

Book Review: Adrienne Rich, Trailblazer - poet, mother, lesbian feminist, Marxist...

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Review of *The Power of Adrienne Rich: A Biography*, by Hilary Holladay, Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2020, 480 pages, \$32.50 hardback.

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ADRIENNE RICH WAS many things to many people. She was one of the United States' leading poets, the recipient of countless honors, beginning while she was still in college and continuing until her death in 2012. In her forties, Rich became a lesbian feminist icon, idolized by crowds who flocked to her readings and talks, renowned for her book on motherhood *Of Woman Born* and her essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence."

She was also a public intellectual on the radical left, without interruption from the 1960s through the rest of her life. The red threads of her thought can be traced from before her emergence as a feminist celebrity. She wove them into an even more impressive intellectual edifice in the three decades starting in the mid-1980s, when she branched out in new revolutionary directions.

Hilary Holladay's beautifully and incisively written biography provides a wealth of material to track Rich's political and intellectual development as well as her poetry and her life. My assessment, however, is that the book could easily have been twice as long. It left me hungry for more on several levels.

While *The Power of Adrienne Rich* comments on each of Rich's dozens of books of poetry, it still leaves room for more in-depth literary analysis.

It illuminates her life with details of her family of origin, her sexual relationships and her many intense friendships. It is particularly strong on the influence of her domineering father, Arnold Rich, and of her partner from 1976 on, Michelle Cliff.

But there must be other important things to say about (for example) her difficult ties with her sister Cynthia Rich, and her devoted but complex love for her three sons. As for Rich's close friendships and recurrent breaks, there were too many of them, extending over far too many years, to do justice to them all in a few hundred pages.

While this article is in part a review of Holladay's excellent book, therefore, it also explores some issues in greater depth than Holladay does. In particular, it tries to illuminate Rich's deep engagement with Marxism during the last thirty years of her life.

Holladay's main focus is on Adrienne Rich the lesbian feminist. This makes sense, given how crucial Rich was to so many women, her pathbreaking exploration in her poetry of love and eroticism between women, and the enduring strength of her thought in this field.

My own interest, though, is at least as great in Rich's evolution in her last three decades — when her lesbian feminism, though still important, was by her own account less central for her. Lesbian feminists still celebrate Rich's writings of the 1970s — rightly — but the Marxist left has paid too little attention to her work.

No doubt there are several explanations for this. Rich came to Marxism just as it began a long decline in the United States, in terms of both its political and intellectual influence. Though she taught at many universities, she was never well integrated into academic Marxist circles. And despite her high regard for Raya Dunayevskaya's attempt to fuse Hegelian Marxism with feminism, Rich was never active in any particular Marxist current.

Still, nothing justifies Marxists' neglect of Rich's thought. Fortunately, her essays provide an ample basis for reconstructing it. It is high time to pay it more attention.

A Life on the Left

Rich's political life can be divided into four major periods:

- In the 1950s, she was in retrospect a startlingly conventional and conservative young woman, as a wife (to the economist Alfred Conrad) and mother. She wrote for example in her journal in 1950 that any woman who claimed to want "sovereign 'equality' simply doesn't speak truth." (53)
- In the 1960s, at first somewhat in her husband's shadow, she became active on the New Left, particularly in solidarity with anti-war and anti-racist students at City College of New York.
- In 1970 she joined the women's movement, throwing herself into a close-knit women's community, transforming her thinking, playing a major part in the creation of second-wave radical feminist theory, and within a few years coming out as a lesbian.
- Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 and a trip to Sandinista Nicaragua in 1983 catalyzed Rich's striking out in new directions, proclaimed publicly in her seminal 1984 essay "Toward a Politics of Location."

Several major themes bind together Rich's political writing of the 1960s, the 1970s, and her last, Marxist decades. Anti-racism in particular was always key for her. This was inevitable at City College, where solidarity with Black students was urgent and inescapable for a radical.

In those years June Jordan and Audre Lorde became her intimate friends and co-thinkers, which they remained as long as they lived.

Rich often welcomed fierce debates with people she loved, only sometimes to break with them when the struggle became too much for her. Neither "a saint nor a superwoman," Holladay comments, "when someone angered or disappointed her or just wore her out, she cut ties, often with little warning." (324)

But Rich never wavered in her commitment to Jordan and Lorde, or shrank from the challenges they posed to her as a white anti-racist. The same was true with Rich's Black Jamaican life partner Michelle Cliff.

Even in the 1970s when Rich believed that identification with women transcended every other identity, she also had a constant preoccupation with many women's victimization by class and poverty.

As early as 1971, she was thinking of the women whom Virginia Woolf "left out of the picture altogether — women who are washing other people's dishes and caring for other people's children, not to mention women who went on the streets last night in order to feed their children." (1)

More could be said in Holladay's book, too, about Rich as a disabled person, who lived much of her life in chronic pain from rheumatoid arthritis. Holladay does make clear that in her personal life Rich was reticent and stoical about her pain, although her disability was at times obvious to people who met her — and startling if they had known nothing about it.

In later life Rich did begin to address the issue politically a little. Her work served as an explicit inspiration to disabled activists and scholars. (2)

Lesbian Feminist

A half-century later, it is difficult to fathom how sharply Rich cut herself off from her East Coast left-wing intellectual milieu in 1970 by becoming a feminist.

When in 1975 she had the temerity to contest Susan Sontag's assertion that the women's movement was responsible for promoting the Nazi films of Lili Riefenstahl — feminists had in fact protested the films' screening — Sontag accused her of "one of the roots of fascism," an anti-intellectualism that was "a persistent indiscretion of feminist rhetoric."

Although Rich, like Sontag, had been a long-time contributor to the *New York Review of Books*, Sontag's influence helped ensure that Rich's work hardly ever appeared in it again. (3)

Today we can distinguish the conclusions about women's oppression that Rich affirmed from the 1970s to the end of her life from other standpoints she developed in the 1970s that she later qualified.

She continued to assert, for example, that a "change in the concept of sexual identity is essential if we are not going to see the old political order reassert itself in every new revolution." (4)

"I go on believing," she said in 1984, "that the liberation of women is a wedge driven into all other radical thought." (5)

The close link she saw between lesbian identity and feminism also remained a constant. As she wrote in 1976, "It is the lesbian in us who drives us to feel imaginatively ... the full connection between woman and woman."

This meant for her that all consistent feminists were tapping into a lesbian ethos, (289) resisting the myriad forms of women's oppression that simultaneously constricted lesbian possibility, and moving in countless ways across history in and out of a "lesbian continuum."

Not that she discounted the sexual component of lesbianism. On the contrary, she wrote, "the physical passion of woman for woman ... is central to lesbian existence." (6) Her poetic explorations of lesbian eroticism were groundbreaking and compelling.

This conception led her to deemphasize commonalities between lesbians and gay men. She was not one of the lesbians who took part in mixed gay/lesbian radical groups around the time of the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion.

She had almost no sense of a common lesbian/gay culture, especially in the 1970s, insisting that lesbianism was not a “mirror image” of male homosexuality but rather “a profoundly female experience.”(7)

In those years she denounced gay male culture as “reflecting such male stereotypes as dominance and submission as modes of relationship, and the separation of sex from emotional involvement — a culture tainted by profound hatred for women.” (296)

Her critique focused on gay men’s male identities more than their sexuality, however; even in the 1970s she doubted whether gay men feared women any more than straight men did.(8)

In any event, such generalizations became less common in her writings from the 1980s on. She expressed solidarity with gay men devastated by the AIDS crisis, memorializing dead friends, and gay men increasingly became her enthusiastic fans.

At the same time, she rightly denied any vision of a unified gay community. She cited gay Black poet Essex Hemphill to reject “a one-eyed, one gender, one color perception of community,” insisting that it was at best made up of “communities engaged in a fragile coexistence.”(9)

Rich’s relationships with straight men from the 1970s on were more lastingly problematic. Initially her turn to feminism led her to move out of the New York apartment she shared with her husband Alfred Conrad (Alf). Her transformation was so traumatic to Conrad that it apparently helped trigger his subsequent suicide.

Rich spent many years processing and reprocessing that trauma herself. In a poem she wrote two years after the suicide, she wrote, “Next year it would have been 20 years / and you are wastefully dead / who might have made the leap / we talked, too late, of making.”(10)

The frenetic pace and pressures of post-1968 activism had taken a terrible toll on both Rich and Conrad, even before Rich’s immersion in feminism. Holladay’s persuasive verdict is that what saved Rich from her husband’s despair and self-destruction was her poetry, her constant “true north.” (195)

Rich’s prolonged wrestling with the memory of her marriage to Conrad sheds light on her lesbian “separatism” in the 1970s. While she did sometimes opt for all-women classes and all-women discussions at her readings, she also tried to engage deeply with male friends about how feminism should make them change their lives.

She insisted in 1976 on “the dawning hope that women and men may one day experience forms of love and parenthood, identity and community that will not be drenched in lies, secrets and silence.” (287)

This was a dialogue that the men often refused or evaded. They were quick to conclude that in choosing a women’s community, Rich was rejecting them.

She later told the story of a reunion after several years with a male poet who exploded at her: “You disappeared!” She had not realized that her joining a women’s community and “taking part in an immense shift in human consciousness” would “for him [be] so off-to-the-edge [that] it seemed I had sunk, or dived, into a black hole.”(11)

Her love for her sons at least was strong and unconditional. Recalling the “delicious and sinful rhythm” of their lives one summer that the four of them spent together while their father was studying abroad, she described watching “their slender little-boys’ bodies grow brown” as they

“lived like castaways on some island of mothers and children.”

Looking back at how later, together, they lived through Alf’s suicide, she saw the four of them as “survivors, four distinct people with strong bonds.” Her sons’ “love, intelligence, and integrity have been resources for me since we first began to talk to each other,” she wrote.(12)

Even with them, though, she remained a clear-eyed feminist intellectual. She described them in one 1981 interview as “full grown, adult, white males whom I am very fond of and like very, very much, about whose feminism or pro-feminism I would not swear an oath on any account.” (335)

In fact, Rich was always too critical-minded and radical to fit comfortably into any community, even a lesbian feminist one. Although she and Cliff moved to western Massachusetts in 1979 to become part of the strong women’s community there, Holladay notes, “she didn’t find the utopian community of lesbian sisterhood she seems to have imagined.... She was concerned that women were turning inward, getting distracted by New Age pabulum.” (314)

In Rich’s later summary, “A feminism that sought to engage race and colonialism” was being pushed aside by a “model of female — or feminine — self-involvement and self-improvement, devoid of political context or content.”(13)

She remained in many ways a cosmopolitan intellectual. She fully agreed with Cliff’s admonition, “We need to allow ourselves complexity.” (316) Soon Rich’s political development would magnify her distance from the lesbian feminist milieu.



Adrienne Rich (right), with writers Audre Lorde (left) and Meridel Le Sueur (middle), 1980. K. Kendall, CC by 2.0

Toward Marxism

Reagan’s election in 1980 spurred a process of rethinking for her. It led among other things to a trip in 1983 with socialist feminist Margaret Randall to Nicaragua.

In this “tiny impoverished country, in a four-year-old society dedicated to erasing poverty,” she “could physically feel the weight of the United States of North America [and] the cold shadow we cast everywhere to the south.”(14) She felt impelled to battle against a world in which “every public decision has to be justified in the scales of corporate profits.”(15)

She concluded that radical feminists had been wrong in the 1970s when they “shrugged away Marx along with the academic Marxists and the sectarian Left.”(16)

They had failed to appreciate the pioneering work done by Marxist feminists. And while some radical feminists had looked at the intersections of race, class and gender, they had focused too narrowly on individual women’s poverty and class identities, and not enough on how class and poverty “are

produced and perpetuated in the first place.”(17)

She returned to Marx’s writings, where she found “a skilled diagnosis of skewed and disfigured human relationships.”(18) Her freedom to create poetry, she saw now, was linked to historic struggles to give working people generally the time for free creation: “the sacred struggle for the worker’s freedom in time.”(19)

Without joining any Marxist group, Rich increasingly engaged with Marxist milieus. Several of her poems were for example first published in the Marxist journal *Monthly Review*. By 1984 she was questioning the status of patriarchy as (in her 1978 description) “a model for every other form of exploitation.”(20)

“I am less quick than I once was to search for single ‘causes,’” she said in 1984. ““Patriarchy exists nowhere in a pure state; we are the latest to set foot in a tangle of oppressions grown up and around each other for centuries.”

Citing the 1977 Combahee River Collective statement, she acknowledged that most “women in the world must fight for their lives on many fronts at once.”(21)

This turn helped precipitate a break in 1985, initially around the issue of pornography, with several women who had for years been close feminist allies. To their shock, Rich took a “dramatic leap” to the other side of the “sex wars,” supporting a court challenge by the Feminist Anti-Censorship Task Force (FACT) to an anti-pornography ordinance. (347)

For Rich, this reflected a concern that “lesbian sexuality was being downplayed” to avoid alienating potential conservative allies in the fight against pornography. She was also reluctant to see “further powers of suppression ... turned over to the State.”(22)

Rich’s changed position was part of a broader de-centering of feminism. Her “thinking was unable to fulfill itself within feminism alone,” she concluded.(23) Even as she turned to Marxism, however, she sought to preserve a feminist rootedness in unique, ever-changing personal experience.

She found a Marxism that did this partly in the work of Raya Dunayevskaya. This Marxism rejected “resorting to a party line,” she wrote. It tried to “conceptualize a miners’ strike, a poor people’s march, a ghetto revolt, a women’s demonstration both as ‘spontaneous activity’ and as the embodiment of new ideas.”(24)

Rich’s Marxism also drew on Rosa Luxemburg’s stress on the close bonds between socialism, democracy, reform and revolution, and on Gramsci’s call for “a new culture” and “a new moral life.”

She drew as well on Walter Benjamin’s insistence on the need for a “backward vision of disasters and defeats ... to alert us to our contemporary perils”(25) — though in her poem “Benjamin Revisited,” she concluded that the “angel of history is / flown,” leaving to the janitor in the basement “the job of stoking / the so-called past / into the so-called present.”(26)

Rich’s politics, more and more comprehensively radical, cut her off from the “fraternally-twinning” Democrats as well as Republicans.(27)

Her intransigence captured national attention in 1997, when she refused to accept a National Medal of Arts “because the very meaning of art, as I understand it, is incompatible with the cynical politics” of the Clinton Administration. Art “means nothing if it simply decorates the dinner table of power.”(28)

Jewish Identity

The years when Rich came to identify as a Marxist were also a time when she began identifying as Jewish, despite her Protestant mother and her father's deep ambivalence about his Jewish background.

There was never any religious content to Rich's identification, and still less any allegiance to Zionism. (In 2009, after some hesitation "as a believer in boundary-crossings," she publicly endorsed the call for an academic and cultural boycott of Israel.(29))

She firmly rejected the idea of "Jewish sameness," insisting on "[d]issidence and argument" as "acutely characteristic of Jewish life."(30) She felt a special affinity with Marxists of Jewish origin like Rosa Luxemburg and Leon Trotsky. (31)"I'm an American Jew," she wrote, laying claim to "a history of internationalist radicalism."(32)

At a deep personal level, identifying as Jewish required her to wrestle with the Jewish father whose unrelenting demands had first made her a writer. In her sister Cynthia's words, Arnold Rich "was the patriarch of patriarchs who created a woman confident enough to later rip away at patriarchy." (136)

Ironically, Arnold was so deeply assimilated that his daughter's decision to marry a Jew elicited antisemitic tirades from him that ended their closeness. In her 1981 poem "For Ethel Rosenberg," she recalled her father's "seventeen pages / finely inscribed harangues," adding drily, "I hadn't realized / our family arguments were so important."(33)

Yet after his death, Adrienne found that she could "decipher your suffering and deny no part of my own." (351) She recognized that "in his mind ... every day of his life was a Jewish day."(34)

In coming to terms with her Jewishness, Rich was strengthened by Michelle Cliff's struggle to come to terms with her Black identity.

Cliff was a light-skinned Jamaican who could pass for white; her family belonged to the island's colored elite that emphatically did not identify as Black. Both Cliff's lesbianism and her embrace of Black self-identification were factors in her mother's and sister's break with her — while Rich never felt close to her own mother and became estranged from her sister Cynthia.

The title of Cliff's book *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise* could almost have summed up Rich's attitude to her Jewishness. The title of her own essay "Split at the Root," reflecting her parents' mixed marriage, encapsulated her attitude in other words.

Epic

Like Walt Whitman, one of the earlier American poets who inspired and influenced her,(35) Rich ultimately made poetry, not "an escape from history,"(36) but "an instrument of prophecy." (403)

She made her life and work an epic of her country, living by her definition as a "patriot ... who wrestles for the soul of her country,"(37) in the knowledge that "every flag that flies today is a cry of pain."(38)

She infused politics with poetic inspiration, rescuing it from the "despair [of] the political activist who doggedly goes on and on, turning in the ashes of the same burnt-out rhetoric, the same

gestures, all imagination spent.”(39)

She stayed true to the spirit she remembered from the late 1960s and the early women’s movement, of politics “as an expression of the impulse to create.”(40) She embraced radical politics as “a great confluent project of the human imagination, of which art and literature are indispensable tributaries.”(41)

Her death hardly ended her struggles — she left them as a legacy to us all — but her hard life and intense efforts enriched our capacity to carry on these struggles. In her own words:

She died a famous woman denying

her wounds/denying/

her wounds came

from the same source as her power (329)

Peter Drucker

Notes

1. Adrienne Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, 15.
2. See e.g. Robert McRuer, “Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in Lennard J. Davis (ed.), *The Disability Studies Reader*, London: Routledge, 2016, <http://dsfnetwork.org/assets/Uploads/DisabilitySunday/31206.-McRuer-Compulsory-Able-Bodiness.pdf>.
3. Benjamin Moser, *Sontag: Her Life and Work* New York: ECCO, 2020, 396-97.
4. *Arts of the Possible*, 11.
5. *Ibid.*, 66.
6. Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in Ann Snitow et al. eds, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983, 183-85, 194, 195.
7. *Ibid.*, 178, 193.
8. Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1976, 210.
9. Adrienne Rich, *A Human Eye: Essays on Art in Society, 1997-2008*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001, 104.
10. Adrienne Rich, *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1973, 50. Rich and Conrad had married in 1953.
11. Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993, 164-65.

12. *Of Woman Born*, 194, 32, 17.
13. *Ibid.*, 2-3.
14. *Arts of the Possible*, 71-72.
15. *What Is Found There*, xv.
16. *Arts of the Possible*, 69.
17. *Ibid.*, 5.
18. *Ibid.*, 4.
19. *What Is Found There*, 42.
20. "Compulsory Heterosexuality," 202.
21. *Arts of the Possible*, 69-70.
22. Martin Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin: The Feminist as Revolutionary*, New York: New Press, 2020, 193. Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, the authors of the ordinance, as well as Dworkin's biographer Martin Duberman and Rich's biographer Holladay, have all insisted that because the ordinance only empowered women as civil plaintiffs, it did not rely on the state. But civil verdicts too can only be enforced by state action.
23. *Arts of the Possible*, 1.
24. *Ibid.*, 86.
25. *A Human Eye*, 63-64, 67, 68.
26. Adrienne Rich, *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, 17.
27. *Ibid.*, 131.
28. *Arts of the Possible*, 98-99.
29. mondoweiss.net/2009/02/adrienne-rich-turns-on-morally-stoneblind-israel-and-us-media.
30. *Human Eye*, 23.
31. Rich cited Trotsky's essay on revolutionary art at length in *What Is Found There*, 44-47.
32. *Arts of the Possible*, 143.
33. Adrienne Rich, "For Ethel Rosenberg," *The Iowa Review* 12.2 (1981), <https://ir.uiowa.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2768&context=iowareview>.
34. *A Human Eye*, 20.
35. Rich celebrated Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, and especially his *Calamus* poems, in *A Human Eye* 107-12.

36. What Is Found There, xiv.

37. I am indebted for this insight to the London Review of Books podcast by Seamus Perry and Mark Ford: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/podcasts-and-videos/podcasts/close-readings/on-adrienne-rich>. Thanks to Jeff Webber for drawing this podcast to my attention.

38. Adrienne Rich, *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991, 23.

39. What Is Found There, 17.

40. *Ibid.*, 25.

41. *A Human Eye*, 102.

P.S.

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<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc214/adrienne-rich-trailblazer/>