

Adrienne Rich

‘I happen to think poetry makes a huge difference.’

BY MATTHEW ROTHSCHILD

Adrienne Rich is one of the leading American poets of our century. For forty years, her distinguished writings have brought accolades, including the National Book Award, the Fellowship of American Poets, and the Poet’s Prize. But as she puts it in her early 1980s poem “Sources,” she is a “woman with a mission, not to win prizes/but to change the laws of history.”

It is this mission that sets Rich apart, for she has forsaken the easy path of academic poetry and hurled herself into the political fray. An early feminist and an outspoken lesbian, she has served as a role model for a whole generation of political poets and activists. Consciously she has fused politics and poetry, and in so doing, she—along with Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and a small handful of colleagues—rediscovered and rejuvenated the lost American tradition of political poetry.

Her latest work, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, takes its title from a stanza of William Carlos Williams: “It is difficult/to get the news from poems/yet men die miserably every day for lack/of what is found there.” This ambitious, sweeping work contains an elaborate defense of political poetry, an intricate reading of three of her great predecessors (Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, and Muriel Rukeyser), and generous introductions to dozens of contemporary political poets. It also is a trenchant indictment of American society today and a turbulent coming-to-grips with her own citizenship. In this regard, it is a prose continuation of *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*.

I spoke with her one cool sunny September afternoon on the patio of her modest home on the outskirts of Santa Cruz, California, which she shares with her partner, the novelist Michelle Cliff. When it became too cold, we went inside and finished the interview in her living room. Works by June Jordan and Audre Lorde rested on a nearby coffee table.

Q: In *What Is Found There* you write that “poetry is banned in the United States,” that it is “under house arrest.” What do you mean?

Adrienne Rich: When you think about almost any other country, any other culture, it’s been taken for granted that poets would take part in the government, that they would be sent here and there as ambassadors by the state proudly, that their being poets was part of why they were considered valuable citizens—Yeats in Ireland, Neruda in Chile, St.-John Perse in France. At the same time, poets like Hikmet in Turkey, Mandelstam in the Soviet Union, Ritsos in Greece, and hundreds of others have been severely penalized for their writings, severely penalized for a single poem. But here it’s the censorship of “who wants to listen to you, anyway?”—of carrying on this art in a country where it is *perceived* as so elite or effete or marginal that it has nothing to do with the hard core of things. That goes hand in hand with an attitude about politics, which is that the average citizen, the

regular American, can’t understand poetry and also can’t understand politics, that both are somehow the realms of experts, that we are spectators of politics, rather than active subjects. I don’t believe either is true.

Q: How did American poetry come to be viewed as so marginal?

Rich: Poetry in America became either answerable to a certain ideology—as it was, Puritanism—focusing on certain themes, expressive of certain attitudes, or it became identified in the Nineteenth Century with a certain femininity, the feminization of literature, what Nathaniel Hawthorne called “that horde of scribbling women.” In *What Is Found There*, I suggest that in carrying out the genocide of the indigenous people, you had to destroy the indigenous poetry. The mainstream American tradition depends on the extirpation of memory and the inability of so many white American poets to deal with what it meant to be a North American poet—Whitman, of course, the great exception in his way, and in her own way Dickinson, so different but so parallel. And yet that still doesn’t altogether explain it.

Q: What more is there?

Rich: I think there’s been a great denial of the kinds of poets and poetries that could speak to a lot more people. Poetry has been kind of hoarded inside the schools, inside the universities. The activity of writing about poems and poetry—the activity of making it available and accessible—became the property of scholars and academics and became dependent on a certain kind of academic training, education, class background.

Q: Is that why people say, “I just don’t get it. I don’t understand poetry”?

Rich: It’s something people say in reaction to feeling, “I don’t know much about it. I haven’t been exposed to a lot of it.” It may also be a defense against what Muriel Rukeyser calls “the fear of poetry”—which she calls a disease of our schools.

Q: But a lot of contemporary political poetry is extremely clear and accessible, isn’t it?

Rich: Instead of political poetry, we might want to say poetry of witness, poetry of dissent, poetry that is the voice of those and on behalf of those who are generally unheard. I’m reading poetry all the time that is enormously accessible in its language. And I don’t mean by that using the smallest possible vocabulary. We’re living in a country now where the range of articulateness has really diminished down to almost a TV level, where to hear people speaking with rich figures of speech, which used to be the property of everybody, is increasingly rare.

Q: What you call “the bleached language” of our era?

Rich: Yes. But I'm seeing a lot of poetry that is new, that is political in the broadest and richest sense. Fewer people would feel the "fear of poetry" if they heard it aloud as well as read it on the page. There are enormous poetry scenes now—poetry slams or competitions—they have the flavor of something that is still macho, but certainly lots of people go to them, and there are some remarkable women participants, like Patricia Smith. Throughout this country, there are readings that have nothing to do with academic sponsorship.

Q: The macho-ness, the turning of poetry into a competitive sport, does that trouble you at all?

Rich: For people to have a good time with it is wonderful. But in the past twenty years I have participated in and gone to so many women's poetry readings where the sense of building a voice, communally, was the thing rather than individuals trying to compete against each other to be the best, the winner. That sense of poetry as a communal art feels crucial to me. It's certainly something that has prevailed in other movements, as well. It was present in the antiwar movement, it was present certainly in the black liberation struggle of the 1960s, it's certainly present in the community activities and the community building of other groups in this country. So for poetry to operate as a community-building and community-enhancing project—rather than something for the glory of *the poet*—would be a tremendous opening up.

Q: Did it bother you earlier in your career when your critics dismissed your political poetry as angry, or bitter, or merely political?

Rich: Well, yeah, it bothered me when I was younger a lot. It bothers me a lot less now.

When I was putting together the manuscript of my third book, which was called *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* and which contains what I think of as my first overtly feminist poem, called "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law," some friends of mine looked at the manuscript and said, "Now don't give it this title. People will think it's some sort of female diatribe or complaint." I wanted that title, and I wanted that poem. And it was true: Critics said that book was too personal, too bitter (I don't think the word "shrill" was being used then). But I knew this was material that would have to find a place in my poetry, in my work, that it was probably central to it—as indeed it came to be.

Recently, I was sent a clipping from the *Irish Times* in which the Irish poet, Derek Mayhon, refers to me as "cold, dishonest, and wicked." He deplores the "victimology" of my ideas, which he says have seduced younger women poets. When I read that, I was sort of astounded, because we are in 1993. But then I thought, what this man is afraid of is the growing feminism in Ireland and the growing energy and strength of Irish women poets. It's easier for him to criticize a North American woman poet than to address what's going on in his own country—that might be very threatening to him as a male and in a country where poetry has been so predominantly a male turf. Anyway, those kinds of attacks have come all along, and you do expect them.

Q: It's just a standard put-down for you now, isn't it?

Rich: I don't really see it directed at me. I see it directed at a larger phenomenon. It's not just about me and my work. It's about movements of which I am a part. It's about a whole social structure that is threatened or feeling itself threatened.

Q: Are you saying it's an attack on the women's movement or the lesbian movement?

Rich: Well, yes. I suppose if you attack one writer, you think then others will have less temerity. But there are such wonderful younger women writers coming along who are creating out of their anger, their fury, their sense of the world. Nothing's going to stop that.

Q: There does seem to be a lot of energy left in the women's liberation movement, and the lesbian and gay-rights movement, two movements you've been closely associated with. Do you share that assessment?

Rich: Partly because of economic conditions, and partly be-

Sigh no more, ladies.

Time is male
and in his cups drinks to the fair.
Bemused by gallantry, we hear
our mediocrities over-praised,
indolence read as abnegation,
slattern thought styled intuition,
every lapse forgiven, our crime
only to cast too bold a shadow
or smash the mold straight off.

For that, solitary confinement,
tear gas, attrition shelling.
Few applicants for that honor.

Well,
she's long about her coming, who must be
more merciless to herself than history.
Her mind full to the wind, I see her plunge
breasted and glancing through the currents,
taking the light upon her
at least as beautiful as any boy
or helicopter,
poised, still coming,
her fine blades making the air wince

but her cargo
no promise then:
delivered
palpable
ours.

*Excerpted from the poem, "Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,"
in Adrienne Rich's "Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970."
(W.W. Norton & Co., 1993).
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cause of work that has gone on in the women's movement and the lesbian-gay movement, we're realizing there can be no single-issue campaigns. We're realizing we can work in one area or another but we need to be constantly conscious of ourselves as part of a network with others. I see the women's movement as a much more multicultural movement than it has ever been, which I think is a tremendous strength. It's also a question of providing for the needs—just basically that—providing shelters for battered women, providing the rape-crisis hot line, and providing food and shelter a lot of the time.

We're talking about something really large: How does change come about at the end of this century, at this particular time that we're finding ourselves in? I still believe very strongly that there isn't going to be any kind of movement joined, any mass movement, that does not involve leadership by women—I don't mean *only* leadership by women or leadership by *only* women but leadership by women. This is the only way that I see major change approaching. And I think one of the things that we've seen over the last few years in some of the spectacles that have been served up on television such as the Anita Hill hearings is the way the system has revealed itself as a white man's system.

Q: You say somewhere that it was not until 1970 that you saw yourself fully as a feminist.

Rich: I think it was then that I first used the word about myself. It's odd because there's so much discussion now about whether young women want to be labeled feminist or not. And I remember thinking I didn't want to be labeled as a feminist. Feminists were these funny creatures like Susan B. Anthony, you know.



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She was a laughingstock when I was growing up. Or Carrie Nation. They were caricatured.

Q: Why the current resistance?

Rich: Names, labels get kind of lodged in a certain point of time and appear to contain only a certain content, and they lose their fluidity, they lose their openness, and then the new generation comes along and wants to register its own experience in its own way. That doesn't really bother me that much. I myself have gotten tired of the word feminism and am going back to the old phrase, women's liberation.

Q: Why is that?

Rich: Women's liberation is a very beautiful phrase; feminism sounds a little purse-mouthed. It's also become sort of meaningless. If we use the phrase women's liberation, the question immediately arises, "Liberation from what? Liberation for what?" Liberation is a very serious word, as far as I'm concerned.

Q: You make great claims for women's liberation as a democratizing force.

Rich: I see it as potentially the ultimate democratizing force. It is fundamentally anti-hierarchical, and that involves justice on so many levels because of the way women interpenetrate everywhere. And the places we don't interpenetrate—the higher levels of power—are bent on retaining power, retaining hierarchy, and the exclusion of many kinds of peoples.

Q: What do you make of the current attacks on feminism, which seem to be on two tracks right now: that it is a cult of victimization, and the other, that women's studies is peripheral or unrigorous intellectually?

Rich: Women's studies and feminism have always been attacked. I think it was in 1970 that I remember seeing an article in *Harper's* called "Requiem for the Women's Movement," when the women's movement was just beginning to show its face. Its death is being constantly announced. But it's an unquenchable and unkillable movement that has come and gone or come and submerged throughout the world in many different places in many different times. At this point, I think we live in an era of such global communications that that cannot happen again.

Q: Sometimes in your description of the United States the task of changing our society seems so awesome, so daunting. One of the recurring metaphors in your book *What Is Found There* is that the United States is in depression, mental depression, a clinical depression, a depressive state. What do you mean by that?

Rich: I was writing that in 1990, and I was trying to look at what I saw around me: a shared mood, a shared emotional crisis, that people—battered by a more-than-ever indifferent and arrogant distribution of resources—felt themselves to blame for the fact that they couldn't manage, that they couldn't survive, that they couldn't support their families, that they couldn't keep a job, the enormous proliferation of weaponry. . . .

Q: You have an arresting image when you write that "war is the electroshock treatment" for this depression.

Rich: Which was part of the purpose of the Persian Gulf war—to distract from the domestic anger and despair. And to some extent it worked. But it was very ephemeral. It's not that I feel that the depression is only psychological, but we do have to take note of the psychological effects of an economic system. Capitalism, as we know it, leads to this kind of despair and self-blame, stagnation of the will. It's really important to look at that, and move through it.

Q: One of the manifestations of that depressiveness is the proliferation of pop therapies. You seem to take those on and lash out at them in *What Is Found There*. What bothers you so much about them?

Rich: It's not that I don't believe in introspection, in the recovery of buried memory, in the things that therapy is supposed to do, but—and I saw this most vividly in the women's movement—therapy, twelve-step groups, support-groups so-called, seemed to be the only kind of organization going on in small

groups, in communities; they seemed to be the only thing that people were doing. I compared this to the early consciousness-raising of the women's liberation movement where, yes, women met in groups to speak about their experience as women but with the purpose of going out and taking action. It was not enough simply to put everything in the pot and let it sizzle. The solutions in these therapy groups are purely personal. It's not that I haven't seen activists who became ineffectual because of the failure to attend to their feelings. I'm not saying write all that off. But therapy, self-help became the great American pastime. It also became an industry.

Q: The fatuousness of the language that came along with these therapies seemed to rankle you?

Rich: Yes, because it sells us—and what we're going through—so completely short. And it keeps us in one place; it keeps us stagnating.

Q: Is that fad fading?

Rich: It's hard to say in a place like Santa Cruz. It's also been largely but not entirely a middle-class preoccupation.

Q: In your last two works, you seem to be wrestling with what it means to be a citizen of the United States.

Rich: To a certain extent in *Atlas*, I was trying to talk about the location, the privileges, the complexity of loving my country and hating the ways our national interest is being defined for us. In this book, *What Is Found There*, I've been coming out as a poet, a poet who is a citizen, a citizen who is a poet. How do those two identities come together in a country with the particular traditions and attitudes regarding poetry that ours has?

Q: This claiming of your citizenship marks a departure from universal brotherhood or sisterhood, or could be viewed as that. You talk of the Virginia Woolf lines . . .

Rich: "As a woman, I have no country. As a woman, I want no country. As a woman, my country is the whole world."

Q: You write that at one point you embraced that view but now in a sense you are rejecting it. How did you change your mind?

Rich: Through recognizing that I was, among other things, a white and middle-class citizen of the United States, not only a woman. I had been to Nicaragua when the whole issue of what it means to be a citizen of a large and powerful country that is making it impossible for the people of small adjacent countries to have a decent or secure life was uppermost.

Q: But isn't that an unusual time to claim your citizenship in the United States, since you recognized yourself as part of that "raised boot" of oppression in Nicaragua and Latin America?

Rich: Well, it's not simply a joyful claiming. It has its pain. A couple of friends of mine who come from Latin America and the Caribbean have described some of the things they have gone through when they were coming off a plane to enter the United States—what it means to travel with a certain passport. Their experience is different from mine, traveling around the world with an American passport: I have never been taken off to detention; I have never been questioned; I have generally been told to go ahead in line. Small but very large experiences like that—real differences in what this piece of paper brings you—the benefits, the privileges. Overall in my life it has been a privileged passport behind which stands a lot of power that has been placed on the side of some of the worst regimes in the world. So I'm trying to make sense of that, to come to grips with it—but not to deny it and not to float beyond it and say I transcend this because I'm a woman, I'm a feminist, and I'm against imperialism.

Q: Since the Right is so much more powerful than the Left or the movements on the Left in this country, don't you fear it's more likely that the Right will ascend as things get tighter?

Rich: I certainly feel the Right's enormous power to control the media. Sometimes I ask myself if we don't need to reconceptualize ourselves in this country. We—something broadly defined as the Left, which has maybe got to have a different nomenclature altogether—really need to consider ourselves as a resistance movement. We have to see ourselves as keeping cer-

tain kinds of currents flowing below the surface—the "secret stream" that Václav Havel talks about. He writes in his essay "The Power of the Powerless" about the small things that people have done and do all the time—just small acts of resistance all the time—that are like signals to other people that you can resist just a little bit perhaps here, just a little bit perhaps there. This isn't something sweeping yet, but these things can interconnect—these gestures, these messages, these signals. Sometimes I feel we need to be conceptualizing ourselves more that way—as a resistance movement.

Q: At times you seem to be waging an internal battle about the value of revolutionary poetry, the value of the word versus political action. You almost seem to ask yourself whether writing poetry of witness is adequate to the task at hand, or even a good use of your time.

Rich: I wouldn't say it isn't a good use of my time because it's really at the very core of who I am. I have to do this. This is really how I know and how I probe the world. I think that some of those voices come from still residual ideas about poetry not making a difference. I happen to think it makes a huge difference. Other people's poetry has made a huge difference in my life. It has changed the way I saw the world. It has changed the way I felt the world. It has changed the way I have understood another human being. So I really don't have basic doubts about that. And I'm also fortunate to be able to participate with my writing in activism. But still there are voices in my head. The other thing is that at the age I am now and the relative amount of visibility that I have, that gives you a certain kind of power, and it's really important to keep thinking about how to use that power. So I just try to keep that internal dialogue going. I would never want it to end. Having listened to so many women whose lives and the necessity of whose lives have made it very, very difficult for them to become the writers they might have become or to have fulfilled all that they wanted to fulfill as writers makes it feel like a huge privilege to have been able to do my work. So that's a responsibility.

Q: You must get reinforcement from readers. Do you have readers who come up to you and say, "You've changed my life?"

Rich: Yes, I do, and I usually say to them—which I also believe to be true—"You were changing your life and you read my book or you read that poem at a point where you could use it, and I'm really glad, but *you* were changing your life." Somehow when we are in the process of making some kind of self-transformation—pushing ourselves out there further, maybe taking some risk that we never believed we would take before—sometimes a poem will come to us by some sort of magnetic attraction.

Q: That reminds me of the one time I heard Audre Lorde speak. She was quite defiant to her audience when they started to clap. She really wasn't interested in applause at all. And she said, "Applause is easy. Go out and do something." I'd never seen anything like it. Most people who speak like to give a performance and bask in the glow of the applause. She really didn't want any of it.

Rich: Well, Audre had a strong sense of the energy that can be generated by poetry, that poetry is a source of power, as you know if you read an essay like "Poetry Is Not a Luxury." And she resisted being turned into some kind of mascot or token—which is something that happens in the women's movement as it does anywhere else—an artist comes along and people try to capture her and take their own latent power and hand it over to someone who is viewed as stronger, braver, more powerful. She wanted people to keep their energy and keep their power, touch it through her poetry, but then go out and use it, seriously. We used to talk about this a lot—there was this phrase, I don't know if I found it or she found it, but it was "assent without credence," where people are applauding you but they don't make what you're saying part of their life, their living. She was very, very aware of it and concerned. And she was resisting like hell being made into some token black goddess in some largely white women's gathering, as so often would be the case.

Q: Is it a question of resisting being a leader, or resisting playing the role of the leader?

Rich: I think she was ambivalent about that because she knew she was a leader, for better or worse. And she was no shrinking violet: She liked being up there, but I think she had a real conscience about it, too.

Q: Like Audre Lorde, you suggest that poetry has revolutionary power. How does poetry have such power?

Rich: It's such a portable art, for one thing; it travels. And it is made of this common medium, language. Through its very being, poetry expresses messages beyond the words it is contained in; it speaks of our desire; it reminds us of what we lack, of our need, and of our hungers. It keeps us dissatisfied. In that sense, it can be very, very subversive.

Q: You have a line, "poetry is the liquid voice that can wear through stone."

Rich: It's an ever growing current that's being fed by all these rivulets that were themselves underground. I think we're producing a magnificent body of poetry in this country today, most of which unfortunately isn't enough known about. But it's out there, and some people know about it.

Q: June Jordan has this great remark in one of her poems, "I lust for justice." You have that, too. Where does it come from?

Rich: Sometimes I think it's in all of us. It gets repressed. It gets squashed. Very often by fear. For me, I know it's been pushed down by fear at various times.

Q: Fear of what?

Rich: Fear of punishment. Fear of reprisal. Fear of not being taken seriously. Fear of being marginalized. And that's why I think it's so difficult for people on their own and in isolated situations to be as brave as they can be because it's by others' example that we learn how to do this. I really believe that justice and creativity have something intrinsically in common. The effort to make justice and the creative impulse are deeply aligned,

and when you feel the necessity of a creative life, of coming to use your own creativity, I think you also become aware of what's lacking, that not everyone has this potentiality available to them, that it is being withheld from so many.

Q: Do you ever get totally depressed about the possibility of change in this country?

Rich: I find the conditions of life in this country often very, very depressing. The work that I choose to do is very much in part to not get lost and paralyzed. The activism I choose to do, the kind of writing I choose to do has a lot to do with that, with going to the point where I feel there is some energy. And there is a lot of energy in this country—but it's diffused, it's scattered, it's localized. And it's not in the mainstream media; you can get totally zonked there. What is so notably absent from there is the very thing that poetry embodies, which is passion, which is desire, real desire—I'm not talking about sex and violence. And what I feel among my friends who are activists, who are making things happen, however locally and on however limited a scale—there is an energy there.

We're in this for the long haul. That just cannot be said too often. I mean, there's not going to be some miracle in the year 2001. It seems to me our thinking is much less naive than when I started out—about what it's going to take to make real human possibility happen, to make a democracy that will really be for us all.

Q: You write in *What Is Found There*, "You're tired of these lists; so am I"—these lists being sexism, racism, homophobia, etc. Do you ever get so tired that you just don't want to do politics for a while?

Rich: No, I'm not tired of the issues; I'm tired of the lists—the litany. We're forced to keep naming these abstractions, but the realities behind them are not abstract. The writer's job is to keep the concreteness behind the abstractions visible and alive. How can I be tired of the issues? The issues are our lives. ■

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