

TRACES OF LESBIAN EXISTENCE IN ADRIENNE RICH'S "TWENTY-ONE LOVE POEMS"

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Abstract: Adrienne Rich's works are often permeated with notions that concern the real experiences of people. Her poetry and prose are constantly filled with issues regarding human impulses, struggles, and achievements, as well as political debates and injustices. The aim of this article is to engage in an analysis of selected poems from Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" in order to investigate the development of the author's notion of "lesbian existence" outlined in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". In the essay, Rich critically positions herself regarding the discrimination and lack of approach in relation to the issue of life experiences of lesbians, claiming a space for conversation and expression of minorities. This platform of articulation is also seen in the selected poems analyzed in this article as Rich unfolds the concept of lesbian existence through the images of affectionate lovers, who develop a relationship based on affinity, companionship, and intimacy. Rich undoubtedly leaves her mark on the discussions of the subjects of love and history between women, contributing through her work to the building of a poetic record of lesbian experience.

Keywords: Adrienne Rich; American Poetry; Contemporary Poetry; Lesbian Existence.

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TRAÇOS DA EXISTÊNCIA LÉSBICA NOS “VINTE E UM POEMAS DE AMOR” DE ADRIENNE RICH

Resumo: As obras de Adrienne Rich são frequentemente permeadas de noções vinculadas às experiências reais das pessoas. Sua poesia e prosa são profundamente repletas de questões relativas aos impulsos, lutas e realizações humanas assim como debates políticos e contextos de injustiça. O objetivo deste artigo é fazer uma análise da obra da autora através de um estudo detalhado de poemas selecionados da coleção de Rich “Twenty-One Love Poems”, investigando o desenvolvimento do conceito de “existência lésbica” elaborado no ensaio da autora intitulado “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”. No ensaio, Rich se posiciona criticamente em relação à discriminação e falta de uma abordagem no que se refere às questões de experiências de vida das lésbicas, reivindicando um espaço de discussão e expressão das minorias. Esta plataforma de articulação também é vista nos poemas selecionados e analisados no artigo, demonstrando como Rich desdobra o conceito de existência lésbica através das imagens de pares apaixonados que desenvolvem uma relação baseada em afinidade, companheirismo e intimidade. Rich certamente deixa sua marca nas discussões sobre os assuntos de amor e a história entre mulheres, contribuindo através de seu trabalho para a construção de um registro poético sobre a experiência lésbica.

Palavras-chave: Adrienne Rich; Poesia Norte-Americana; Poesia Contemporânea; Existência Lésbica.

Introduction

Adrienne Rich's works are often permeated with notions that concern the real experiences of people. Her poetry and prose are constantly filled with issues regarding human impulses, struggles, and achievements, as well as political debates and injustices. In relation to the subject of love between women, Adrian Oktenberg (1993, p. 331) comments that on Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems" the lovers "are not only fictive creations, but also, simultaneously, real human beings. The decisions they make have consequences in

the actual world, the world of pain and struggle, life and death". Also, a distinctive approach to a love relationship between women is proposed by Rich, as Oktenberg (1993, p. 342) claims that the aforementioned poems "recognize the connection, the primary bond, between women as a source of integrity and strength". The uniqueness of these poems is acknowledged by Brett C. Miller (2018, p. xi) as being "the first explicitly lesbian love lyrics by an established poet" which hints at the author's trailblazing effect in literature and society. The aim of this article is to analyze selected poems from Rich's "Twenty-One Love Poems", more specifically the poems III, IV, XI, XII, and XIII, in order to investigate the development of the author's notion of "lesbian existence" (RICH, 2018a, p. 212), which is presented in her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence", focusing on the instances of corporeality and intimacy as well as the themes of partnership and lifetime companionship.

Among the valuable subjects approached in the aforementioned essay, Rich critically comments on the struggles that lesbians frequently experience. Regarding the issue of intolerance against lesbians, Rich (2018a, p. 213) claims that:

[t]he lesbians, unless in disguise, face discrimination in hiring and harassment and violence in the street. Even within feminist-inspired institutions such as battered-women's shelters and Women's Studies programs, open lesbians are fired and others warned to stay in the closet.

Lamentably, in relation to the difficulties that lesbians usually go through, the disclosure of their own personal reality results in constant provocation and disturbance of their lives. Also, Rich (2018a, p. 215) expresses her concern with the general disregard and disapproval of a love relationship between women, more specifically by highlighting the two following problematic aspects:

first, how and why women's choice of women as passionate comrades, life partners, co-workers, lovers, community has been crushed, invalidated, forced into hiding and disguise; and second, the virtual or total neglect of lesbian existence in a wide range of writings, including feminist scholarship.

By saying this, Rich critically positions herself in relation to the discrimination and lack of approach regarding the issue of life experiences of lesbians. Juraci Andrade de Oliveira Leão (2007, p. 35) points out that in her writings Rich singles out that the heterosexual mode has political ties to society in terms of imposing a normative behavior and by highlighting this situation, it is possible to foreground and investigate how gender relations are enforced. This discussion leads to a greater level of attention to female relationships and their particularities in contemporary society.

In order to fairly refer to the history and experiences in a relationship between women, Rich (2018a, p. 226) proposes the terms "lesbian existence" and "lesbian continuum". The author then clarifies the preference of such terms:

I have chosen to use the terms *lesbian existence* and *lesbian continuum* because the word *lesbianism* has a clinical and limiting ring. *Lesbian existence* suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range-through each woman's life and throughout history-of woman-identified experience, not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. [...] As the term *lesbian* has been held to limiting, clinical associations in its patriarchal definition, female friendship and comradeship have been set apart from the erotic, thus limiting the erotic itself (RICH, 2018a, 226-228).

By choosing such terms, Rich suggests the discontinuity of a restricted and discriminative image of lesbian relationships. Ariane Avila Neto de Farias (2017, p. 69) observes how Rich disconnects the notion of female identity in relation to a male figure by placing the togetherness between women as a focal point. Besides, Rich broadens the understanding of a love relationship between women by taking it beyond the borders of eroticism. Rich (2018a, p. 227) complements her ideas by claiming that “I perceive the lesbian experience as being, like motherhood, a profoundly *female* experience, with particular oppressions, meanings, and potentialities we cannot comprehend as long as we simply bracket it with other sexually stigmatized existences”. The author thus sensibly enhances the notion of lesbianism by rejecting the focus on the reduced ideas that surround such subject and including other aspects related to life experiences.

Even though Rich proposes a more elaborated and comprehensive view on the issue of lesbian relationships, the battles and struggles of women are not excluded from the idea of lesbian existence. Rich (2018a, p. 227) explains that:

Lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life. It is also a direct or indirect attack on male right of access to women. But it is more than these, although we may first begin to perceive it as a form of naysaying to patriarchy, an act of resistance. It has, of course, included isolation, self-hatred, break-down, alcoholism, suicide, and intrawoman violence; we romanticize at our peril what it means to love and act against the grain, under heavy penalties.

Thus, the notion of lesbian existence can be considered as part of a movement of resistance, hinting also that a great array of difficulties has not been eliminated from women’s life experiences. Alice Templeton (1994, p. 78) comments on Rich’s poetry volume *The*

Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977 (1978) that includes "Twenty-One Love Poems" by saying that as "an act of imagining and conceiving worlds and new relations, poetry moves the poet and the reader toward a critical and creative understanding of experience and of possibility for action". Rich's tendency of taking a practical approach when it comes to her writings is also pointed out by Leão (2007, p. 36) as she observes how Rich links literature with palpable life changes. The connection between art and life is clearly felt in the poet's works. Her active voicing of the lack of registered history of lesbian experience, or even the annihilation of such records, as Rich (2018a, p. 227) argues, highlights the escalation of adversities and the discriminative treatment of lesbians. As it will be possible to perceive in the selected poems to be analyzed in this article, Rich leaves her mark on the subject of love and history between women, contributing through her work to the building of a poetic record of lesbian experience.

Looking closely at the poems

The first poem to be discussed is the one entitled III, which suggests the presence of the notion of lesbian experience. Cheri Colby Langdell (2004, p. 143) explains that "Twenty-One Love Poems" is a "beautiful sequence of poems addressed to [Rich's] lover", in which lesbian love takes center stage. In the following lines, there is a link between the poem and the previously mentioned notion:

And you, you move toward me with the same tempo.
Your eyes are everlasting, the green spark
of the blue-eyed grass of early summer,
the green-blue wild cress washed by the spring. (9-12)
(RICH, 2018b, p. 63)

In line 9, it is possible to observe traces of similarities between the speaker and the beloved one—in this case, as in the analysis of other poems, it is being considered that the speaker is a woman as well as the beloved one. The “same tempo” can be a suggestion to what both have in common, which can be referring to something either abstract or concrete, indicating a harmonious connection between them. The following lines show that the speaker tenderly admires her lover. In line 10, the mentioning of the lover’s eyes as “everlasting” suggests an in-depth knowledge about the lover and that she imprinted in the speaker meaningful memories, which are fondly extended and suggested as part of life in lines 11 and 12 with the mentioning of colors, elements of nature, and seasons. The lesbian existence can be perceived as the profound knowledge that the speaker demonstrates of her lover and the tenderly affection between the two women are emphasized through the suggested history and experiences between them. Lines 13 to 17 offer the images of time spent together and companionship:

At twenty, yes: we thought we'd live forever.
At forty-five, I want to know even our limits.
I touch you knowing we weren't born tomorrow,
and somehow, each of us will help the other live,
and somewhere, each of us must help the other die.
(13-17) (RICH, 2018b, p. 63)

In lines 13 and 14 there is a suggestion to the history of a couple growing together and knowing each other by mentioning the passing of the years. In the final lines 15, 16, and 17 there is a reference to intimacy and companionship that hopefully will last for a long time in the relationship, perhaps until death. Langdell (2004, p. 143) observes that “they touch aware that they are not young, but that each will be there for the other throughout life [...]. This is an eternal bond”. Again, the lesbian experience is noticed through the history,

the knowledge they have of one another, and the experiences they have shared together.

Poem number XI is also included in the investigation regarding the development of the notion of lesbian existence. Line 5, "I want to travel with you to every sacred mountain" (RICH, 2018b, p. 66), already hints the idea of spending time together with a partner, going through meaningful experiences, and facing long and different life journeys. The notions of companionship and intimacy are suggested in the following lines:

I want to reach for your hand as we scale the path,
to feel your arteries glowing in my clasp,
never failing to note the small, jewel-like flower
unfamiliar to us, nameless till we rename her, (7-10)
(RICH, 2018b, p. 66-67)

In line 7, an intensified idea of companionship is hinted by the image of the speaker reaching for the lover's hand in order to journey together. The intimacy in this relationship is suggested when the speaker mentions that she wants to "feel [the lover's] arteries", indicating proximity and intimate knowledge of the lover and her body. An invitation to explore new territories and to venture into unexpected situations, but still regard the apparently insignificant details, is suggested by the possibility of finding the unknown and small "jewel-like flower". The idea of building a relationship that includes the sharing of varied experiences, the discovery of intimacy, and the enjoyment of companionship are paramount elements of Rich's notion of lesbian existence, in which a corporeal and affective history between two lovers is highlighted.

In XII, the synchronism between a couple and the individual history of each lover are issues emphasized in the poem. The first lines to be analyzed are the following:

Sleeping, turning in turn like planets
rotating in their midnight meadow:
a touch is enough to let us know
we're not alone in the universe, even in sleep: (1-4)
(RICH, 2018b, p. 67)

In lines 1 and 2, a vivid image of synchronism and intimacy in the relationship of the couple is suggested by the mentioning of the word "sleeping" and the harmonious rotation of the planets. The issue of intimacy, companionship, and profound knowledge shared by both the speaker and the lover in relation to each other is expressed in lines 3 and 4 with the reference to the single "touch" being sufficient to reassure their own existence. The idea of synchronism continues in the lines, "I've wakened to your muttered words / spoken light-or dark-years away / as if my own voice had spoken" (7-9) (RICH, 2018b, p. 67), especially by the mentioning in line 9 of the equality of voices. This strongly suggests, along with the analysis of lines 1 to 4, the presence of a complementary and affectionate partnership in which both lovers share in-depth knowledge of themselves, companionship, and familiarity. This displays an indication of the lesbian existence through the suggested history of the couple. The poem also hints at the individuality of the lovers, as it is possible to perceive in the lines, "But we have different voices, even in sleep, / and our bodies, so alike, are yet so different" (10-11) (RICH, 2018b, p. 67). Both lovers have their own identity, and the acknowledgment of such idea in the poem suggests that the couple has shared moments together and perceived distinctions, respecting at the same time their own differences. The likeness and distinction of the lovers' bodies hints at the multitude of different corporeal reactions, the diverse details that when added together result in a unique human being. These aspects can be linked to the subject of lesbian existence as it comprises, as already mentioned, the notion of partnership and the sharing of time together.

The synchronicity highlighted in the aforementioned poem can also be found in Elizabeth Bishop's "Close close all night". Such subject is already perceived in the first stanza:

Close close all night
lovers keep.
They turn together
in their sleep, (1-4) (BISHOP, 2008)

In the lines above there is a suggestion of a sensual image of a couple sleeping together. Their synchronicity and intimacy are emphasized by the words "turn together" and the repetition of "close". The depiction of closeness continues in the following lines:

close as two pages
in a book
that read each other
in the dark. (5-8) (BISHOP, 2008)

Here the poem offers an analogy of the embracement of the couple to the vivid proximity of the pages of a book, suggesting a delicate and careful sense of discovery as they "read each other". The idea of familiarity increases in the final stanza:

Each knows all
the other knows,
learned by heart
from head to toes. (9-12) (BISHOP, 2008)

The sense of intimacy is then crystallized by the affirmation that both lovers are affectionately involved and share knowledge of which other. The use of the expression "learned by heart" emphasizes the sense of willingness, commitment, and fondness between the couple. A very sensual image is again offered with

the last line, suggesting bodily familiarity. The intense affinity of both lovers brings the idea of sensuality and also complicity in the relationship. This synchronic intimacy can be connected with the notion of lesbian existence in the sense that the poem offers the image of a couple who is lovingly sharing moments of discovery and understanding about themselves.

Another selected poem to be analyzed in this article is the one entitled XIII, which critically approaches the absence of the history of lesbian existence. The first lines of the poem already point out such subject:

The rules break like a thermometer,
quicksilver spills across the charted systems,
we're out in a country that has no language
no laws, we're chasing the raven and the wren
through gorges unexplored since dawn
whatever we do together is pure invention
the maps they gave us were out of date
by years ... [...] (1-8) (RICH, 2018b, p. 67)

Lines 1 to 5 offer the idea that both lovers are walking through uncharted territory, especially by the mentioning of the nonexistent "language" and "laws", as well as the unseen "gorges". The sense of perilous excitement in the discovery of new areas is also suggested through the picture of the rules being broken and the well-known path, the "charted systems", being stained. The notion of innovation continues in lines 6, focusing on the decisions of the couple. Lines 7 and 8 bring the idea of old-fashioned maps that are useless to the lovers. This implies that the life experiences these women are having, though completely real to them, are not registered anywhere. Thus, there is a vivid reference to the lack of registered lesbian experience, in which the stories, the sharing of moments, the joys and sorrows, the struggles and achievements of lesbians have been constantly

neglected, not documented, or even destroyed, as already mentioned in this article. Both lovers are not, however, alone in their solitary journey, as it can be noticed in the following final lines:

the music on the radio comes clear-
neither *Rosenkavalier* nor *Götterdämmerung*
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. (12-16)
(RICH, 2018b, p. 67-68)

In these lines the speaker of the poem asserts, through the use of the word "clear", that the music playing on the radio is a distinctive song, performed by a woman in her own style. This female musician is committed to her particular preferences, as the song incorporates a "quiet bass" and a "flute", which contrasts with the elaborated operas cited in line 13. There is also a suggestion to the issue of subversion, since the woman chooses to integrate "new words" to very well-known songs, besides the reference to the singer being among the women who are "outside the law". Again, the history and journey of this female musician does not seem to be much different from the couple, as her figure can be considered a metaphor to the apparently unconventional lives of lesbians. All these women are searching for innovative paths and being bold in their choices. They are living their own way of life, even if not considered traditional. It is then possible to notice that the poem raises the issue of lesbian existence as an act of resistance, especially through the figure of the outlaw female singer. She stands as a metaphor to lesbians who decide to live according to their own rules, ignoring the conventional paths from a compulsory way of life, which severely discriminates them.

In IV, ordinary activities and political struggles are issues approached in the poem. It starts as the following:

I come home from you through the early light of spring
flashing off ordinary walls, the Pez Dorado,
the Discount Wares, the shoe-store.
... I'm lugging my sack
of groceries, I dash for the elevator
where a man, taunt, 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.* (1-7)
(RICH, 2018b, p. 63)

In lines 1 and 2, the speaker tenderly refers to an encounter with her lover, as the mentioning of the “early light of spring / flashing off ordinary walls [...]” suggests an affectionate aura to their relationship. Lines 2, 3, and 4 offer a detailed image of the speaker carrying on daily and ordinary activities, as well as appointing particular places through which the speaker passes by on her way home, such as the store “Pez Dorado”. In lines 5, 6, and 7, even the encounter with the insulting man in the elevator does not disturb the peaceful and joyful state of mind that the speaker appears to demonstrate. A description of regular activities being performed continues in the following lines:

I let myself into the kitchen, unload my bundles,
make coffee, open the window, put on Nina Simone
singing Here comes the sun ... I open the mail,
drinking delicious coffee, delicious music,
my body still both light and heavy with you. [...] (8-12)
(RICH, 2018b, p. 63)

Such description indicates that these activities, though apparently ordinary, are being carried out with a certain sense of happiness and satisfaction, as the repetition of the word “delicious” denounces such feelings. The account of the detailed actions also reveals particular preferences of the speaker, especially with the mentioning of Nina Simone in line 9, an artist known for her work

related to protest songs¹. In line 12, the encounter with her lover is fondly mentioned once again, demonstrating the idea of affinity and intimacy between the couple, as the words "light" and "heavy" refer to the sensations of the speaker's body. It is possible to perceive that the idea of lesbian existence is hinted at the poem by the image of a meaningful and affectionate encounter between women. The fact that the speaker, after meeting her lover, demonstrates a sense of happiness and amusement in performing her daily actions reveals the significance of this romance to her, as well as the normality in the life of lesbians who are happily in love. The story of the lovers is then disclosed by the effects and sensations of the speaker. The issue of political struggles is intensified in the following lines:

[...] The mail
lets fall a Xerox of something written by a man
aged 27, a hostage, tortured in prison:
*My genitals have been the object of such a sadistic display
they keep me constantly awake with the pain...
Do whatever you can to survive.
You know, I think that men love wars...*
And my incurable anger, my unmendable wounds
break open further with tears, I am crying helplessly,
and they still control the world, and you are not in my
arms. (12-21) (RICH, 2018b, p. 63)

The voice of the tortured man in lines 15, 16, 17, and 18 abruptly breaks the harmonious state of mind of the speaker. In fact, it is possible to notice that the tortured man stands for the voices of those who are brutally reproached, perhaps those who are politically and socially persecuted for their ideals and preferences. The speaker's heartbroken history of struggles is revealed with the "incurable

¹ This information was extracted from footnote 4 of Rich's (2018b, p. 63) "Twenty-One Love Poems".

anger” and the “unmendable wounds” in line 19, and the unbearable possibility of not being able to live in a world with her lover appears in the final lines 20 and 21. Here, there is a suggestion to the fact that the notion of lesbian existence is being violently defied, as the tranquil and joyful way of living of the speaker with her lover is being ferociously threatened.

Conclusion

As a conclusion, Rich’s proposed notion of lesbian existence calls for changes in the perception of love between women, and is sensibly approached in some of her works. By being an innovative term, it brings the idea that a love relationship between lesbians cannot be observed in a restricted sense, as it encompasses aspects of life that are usually detached from such relationship. The idea of lesbian existence then challenges the appalling responses to the lesbians’ way of life, as it throws light into a misconceived and marginalized subject. In the analysis of the poems presented in this article, it is possible to notice that Rich unfolds the concept of lesbian experience through the images of affectionate lovers, who develop a relationship based on affinity, companionship, and intimacy. The struggles, suffering, and violence are not left out of the world of the lovers, remaining as a critical register of their obstacles. Rich thus consolidates her notion by providing a meaningful and truthful account of the lesbian existence.

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