"To love the Stranger, to love solitude—": Feelings of Otherness and Isolation in Adrienne Rich's “Yom Kippur 1984”

Lydia Wells

ENGL 346: Jewish American Literature

Friday, November 15th, 2013
Adrienne Rich is an integral part of the American canon; as a feminist and political activist, Rich distributed a large body of work which changed the course of literary history. The emotions frequently felt in Rich’s poetry—alienation, isolation, dissonance—are most cleverly encapsulated in her poetry, and she explores these concepts using spare language and beautiful imagery. Rich occupies the voice of someone with a different religion, a different sexual orientation, and a different biological sex than the norm; hence, “her identity as a Jew elides with her identity as a woman, a lesbian, and a poet [and] it is from these multiple marginal identities that Rich fuses her poetic vision” with negative emotions and feelings (Chametzky et al. 994). Adrienne Rich’s poem “Yom Kippur 1984” most expertly weaves these feelings of otherness and isolation due to Rich’s position in society as a woman, a lesbian, and a Jew.

The poem “Yom Kippur 1984” cannot be comprehended without a critical understanding of Rich’s childhood and adult years. Both the poem and her life experiences are inextricably bound around conflicting themes of assimilation and identity. Adrienne Cecile Rich was born on May 16th, 1929 to a Jewish father and a Gentile mother. This arrangement, predestined at her birth, was to shape Rich’s poetry in future years. By all accounts Rich’s father proved to be a pivotal figure in her life, even though their relationship would morph from strained to nonexistent at times in Rich’s later years. Rich’s father, Arnold Rich, denied being Jewish for a long time; in fact, Rich admits that “Jewishness was muted in my house of origin” (Rich, A Human Eye 18). The family’s religion, and the many struggles endured by the Jewish people, would remain a closeted mystery to the young poet.

In a later essay Rich would remember that she was “the daughter of a Jewish father and a Protestant mother [who] 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” (Rich, A Human Eye 42). Rich explores this conflict in her autobiographical essay titled “Split at the Root,” in which she writes that “because what isn’t named is often more permeating than what is, I believe that my father’s Jewishness profoundly shaped my own identity and our family existence” (Gelpi and Gelpi 232). Rich acknowledges the effect of her religion on her later identity when she states that she felt “ambivalence as a Jew” and that even admitting her Jewishness to herself and others “seem[ed] to be a dangerous act, filled with fear and shame” (Gelpi and Gelpi 224). Still, regardless of this ambivalence and outright denial of their religion, “the family was…aware of being apart as Jews” (Gilbert and Gubar 1952). It is this separateness and alienation which has seeped into every crevice of Rich’s work.

Rich stands in direct contrast to her mother, who had been the quintessential housewife who “gave over her life to her husband and children” (Gilbert and Gubar 1952). Rather than following in her mother’s footsteps, Rich questioned a woman’s role in an inherently patriarchal world surrounded by male teachers, male poets, and male figures. The poet had married a Harvard economist named Alfred Haskell Conrad in 1953, at a time “under a then-unquestioned heterosexual imperative” (Gelpi and Gelpi 233). As a homemaker during the 1950s she was “expected to conform to a life of domestic femininity,” but she rebelled against this role, however, and felt “anger and confusion…during those years of confinement” (Lauter, Yarborough, and Kyung-Jin 2677).

These very feelings led Rich to explore “the conflict and distress experienced by creative, intellectual women in a culture that too often devalues female experience” (Lauter, Yarborough, and Kyung-Jin 2677). She was not yet vocal about her sexual desires for women, and had three
children before she left her marriage in 1970 at the height of the women’s revolution; her husband committed suicide later that year. After discovering “the suppressed lesbian I had been carrying in me since adolescence [which] began to stretch her limbs,” Rich lived the rest of her life with various partners, the most notable of whom was writer Michelle Cliff (Gelpi and Gelpi 237).

Rich’s life experiences greatly influenced her work, especially the dueling factors which make up her identity. Rich’s identity has been confused by her time and place in society, and throughout much of her life she was banished to the outside, the edges, and the fringes of society. This concept, known often in literature at the concept of the Other, consists of:

an individual who is perceived by the group as not belonging, as being different in some fundamental way. Any stranger becomes the Other. The group sees itself as the norm and judges those who do not meet that norm (that is, who are different in any way) as the Other. Perceived as lacking essential characteristics possessed by the group, the Other is almost always seen as a lesser or inferior being and is treated accordingly. The Other in a society may have few or no legal rights, may be characterized as less intelligent or as immoral, and may even be regarded as sub-human. (Melani)

Rich embodies the Other in many different ways: she shares a different religion (Jewish), a different sexual orientation (lesbian), and a different biological sex (woman) from the norm (non-Jewish, heterosexual, and male). Rich has also witnessed firsthand other forms of discrimination, most of which is documented in her political poetry. This feeling of being the Other lends a mythic, almost subversive feel to the raw poems of Adrienne Rich, since “the loneliness of the ‘only,’ the token, often doesn’t feel like loneliness but like a kind of dead echo chamber” (Gelpi and Gelpi 233). Through her poetry, Rich exposes how being the Other leads to
a myriad of effects, including solitude, silencing, isolation, and oppression. The concept of the 
Other, and subsequent feelings of dissonance and discord, are found most readily in Rich’s poem 
“Yom Kippur 1984.”

In her short essay titled “The Genesis of ‘Yom Kippur’” Rich cautions the reader against 
reading poetry as an autobiographical art form, and posits that one must separate the poet, the 
narrator, and the poem itself. However, she also concedes that a poem is still deeply rooted in 
“history and social circumstance” and “the poet’s life and consciousness and experience” (Gelpi 
and Gelpi 253). The middle ground, then, is a kind of “transmutation” between fact and fiction 
(Gelpi and Gelpi 253). Using this model, events in Rich’s own life as the Other—the outsider—
can be seen transformed and veiled in her poetry.

At the time “Yom Kippur 1984” was written, Rich admits that she was “doing 
something…dangerous: [she] was flirting with identity” (Gelpi and Gelpi 229). Rich remembers 
how she was in a state of flux; she had just moved across the country, and was grappling with 
issues of homesickness and feelings of belonging. She felt that she was without roots, especially 
feeling the “Jewish sense of what… it mean to be among strangers” due to the looming holiday 
of Yom Kippur, the holiest day in the Jewish faith (Gelpi and Gelpi 255).

In Rich’s own words, Yom Kippur is the day to “make reconciliation first with one’s 
community…because it is said that you cannot look to forgiveness from God before you have 
been forgiven by your people,” (Gelpi and Gelpi 256). This explanation also serves to clarify the 
quote by Leviticus in the poem’s proem. Furthermore, being the outsider in “the America of the 
kinds of events my poem is talking about, that makes solitude dangerous for so many 
people…[The America where you are]far from your own people, your own kind; that makes the 
stranger a threatening figure to us” (Gelpi and Gelpi 256). These complex emotions caused Rich
to examine how being the Other—being a stranger—impacted people in the modern age of strained societal, racial, and ethnic tensions. Rich herself has even admitted that due to such tensions, “at times in the past decade and a half I have felt like a stranger in my own country. I seem not to speak the official language” (Rich, *A Human Eye* 8). Rich unflinchingly explores the discrimination and oppression which are still rampant in the “land of the free and the home of the brave.” She ponders whether humans have changed, or whether there is still inequity and hate even after such atrocities as the Holocaust.

In the proem, Rich presents two quotes. One quote is by poet Robinson Jeffers and one quote is from the book of Leviticus:

*I drew solitude over me, on the long shore.*
- Robinson Jeffers “Prelude”

*For whoever does not afflict his soul through this day, shall be cut off from his people.*
- *Leviticus* 23:29

“Rich uses these two quotations to introduce the central question of the poem, what is the proper relationship between the solitude necessary for a poet to work and the multitude a poet needs for community?” (Hart 403) It is fitting that Rich inserts these quotes into the beginning of the poem, as these very themes of solitude and silencing will permeate the rest of the piece. Rich’s thinking is cyclical, as the final lines of the poem echo the opening lines. This quote from Leviticus also reaffirms what Adrienne Rich stated about the holy day of Yom Kippur: one must grapple with issues on this day, and that whoever does not realize the value of community will be “cut off.” Rich then begins the poem, pondering what it would be like to not be afraid, intimidated, lonely, and uprooted in such a volatile world:

What is a Jew in solitude?
What would it mean not to feel lonely or afraid
far from your own or those you have called your own? (1-3)
Rich then broadens her scope of vision and asks “What is a woman in solitude: a queer woman or man?” (4). These lines echo thoughts found in a later Rich essay, “The Poetics of Recovery,” in which she asks the reader “what is it for a woman, a radical feminist and a lesbian, to be a Jew?” (Gelpi and Gelpi 400). She ends the stanza by repeating, “what in this world as it is can solitude mean?” (6). Essentially, is solitude the same for a Jewish man as it is for a black woman; does solitude mean the same thing for a Christian woman as it does for a gay man? “Although the main clause is interrogative, it is in a prophetic and rhetorical mode--the poet has provided ample evidence of dangerous solitude and degraded multitude for the reader to understand the implications of her question” (Hart 409).

Rich goes on to explain that she does not consider self-imposed isolation and exile to be true solitude:

The glassy, concrete octagon suspended from the cliffs
with the electric gate, its perfected privacy
is not what I mean (7-9)

She makes mention of glass walls, electric gates, and “perfected privacy.” These words connote fragility thinly veiled under man-made security, and this, Rich adamantly exclaims, is not what she means. She also does not equate true solitude with:

the poet’s tower facing the western ocean, acres of forest planted to the east, the woman reading in the cabin, her attack dog suddenly risen
is not what I mean (12-13)

The poet locked away in the tall tower surrounded by “acres of forest” and far from civilization is the same as the fearful woman alone in her cabin, her attack dogs wary and bristling because of the unknown foe outside her door. Through the use of these examples, Rich illustrates how fear is often confused with isolation, and how neither emotion is the marrow of true solitude.
Line 15 begins with the narrator explaining how she traveled “three thousand miles from what I once called home.” This journey mimics Rich’s own sojourn and subsequent feelings of homesickness and rootlessness in a new land. The narrator remarks how nothing is there “to bind me to this coast [as something] once bound me back there” (16-17). She does not feel at home yet amongst “the hateful-eyed/human-bodied [who] are all about me; you that love multitude may have them” (21-22). This is the first instance in which the word “multitude” is used, although, interestingly enough, the word will be used a total of five times within the entire poem, rivaling the eleven total instances of the world “solitude.” In this italicized section, which constitutes the internal thought processes of the narrator, the narrator compares herself to the masses. She recognizes her distinctness and her separateness due to her various positions in the world. In the following lines clear distinctions are drawn between the multitude, who are simply described as a “blur,” and the “separate persons” who are described as “stooped” and “bent” (23-28).

Next, in lines 31-32, the narrator questions having to choose between these two distinct groups. She asks:

Must I argue the love of the multitude in the blur or defend a solitude of barbed-wire and searchlights, the survivalist’s final solution, have I a choice?

With its images and overtones that evoke the Holocaust, the narrator firmly posits herself as belonging to the Jewish people, an outsider group in the eyes of the world. She wonders whether she should love those around her or defend her own people; however, does she have a choice, belonging to the latter group? Beginning with the next stanza the narrator debates going to face the enemy, a risky and dangerous proposition:

To wander far from your own or those you have called your own to hear strangeness calling you from far away
and walk in that direction, long and far, not calculating risk
to go meet the Stranger without fear or weapon, protection nowhere on your mind (33-36)

At this point the poet introduces the concept of the “Stranger” with a capital “s.” The reader must remember that the point-of-view is from a Jewish standpoint and that in this instance, the Stranger actually represents the dominant culture; furthermore, the Stranger is different from the Other.

In the next stanza the narrator extinguishes notions of meeting the Stranger, instead using staccato lines urging her fellow friends to quickly and desperately:

Find someone like yourself. Find others.
Agree you will never desert each other.
Understand that any rift among you
means power to those who want to do you in.
Close to center, safety; toward the edges, danger (39-43)

The narrator advocates passivity, contentment, and trust amongst members of an oppressed group. The narrator speaks of forming bonds, and cautions her fellow comrades against the dominant culture, “those who want to do you in.” She mentions that their group is considered dangerous because they occupy a role on the fringes of society, that the dominant culture occupies the safe center, and anything unknown to the dominant culture is something to be feared.

However, a rift occurs in the very next line, introducing the central conflict of the poem.

At this point in the poem the narrators admits that she has:

…a nightmare to tell: I am trying to say
that to be with my people is my dearest wish
but that I also love strangers
that I crave separateness (44-47)

Rich deftly illustrates the dangerous tightrope walk between dueling cultures: does one who
belongs to an oppressed minority group stand by and defend the community, or does one act as a “traitor,” assimilating into the dominant culture? Rich:

comments on her sin of contradiction: understanding the necessity of political solidarity with the minority she is part of, she nonetheless confesses” her love for the Stranger. “In this verse paragraph, she substitutes ‘stranger’ and ‘separateness’ for the terms…solitude and multitude…This strophe contains one question that the poet cannot pose to herself alone because it requires an answer from others. (Hart 408)

On one hand she maintains her separateness and urges those around her to stick together; however, she admits that she feels the sweet seduction of treason. Tension and power struggles abound throughout the duration of the poem.

The narrator acknowledges her act of betrayal, and continues the use of contradiction, citing her “worst friends” and “best enemies” (49). She writes:

This is the day of atonement; but do my people forgive me? If a cloud knew loneliness and fear, I would be that cloud (52-53)

The narrator feels fear and loneliness for loving strangers and craving separateness, and now she is truly in solitude. Still, in her unique position she acknowledges that:

To love the Stranger, to love solitude—am I writing merely about privilege about drifting from the center, drawn to edges, a privilege we can’t afford in the world that is, who are hated as being of our kind: faggot kicked into the icy river, woman dragged from her stalled car into the mist-struck mountains, used and hacked to death young scholar shot at the university gates on a summer evening walk, his prizes and studies nothing, nothing availing his Blackness (54-59)

Many of those who have been typecast as the Other have “turned from the multitude to embrace solitude, yet Rich rightfully sees such solitude as a dangerous choice in the examples she recites in her poem: women killed alone on the road or in the woods, a Black man killed in New York
City, a gay man killed in Maine. She knows that solitude without privilege can be deadly” (Hart 406). This passage delineates the privileged from the oppressed, and also links Rich’s own real-life experiences as a woman, lesbian, and Jew into the poem.

In a handful of lines Rich explores issues of homophobia (“faggot kicked into the icy river”), male brutality against women (“woman dragged from her stalled car…used [raped] and hacked to death”), and racism (“young scholar shot…nothing availing his Blackness”). Rich’s diction is purposefully harsh and critical, using the derogatory forms of words (“faggot,” “queer”) to impart power and impact while simultaneously highlighting what makes the person “other,” or separate from the norm. While the narrator raises several other issues, she returns yet again to turning her back on her own faith and community, asking whether she is “deluded that she’s escaped the tribe” (60).

The poem ends in a rush of staccato lines with an abundance of religious allusions. The references contain ideas of destruction and death, solitude and multitude, rebirth and rejuvenation:

When the winter flood-tides wrench the tower from the rock, crumble the prophet’s headland, and the farms slide into the sea
when leviathan is endangered and Jonah becomes revenger
when center and edges are crushed together, the extremities crushed
together on which the world was founded
when our souls crash together, Arab and Jew, howling our loneliness
within the tribes
when the refugee child and the exile’s child re-open the blasted and forbidden city (80-84)

As the poem comes to a close, the narrator continues to question her betrayal of her faith, even wondering:

And I ask myself, have I thrown courage away?
have I traded off something I don’t name?
To what extreme will I meet the extremist? (68-70)
The speaker then personifies solitude as a woman—like her—with “breasts” and “plumes” of hair who reassures her that “Yes, you are loved, why else this song? in the old places, anywhere?” (74-77). Even more, in the last stanza, the two dueling sides fuse together, and the narrator wonders what will happen “when center and edges are crushed together, the extremities crushed together on which world was founded” (82). Will the accused and accuser, the oppressed and the oppressor, meet and reconcile? And in this new world, “reborn and haunted, what will solitude mean?” (86). The poem ends with still more questions than answers; these “questions of her nation that require a collective answer” cannot be fulfilled solely on the page (Hart 410).

Throughout the poem the narrator has perceived fundamental black-and-white differences between the two dueling sides. However, as the poem concludes it becomes apparent that she now realizes the two sides are essentially the same. In her haste to confront whether she has betrayed her community, it must also be asked whether her community has betrayed her. The community to which she belongs apparently lacks empathy and acceptance, the very attributes which they accuse their oppressors of lacking. The vicious persecution repeats itself in an endless cycle.

“Yom Kippur 1984” raises a myriad of issues which Rich faced in her own life; namely, how does one reconcile being an outsider, the Other, in all areas of life? Being a woman, lesbian, and Jew, Rich understood the different facets of America, the country “of violence…that humiliates people on the grounds of their differences” (Gelpi and Gelpi 256). For example, Rich makes the reader aware of important problems still found in American society after the women’s revolution of the 1960-70s. Throughout most of her life, Rich was a radical feminist who was concerned with finding a place, a voice, and a role in the world. “To locate myself in my body means more than understanding what it has meant to me to have a vulva and clitoris and uterus
and breasts,” she says. “It means recognizing this white skin, the places it has taken me, the
places it has not let me go” (Rich, Arts 68). These restraints are very prominent in the poem. She
examines the power struggles between the sexes, and portrays man as an insatiable animal who
freely rapes and kills without remorse. Man is depicted as “a fascination and a terror; and the
source of the fascination and the terror is, simply, Man’s power—to dominate, tyrannize, choose,
or reject the woman” (Gilbert and Gubar 1983).

The fear that women experience in a male-dominated world is best encapsulated in line
38, in which Rich writes about “the woman in the ungainly twisting shadows of the street: Make
those be a woman’s footsteps; as if she could believe in a woman’s god.” This situation has
been felt by many women before, who have found themselves on a dark street and suddenly hear
footsteps in the distance; the mind automatically jumps to conclusions, making the sound
ominous. There are also two instances throughout the poem in which women are brutally
attacked and killed (lines 57-58 and 60-62). In both instances women are used and discarded like
garbage, attesting to man’s true power and brutality.

Moreover, “Yom Kippur 1984” also raises several issues of severe homophobia. The
poem mentions hates crimes against both men and women (specifically lines 57 and 62). In
regards to lesbianism, Rich has stated that “women’s love for women has been represented
almost entirely through silence and lies. The institution of heterosexuality has forced the lesbian
to dissemble, or be labeled a pervert, a criminal, a sick or dangerous woman, etc., etc. (Rich, A
Human Eye 36). In her poem “Yom Kippur 1984” Rich attempts to destroy this myth,
showcasing how those who do not follow the heterosexual norm are often mistreated or misused,
and that their abusers are indeed the “sick” and “dangerous” criminals.
Lastly, and most importantly, “Yom Kippur 1984” is steeped in issues surrounding what it means to be Jewish in the latter half of the twentieth century. Rich has commented that the concept of “diaspora—a multifaceted condition—means never always, or anywhere, being just like other Jews. It means class and cultural difference, dissension, contradiction…and the ‘always/already’ of anti-Semitism” (Rich, A Human Eye 22). Rich has also asked “is anti-Semitism the model for racism, or racism for anti-Semitism?” (Rich, Arts 78). In the opening lines Rich furthers that very question by stating:

“What is a Jew in solitude?
What would it mean not to feel lonely or afraid
far from your own or those you have called your own?” (1-3)

Rich tries to imagine what it would be like as a Jew to not feel discrimination, fear or loneliness in America, far from a homeland or fellow people. Rich’s narrator in “Yom Kippur 1984” is a “new” type of Jew, “a North American Jew, born and raised three thousand miles from the war in Europe” (Rich, Arts 68). Rich posits that if she had lived closer to the epicenter, she “would be somebody else” (Rich, Arts 68). She would be a part of the “original ghetto dwellers identified as a racial type, suffering under pass laws and special entry taxes, enforced relocations, massacres: the scapegoats, the aliens, never seen as truly European, but as part of that darker world that must be controlled, eventually exterminated” (Rich, Arts 78). It is this new Jewish-American identity, and the repercussions and consequences that come with this oxymoronic title, which Rich explores deftly in her poem.

In the end, Adrienne Rich—radical feminist, gay rights advocate, and political activist—laments the fact that “sometimes [she feels she has] seen too long from too many disconnected angles” (Gelpi and Gelpi 238). She has experienced the consequences of being labeled the Other in all aspects of her life. Regardless, she occupies a special place in the canon as a woman who
experienced multiple levels of oppression and many feelings of otherness in a cruel and unjust society. Rich’s poem “Yom Kippur 1984” is a cathartic work in which Rich tries to “understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create” (Rich, *Arts* 64). Readers can see that all three major components of Rich’s life—woman, lesbian, and Jew—are the products of being cast as the Other in everyday life.
Works Cited


