XXI, as the final poem of the series, provides a vivid physical respresentation of Rich's illocutionary project in the "Twenty-One Love Poems." While Claire Keyes claims "It is difficult to see this poem as a love poem" (172), I believe that the love in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" is inextricable from the linguistic power they are endowed with, and thus a reading of Rich's physical representation of that power will reveal the love in her words:

> And this is not Stonehenge
> simply nor any place but the mind
> casting back to where her solitude,
> shared, could be chosen without loneliness,
> not easily nor without pains to stake out
> the circle, the heavy shadows, the great light. (35-6)

The "place" to which Rich leads the reader in the last poem is not a place at all, but an act of "the mind/casting back." Emphasis is placed on the need "to stake out/the circle, the heavy shadows, the great light," a physical act which most critics, such as Werner, Christ, and

Carruthers rightly recognize as a "specifically lesbian space--at once psychological, social, and mythological" (Werner 97). I would argue that the creation of this space, which represents the "Twenty-One Love Poems" as a whole, is an act of dedication and love, and does not require the presence of any literal lover in poem XXI to be described as such.

The final lines of the poem are an affirmation of the "creation" of Rich's words and the space they claim:

> I choose to be a figure in that light,
> half-blotted by darkness, something moving
> across that space, the color of stone
> greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
> a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle.
> (36)

The "here" in which Rich chooses to walk is a state of mind, a source of inspirational power, and a source of the passion which allows her to answer the lesbian imperative. The phrase, "half-blotted by darkness" recalls the "half-world" of poem V; however, Rich's poetry means that there is now no longer only half the story, but a complete circle . As Jane Hedley and Rima Shore suggest, "this circle" is the "Twenty-One Love Poems" (351, 269), a circle cast to protect, enclose, nurture, and create lesbian space. Rich's words create that space through their illocutionary force: they change the world through the articulation of her lesbian experience and love.

CHAPTER FIVE:
READING THE "LOVE" IN THE "TWENTY-ONE LOVE POEMS"

As I have suggested in the previous chapter, the "love" in Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" does not reside solely in the presence of her lover. Rima Shore reads a (con)fusion in who the poems are addressed to, whether to Rich's lover, or to "her poetry come to life"(270). I would suggest a third possibility, that Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems," an illocutionary attempt to break lesbian silence, can be read as addressed to Rich's lesbianism. A reading of these three levels of love in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" is illuminated by lesbian speech-act theory because Rich's expression of love cannot be understood in traditional ways, as some critical response has shown. In the center of this lesbian speech-act theory reading is "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)," the sheer sensuality of which sets it markedly "outside the law" of tradition and language.

While Rima Shore draws attention to the (con)fusion of the object of Rich's love in the "Twenty-One Love Poems," at the same time she comments that Rich's lover seems paradoxically absent in the poetry: "Twenty-One Love Poems seems to grow out of this 'desire to show you to everyone I love,' and yet the lover remains for the most part unseen and unheard"(265). I believe that this "absence" is the major source of misreadings of the "love," or lack of

love in the poems. While tradition would seem to dictate otherwise, I would argue that this "absence," as in the case of poem XXI above, need not be read as a lack or shortcoming. Similarly, Shore goes on to explain where she feels Rich's lover is present in the poems:

> our glimpse of this love affair is mostly of the moments in between--not the waking, not the parting, but the moment after waking, the moment after parting. We see not the lover, but her reflection in the poet's ordinary life. (265)

The idea of "ordinary life" which Shore identifies is crucial to reading the love in these poems. As Rich reminds her lover in poem XIX, "(I told you from the first I wanted daily life,/this island of Manhattan was island enough for me)" (34).

Truly, the "Twenty-One Love Poems" are a poetry of "daily life" because "daily life" is crucial to Rich's poetic project. Recall that in poem XVII, the tape-recorder which Rich mourns "merely played but should have listened to us" (34). As I suggested then, the "Twenty-One Love Poems" are a linguistic tape-recorder which Rich creates to break that silence, to instruct "those after us":

> this we were, this is how we tried to love,
> and these are the forces they had ranged against us,
> and these are the forces we had ranged within us,
> within us and against us, against us and within us. (34)

Thus, Rich wants to record for those after her something which she never had: a "map" of lesbian love which attempts both to accurately chart the route two women take in their relationship, and to warn of the "forces" or dangers they encounter along the way. Notice Rich's use of the rhetorical figure of chiasmus in the final line: "within us

and against us, against us and within us." The pattern of this line, with its mirroring repetition reverses the positions of the forces Rich is recording: the forces "within us" are on the outside, and the "forces they had ranged against us" are on the inside. This reversal emphasizes how easy it is to internalize outside homophobia, and how very real and strong these forces "within us" are. To record these forces, Rich must record a love which is not traditional, idealized, or even perhaps "love" as it is usually defined.

Having clarified what I read to be Rich's project for her "love" in the "Twenty-One Love Poems," it now becomes easier to refute those critics who do not recognize any love in them. Kevin McGuirk describes Rich in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" as "most vulnerable and therefore most embattled"(75). What McGuirk reads as Rich's being "embattled" and "negative" is the result of Rich attempting to record the negative forces which are working against her relationship with her lover honestly. The "deep and anguished proximity of two lives"(280) which Olga Broumas reads can now be understood as the anguish Rich feels at realizing that the silence which has erased women's and lesbian history is also present in an internalized form in her own relationship: the silence of her lover. What distinguishes my reading from past critics' is the fact that the very real pain in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" does not erase the love which is the force behind their composition.

Rich's break with convention in these poems can also be read as an act of love. She confesses to her lover in poem VII her fear of

"using" her when she creates her in words. In this way, the "absence" of Rich's lover (non-traditional in love poetry) can be read as Rich's attempt not to use her. Jane Hedley's arguments about Rich's use of Petrarchan tradition are also relevant here. Rich's re-vision of the blazon, which I recognize in her description of her lover's eyes, can be read as a similar attempt to "de-fetishize" the object of her love in opposition to the male tradition. Caroline Halliday's analysis of the "Twenty-One Love Poems" provides an excellent synthesis of Rich's break with tradition:

> She narrates the reality of living beside another woman, drawing back from the difficulties, or moving on. In "Twenty-One Love Poems," only one is specifically erotic, the floating poem. The implication of this, for me, is that the poet does not tell of the joy of physical loving often because of the necessity of understanding the web of daily meeting, working, reading the papers making it all knit in with her lover and her self....Is Rich suggesting in this integration of many aspects of loving, that there are new ways to love? (85-6)

Indeed, I would answer that Rich is in fact suggesting that there are new ways to write about love.

Poem XIV, the poem in which Rich claims to her lover "I never felt closer to you" (31), provides an important starting point for understanding the closeness and love between the two women:

> It was your vision of the pilot
> confirmed my vision of you: you said, He keeps
> on steering headlong into the waves, on purpose
> while we crouched in the open hatchway
> vomiting into plastic bags
> for three hours between St. Pierre and Miquelon.

I never felt closer to you. (31)

Once again, the journey of Rich and her lover is at once literal and allegorical. On a boat steered by a male "captain" the two women suffer from the pitch and roll of a turbulent sea. Rich's lover attributes at least part of their suffering to the captain's efforts to keep the boat from overturning, his steering into the waves "on purpose." Her lover's attitude allows Rich to gain insight into her character, to "confirm" her vision of her lover, and feel close to her.

The second half of the poem provides even more insight into why Rich might have felt closest to her lover on this trip. While Rima Shore suggests that the closeness comes from "resisting the elements together"(269), I would argue that the situation is more complex. Rich and her lover are surrounded in this boat by "honeymoon couples/huddled in each other's laps and arms," heterosexual couples unconsciously exerting their privilege in public displays of affection. This is an excellent example of a force both "within" and "against" lesbians: while lesbians face the same tumultuous challenges in relationships as heterosexuals, they are not able to express their support for each other in the same way, because of their own fear and the attitudes of those around them. Thus, the boat trip provides an example of the contemporary invisibility of lesbians.

I would argue that the closeness Rich and her lover feel is a result of their ability to establish a new signifier for their love in the face of authority, and the ignorance of the "honeymoon couples":

> I put my hand on your thigh
> to comfort both of us, your hand came over mine,
> we stayed that way, suffering together
> in our bodies, as if all suffering
> were physical, we touched so in the presence
> of strangers who knew nothing and cared less
> vomiting their private pain
> as if all suffering were physical. (32)

Through their comforting touch, Rich and her lover join in a symbolic embrace which sustains them not only through the difficulties they share with the other heterosexuals in the journey of life, but also through their invisibility on that journey.

That poem XIV should immediately precede "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" is significant. "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" seeks to record that which is invisible to the "honeymoon couples" in poem XIV, that of which they "knew nothing and cared less." As the ironic repetition of "as if all suffering were physical" in poem XIV suggests, all suffering is not physical: the "Twenty-One Love Poems" record the emotional suffering that silence and invisibility cause, and in "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)," the joy which the physicality between two women can bring is celebrated.

Why does "THE "FLOATING POEM" float? I would argue that it does so precisely because it records experience which is so invisible, experience which floats calmly, anchored above the pitching, man-driven boat that Rich and her lover inhabit. Rima Shore focuses on the fact that a poem which floats is "[defying] the

law of gravity" (268), making "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" an answer to poem II, in which Rich yearns for a time when she and her lover can "move openly together/in the pull of gravity" (25). Craig Werner recognizes the linguistic element of this poem's "FLOATING" when he acknowledges it as "an emblem of a process of communication denied by received languages" (95). Thus, "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" floats in many ways: invisibly, triumphantly above and beyond language, it floats without a number, cradled in protective parentheses which announce its importance.

The poem begins with a powerful natural simile describing the lovemaking the two women share:

> Whatever happens with us, your body
> will haunt mine--tender, delicate
> your lovemaking, like the half-curled frond
> of the fiddlehead fern in forests
> just washed by sun. (32)

Rich's simile captures many aspects of their lovemaking through comparison with the frond of the fern: like a "half-curled frond" there is potential for growth in their lovemaking, the sense of a new beginning. Similarly, the lines "in forests/just washed by sun" contain a cleansing image emphasizing the naturalness, and "cleanness" of their sexuality. The telescopic movement of the image from the close focus on the "half-curled frond" to the whole "fiddlehead fern" to the "forests" to the "sun" imparts the sense that

their lovemaking is a singular, precious treasure which has been found after a long search.

While Rich may use both metaphor and simile in "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)," Jane Hedley's analysis draws attention to Rich's use of metonomy here as a way to reinforce the re-visionary force of her illocutionary tape-recorder. This is a logical extension of Rich's re-vision of the Petrarchan blazon, another example of her emphasis on mutuality over the "fetishizing" power-dynamic of traditional love poetry. Hedley describes the contrast thus:

> When X "stands for" Y metaphorically, a substitution has been made that is "creative," and highlights the subjective or constructive aspect of human perception; when X "stands for" Y metonymically both are preserved, and a "natural" connection is affirmed to exist between them. (346)

This is yet another example of Rich's resistance to "using" her lover in the traditional way: instead she preserves the integrity of both bodies in the poem, and affirms their "natural" connection.

Actually reading the metonomy and using Hedley's analysis to understand how they operate is the best way to appreciate its uniqueness:

> ...Your travelled, generous thighs
> between which my whole face has come and come--
> the innocence and wisdom of the place my tongue has
> found there--
> the live, insatiate dance of your nipples in my mouth--
> your touch on me, firm, protective, searching
> me out, your strong tongue and slender fingers
> reaching where I had been waiting for years for you
> in my rose-wet cave--whatever happens, this is. (32)

As Hedley observes, these images have the opposite effect from that of a traditional male blazon, which serves to "distance the female body and hold it still" (346):

> ...There are two bodies involved, and the poem's metonymies refer to their interactions and reciprocal movements: it is really these that the poem depicts, or is about....Instead of an object contemplated by a subject, we have the active reciprocity of "your nipples in my mouth--your touch on me." Instead of poetic strategies that achieve control and maintain distance, there is a fearless mutual searching-out of each other's innermost places. (346-7)

"(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" is an example of Rich's new way to write about love, an example of how speaking lesbian experience can revise both language and poetic structures.

The last words of "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" are a distillation of the illocutionary force which Rich imparts to her project: "whatever happens, this is." Angela Esterhammer draws attention to the significance of the phrase "this is" for speech act theory:

> "This is" serves as the Wittgensteinian gesture that calls attention to an imagined object, alerting the reader to understand the copula in a non-referential way, conceding to it the power of establishing an independent reality ("this is")...Deictics are only for discourses which can stand the intrusion of subjectivity...They are also essential, I would argue, to poetic texts which attempt to establish the performativity of their language based on an authority located in the writer's visionary consciousness. (42)

The significance of these words is their simultaneous recognition of the life of Rich's now spoken experience and the enactment of it:

"this is" seals the speech act and affirms Rich's success. What was before invisible is visible, and no matter what happens between the lovers, their shared experience in the form of these words has joined language. Halliday reads the mood here as negative, as Rich is "looking to a time when [she and her lover] might be apart"(85), but this is subordinate to the fact that Rich is looking towards a future in which her words, regardless of what "happens between [them]," will live.

In the "Twenty-One Love Poems," with the "(FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)" as their powerful centre of the lesbian speech act, Rich has succeeded in her hoped-for goal with her lover:

> If I could let you know--
> two women together is a work
> nothing in civilization has made simple. (XIX 35)

While successfully recording the forces both "within" and "against" her and her lover, Rich is also successful in creating a series of poems which write love in a new way. The "Twenty-One Love Poems" break the silence surrounding lesbianism, and in the final image of poem XXI, "I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle," they affirm Rich's love for her lover, her poetry, and her own lesbianism.

CHAPTER SIX:
LESBIAN SPEECH-ACT THEORY
BEYOND THE "TWENTY-ONE LOVE POEMS":
ADRIENNE RICH AND DAPHNE MARLATT

Lesbian speech-act theory, as I formulate it, is not only applicable to Adrienne Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems." This chapter will explore the potential of lesbian speech-act theory by using it to read two other poems by Adrienne Rich. The first poem is from her collection The Dream of a Common Language, and is thus a poem with more obvious ties to the "Twenty-One Love Poems"; the other poem is from her most recent collection, An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems, 1988-1991. To broaden the scope further, I will also be reading selections from Daphne Marlatt's latest collection, Salvage from a lesbian speech-act perspective. In this, I aim to highlight the many interesting connections between these lesbian texts which actually inspired the creation of lesbian speech-act theory.

First, from the collection in which the "Twenty-One Love Poems" appear, Rich's "Transcendental Etude" responds well to a lesbian speech-act theory approach. As the concluding poem of The Dream of a Common Language, "Transcendental Etude" also contains the "last word" on many themes and issues which are raised in the

center of the collection by the "Twenty-One Love Poems." One of the most striking similarities appears in the title, "Transcendental Etude," a musical metaphor which informs the poem and continues Rich's use of musical imagery in the "Twenty-One Love Poems." The title's metaphor is more complex than Rich's earlier search for "old songs/with new words," however. Now Rich is searching for the poetic life equivalent of Franz Lizst's transcendental etudes for the piano: a poetic exercise which can help lesbians perform and understand our life which we are born into, "forced to begin in the midst of the hardest movement"(73). Thus, music again provides the metaphor for Rich's act of linguistic creation: "Transcendental Etude" is both the call for a new "map" to achieve musical strength and its enactment, similar to the tape-recorder in poem XVII of the "Twenty-One Love Poems."

In creating this complex metaphor in which lesbians are pianists born lacking the "technique" to perform their own lives, Rich recognizes some important struggles:

> ...nothing that was said
> is true for us, caught naked in the argument,
> the counterpoint, trying to sightread
> what our fingers can't keep up with, learn by heart
> what we can't even read. And yet
> it is this we were born to. We aren't virtuosi
> or child prodigies, there are no prodigies
> in this realm, only a half-blind, stubborn
> cleaving to the timbre, the tones of what we are
> --even when all the texts describe it differently. (74)

The images in this passage formulate the lesbian imperative as I have identified it in the "Twenty-One Love Poems": here, music becomes a symbol for the language which lesbians have been denied access to. The word "half-blind" recalls Rich's image of the "half-world" of silence which lesbians have inhabited. Even while lesbians may recognize their own song and "cleave" to it, they must do so in the face of "all the texts" which "describe it differently."

"Transcendental Etude" affirms the creative potential lesbians will hold as they begin to exercise with Rich's own transcendental etude, and the others which will follow it in the future. While lesbians have historically been "rootless" (75), in the "Twenty-One Love Poems," they are beginning to take root in the form of the "blazing trees." Here, the image of growth and change is unmistakeable:

> ...two women, eye to eye
> measuring each other's spirit, each other's
> limitless desire,
> a whole new poetry beginning here. (76)

Lesbian locution is able to create a "whole new poetry" because of the silence it breaks, because of its untapped resources: the illocutionary force of Rich's expression is revolutionary. "Transcendental Etude" and, thus, the entire collection The Dream of a Common Language, ends with an image which affirms that revolutionary potential. The "huge/rockshelves that underlie all life," too huge for our understanding in "a lifetime"(73) open the

poem, and reappear with a positive potential at the end: "and now the stone foundation, rockshelf further/forming underneath everything that grows"(77). This rock foundation is like the language the lesbian enters to speak "herself": seemingly immoveable, it, too, will change with re-vision, altering the foundation of "everything that grows" on the earth.

Rich's most recent collection of poetry, An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems, 1988-1991, provides an interesting contrast to the speech-act transcendence of "Transcendental Etude" in "(DEDICATIONS)," the thirteenth section of the title poem. Notice the similarity in the style of title to "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)": both are cradled within parentheses which suggest to me a certain protectiveness and sense of intimacy. "(DEDICATIONS)" is indeed just as its title suggests, a series of personal dedications from the poet to many of her unseen readers. A tone of protectiveness informs the poem, a sense of nurturing that is extended to all of the readers in their many differences:

> I know you are reading this poem as you pace beside the stove
> warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder, a book in your hand
> because life is short and you too are thirsty.
> 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 which words they are. (26)

"(DEDICATIONS)" provides a vivid contrast here because it is addressed to twelve specifically identified readers, not the lesbian "we" which appeared both in the "Twenty-One Love Poems" and "Transcendental Etude." How Rich constructs her readers in this poem is a crucial part of why "(DEDICATIONS)" can be viewed as a speech act.

Rich's readers are, in fact, the poem "(DEDICATIONS)": without them it wouldn't exist, for it is a dedication to their existence. To enact her poem, Rich creates twelve contrasting readers, twelve haunting cameos of individual struggle. While the readers Rich creates are almost certainly fictional, this, I would argue, is the point: Rich's act of dedication is an act of creation. She creates twelve potential places for her live reader to identify with, and a perfect match is not necessary. Rich uses anaphora to begin the cameo of each new reader with "I know you are reading this poem...," a phrase which is arresting to read because each time you read it, your identity as a reader melds with those to whom Rich is dedicating her poem. Thus, in creating twelve fictional readers for her poem, Rich also dedicates it to her flesh-and-blood reader because she, too, as Rich knows, is "reading this poem."

As I have suggested earlier, the use of deictics in poetry is an important indicator of illocutionary force: when a lesbian brings her experience to language, sometimes all she can do is use a linguistic pointer, "this," to suggest the immediacy of her translation. "(DEDICATIONS)" is an excellent example of such a use of a deictic:

the repetition of "I know you are reading this poem" creates "this poem." "This poem" is composed of the portraits of those who are reading it, "this poem" is flesh and blood, Rich's word made flesh once again. "This poem" is a center of activity, a commonality in difference which comes alive each time it is read because it tells each reader "I know you are reading this poem": "(DEDICATIONS)" creates a community of readers with words, and it is dedicated to those readers for no other reason than that they exist and struggle. As such, "(DEDICATIONS)" is a powerful example of Rich closing the gap between "words" and "living," a self-reflexive speech act which creates itself out of Rich's knowledge and presence in the text.

DAPHNE MARLATT: SALVAGE

In a 1986 collection of Canadian women's writings entitled Sp/elles, Daphne Marlatt defines her own writing as an answer to the lesbian imperative when she states that, as a lesbian, she is "writing in order to be" (66). Reading Marlatt's poetry from a lesbian speech-act perspective does provide some very interesting comparisons with Rich, suggesting that this theory can help in analysing a specific lesbian aesthetic. In the introduction to her most recent collection, Salvage, Marlatt clarifies the linguistic nature of her project as she explains its title:

> These are littoral poems, shoreline poems--and by extension the whole book--written on that edge where a feminist consciousness floods the structure of patriarchal

> thought. They began as a project to salvage what i thought of as "failed" poems. But the entire book attempts to salvage the wreckage of language so freighted with phallocentric values it must be subverted and re-shaped, as Virginia Woolf said of the sentence, for a woman's use. (9-10)

Like Rich and Woolf before her, Marlatt recognizes that language itself must be altered to bear new meanings and express women's experience. Marlatt also conceives of her "salvage" work as closely related to her own existence, as a way of living in language, of "being."

While both poets recognize the necessity of linguistic re-vision, Marlatt's approach is very different. Marlatt works from the foundations of language, reaching back to the roots of words and liberating them, letting them play and flow on their own. The result is a very flowing style in verse paragraphs that lack the usual capitalization at the beginning of each sentence. In fact, at a poetry reading in Hamilton, Ontario last December, Marlatt stated that her ideal would be to have the words in one continuous line, never broken by the necessity of the end of a page (Hamilton Public Library, Dec. 2, 1992). The poem "River Run" provides an example of this flow and the visceral connection to language that Marlatt's poetry creates:

> finding a way to write her in, her and her, write she, write suck and rush, high and daring to be, attaches her body to words where they stick to her licking at old holes, tongue lashings, lashings of rain as at no one. (25)

Marlatt's poetry can be read as an example of the "whole new poetry beginning here"(76) of which Rich spoke in "Transcendental Etude." In "finding [her] way" to write "lesbian," Daphne Marlatt creates a poetry in which many clauses act together: "finding," and "daring," the poet "attaches her body to words" in a style that is the embodiment of her sensual experience.

In the poem "(Dis)spelling" Marlatt creates a beach which has many connections to the beach in Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems": Marlatt's beach, too, is symbolic of past silence and history, but she is more successful in claiming a territory of her own from it:

> i too discover i can walk...deep in this place that feels like history, old jossticks burning, old offerings
>
> [...] you call me and i am speechless. you call me and i am still. out of this murmuring wreckage of names, old beach, i am finding a new floor. miles off i walk in water feeling the current, our swift magnetic current run, all around the islands sinking in me and you. (114)

While the landscape seems initially external, by the end of the passage, with the "islands sinking in me and you," it is internal. The image of the islands here is a volcanic one: the "lesbian" is again submerged, and her unseen power has not yet been tapped, has not yet reached the air, or language.

The final poem, "Booking Passage," is the most overtly performative of the collection, and it bears a striking resemblance to Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" in its constuction of a journey by

boat which lesbians must undertake to find their history and themselves:

> ...murmur, <u>mer-mère</u>, historicity stored in the tissue, text...a small boat, fraught. trying to cross distance, trying to find that passage (secret). in libraries where whole texts, whole persons have been secreted away. (117)

Although Rich and her lover are ostensibly travelling between St. Pierre and Miquelon on their journey, and the islands Marlatt and her lover travel between have no names, I would argue that they are one and the same: contact points, or uprisings of the submerged "lesbian continent" which the poets' language is "trying" to bring into sight.

The final section of "Booking Passage" is an excellent summary of "what" Daphne Marlatt's words are "trying" to do, and it evokes a vivid sense of the enormity of the linguistic force which will be necessary to drain the sea which covers the "lesbian continent":

> this tracking back and forth across the white, this tearing of papyrus crosswise, this tearing of love in our mouths to leave our mark in the midst of rumour, coming out.
>
> ...to write in lesbian. (118)

Marlatt's words come alive, "tracking back and forth across the white" of the empty page she needs to cover, the uncharted territory she is claiming. Notice, too, that for Marlatt, "lesbian" is not only her experience but a language that is created out of her experience. Thus, while Marlatt's linguistic goal is "to write <u>in</u>" the lesbian subject

who was previously excluded from discourse, she is simultaneously creating a new language to achieve this: she must "write in lesbian." The journey which Marlatt has undertaken, the "passage" she has booked is not without risk, however:

> the dark swell of a sea that separates and beats against our joined feet, islands me in the night, fear and rage the isolate talking in my head. to combat this slipping away, of me, of you, the steps...(118)

Most remarkable here is Marlatt's transformation of the noun "islands" into a verb: the "dark swell" of obscurity still threatens, and "islands [Marlatt] in the night," isolating her from herself and her lover. Marlatt's words must work against the "dark swell" to assert her existence in poetry, in language.

"Booking passage" concludes with an extremely self-referential section which affirms Marlatt's success in bringing her experience to language. This is achieved in part, as Esterhammer's criticism would suggest, by her repeated use of the deictic "this" to confirm the performativity of her language:

> translated here...
>
> like her, precisely on this page, this mark: a thin flame runs under / my skin. twenty-five hundred years ago, this trembling then. actual as that which wets our skin her words come down to us, a rush, poured through the blood, this coming and going among islands is. (119)

Invoking the words of her poetic predecessor Sappho, Marlatt affirms that "this trembling" (i.e., lesbianism) has lived as long as history. She concludes Salvage, her own act of linguistic salvage with

a simple statement of being that echoes "(THE FLOATING POEM, UNNUMBERED)": "this coming and going among islands is."

Thus, "whatever happens," Marlatt and Rich have both charted their searching journeys among islands buried by the sea. Their experience and their love now is, and has a life and being in language. In fact it is a language in Marlatt's case, for she writes "in lesbian." To achieve these speech acts, the descriptive power of their words must be acknowledged: for a lesbian writing, the performativity of her language is rooted in her ability to speak the "unspeakable," to bring it the light, and point for all to see, "This is me, this is my love, this exists, this is."

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