

Semite and Jew? And, as a feminist, how was I charting for myself the oppressions within oppression?

The earliest feminist papers on Jewish identity that I read were critiques of the patriarchal and misogynist elements in Judaism, or of the caricaturing of Jewish women in literature by Jewish men. I remember hearing Judith Plaskow give a paper called "Can a Woman Be a Jew?" (Her conclusion was "Yes, but . . .") I was soon after in correspondence with a former student who had emigrated to Israel, was a passionate feminist, and wrote to me at length of the legal and social constraints on women there, the stirrings of contemporary Israeli feminism, and the contradictions she felt in her daily life. With the new politics, activism, literature of a tumultuous feminist movement around me, a movement which claimed universality though it had not yet acknowledged its own racial, class, and ethnic perspectives or its fears of the differences among women, I pushed aside for one last time thinking further about myself as a Jewish woman. I saw Judaism simply as another strand of patriarchy. If asked to choose, I might have said (as my father had said in other language): *I am a woman, not a Jew.* (But, I always added mentally, if Jews had to wear yellow stars again, I, too, would wear one—as if I would have the choice to wear it or not.)

Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, exmatriate southerner, *split at the root*—that I will never bring them whole. I would have liked, in this essay, to bring together the meanings of anti-Semitism and racism as I have experienced them and as I believe they intersect in the world beyond my life. But I'm not able to do this yet. I feel the tension as I think, make notes: *If you really look at the one reality, the other will waver and disperse.* Trying in one week to read Angela Davis and Lucy Davidowicz;⁴ trying to hold throughout to a feminist, a lesbian, perspective—what does this mean? Nothing has trained me for this. And sometimes I feel inadequate to make any statement as a Jew; I feel the history of denial within me like an injury, a scar. For assimilation has affected my perceptions; those early lapses in meaning, those blanks, are with me still. My ignorance can be dangerous to me and to others.

Yet we can't wait for the undamaged to make our connections for us; we can't wait to speak until we are perfectly clear and righteous. There is no purity and, in our lifetimes, no end to this process.

This essay, then, has no conclusions: it is another beginning for me. Not just a way of saying, in 1982 Right Wing America, *I, too, will wear the yellow star.* It's a moving into accountability, enlarging the range of

4. Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Lucy S. Davidowicz, *The War against the Jews 1933–1945* (1975) (New York: Bantam, 1979).

accountability. I know that in the rest of my life, the next half century or so, every aspect of my identity will have to be engaged. The middle-class white girl taught to trade obedience for privilege. The Jewish lesbian raised to be a heterosexual gentile. The woman who first heard oppression named and analyzed in the Black Civil Rights struggle. The woman with three sons, the feminist who hates male violence. The woman limping with a cane, the woman who has stopped bleeding are also accountable. The poet who knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor's language sometimes sounds beautiful. The woman trying, as part of her resistance, to clean up her act.

Blood, Bread, and Poetry: The Location of the Poet (1984)†

The Miami airport, summer 1983: a North American woman says to me, "You'll love Nicaragua: everyone there is a poet." I've thought many times of that remark, both while there and since returning home. Coming from a culture (North American, white- and male-dominated) which encourages poets to think of ourselves as alienated from the sensibility of the general population, which casually and devastatingly marginalizes us (so far, no slave labor or torture for a political poem—just dead air, the white noise of the media jamming the poet's words)—coming from this North American dominant culture which so confuses us, telling us poetry is neither economically profitable nor politically effective and that political dissidence is destructive to art, coming from this culture that tells me I am destined to be a luxury, a decorative garnish on the buffet table of the university curriculum, the ceremonial occasion, the national celebration—what am I to make, I thought, of that remark? *You'll love Nicaragua: everyone there is a poet.* (Do I love poets in general? I immediately asked myself, thinking of poets I neither love nor would wish to see in charge of my country.) Is being a poet a guarantee that I will love a Marxist-Leninist revolution? Can't I travel simply as an American radical, a lesbian feminist, a citizen who opposes her government's wars against its own people and its intervention in other people's lands? And what effectiveness has the testimony of a poet returning from a revolution where "everyone is a poet" to a country where the possible credibility of poetry is not even seriously discussed?

Clearly, this well-meant remark triggered strong and complex feelings in me. And it provided, in a sense, the text on which I began to build my talk here tonight.

I was born at the brink of the Great Depression; I reached sixteen the

† Talk given for the Institute for the Humanities, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, series "Writers and Social Responsibility," 1983. Originally published in the *Massachusetts Review*. Notes to this essay are Rich's.

Rich

year of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. The daughter of a Jewish father and a Protestant mother, I learned about the Holocaust first from newsreels of the liberation of the death camps. I was a young white woman who had never known hunger or homelessness, growing up in the suburbs of a deeply segregated city in which neighborhoods were also dictated along religious lines: Christian and Jewish. I lived sixteen years of my life secure in the belief that though cities could be bombed and civilian populations killed, the earth stood in its old indestructible way. The process through which nuclear annihilation was to become a part of all human calculation had already begun, but we did not live with that knowledge during the first sixteen years of my life. And a recurrent theme in much poetry I read was the indestructibility of poetry, the poem as a vehicle for personal immortality.

I had grown up hearing and reading poems from a very young age, first as sounds, repeated, musical, rhythmically satisfying in themselves, and the power of concrete, sensuously compelling images:

All night long they hunted
 And nothing did they find
 But a ship a-sailing,
 A-sailing with the wind.
 One said it was a ship,
 The other he said, Nay,
 The third said it was a house
 With the chimney blown away;
 And all the night they hunted
 And nothing did they find
 But the moon a-gliding
 A-gliding with the wind. . . .

Tyger! Tyger! burning bright
 In the forest of the night,
 What immortal hand or eye
 Dare frame thy fearful symmetry?

But poetry soon became more than music and images; it was also revelation, information, a kind of teaching. I believed I could learn from it—an unusual idea for a United States citizen, even a child. I thought it could offer clues, intimations, keys to questions that already stalked me, questions I could not even frame yet: *What is possible in this life? What does "love" mean, this thing that is so important? What is this other thing called "freedom" or "liberty"—is it like love, a feeling? What have human beings lived and suffered in the past? How am I going to live my life?* The fact that poets contradict themselves and each other didn't baffle or alarm me. I was avid for everything I could get; my child's mind did not shut down for the sake of consistency.

I was angry with my friend,
 I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
 I was angry with my foe,
 I told it not, my wrath did grow.

As an angry child, often urged to "curb my temper," I used to ponder those words of William Blake, but they slid first into my memory through their repetitions of sound, their ominous rhythms.

Another poem that I loved first as music, later pondered for what it could tell me about women and men and marriage, was Edwin Arlington Robinson's "Eros Turannos":

She fears him, and will always ask
 What fated her to choose him;
 She meets in his engaging mask
 All reasons to refuse him;
 But what she meets and what she fears
 Are less than are the downward years,
 Drawn slowly to the foamless weirs
 Of age, were she to lose him. . . .

And, of course, I thought that the poets in the anthologies were the only real poets, that their being in the anthologies was proof of this, though some were classified as "great" and others as "minor." I owed much to these anthologies: *Silver Pennies*; the constant outflow of volumes edited by Louis Untermeyer; *The Cambridge Book of Poetry for Children*; Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*; the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. But I had no idea that they reflected the taste of a particular time or of particular kinds of people. I still believed that poets were inspired by some transcendent authority and spoke from some extraordinary height. I thought that the capacity to hook syllables together in a way that heated the blood was the sign of a universal vision.

Because of the attitudes surrounding me, the aesthetic ideology with which I grew up, I came into my twenties believing in poetry, in all art, as the expression of a higher world view, what the critic Edward Said has termed "a quasi-religious wonder, instead of a human sign to be understood in secular and social terms."¹ The poet achieved "universality" and authority through tapping his, or occasionally her, own dreams, longings, fears, desires, and, out of this, "speaking as a man to men," as Wordsworth had phrased it. But my personal world view at sixteen, as at twenty-six, was itself being created by political conditions. I was not a man; I was white in a white-supremacist society; I was being educated from the perspective of a particular class; my father was an "assimilated" Jew in an anti-Semitic world, my mother a white southern Protestant; there were particular historical currents on which my consciousness would

1. Edward Said, "Literature As Values," *New York Times Book Review* (September 4, 1983), p. 9.

beth Barrett Browning's anti-slavery and feminist poetry, H.D.'s anti-war and woman-identified poetry, like the radical—yes, revolutionary—work of Langston Hughes and Muriel Rukeyser, were still buried by the academic literary canon. But the first idea was extremely important to me: a poet—one who was apparently certified—could actually write about political themes, could weave the names of political activists into a poem:

MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connally and Pearce
Now and in time to come
Wherever green is worn
Are changed, changed utterly:
A terrible beauty is born.

As we all do when young and searching for what we can't even name yet, I took what I could use where I could find it. When the ideas or forms we need are banished, we seek their residues wherever we can trace them. But there was one major problem with this. I had been born a woman, and I was trying to think and act as if poetry—and the possibility of making poems—were a universal—a gender-neutral—realm. In the universe of the masculine paradigm, I naturally absorbed ideas about women, sexuality, power from the subjectivity of male poets—Yeats not least among them. The dissonance between these images and the daily events of my own life demanded a constant footwork of imagination, a kind of perpetual translation, and an unconscious fragmentation of identity: woman from poet. Every group that lives under the naming and image-making power of a dominant culture is at risk from this mental fragmentation and needs an art which can resist it.

But at the middle of the fifties I had no very clear idea of my positioning in the world or even that such an idea was an important resource for a writer to have. I knew that marriage and motherhood, experiences which were supposed to be truly womanly, often left me feeling unfit, disempowered, adrift. But I had never had to think about bread itself as a primary issue; and what I knew of blood was that mine was white and that white was better off. Much as my parents had worried about questions of social belonging and acceptability, I had never had to swallow rage or humiliation to earn a paycheck. The literature I had read only rarely suggested that for many people it is a common, everyday fact of life to be hungry. I thought I was well educated. In that Cold War atmosphere, which has never really ended, we heard a lot about the "indoctrinating" of people in the Soviet Union, the egregious rewriting of history to conform to Communist dogma. But, like most Americans, I had been taught a particular version of our history, the version of the propertied white male; and in my early twenties I did not even realize this. As a younger and then an older woman, growing up in the white mainstream American culture, I was destined to piece together, for the

rest of my life, laboriously and with much in my training against me, the history that really concerned me, on which I was to rely as a poet, the only history upon which, both as a woman and a poet, I could find any grounding at all: the history of the dispossessed.

It was in the pain and confusion of that inward wrenching of the self, which I experienced directly as a young woman in the fifties, that I started to feel my way backward to an earlier splitting, the covert and overt taboos against Black people, which had haunted my earliest childhood. And I began searching for some clue or key to life, not only in poetry but in political writers. The writers I found were Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, and James Baldwin. Each of them helped me to realize that what had seemed simply "the way things are" could actually be a social construct, advantageous to some people and detrimental to others, and that these constructs could be criticized and changed. The myths and obsessions of gender, the myths and obsessions of race, the violent exercise of power in these relationships could be identified, their territories could be mapped. They were not simply part of my private turmoil, a secret misery, an individual failure. I did not yet know what I, a white woman, might have to say about the racial obsessions of white consciousness. But I did begin to resist the apparent splitting of poet from woman, thinker from woman, and to write what I feared was political poetry. And in this I had very little encouragement from the literary people I knew, but I did find courage and vindication in words like Baldwin's: "Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety." I don't know why I found these words encouraging—perhaps because they made me feel less alone.

Mary Wollstonecraft had seen eighteenth-century middle-class Englishwomen brain-starved and emotionally malnourished through denial of education; her plea was to treat women's minds as respectfully as men's—to admit women as equals into male culture. Simone de Beauvoir showed how the male perception of Woman as Other dominated European culture, keeping "woman" entrapped in myths which robbed her of her independent being and value. James Baldwin insisted that *all* culture was politically significant, and described the complexity of living with integrity as a Black person, an artist in a white-dominated culture, whether as an Afro-American growing up in Harlem, U.S.A., or as an African in a country emerging from a history of colonialism. He also alluded to "that as yet unwritten history of the Negro woman"; and he wrote in 1954 in an essay on Gide that "when men [heterosexual or homosexual] can no longer love women they also cease to love or respect or trust each other, which makes their isolation complete." And he was the first writer I read who suggested that racism was poisonous to white as well as destructive to Black people.

The idea of freedom—so much invoked during World War II—had

become pretty abstract politically in the fifties. Freedom—then as now—was supposed to be what the Western democracies believed in and the “Iron Curtain” Soviet-bloc countries were deprived of. The existentialist philosophers who were beginning to be read and discussed among young American intellectuals spoke of freedom as something connected with revolt. But in reading de Beauvoir and Baldwin, I began to taste the concrete reality of being unfree, how continuous and permeating and corrosive a condition it is, and how it is maintained through culture as much as through the use of force.

I am telling you this from a backward perspective, from where I stand now. At the time I could not have summed up the effect these writers had on me. I only knew that I was reading them with the same passion and need that I brought to poetry, that they were beginning to penetrate my life; I was beginning to feel as never before that I had some foothold, some way of seeing, which helped me to ask the questions I needed to ask.

But there were many voices then, as there are now, warning the North American artist against “mixing politics with art.” I have been trying to retrace, to delineate, these arguments, which carry no weight for me now because I recognize them as the political declarations of privilege. There is the falsely mystical view of art that assumes a kind of supernatural inspiration, a possession by universal forces unrelated to questions of power and privilege or the artist’s relation to bread and blood. In this view, the channel of art can only become clogged and misdirected by the artist’s concern with merely temporary and local disturbances. The song is higher than the struggle, and the artist must choose between politics—here defined as earth-bound factionalism, corrupt power struggles—and art, which exists on some transcendent plane. This view of literature has dominated literary criticism in England and America for nearly a century. In the fifties and early sixties there was much shaking of heads if an artist was found “meddling in politics”; art was mystical and universal, but the artist was also, apparently, irresponsible and emotional and politically naïve.

In North America, moreover, “politics” is mostly a dirty word, associated with low-level wheeling and dealing, with manipulation. (There is nothing North Americans seem to fear so much as manipulation, probably because at some level we know that we belong to a deeply manipulative system.) “Politics” also suggested, certainly in the fifties, the Red Menace, Jewish plots, spies, malcontents conspiring to overthrow democracy, “outside agitators” stirring up perfectly contented Black and/or working people. Such activities were dangerous and punishable, and in the McCarthy era there was a great deal of fear abroad. The writer Meridel Le Sueur was blacklisted, hounded by the FBI, her books banned; she was dismissed from job after job—teaching, waitressing—because the FBI intimidated her students and employers. A daughter of Tillie

Olsen recalls going with her mother in the 1950s to the Salvation Army to buy heavy winter clothes because the family had reason to believe that Leftists in the San Francisco Bay Area would be rounded up and taken to detention camps farther north. These are merely two examples of politically committed writers who did survive that particular repression—many never recovered from it.

Perhaps many white North Americans fear an overtly political art because it might persuade us emotionally of what we think we are “rationally” against; it might get to us on a level we have lost touch with, undermine the safety we have built for ourselves, remind us of what is better left forgotten. This fear attributes real power to the voices of passion and of poetry which connect us with all that is not simply white chauvinist/male supremacist/straight/puritanical—with what is “dark,” “effeminate,” “inverted,” “primitive,” “volatile,” “sinister.” Yet we are told that political poetry, for example, is doomed to grind down into mere rhetoric and jargon, to become one-dimensional, simplistic, vituperative; that in writing “protest literature”—that is, writing from a perspective which may not be male, or white, or heterosexual, or middle-class—we sacrifice the “universal”; that in writing of injustice we are limiting our scope, “grinding a political axe.” So political poetry is suspected of immense subversive power, yet accused of being, by definition, bad writing, impotent, lacking in breadth. No wonder if the North American poet finds herself or himself slightly crazed by the double messages.

By 1956, I had begun dating each of my poems by year. I did this because I was finished with the idea of a poem as a single, encapsulated event, a work of art complete in itself; I knew my life was changing, my work was changing, and I needed to indicate to readers my sense of being engaged in a long, continuous process. It seems to me now that this was an oblique political statement—a rejection of the dominant critical idea that the poem’s text should be read as separate from the poet’s everyday life in the world. It was a declaration that placed poetry in a historical continuity, not above or outside history.

In my own case, as soon as I published—in 1963—a book of poems which was informed by any conscious sexual politics, I was told, in print, that this work was “bitter,” “personal”; that I had sacrificed the sweetly flowing measures of my earlier books for a ragged line and a coarsened voice. It took me a long time not to hear those voices internally whenever I picked up my pen. But I was writing at the beginning of a decade of political revolt and hope and activism. The external conditions for becoming a consciously, self-affirmingly political poet were there, as they had not been when I had begun to publish a decade earlier. Out of the Black Civil Rights movement, amid the marches and sit-ins in the streets and on campuses, a new generation of Black writers began to speak—and older generations to be reprinted and reread; poetry

readings were infused with the spirit of collective rage and hope. As part of the movement against United States militarism and imperialism, white poets also were writing and reading aloud poems addressing the war in Southeast Asia. In many of these poems you sensed the poet's desperation in trying to encompass in words the reality of napalm, the "pacification" of villages, trying to make vivid in poetry what seemed to have minimal effect when shown on television. But there was little location of the self, the poet's own identity as a man or woman. As I wrote in another connection, "The enemy is always outside the self, the struggle somewhere else." I had—perhaps through reading de Beauvoir and Baldwin—some nascent idea that "Vietnam and the lovers' bed," as I phrased it then, were connected; I found myself, in the late sixties, trying to describe those relations in poetry. Even before I called myself a feminist or a lesbian, I felt driven—for my own sanity—to bring together in my poems the political world "out there"—the world of children dynamited or napalmed, of the urban ghetto and militarist violence—and the supposedly private, lyrical world of sex and of male/female relationships.

I began teaching in an urban subway college, in a program intended to compensate ghetto students for the inadequacy of the city's public schools. Among staff and students, and in the larger academic community, there were continual debates over the worth and even the linguistic existence of Black English, the expressive limits and social uses of Standard English—the politics of language. As a poet, I had learned much about both the value and the constraints of convention: the reassurances of traditional structures and the necessity to break from them in recognition of new experience. I felt more and more urgently 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.

By the end of the 1960s an autonomous movement of women was declaring that "the personal is political." That statement was necessary because in other political movements of that decade the power relation of men to women, the question of women's roles and men's roles, had been dismissed—often contemptuously—as the sphere of personal life. Sex itself was not seen as political, except for interracial sex. Women were now talking about domination, not just in terms of economic exploitation, militarism, colonialism, imperialism, but within the family, in marriage, in child rearing, in the heterosexual act itself. Breaking the mental barrier that separated private from public life felt in itself like an enormous surge toward liberation. For a woman thus engaged, every aspect of her life was on the line. We began naming and acting on issues we had been told were trivial, unworthy of mention: rape by husbands or lovers; the boss's hand groping the employee's breast; the woman beaten in her home with no place to go; the woman sterilized when she sought an abortion; the lesbian penalized for her private life by loss of her

child, her lease, her job. We pointed out that women's unpaid work in the home is central to every economy, capitalist or socialist. And in the crossover between personal and political, we were also pushing at the limits of experience reflected in literature, certainly in poetry.

To write directly and overtly as a woman, out of a woman's body and experience, to take women's existence seriously as theme and source for art, was something I had been hungering to do, needing to do, all my writing life. It placed me nakedly face to face with both terror and anger; it did indeed *imply the breakdown of the world as I had always known it, the end of safety*, to paraphrase Baldwin again. But it released tremendous energy in me, as in many other women, to have that way of writing affirmed and validated in a growing political community. I felt for the first time the closing of the gap between poet and woman.

Women have understood that we needed an art of our own: to remind us of our history and what we might be; to show us our true faces—all of them, including the unacceptable; to speak of what has been muffled in code or silence; to make concrete the values our movement was bringing forth out of consciousness raising, speakouts, and activism. But we were—and are—living and writing not only within a women's community. We are trying to build a political and cultural movement in the heart of capitalism, in a country where racism assumes every form of physical, institutional, and psychic violence, and in which more than one person in seven lives below the poverty line. The United States feminist movement is rooted in the United States, a nation with a particular history of hostility both to art and to socialism, where art has been encapsulated as a commodity, a salable artifact, something to be taught in MFA programs, that requires a special staff of "arts administrators"; something you "gotta have" without exactly knowing why. As a lesbian-feminist poet and writer, I need to understand how this *location* affects me, along with the realities of blood and bread within this nation.

"As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world." These words, written by Virginia Woolf in her feminist and anti-fascist book *Three Guineas*, we dare not take out of context to justify a false transcendence, an irresponsibility toward the cultures and geopolitical regions in which we are rooted. Woolf was attacking—as a feminist—patriotism, nationalism, the values of the British patriarchal establishment for which so many wars have been fought all over the world. Her feminism led her by the end of her life to anti-imperialism. As women, I think it essential that we admit and explore our cultural identities, our national identities, even as we reject the patriotism, jingoism, nationalism offered to us as "the American way of life." Perhaps the most arrogant and malevolent delusion of North American power—of white Western power—has been the delusion of destiny, that white is at the center, that white is endowed with some right or mission to judge and ransack and assimilate and destroy

the values of other peoples. As a white feminist artist in the United States, I do not want to perpetuate that chauvinism, but I still have to struggle with its pervasiveness in culture, its residues in myself.

Working as I do in the context of a movement in which artists are encouraged to address political and ethical questions, I have felt released to a large degree from the old separation of art from politics. But the presence of that separation "out there" in North American life is one of many impoverishing forces of capitalist patriarchy. I began to sense what it might be to live, and to write poetry, as a woman, in a society which took seriously the necessity for poetry, when I read Margaret Randall's anthology of contemporary Cuban women poets *Breaking the Silences*. This book had a powerful effect on me—the consistently high level of poetry, the diversity of voices, the sense of the poets' connections with world and community, and, in their individual statements, the affirmation of an organic relation between poetry and social transformation:

Things move so much around you.
Even your country has changed. You yourself have
changed it.

And the soul, will it change? You must change it.
Who will tell you otherwise?
Will it be a desolate journey?
Will it be tangible, languid
without a hint of violence?
As long as you are the person you are today
being yesterday's person as well,
you will be tomorrow's . . .
the one who lives and dies
to live like this.²

It was partly because of that book that I went to Nicaragua. I seized the opportunity when it arose, not because I thought that everyone would be a poet, but because I had been feeling more and more ill informed, betrayed by the coverage of Central America in the United States media. I wanted to know what the Sandinistas believed they stood for, what directions they wanted to take in their very young, imperiled revolution. But I also wanted to get a sense of what art might mean in a society committed to values other than profit and consumerism. What was constantly and tellingly manifested was a *belief* in art, not as commodity, not as luxury, not as suspect activity, but as a precious resource to be made available to all, one necessity for the rebuilding of a scarred, impoverished, and still-bleeding country. And returning home I had to ask myself: What happens to the heart of the artist, here in North Amer-

2. Nancy Morejón, "Elogia de la Dialéctica," in *Breaking the Silences: Twentieth-Century Poetry by Cuban Women*, ed. Margaret Randall (1982, Pulp Press, Box 3868 MPO, Vancouver, Canada V6B 3Z3).

ica? What toll is taken of art when it is separated from the social fabric? How is art curbed, how are we made to feel useless and helpless, in a system which so depends on our alienation?

Alienation—not just from the world of material conditions, of power to make things happen or stop happening. Alienation from our own roots, whatever they are, the memories, dreams, stories, the language, history, the sacred materials of art. In *A Gathering of Spirit*, an anthology of writing and art by North American Indian women, a poem by the Chicana/American Indian poet Anita Valerio reasserts the claim to a complex historical and cultural identity, the selves who are both of the past and of tomorrow:

There is the cab driver root and elevator
root, there is the water
root of lies The root of speech hidden in the secretary's
marinated tongue There is the ocean
root and seeing
root, heart and belly root, antelope
roots hidden in hills There is the root
of the billy club/beginning with electric drums . . .

root of hunters smoky
ascensions into heaven trails
beat out of ice There is the root
of homecoming The house my grandfather built first I see
him standing in his black
hat heating the snake with a stick
There is the root shaped
by spirits speaking
in the lodge There is the root you don't
want to hear and the one that hides
from you under the couch. . . .

Root of teeth and
the nape of the goat oranges, fog
written on a camera There is the carrot owl hunting
for her hat in the wind moccasins

of the blue deer
flashing
in the doorknob. . .

There is the root of sex eating
pound cake in the kitchen crumbs
crumbs

alibis
crumbs
a convict astroprojects She is

picking up her torches, picking up her psalms, her necklaces³

I write in full knowledge that the majority of the world's illiterates are women, that I live in a technologically advanced country where 40 percent of the people can barely read and 20 percent are functionally illiterate. I believe that these facts are directly connected to the fragmentations I suffer in myself, that we are all in this together. Because I can write at all—and I think of all the ways women especially have been prevented from writing—because my words are read and taken seriously, because I see my work as part of something larger than my own life or the history of literature, I feel a responsibility to keep searching for teachers who can help me widen and deepen the sources and examine the ego that speaks in my poems—not for political “correctness,” but for ignorance, solipsism, laziness, dishonesty, automatic writing. I look everywhere for signs of that fusion I have glimpsed in the women's movement, and most recently in Nicaragua. I turn to Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* or Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* or James Baldwin's *Just above My Head*; to paintings by Frida Kahlo or Jacob Lawrence; to poems by Dionne Brand or Judy Grahn or Audre Lord or Nancy Morejon; to the music of Nina Simone or Mary Watkins. This kind of art—like the art of so many others uncanonized in the dominant culture—is not produced as a commodity, but as part of a long conversation with the elders and with the future. (And, yes, I do live and work believing in a future.) Such artists draw on a tradition in which political struggle and spiritual continuity are meshed. Nothing need be lost, no beauty sacrificed. The heart does not turn to a stone.

The Genesis of “Yom Kippur 1984” (1987)†

I want to do something hands-on, about the making of poetry. I want to talk about the way in which a particular poem came together. I picked “Yom Kippur 1984” because I have some sense of how it came about. I don't keep drafts, I don't keep records of the process (maybe sometimes the briefest of notes in a journal), but I do remember a great deal about how this poem was written because I was in a kind of struggle with it for a whole year. I learned a lot in that struggle, some of which I'll try to tell you about.

There's a tendency to treat poems—at least in certain circles—as a sort of documentation on the poet's life, as perhaps a kind of autobiography, and I want to start by addressing that notion. I feel very strongly

3. Anita Valerio, “I Am Listening: A Lyric of Roots,” in *A Gathering of Spirit, Sinister Wisdom* 22/23 (1983, ed. Beth Brant): 212–213.

† The text is a transcription of remarks made by Adrienne Rich in New York City in 1987 as part of an informal discussion of “Yom Kippur 1984.” Printed by permission of the author.

with Wallace Stevens that “poetry is the supreme fiction,” that a poem is not a slice of the poet's life, although it obviously emerges from intense places in the poet's life and consciousness and experience. But Muriel Rukeyser has a line—she wrote it when she was very young and she already knew this; the line is “Breathe in experience, breathe out poetry.” There is a sense of transmutation: something has to happen between the breathing in of experience and the breathing out of poetry. It has been transformed, not only into words but into something new.

At the same time I don't want to present the poem as an aesthetic object unrelated to life and history and social circumstance. When I was an undergraduate in the 1950s, we were taught the New Criticism. The New Critical approach was to examine the poem strictly as text, not to entertain anything from the poet's biography or the historical or social context of the times. But for many of us who had been trained to read that way, and who were poets ourselves, it became more and more apparent that you couldn't read that way: social and historical context were crucial.

And this reaction became coupled with the importance—in the feminist movement of the early 70s—of beginning to find out what in fact had been the *lives* of our artists, what in fact had been the *lives* of our thinkers. What had happened to these women, how had they become the exceptions? What experiences had they been encoding? What concerns me now is whether this has led to a kind of overreading in terms of the autobiographical.

To give you an example, I have a poem written in the 60s called “Women.” It begins, “My three sisters are sitting on rocks of black obsidian / For the first time in this light / I can see who they are.”¹ I have seen that poem glossed as a poem about Rich's three sisters. On the simplest level such a reading is factually incorrect, since Adrienne Rich has one sister, not three. But more than that, even supposing that Adrienne Rich the individual had three sisters, the poem lives by metaphor. On one level I can look at another woman who is not my blood kin and call her sister, or on another level all three sisters are aspects of the poet's self.

That's a rather straightforward example of what I'm currently concerned about in the reading of poems. The I in a poem, I want to insist, is the consciousness from which the poem comes, but it's not the I to whom I subscribe when I sign an affidavit, when I set forth facts in order to get a driver's license or a passport. It's not I as in ID card, not the I of whatever's in my FBI file or *Who's Who*. A poem is not a biographical anecdote. Finally a poem is a construction of language that uses, tries to use everything that language can do, to conjure, to summon up something that's not quite knowable in any other way. Using the tonal and

1. See *The Fact of a Doorframe*, p. 94 [Editors].