

## The Icon Across the Street

### Harriet Malinowitz

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I think it is accurate to say that there has been no one, other than those with whom I have had some sort of intimate human relationship, that I have loved—and I mean that term seriously, if unconventionally—as much as I loved Adrienne Rich. It's not that I didn't know her at all; I did have a fair amount of real, direct contact with her—but every moment of that contact involved a sort of “double consciousness,” to appropriate W.E.B. Du Bois's term (16). What I mean is that I would talk to her, as one person to another, pretending she was a normal human being, while at the same time, there loomed over her shoulder the specter of her other self—incandescent, iconic, and incorporating an elusive spiritual consequence for me. It was like being in a crappy TV show, where the setup is that the ghost is talking to you and you have to pointedly ignore it in order to hear what the mortal before you, who must be kept unaware of the ghost's presence, is saying.

In 1979 I was a graduate student in an MFA program at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. I had also just discovered women's studies and become a devotee. My first, and very overpowering, lesbian love affair had recently come and gone, leaving me terribly depressed. Since being in nature offered some solace and I wanted to finally live without a roommate, I moved twenty minutes out of town to the tiny, picturesque, Robert Frosty village of Montague. I had a couple of acquaintances there, a nice apartment in a house that had been divided into four rental units, and lovely country roads to walk on which both salved and poignantly bolstered the melancholy in which I steeped.

Amidst that year's flood of feminist and lesbian reading—ranging from the theoretical to the creative—two books had taken on biblical status for me, and both were by Adrienne Rich. One was her essay collection *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, and the other was her poetry collection *The*

*Dream of a Common Language*; both had been recently published by Norton. Adrienne (which is how I'll continue to refer to her, since that's what I called her) was, first and foremost, a poet, and alas, I am not much of a poetry person, so it was via a great leap of fervor that I embraced her poetry, while cherishing most of all her extraordinarily poetic prose. The most luminous essays in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* were, for me, these:

- her piece on *Jane Eyre* (“I would suggest...that Charlotte Bronte is writing...the life story of a woman who is *incapable* of saying *I am Heathcliff* (as the heroine of Emily's novel does) because she feels so unalterably herself” [91]);
- “Vesuvius at Home,” her essay on Emily Dickinson (“Her niece Martha told of visiting her in her corner bedroom on the second floor at 280 Main Street, Amherst, and of how Emily Dickinson made as if to lock the door with an imaginary key, turned, and said: ‘Matty: here's freedom’” [158]);
- her “Teaching Language in Open Admissions” (51-68), which she dedicated to Mina Shaughnessy and which unveiled for me, for the first time, the possibility of a future in composition;
- and above all, her “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying”:

An honorable human relationship—that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word “love”—is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.

It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation.

It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity.

It is important to do this because we can count on so few people to go that hard way with us. (188)

These tomes were always out in my apartment, like part of the furniture, and I agonized over them daily. So it might seem as farfetched as a crappy TV show when I tell you that Adrienne and her partner, Michelle

Cliff, just happened to buy the house across the street and move into the little hamlet of Montague shortly after I did. My reading chair in the bay window, my bed, and my desk all had perfect views of her house, a feature that outdid the claims of my most wildly-imagined real estate ad. Sometimes I think of another of her famous essays as “The Politics of Location, Location, Location.”

One day, soon after they had moved in but before I had met them, I spotted them walking just yards ahead of me on the main street of Amherst. What an incredible behind-the-scenes-of-genius opportunity! My brother was visiting me, and I engaged him as my accomplice to find out what they were saying. At my behest, he sped up and passed them on the sidewalk, whereupon he heard Michelle say, “We'll roast a chicken tonight,” and by the time I caught up with him, I had gleaned further information from Adrienne: “and make a big salad.”

One afternoon soon after that, I was napping when the phone rang. Those were the primitive days when you had no way of knowing who was on the phone before you picked it up, and if you happened to be abruptly awakened from a nap, it was especially confusing. It was Adrienne—or “Adrienne, from across the street,” as she put it, as if I didn't know which Adrienne it was—calling to ask about an article that she'd appreciate getting a copy of from the *Valley Women's Voice*, an earnest local startup feminist newspaper; I was in the editorial collective. I can't remember much of the rest of the conversation; I do remember she said the *Valley Women's Voice* was one of only four newspapers she now read, which did not include the *New York Times*. I hung up the phone still dazed, ruining my unrehearsed performance.

I felt worse when, a few days later, she stopped in to get the article. A gay male friend was visiting—who I simply failed to introduce, as if there were no male person of the species visiting me at all. Lou Reed was rasping on the stereo turntable with the arm lifted up, so that it played over and over; and as Adrienne looked around the room, her eyes came to rest on a print of Gustave Klimpt's *The Kiss* above the stereo. It was just a pretty thing that a poor grad student could afford at a yard sale, but I suddenly saw, in the mirror of Adrienne's dubious gaze, how the woman's neck was practically snapping off in acquiescence to the man's crippling embrace. Oh God, it all seemed so canonically male-centered and heterosexual! How could I possibly explain myself?

After that, I would sometimes run into Adrienne in Montague's little post office, and she would always talk to me as if it were a perfectly normal thing to do. Soon, we became classmates as well. Gloria Joseph, who taught at nearby Hampshire College, ran a year-long seminar attended by undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, and administrators from around what was known as the Five-College Area. Entitled *The Significant Role of Black Women in Women's Studies*, the seminar was informed, more than anything, by its roster of guest speakers—which included Adrienne, Michelle, Audre Lorde, Betty Shabazz, anthropologist and later first African-American woman president of Spelman College Johnetta Cole, literary critic Andrea Rushing, and many others. It was a hub of what was then called “confrontational politics,” and I always took my calm-down vitamins before I went. Nonetheless, it was a life-changing event for me. After they had each led one class meeting, Adrienne and Michelle stayed for the rest of the year and participated in class discussions like anyone else.

Eventually, I left Montague, moving to New York, and sometime after that Adrienne and Michelle moved to Santa Cruz, because the New England climate had a terrible effect on the rheumatoid arthritis from which Adrienne suffered from her youth until her death last year. From my coveted vantage points of my reading chair, desk, and bed, I had seen the extremity of the illness wax and wane, as she assumed, and then shed, and then assumed again, a cane. Once in the post office, she told me of yet another upcoming operation in Boston, and it struck me that her remarkable output over the years had continued amidst recurrent surgeries and what for most would have been mentally and creatively thwarting pain.

In the years that followed, in our own way, we each got involved with the politics of Central America and the other ravages of the Reagan and then Bush years, and later still, with the need to speak out as Jews about freedom and justice for Palestinians. As a result, there were various occasions when our paths again crossed. Each time, I felt first overtaken by an importunate shyness, as the contrast between the multitudes of admiring people this woman encountered every month and the comparative littleness of my own sphere left me unbelieving that she could possibly remember me. But it seemed that Adrienne Rich remembered everyone. Once, at a benefit reception, I saw her hesitate at

the threshold of a large Manhattan loft, scan the room, see me, and then set out, in her steady limp, across the room to embrace me. We talked for about fifteen minutes, and again, I did her the gross injustice of being so preoccupied with marveling at her presence that I couldn't follow what she said. Another time, she introduced me to one of her sons, and again, I could barely sustain the give-and-take of conversation as I wondered, “Wow, how does he feel about the way she wrote of his childhood in *Of Woman Born*?”

I was up very late at my computer one night, almost a year ago, when I glanced at the online *New York Times* as it reloaded its latest update onto my screen, and I saw her name accompanied by the years “1929-2012.” The gasping feeling I had came simultaneously with the thought, “I always knew this would happen someday.” She is the only person outside my own private life whose loss I braced myself for, years in advance, as I did for family members.

And though what I have described of my response to her probably suggests all the puerility of a teenybopper's crush on a rock star, it really wasn't that at all. It's truly not that I idolized her. Yes, for me, an inveterate atheist, she was sort of like God, but not the omnipotent, Old Testament sort that one adores and beseeches and cowers before and thanks and obeys. She was God for me almost as a sort of transcendent fiction that one can invent and summon up at any time for comfort and strength, in much the same way that I understand Jesus and heaven to work for many people. Her astonishing complexity, seriousness, moral intensity, and meticulous use of language were qualities I longed to have access to in my daily life, and I had dreams in which she approved of those things about me with which I most struggled: my need for solitude; my tendency to prioritize reading and writing over social relations; my inability to go with the flow about matters that seemed highly significant to me, even if they did to no one else; my inability to distinguish between describing life and living it; my drive to use language precisely, not carelessly.

These days, I often summon up my inner God of Adrienne Rich when I am forced to deal with Outcomes Assessment. I think these words from her poem “The Stranger,” from *Diving Into the Wreck*, presciently speak for many of us in contemporary higher education:

*I am the living mind you fail to describe  
in your dead language*

As some of our own colleagues in English and Writing departments devote months of their working lives to an enterprise that seems more the bailiwick of Party hacks in George Orwell's *1984* (or George W. Bush's White House) than of members of a discipline supposedly committed to language and meaning, I think of Adrienne Rich. I think of her refusing to accept the National Medal of Arts in protest of the Newt Gingrich-led attack on the NEA, the NEH, and PBS—"I could not participate in a ritual that would feel so hypocritical to me" ("Why I Refused" 99)—and I wonder why many more of us don't much more simply refuse the narcotizing gibberish of *objectives* vs. *goals*, *best practices* and *rubrics*, *inputs* and *outputs*, *good verbs* vs. *bad verbs*, *outcomes* and *stakeholders* that betray and vitiate the critical, reflective, and creative values they purport to safeguard.

I sense my inner Adrienne at campus re-accreditation prep meetings looking from dean to colleague, colleague to trustee, and she is as astonished as the four-legged window peepers in the final passage of *Animal Farm*: "The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which" (128). She frowns as terms such as "excellence," "culture of evidence," "institutional effectiveness," "open discussion and dialogue," and "transparency" are dribbled about by the team like basketballs—"pimped," as she might say, much as she wrote in "Arts of the Possible," "In the vocabulary kidnapped from liberatory politics, no word has been so pimped as *freedom*" (147). In that same 1997 lecture, she went on to ask—though it was capitalism she was speaking of at the time—"Where, in any mainstream public discourse, is this self-referential monologue put to the question?" (148). In the lecture hall, my inner Adrienne whispers to me from the preface to the earlier (1993) *What is Found There*:

the society I was living and writing in...smelled to me of timidity, docility, demoralization, acceptance of the unacceptable. In the general public disarray of thinking, of feeling, I saw an atrophy of our power to imagine other ways of navigating into our collective future" (xiii).

When I found out that she died, I immediately set about organizing a tribute to her on my campus, Long Island University-Brooklyn. I envisioned this as a somewhat impromptu, in-house event, not necessarily something that would be publicized to the community, so I was greatly surprised to receive an email, sometime later, from Pablo Conrad, one of her three sons. He lived in Brooklyn, he said, and he'd heard about the event afterward and wished he'd been there. Would I tell him about it? We corresponded for a few rounds—he was really nice—and I told him about having lived in Montague—a coincidence he seemed to enjoy. I also wrote to him:

[Adrienne] had an almost uncanny impact on the psychological lives of some women writers (and, I suppose, others)—including myself...I presume that being her son must have been a complicated and extraordinary experience—galaxies beyond the experience of those like myself who simply introjected her as a sort of "alternative" mother (without her knowledge or permission, of course!). (4/17/12)

And there you have it. I imagine that there are hundreds of us walking around with little pieces of Adrienne implanted in us. And if she doesn't exist anymore, well, in my view, God doesn't either, but so far, that hasn't lessened his effect upon the world.

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