Trauma, Poetry and Politics in Adrienne Rich's "An Atlas of the Difficult World"

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Pro gradussani käsittelen amerikkalaisen runoilijan ja teoreetikon Adrienne Richin (s. 1929) runoelmaa "An Atlas of the Difficult World" (1991, sisältyy samannimiseen teokseen). Tulkintani mukaan Richin tekstissä on kaksi keskeistä, yhteen kietoutuvaa teemaa: traumaattinen kokemus yhteiskunnallisena ongelmana ja trauman esittämiseen liittyvä problematiikka. Runoelma näkee amerikkalaisen yhteiskunnan traumojen verkostona, jossa menneisyyden "kipupisteet" vaikuttavat nykyhetkeen osin tiedostamattomalla tavalla. Näitä rakenteita Rich yrittää runossaan tehdä näkyväksi.

Kirjallisuustieteellinen traumatutkimus pohjautuu ajatukseen traumasta normaalin kokemuksen rajat ylittävänä shokkina. Pystymme vasta jälkikäteen edes osittain ymmärtämään, mitä olemme kokeneet. Kirjallisuudessa trauman esittäminen on vaikeaa, sillä se ylittää myös kielen rajat. Traumasta kirjoittamisen keskeinen kysymys onkin, miten puhua sellaisesta, jolle ei ole sanoja.

Richin mukaan esteettinen kokemus auttaa trauman työstämisessä. Kirjallisuus on tämän vuoksi lähtökohtaisesti yhteiskunnallisesti merkittävää. Silti trauman purkaminen runoudessa vaatii tiettyjä retorisia keinoja. Esitän, että Rich rakentaa runonsa puhujasta "todistajapuhujan" (*witness speaker*), joka pyrkii kielellistämään kollektiivisesti merkityksellisiä kokemuksia, mutta myös hahmottelemaan tekstiin oman kokemuksensa rajoja.

Yhdysvaltoja luonnehtii Richin mukaan ihmisten vieraantuneisuus toisistaan ja joskus jopa omasta itsestään. Amerikkalaisten kollektiivinen trauma on muodostunut niiden lukuisien shokeeraavien kokemusten summana, joista virallisessa puheessa vaietaan kansallisen yhtenäisyyden nimissä. Rich kritisoi virallisen muistamisen tapoja Yhdysvalloissa, sillä ne myötävaikuttavat hänen mukaansa siihen, että vaikeista kokemuksista vaietaan edelleen.

Richin mukaan kirjallisuudella voi olla keskeinen asema traumasta selviämisessä. Kirjallisuuden avulla voidaan ilmaista "sanomatonta" ja luoda uudenlaisia käsitteellisiä yhteyksiä – jopa yhteyksiä ihmisten välille, Rich ehdottaa. Tämä johtuu etenkin siitä eettisen vastuun kokemuksesta, jonka kirjallisuus voi parhaimmillaan saada aikaan. Etiikkaan painottunut tutkimus onkin se alue, jossa näkisin kirjallisuustieteellisellä traumatutkimuksella olevan eniten annettavaa tulevaisuudessa.

Avainsanat: runous, trauma, yhdysvaltalainen kirjallisuus, etiikka, Adrienne Rich.

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1. Introduction

In an essay published in November 2006 in *The Guardian*, Adrienne Rich discusses, among other things, the famous, enigmatic declaration by Percy Bysshe Shelley about poets being "the unacknowledged legislators of the world". Rich argues that instead of speaking figuratively, Shelley was in fact

> out to change the legislation of his time. For him there was no contradiction between poetry, political philosophy, and active confrontation with illegitimate authority. For him, art bore an integral relationship to the 'struggle between Revolution and Oppression'.[1]

As my study will show, Rich could be describing her own work here. Rich (born 1929 in Baltimore, Maryland) has published seventeen volumes of poetry and four works of prose.[2] A persisting characteristic in most of her work is, indeed, the interweaving of poetry and politics.[3] Almost any literary text can, of course, be read as a political statement, depending on our approach. Inherent in Rich's texts is, however, a very overt wish to challenge existing social structures.

Most famously, Rich has been one of the pioneering figures of feminism, at least in the United States. Her search for a radical lesbian-feminist voice culminated in the 1970s in such volumes of poetry as *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978). She is also renowned for her prose of the same period, most notably *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as an Experience and Institution* (1976). In her prose of the 1970s, Rich stressed the necessity of

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[1] Rich, Adrienne. "Legislators of the World." *The Guardian* November 18th 2006. Downloaded December 1st 2006 http://books.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1950812,00.html

[2] For biographical and bibliographical information, see for example Rich's profile at *Contemporary Authors Online*, Thomson Gale Database. http://galenet.galegroup.com Updated July 17th 2006, accessed August 30th 2006. Or "Adrienne Rich: A Chronology" and bibliography in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose.* Ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi. (New York: W & W Norton, 1993) pp. 424 – 429.

[3] No generalisations apply to a career of half a decade; here it must be noted that Rich was not consciously "political" in her earliest verse in the 1950s, which Rich herself has described as the work of a "middle-class white girl taught to trade obedience for privilege". Quoted in *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*. Ed. Lorna Sage. (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1999) p. 530.

female bonding to challenge patriarchal structures and her poetry reflected these ideas.[4] Deborah L. Madsen notes that in her poetry of this period, "Rich writes of her personal rage in the political terms of radical lesbian feminism, which reach out to the community of women and other victims of patriarchal violence."[5] As might be predicted, this conviction earned Rich at least as many fervent critics as admirers.[6]

In the 1980s and beyond, Rich's poetry and thinking has changed. The period that for example Peter Erickson terms the "late phase" of Rich's career[7] begun, critics agree, approximately with the publication either *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986) or *Time's Power* (1988). From these volumes on, as the critic Joshua S. Jacobs points out, Rich has applied "the core feminist concerns of her work to the lives of a range of men and women across geographic, ethnic and religious boundaries".[8] Indeed, during the last couple of decades, Rich's work has not been exclusively concerned with the female experience. The central themes of her later poetry are the problems of national and ethnic identity (especially Jewishness), death and the passing of time, and the act of writing poetry itself.

This does not mean, however, that Rich's social commitment had somehow decreased. Piotr Gwiazda notes that Rich now "considers her life and poetry in relation to larger problems of American history."[9] The present study is, generally speaking, a study of what Gwiazda puts into words, a relationship that is complicated by the *traumatic* nature of many of the experiences Rich

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[4] See especially the famous and controversial essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence". Rich, Adrienne. *Blood, Bread and Poetry. Selected Prose 1979-1986.* New York: Norton, 1986. pp. 23-75.
[5] Madsen, Deborah L. *Feminist Theory and Literary Practice*. (London: Pluto Press, 2000) p. 174.
[6] Claire Keyes's readings in *The Aesthetics of Power: The Poetry of Adrienne Rich.* (London: The University of Georgia Press, 1986) are examples of the way in which Rich has been criticised for not finding an aesthetically satisfying balance – whatever that might be – between poetry and politics. On the other hand, Willard Spiegelman argues that "among the major English language poets in this half century" Rich is "alone in making of lyric a medium adequate to the task of propounding a politics". *The Didactic Muse: Scenes of Instruction in Contemporary American Poetry.* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1989) p. 163.
[7] Erickson, Peter. Review of "Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995 – 1998." *Women's Studies* (28) 6 (Philadelphia: Taylor & Francis, 1999) pp. 711-716.
[8] Jacobs, Joshua S. "'An Atlas of the Difficult World': Adrienne Rich's Countermonument". *Contemporary Literature* (42) 4 (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 2001) p. 727.
[9] Gwiazda, Piotr. "'Nothing Else Left to Read': Poetry and Audience in Adrienne Rich's 'An Atlas of the Difficult World.' *Journal of Modern Literature*. (28) 2 (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005) p. 166.

writes about. Sigmund Freud, whose work continues to influence discussion on trauma and literature, argued that traumatic experience is so shocking that it cannot at first be assimilated into the consciousness – it is fully experienced only later on.[10] Therefore it can be suggested, as several critics have recently done, that trauma demands a specific way of writing, one that acknowledges how trauma cannot be embraced by our consciousness similarly to "ordinary" experiences. The argument that trauma is the main subject of an important part of Rich's late work must therefore be accompanied by a consideration of the impact the peculiar nature of trauma has on the rhetorics and aesthetics of her poetry. I will go on to suggest that the particular mode in which Rich writes about trauma can be termed "poetry of witness", a concept I will define in what follows.

To claim that Rich writes in this particular literary mode is to set my reading against some of the earlier criticism on Rich. In addition to her (justified) labelling as a feminist poet, Rich has sometimes been called a confessional poet, in the sense in which confessionalism means poetry focused on the autobiographical "I" and his/her identity formation. This label may be adequate for some of Rich's earlier poetry, as the influential feminist critic Sandra Gilbert, for instance, argues.[11] However, as my study will demonstrate, Rich's "late work" makes a point of struggling against what Rich sees as a self-centered view of writing.[12] Instead of being confessional, Rich's poetry now seeks to be *testimonial*, an instance of bearing witness to traumatic experiences that have meaning far beyond the self. Rich's poetry occasionally employs autobiographical devices, as I will demonstrate, but even then the connection between literature and life is made to argue for the collective significance of both.

In this study I will seek to find what meanings the phenomenon of trauma holds for

[10] Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Vol XVIII.* Ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogart Press, 1955) pp. 7-71.
[11] See Madsen, 2000, p.174; Gilbert, Sandra M." 'My Name Is Darkness': The Poetry of Self-Definition." *Contemporary Literature,* (18) 4 (Madison: Wisconsin UP, 1977), p.444. Famous confessional poets include, Rich's contemporaries Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, and Robert Lowell.
[12] This change of course is a self-critical act, too. The problem with some of Rich's earlier work is well paraphrased by Helen M. Dennis, in her article about *Of Woman Born*, where, arguably, "a subjective stance is articulated in a prophetic and universalizing mode." *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*. p. 477.

Rich's poetry and for her social critique. I will argue that these meanings can be examined on two interconnected levels: firstly, trauma is an issue troubling Rich's reflections of poetry and literature in general. Secondly, Rich employs the concept of trauma in her analyses of American history and society. It is of course not possible to read Rich's entire *oeuvre* here, and therefore I have chosen to focus on a single poem sequence that I find the most illustrative of the concerns of Rich's late work. The text in question is "An Atlas of the Difficult World" (1991), a poem-sequence in thirteen parts in the volume of the same name. This volume, and especially its titular sequence, is perhaps the most famous and critically noted work of the later phase of Rich's career. In "Atlas", as Alice Templeton points out, Rich's primary themes are death and violence, particularly in the contexts of nationalist and ethnocentric ideologies.[13] More specifically, Rich deals with such questions as the multiple manifestations of the concept of American national identity, and the various denials on which its official version is constructed.

When it comes to the theoretical framework of my study, the overall thematics of the poem necessitate recognition of the perspectives of North American Studies. The base from which my readings arise is, however, the interdisciplinary approach of *trauma studies*. It is a branch of cultural and literary criticism that emerged in the early 1990s in the work of various predominantly American scholars influenced by both Freudian psychoanalysis and deconstructionist theory. Trauma studies is concerned with the representation of violent, shocking and incomprehensible experience in first-hand and second-hand testimonies, as well as in various works of art and philosophy. Trauma studies argues, at least implicitly, that there is a traumatic core to our very existence, both on the individual level and on the level of the various communities which we belong to.

In its theoretical approach, my work differs from the majority of studies that have been

[13]Templeton, Alice. *The Dream and the Dialogue: Adrienne Rich's Feminist Politic*s. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1993) p. 159.

published on Rich. The few book-length studies and articles about her "late" work attempt to find a continuation between her earlier, more explicitly feminist work and the poems of the late 1980s and the 1990s the central themes of which are, as said, culminated in *An Atlas of the Difficult World*.[14] Templeton remarks that it is impossible to investigate "the cultural impact of Rich's work, or the critique of culture implied in her poetry" without taking into account the influence of feminism in both Rich's writing and in her readers.[15] The focus of my study is, partly, indeed in the cultural critique implied in Rich's poetry, and this work might, at first sight, be criticised for the lack of any explicitly feminist theories[16]. However, I think that a feminist approach (that is, any of those feminist approaches available) does not necessarily do justice to the central aspects of "Atlas", its themes and the meanings of her rhetorical choices. As said, later in this study, I will nevertheless address the problems that Rich has encountered in her own early feminist writings and investigate the means in which this self-critique has shaped her late work.

I consider my study to be an interdisciplinary one, and not only because of the multifaceted nature of trauma studies. Because the strong socio-political commitment that characterizes Rich's poetry a mere study of rhetoric that is so often attempted in analyses of poetry would not do justice to it. On the other hand, as often is the case in the criticism concerning Rich, the political should not obliterate the poetic either. Rich's poetry requires analysis that takes into account both the linguistic, rhetorical and referential (political, social) factors of the texts explored. Trauma studies is indeed such an approach, and I will make use of both the literary as well as the more social-scientific side of trauma theory. One of the most important theorists for my study is the literary critic Cathy Caruth. Caruth, who is strongly influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, as well as the thought of Paul de Man, is a central theorist in contemporary trauma studies. Her writings are

[14] See for example Templeton 1993.
[15] Ibid., p. 1.
[16] A great number of the major theorists of trauma studies are women, and some of them are originally known as theorists of feminism. It would certainly be interesting to study the relations between trauma studies and feminism.

particularly useful for reading literature and paying attention to the rhetorical and narrative structures of literary texts. On the other hand, Jenny Edkins, another theorist whose work is of major importance for my study, works in the field of political theory. Her writings about the entanglement of the political and the traumatic are of use for the present study, because she adapts the core ideas of trauma studies to historical events and their remembrance and representation. Edkins also asks whether the notion of trauma can be employed as a means of political protest, a question that is essential in relation to Rich's work.

This study will proceed as follows. In the following chapter, I will introduce the basic assumptions of trauma theory. First of all, it is necessary, to explain the connection of trauma to literature. Because the attempt to take a political stand is so central a motive in Rich's work, I will especially try to find out how the notion of trauma can be used (and, perhaps abused, too) as a means of political protest. Because my main focus is in Rich's poetry, not prose, I will also ask what the notion of trauma means in connection to language, especially that of poetry.

After introducing the theoretical core of this study I will move on to the central part of this study, the textual analysis. Chapter 3 is devoted to the ways in which Rich constructs what I will call "a witness speaker" by using particular rhetorical devices. I will argue that "Atlas" is not only a critique of society but a self-reflexive poem about *writing* such a critique, and the complexities encountered therein. The bodily and locational aspects of the process of writing will be taken into account, because they are so central to Rich's thinking. I will, moreover, discuss the aesthetics of witness poetry, because in "Atlas" they are evoked precisely through the speaker and her perceptions.

Chapter 4 will focus more explicitly on the social criticism inherent in the poem and place the poem in its context in American literature. I shall argue that Rich tackles with the collective American traumas in three ways: first, by focusing on the problems of representing a traumatised

nation; secondly, by depicting the nation through what separates people from each other (and, sometimes, from their own selves, too); and thirdly, by criticising official patterns of national commemoration.

Chapter 5 is a conclusive account on how “Atlas” succeeds in working through the traumas that have been traced in the text. I will suggest that the tactics of survival proposed in Rich’s poem include various figures of entanglement: connection between other texts, and the connection that Rich would like to establish with the audience.

2. Trauma, Poetry and Politics: Theoretical Viewpoints

> Theory – the seeing of patterns, showing the forest as well as trees – theory can be a dew that rises from the earth and collects in the rain cloud and returns to earth over and over. But if it doesn't smell of the earth, it isn't good for the earth.[17]

The history of scholarship on trauma is both the history of a certain academic paradigm, and the history of a concept, its uses and its abuses. The outlines of both approaches are sketched below. In what follows, I will look at the various ways in which the term has been defined. Then, I will go on to examine how the notion of trauma relates to literature, especially poetry. The last subchapter deals with the way in which the recognition of trauma can be a strategy of political protest.

2.1. "A Wound that Cries Out": Defining Trauma

The word trauma originates in Greek, where *τραϋμα* means wound. In English, too, trauma first referred to bodily injury. Only in the late nineteenth century the meaning of the word extended to *psychic* injury and its after-effects, a phenomenon the philosopher William James aptly described as a "thorn in the soul".[18] Indeed, inherent to the concept of trauma has always been the idea that the patient / survivor / victim[19] is subject to an experience that is somehow foreign to her own conception of herself and for the interpretation of which she does not have the means. As Cathy Caruth writes, the traumatised "become themselves the symptom of a history they cannot entirely

[17] Rich 1986, pp. 213 – 214.
[18] Entry "trauma". *The Oxford English Dictionary.*
[19] The variety of terms reveals the different approaches one can take to trauma. In psychotherapy, the traumatised person is viewed, of course, as a patient, who needs to be healed. For example in Cathy Caruth's recent work, the emphasis is in survival more than in victimhood. See for example her essay "The Claims of the Dead: History, Haunted Property, and the Law." *Critical Inquiry*, (28) 2, pp. 419-441.

possess."[20] Trauma possesses us, then, rather than being under our control even to the extent that a less shocking experience would be; this is because no schemes exist in our minds in which trauma could be assimilated.

The surfacing of the psychic meaning of trauma coincided with the emergence of psychoanalysis, and in particular, of course, the work of Sigmund Freud. Modern trauma theory is significantly influenced by Freud. His analysis of trauma is based on his studies on the nightmares of the veterans of the First World War. In his earlier writings Freud had explained dreams as symbolic expressions of unconscious wishes, and instances where these wishes are fulfilled. However, this explanation is not applicable to the veterans' dreams: they are by no means pleasant or symbolic. They are, rather, characterized by "literality", as they seem to take the soldier back to the very site of the initial shock.[21] One the basis of these findings Freud observed that the behaviour of the traumatised patient is not characterised by a search for pleasure but, rather, by an uncontrollable mechanism of repetition that forces the patient to return to the site of the trauma again and again. With the notion of the peculiar nature of the traumatic dream, Freud was forced to change his perception of human behaviour. Humans are not, then, controlled only by the will to live, (Freud famously called it *Eros*) but, also, sometimes by what may be interpreted as a death wish (*Thanatos*).

Trauma theory in the 1990s agrees with Freud in its understanding of its core term. This, according to Caruth, is the "most general definition" of the phenomenon:

> [Trauma is] an overwhelming experience of sudden of catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena.[22]

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[20] Caruth, Cathy. "Introduction" in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory.* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995) p. 5.
[21]Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Ed. James Strachey (London: The Hogart press) pp. 7-71.
[22] Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History.* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996) p. 11.

This definition shows that inherent to the idea of repetition as a central mechanism of trauma is the notion that trauma is not fully experienced as the initial shock occurs but only belatedly. It is, as Caruth notes, "a double wound" that is "not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature [---] returns to haunt the survivor later on."[23]

Despite of what was noted above, the body is not forgotten in trauma theory, quite the contrary. E. Ann Kaplan argues, for instance, that when it first emerged, trauma theory was precisely an attempt to "bring the body back" to theory.[24] While adhering to the poststructuralist notion that textual reference might be indirect, trauma theory emphasises the connection between our material existence and the text.[25] In texts about trauma (such as Rich's, see section 2.3.) the body often figures as a container of the "unspeakable" or "unrepresentable" knowledge that intrudes between trauma and its representation.

Trauma, thus, shatters the way in which we experience our existence. Caruth remarks that "the notion of trauma" forces us to deal with "the fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation to reality".[26] The difficulty of this obligation becomes more comprehensible when we take into account the psychoanalytical, or more specifically, Lacanian conception of the subject that has greatly influenced trauma studies. This conception presupposes that we attempt to create coherent identities by finding ourselves a place within the social order. But the coherence is always imaginary, as there is always something more in the individual identity than what a particular social

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[23]Ibid., p. 4.
[24] Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005) pp. 34-35. The pioneering trauma theorists Caruth and Felman in fact have close ties to the deconstructionist movement, which Kaplan sees as preoccupying itself with the abstract reasoning: they were Paul de Man's students at Yale.
[25] Caruth argues that the poststructuralist argument about the uncertainty of reference, and the consequentially limited access to others' and even our own experiences, does *not* mean that we cannot make political and ethical judgements: "through the notion of trauma [---] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, at precisely permitting *history* to arise where *immediate understanding* may not." (*Unlaimed Exprience*, p.11) I will go on to discuss Caruth's understanding of the concept of history later in this study.
[26] Ibid., p. 91.

or symbolic site can contain. The imaginary coherence of the subject is always threatened by the unsymbolisable, or in Lacanian terms, the traumatic "Real".[27] With the notion of the "fundamental enigma" that trauma forces us to confront Caruth refers to the fact that a part of the subject cannot be accessed because it is characteristically marked by trauma. This is the case not only within traumatised patients who have gone through an experience of violent shock, but within practically everyone who attempts to make sense of her own identity. This notion of trauma as a structural, not only historically particular phenomenon renders it possible to read a great variety of texts through the framework of trauma theory.

However, the central mechanism of trauma is that although the traumatised part of our subjectivity is rendered empty, inaccessible and devoid of meaning, it nevertheless continues to haunt us because our subjectivity is characterised by the strive for coherence. Trauma, Caruth notes, "Simultaneously defies and demands our witness".[28] We want to avoid the traumatic *and* to process it continually, and, more specifically, to communicate it. One of the main ideas in Caruth's theory is the notion that the aftermath of trauma involves not only the traumatized subject, but also another person, *the listener* to whom the event can be recounted. Trauma is not a "simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality that is not otherwise available."[29] Notably, the grammatical subject of the Caruth's argument is trauma itself. The addressee for whom the otherwise unavailable "reality" is communicated could be both the traumatized survivor and the listener for whom the story is recounted. Caruth's syntax thus emphasizes the idea that trauma radically undermines the subject's possibilities to control her own thought and language. Trauma, thus, is an encounter with the

[27]Edkins, Jenny. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp. 11-12.
[28]Caruth 1996, p. 5. See also Felman's account of how trauma continually "pursues" the survivor. Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony. Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History.* (New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 23. The deconstructionist background of both Felman and Caruth is evident in these formulations.
[29]Ibid., p. 4.

unknown, for both the listener and the traumatized.[30]

I have attempted to describe, following, mainly, Caruth, how trauma studies defines its core concept. The central notions here are the belatedness of the traumatic experience and the dialectic of knowing and ignorance that characterizes our understanding of it. Next I will go on to look at the literary aspects of trauma that are of the foremost importance in my study. How to communicate in literature something we do not have the linguistic means for – or rather, how does the trauma communicate itself in a literary text? How, as readers, are we to make sense of texts in which this task is performed? In what follows I will explore the various ways in which trauma and literature are interrelated, and attempt to find out what political connotations this relationship may have.

2.2. "A testimonial project of address": Trauma and Poetry

As said, the importance of literature for psychoanalytic theory is vast. For both Freud and Lacan literature was not only an object of inquiry but also, at least in the case of certain texts, already in itself a theory of the unconscious.[31] Literary texts are a central object of interest also for contemporary trauma studies. Caruth suggests that there is a particular linkage between the literary and the traumatic when she writes that the traumatic experience must be "spoken [testified to as well as theorized] in a language that is always somewhat literary, a language that defies, even if it claims our understanding."[32] Caruth does not fully explain here what she means by "literary" which, at first, makes her argument seem somewhat unconvincing. Elsewhere in *Unclaimed Experience* she, nevertheless, discusses the problem of referentiality that is central both to trauma testimonies *and* to

[30] This dialogic situation, of course, is central to psychoanalysis in general. As Shoshana Felman points out, Freud's revolutionary discovery was that "it takes two to witness the unconscious": in psychoanalytic dialogue, the doctor's speech "resonates" with the patient's rather than substituting it. Both thus bear witness to what Felman calls "a truth --- that is *not available* to its speaker." Felman & Laub 1992, p. 15.
[31] Bowie, Malcolm. *Freud, Proust and Lacan. Theory as Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) p. 136.
[32]Caruth 1996, p. 5.

literary theory, especially in the context of post-structuralism and deconstruction. Caruth remarks that "for history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs [.]"[33] There is a gap between the experience and our understanding of it. Although this is not the condition of, exclusively, the experience of trauma, here the rift between reality and its representation is at its most visible. But this notion does not mean, Caruth argues, that we cannot have any access to the reality of our own experience or that of another's.[34] Rather, in the same way as a literary text, trauma requires interpretation and re-interpretation from both for the survivor and the listener of her testimony. Manifesting themselves in the form of tropes (figures of speech), trauma and literature are both partially unknown and inexplicable, and therefore they continue to bother us and to demand interpretation.

The "literariness" that characterizes accounts of traumatic experience also entails that these accounts should not be judged on the basis of their truth value. For if "the truth" is not wholly available for the trauma survivor herself, how could it possibly be transmitted to the listener of her testimony? Exact reference to reality is not what testimonies of traumatic experiences are striving to communicate. The same can be said about literature, even in the cases when both categories of expression explicitly aim at dealing with events that "have really happened". Shoshana Felman, the co-author of the influential book *Testimony* and thus another pioneer in trauma studies, analyses the referentiality of testimonies. Felman suggests that a testimony bears more similarity to a performative speech act rather than a simple statement[35]. According to J.L. Austin's famous theory, a performative speech act is in itself a part of doing an action. It does not attempt to state the truthfulness or falsity of whatever it refers to. Thus, the specific power of testimony arises from the notion that it does *not* attempt to make sense of history by producing a closure, "a totalizing

[33] Ibid, p. 18.
[34] Ibid, pp. 10-11. Here Caruth defends herself against the critics who see the poststructuralist approach to language as somehow ethically problematic.
[35] Felman 1992, p. 5.

account" of the traumatic event. Rather, it is an act that aims at making an impact on reality, or more specifically, the listener to whom the testimony is addressed. This facet of testimonial discourse challenges the conception that historiography, the narrative of historical facts, would be the only legitimate way to deal with historical events. Felman states that testimony opens the way to the understanding of the impact of historical events, as well as the action in history that arises from the influence of trauma beyond the traumatic event and the individual survivor. [36]

On the basis of this notion, Felman suggests that there be an interesting link between literature and the performative "project of address" that characterizes testimonial texts. Significantly for my study, this relation manifests itself particularly in poetry. Taking her example from Paul Celan's work, Felman argues that in some cases, poetry can be described as a kind of a testimony. This happens when poetry actively seeks out an addressee, even in the cases when the historical realities that it recounts would make the project of address virtually impossible – such as in poetry concerning the concentration camps, as in Felman's example. This happens, too, when poetry acknowledges its inner voids and discrepancies, and ceases to rely on its own supposed "artistic mastery", a belief in its own autonomy and authenticity. In those cases, poetry may become a "testimonial *project of address*".[37] Felman's complex account on how poetry might dislocate its own "artistic mastery" is, as said, partly based on Celan's equally complex poetry. One might argue that the characteristics or this "project of address" are either not applicable on any other type of text, or that because of the abstractness of her formulations, Felman is not actually saying anything that could not be true in the case of any imaginable literary text, if we choose to read it as a testimony. In my opinion, however, Felman's basic notion about what characterizes a testimonial text can be adapted specifically to such texts that defy a total closure of meaning and actively attempt to reach

[36] Ibid. Felman agrees with Caruth who suggests that "the traumatic nature of history means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others. Caruth 1996, p. 18. To discuss trauma, Caruth also uses the tropes of "leaving", "falling" and "departure", which in my view refer precisely to the same idea that Felman suggests in making the linkage between testimony and "what in history is action".
[37] Felman 1992, p. 38.

towards its reader.

Felman is not alone in stating that poetry might discuss trauma particularly well (although this view is of course disputable). Also Susan Gubar, whose *Poetry after Auschwitz* is the most extensive study available on poetry written about the Holocaust, believes that poetry can have a special relationship to testimonies of trauma. Gubar argues against those who condemn any representation of the Jewish genocide, and especially, the critics who believe that lyric poetry is an inappropriate form of representation of the atrocities of the concentration camps. Rather, she suggests, poetry is a particularly suitable method for handling this material. One reason for this is precisely the dialogic situation that, because of certain figures of speech, is more characteristic of prose than poetry.[38] Another reason is the nonlinear concept of time that is more characteristic of poetry than of traditional prose. Poetry, states Gubar, "abrogates narrative coherence and thereby marks discontinuity." It refuses to "make sense" of the events or to find but nevertheless "denote[s] the psychological and political, ethical and aesthetic consequences of the calamity"[39] - indeed, it recognizes the "impact of history" that both Felman and Caruth discuss.

There might even be a mimetic relationship between poetry and the traumatic experience, for Gubar suggests that "verse can violate narrative logic as completely as trauma itself"[40].This appears to be true especially when it comes to lyric poetry, the poetic mode that most consciously attempts to imitate speech, or at least bears resemblance to a speech act: "Like symptoms in the aftermath of trauma, *lyrical utterance* often announces itself as an involuntary return to intense feelings about an incomprehensible moment.[41]" In other words, Gubar regards poetry as a literary equivalent to the temporality of trauma. Poetry, especially lyric poetry with a

[38]On the use of the trope of prosopopoeia in Holocaust poetry, see the chapter "The Dead Speak" in Gubar, Susan. *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003) pp. 177-206.
[39]Gubar 2003, p. 7.
[40] Ibid., p. 8.
[41]Ibid.

specified speaker, very often uses the present tense and emphasizes its attachment to the moment in time it describes by the figures of speech that create an impression of a dialogic situation. In so doing, it contests the linearity that characterizes our efforts to comprehend and represent history. It can be argued that the temporality of poetry is very similar to what Jenny Edkins, whose thoughts are explored next, terms "trauma time" as a contrast to the official linear conception of time that guarantees the continuity of political status quo.

2.3. The Resistance to Narrative: Trauma and Politics

A central argument of trauma studies is, indeed, that because of the belated nature of the experience, the retelling of a trauma questions the linearity of a traditional, chronological narrative. Trauma violates the linear conception of time that is so central to the Western way of thinking, manifested in such concepts as "the past", "the present" and "the future".[42] Because the experience of trauma is belated it is never completely locatable in what we call the past. It has to be continually worked through and processed. Trauma claims a different temporality than that of the linear prose narrative, and as we shall see later, this peculiar temporality has to be taken into account in any attempt to represent trauma.

Jenny Edkins, a political theorist, uses the notion of traumatic memory and its non-linear temporality as a starting point for her study on the establishment, as well as the critique of, the modern Western political system. Edkins argues that the political and the traumatic are connected in the very idea of the nation state: "[s]overeign power produces and is itself produced by trauma"[43], by starting wars and inciting genocide, and excluding certain groups of people from its citizenry. For Edkins, trauma has a profoundly social meaning: it is an extreme example of the experience of powerlessness and betrayal that takes place

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[42]See for example Edkins 2003, p. 34.
[43]Edkins, Jenny. *Trauma and the Memory of Politics.* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. xv.

> when the very powers that we are convinced will protect us and give us security become our tormentors: when the community of which we considered ourselves members turns against us or when our family is no longer a source of refuge but a site of danger.[44]

This experience of betrayal shatters our conception of ourselves and of the world we live in. However, in order for the political system to achieve continuity, national traumas have to be appropriated, and this is done by establishing "a linear narrative of national heroism". This essentially apolitical narrative is recounted through various forms of official commemoration such as memorials, museums, and official discourse. Inexplicable and impossible to attach meanings to, trauma cannot be merged into this linear public narrative of state power.[45]

However, the linear time of politics can be challenged by the recognition of the past traumas. This practice, for Edkins, is an important form of social critique. "Remembering what happened in all its traumatic reality", states Edkins, "is the only way to escape the cycle of violence that our present reliance on neat and heroic stories of the past traps us in"[46]. How, then, should trauma be represented in order to challenge the official narrative that is based on forgetting and appropriation? In fact, trauma cannot be represented at all, because as Edkins states, and as we have seen from Caruth's formulations above, it is impossible to "speak within a trauma"[47]. This results from the impossibility to completely understand it at the first instance. Rather, the best way to contest the official, linear narratives of state power would be to "recognize" and to "surround" or "encircle" the trauma.[48] It is inherent in the nature of the phenomenon that there cannot be any clear-cut ethical rules for the project of "encircling" trauma. A testimony is always based on dialogue and the nature and the outcome of the project is always dependent on the particular witness and the particular

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[44] Ibid., p. 4.
[45] Ibid., p. xiv, and *passim.*
[46] Ibid., p. 173.
[47] Ibid., p. 16.
[48] Ibid pp. 15-17, p. 59.

listener, and also, of the particularities of the traumatic event in question.[49] However, it can be stated that non-linearity and the resistance to closure are, according to all the theorists introduced above, the keys to dealing with, or "encircling", trauma in a politically conscious way.

Of course, it cannot be stated that trauma *must* always be recounted in a non-linear way. In psychotherapy, for instance, it is sometimes essential that the patient finds words to recount the trauma as a story, in non-metaphorical language[50]. Nevertheless, when we observe trauma as a historical and political phenomenon, the willingness to narrativise and externalise trauma can have politically dangerous consequences that mute any attempts for political protest, as Edkins points out.[51]

In what follows, I will turn to Adrienne Rich's work to see whether it succeeds in its effort of dealing with, on one hand, the traumas of American history, and on the other, the traumas that may be inherent in the very project of writing poetry that aims at taking a political stand. In the next chapter, I will focus on, especially the latter issue by suggesting that Rich's poetry is characterised by an insistence to write what I will call "poetry of witness".

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[49] Edkins gives several examples of a successful encircling of trauma in art: for example, the Vietnam Wall in Washington and Claude Lanzmann's film Shoah (a nine-hour documentary consisting of Holocaust testimonies).

[50]The psychoanalyst Dori Laub, himself a Holocaust survivor, observes that in the therapy of traumatized patients it is necessary to "undo the entrapment" that the patient finds him/herself in. It is necessary to name the traumatizing event in a non-metaphorical language to escape the "thrall" that retains the patient in the position of a victim. Felman &Laub 2001, pp. 69-70.

[51] See for example Edkins's account of how the attempts of Vietnam veterans to criticize the war were diagnosed as nothing more than symptomatic in Edkins 2003, pp. 46-51.

3. "[B]eauty that insists on speaking truth": Rich's Poetry of Witness

> To herself, to others, to the speechless, to her own autobiography, the poet is not just a witness, but a precocious witness.[52]

This is how Shoshana Felman interprets Rich's poetry, or more precisely, the position of the speaker in her poems in the volumes from *Diving into the Wreck* (1973) to *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986). Felman argues that because Rich's work speaks of an essentially traumatized (female) existence, it cannot be "confessional" or "autobiographical" in the sense that it would speak directly of the personal experience of a certain historical subject; for trauma prevents one from speaking with a full knowledge of what has happened, and instead forces one to engage in a communicative effort of testifying to the perplexing experience that one has survived.

In "Atlas", Rich continues writing, I would suggest, testimony of a kind, but she attempts what can be seen as an even more complex task than that described by Felman. She is not only attempting to bear witness to her own - arguably - traumatic position but also to the traumatic experiences of others. My central argument in this chapter is that Rich's poetry in "An Atlas of the Difficult World" is an attempt towards writing in a specific poetic mode, one I will call *the poetry of witness*, which entails particular rhetorics and aesthetics.[53] Rich creates in her poem a *witness speaker* who is, specifically, commenting on the act of writing poetry itself. Rich wants to accentuate the fact her poem does not primarily concern her own self, at least not a self as a closed entity, but attempts to come to terms with the aspects of reality she cannot comprehend and

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[52] Felman, Shoshana. *What does a Woman Want? Reading and Sexual Difference.* (London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991) p. 136.

[53] Also the critic Anita Helle terms Rich's poetry "poetry of witness". She suggests that Rich's work can be defined according to the parameters set by Felman *et al* in *Testimony* as it "present[s] an intimate relation to singular deaths as symptoms of larger-scale, global, historical disaster" (p.52). However, Helle primarily reads several of Rich's poems as re-workings of the elegy-genre. Helle, Anita. "Elegy as History: Three Women Poets `By the Century's Deathbed."*South Atlantic Review* (61) 2 (Atlanta: South Atlantic Modern Language Association, 1996) pp. 51-68.

assimilate into her identity.

What does "witnessing" mean, though, in relation to trauma? Moreover, how is the project of witnessing related to literature? There certainly is a difference between the definition of bearing witness to trauma in its psychoanalytical sense, and the way in which the notion of "bearing witness" can be used in relation to literature. When it comes to the more general definition of "bearing witness", as Vogler and Douglass note, trauma studies suggest that there be a "special dependency" between the traumatic event and the witness. Whether a certain event is traumatic or not can "only be established by the existence of witnesses whose trauma both authenticates them and the reality of the traumatic event".[54]

When it comes to representations of traumatic experience in art, it is questionable whether an art work can be read as an authentic witness account. What conclusions, after all, can we make on the basis of a historical connection between the work and a particular traumatic event? [55] I think that in the case of Rich's poem, and also as regards art works in general, it is useful to talk about witnessing in the way that the film critic E. Ann Kaplan does. She sees witnessing as a problem of the text itself, and of the relationship of the text with the reader, instead of emphasising the referentiality of the work (that is, the connection between the artwork and the initial trauma from which the work refers to). [56] Kaplan's starting point is the distinction of the three levels of witnessing by the psychoanalyst Dori Laub: "[1] the level of being witness to oneself within the experience [as a trauma survivor], [2] the level of being witness to the testimonies of others [for instance as a therapist], and [3] the level of being a witness to the process of witnessing itself"[57]. Concerning the possibility of bearing witness in the arts, the third level is what interests Kaplan. The

[54] Doulass & Vogler 2003, p. 36.
[55] In *Witness and Memory*, Douglass (p. 57) argues that in reading what they term witness literature, critics have tended to forget the rhetorical and aesthetic aspects of the texts as well as the political context that affects their *own* reading.
[56] Kaplan, E. Ann. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2005) pp. 122 – 125.
[57] Laub, Dori. "Truth and Testimony: The Process and the Struggle." in *Trauma,* p. 61.

crucial feature that distinguishes the third level from the other two is that it does *not* involve what Kaplan calls "vicarious" traumatisation, which occurs, most typically, when a therapist starts to experience the symptoms of her patient's trauma, but can also be caused by representations of shocking events in the arts or the media. However, it is possible to "witness the process of witnessing" only if one consciously moves *beyond* the effects of vicarious trauma in herself, Kaplan suggests. Thus it is possible to replace traumatic compulsions with analytical thinking.

The identification of the qualities likely to provoke vicarious traumatisation is the key to the ethics of witnessing that Kaplan proposes as regards works of art. "The art of witness" produces "a deliberate ethical consciousness" in the audience without leaving us in a state of shock.[58] Such an art work "leads to a broader understanding of the meaning of what has been done to victims"[59]. How is this achieved? First of all, Kaplan notes that the works of witness are conducted with such aesthetic and rhetorical means that they allow the audience simultaneously to identify with the protagonist and "to have a perspective on injustice broader than that of the protagonist herself".[60] The viewer / reader would, ideally, not only identify with a specific occasion or character but to be able to contextualise the trauma. An important feature of the art of witness is, too, that it "leave[s] the wound open", as Kaplan puts it, that is, refuses a closure of meaning when it comes to representing the traumatic experience.[61] Here Kaplan's thinking echoes that of Felman, Caruth and Edkins. As was noted, trauma is always "an encounter with the unknown" for the witness. Therefore we could perhaps argue that an artistic attempt to bear witness to trauma should always stay true to this "strangeness", without even attempting to present authoritative explanations

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[58] Kaplan 2005, p. 122.
[59] Ibid., p. 123.
[60] Ibid., p. 135.
[61] Ibid. This idea about refusing a closure of meaning in works dealing with trauma is a central feature of trauma studies. For example, Jenny Edkins, as we recall from that last chapter, discusses the necessity to "encircle" trauma rather than attempting to directly represent the experience (which would, of course, be impossible, concerning the partly inaccessible nature of trauma).

about the reasons for or the "meaning" of the traumatic experience.[62]

With this theoretical discussion in mind, let us now turn to "An Atlas of the Difficult World". I want to begin the discussion about how the concept of witness figures in Rich's work by analysing the construction of the speaker in "Atlas" because in ways that will be specified below, an analysis of the speaker is the starting point for naming Rich's poem a work of "witness".

3.1. Constructing the Witness Speaker

The position of the first person singular speaker might at first appear a minor feature in the large structure of "Atlas". The poem consists of thirteen parts[63], encompassing nearly a half of the entire volume in which it is contained, and the text is for the most part spoken in what in narratology is called the *extradiegetic* manner, so that the narrator is not taking part in the action. The purpose the poem sets itself already in the title is further specified in Part II, with the declaration "Here is a map of our country". Although the idea of map as a trope for the poem is later contested in the poem (I will discuss this issue in Chapter 4), the concept describes the wide thematic scope of the poem well. "Atlas" deals with the geography, history and society in the United States with references to numerous historical events and many different locations across the country. When it comes to the characters present in the poem, allusions are made for example to the following: strawberry pickers polluted by insecticide in Salinas Valley (Part I); the poet Muriel Rukeyser, who is shown to have shared Rich's concern for poetically "mapping" the United States (Part IV); the black prison writer George Jackson, whose writings the poem also quotes (Part X), Irish immigrants who fled to America during the famine of the 1860s (Part IV), and moreover, various characters whose identity is not historically specified in the sense of the above. Only one section of the poem, Part III, is

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[62] This is not to argue that trauma should not be represented at all - although this has been suggested, too, especially in relation to the Holocaust.

[63] These parts are distinguished by Roman numbers only, except for Parts V and XIII which are named respectively "Dream-Site" and "Dedications".

spoken *exclusively* in the first person singular and deals primarily with the speaker's own scope of experience, as she memorises the people she has known earlier in life.

I would like to suggest, however, that we need to begin our reading of the poem by focusing on the speaker, however small her role might at first seem to be. This is because, as I shall show, Rich has constructed the speaker as a figure for a poet bearing witness, in her poetry, to the traumas (as well as other less "painful" material) of the "difficult world" in which she lives. It is precisely by its positioning of the speaker that Rich's poem raises questions about the possibilities of depicting, or "encircling" trauma in poetry and makes, I would suggest, a statement about the ethics of writing poetry about trauma.

What, then, do we know about the speaker? She is a woman who has only recently moved to California (Part I); she lives in a relationship with another woman (Parts V, XII); she has been married to a man who is now twenty years dead (Part III). Biographical affinities to Adrienne Rich are obvious and this knowledge can of course influence one's reading. Criticism such as that of Helen Vendler is an example of this tendency. She argues that Rich's attempts at "sociological analysis" in "Atlas" are radically narrowed by the poem's "essentially first-person lyric status" and that Rich's own subjective value-judgements blur her alleged aspirations towards objectivity[64]. Vendler's critique is based on a certain conception of what the presence of the first person singular pronoun in the poem denotes[65], namely that it only bears witness to the personal emotions of the poet. Vendler also appears to have an ideal about the universality poetry should reach, as reads Rich as aspiring towards "objectivity". I think, however, that the speaking subject in "Atlas" is not a confessional lyric "I": personal development is not at the forefront of the poem and the self of the

[64] Vendler, Helen. "Mapping the Air". *The New York Review of Books,* (28) 19 November, 1991, pp. 50-6. The *Literary Resource Center* Website, http://galenet.galegroup.com/. Dowloaded April 4th 2006.
[65] David Lindley, for example, points out that "The notion of lyric as essentially the personal utterance of a poet's feelings only takes root in the early nineteenth century. Most modern readers derive their assumptions about poetry in general, and lyric in particular, from the attitude seemingly embodied in Wordsworth's famous dictum about poetry as 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feeling'." "Lyric" in Martin Coyle (ed.). *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism.* (London: Routledge, 1990) p. 193.

speaker is not its main theme. The poem does not attempt to be "objective" either, as it actively denies the possibility of the existence of such position.[66] In arguing that Rich's poem creates a *figure* of a poet bearing witness I suggested that there are specific textual strategies that justify this interpretation. The meaning of a poem of witness arises from how the text positions the speaker in relation to the other material in the poem; a poem of witness cannot, in my view, termed thus on the basis of a supposed "authenticity" of the speaking subject, that is, its identity with the author behind the text.

I will now turn to the text of "Atlas" by showing how the speaker is introduced. The poem begins with a lengthy stanza spoken entirely in the third person. Rich invites us to envision a scenery from Salinas Valley, California, a location referred to as "the salad bowl of the world", as is ironically noted in the poem. The irony arises from the fact the valley is in fact poisoned by insecticides. Both the nature and the people living and working there are polluted. Rich describes the migrant field workers picking strawberries with their throats sore with the insecticide Malathion. Indeed, the society pictured here is itself a source of trauma (understood here as betrayal), not the source of protection that it once promised to be. And paradoxically, it relies on this betrayal to keep the wheels of economy turning: the migrant workers, who are nonexistent before the law, are not entitled to any kind of legal protection.

The second stanza introduces the first person speaker in a sequence that at first appears to have no direct connection with the preceding lines. The impersonal mode of the poem changes into detailed description of someone who has, in one way or another, been forced to witness a scene of violence. This is how the first-person speaker enters the poem:

> I don't want to hear how he beat her after the earthquake,
> tore up her writing, threw the kerosene lantern into her face waiting
> like an unbearable mirror of his own.   I don't

[66] I am referring to, especially, Part II of the poem, discussed in the following chapter.

want to hear how she finally ran from the trailer
how her tore the keys from her hands, jumped into the truck
and backed it into her. I don't want to think
how her guesses betrayed her─that he meant well, that she
was really the stronger and ought not to leave him
to his own apparent devastation. I don't want to know
wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials [---][67]

The abrupt change in the tone of the poem from impersonal narration to first-person singular reflects, I think, Rich's view of the poet's world as one where observation and subjective experience fluctuate, and are sometimes in a painful conflict. In the citation above, the speaker bears witness to a scene of domestic abuse where a man violently attacks her female companion, who is specified as being a writer. We learn that the consciousness of the speaker, in spite of her repetition of the rhetorical gestures of negligence – "I don't want to hear", "I don't want to know" – is dominated by the knowledge of the violence described, however forcefully she attempts to banish it from her thoughts. The poem goes on, "I don't want to know / wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials" and thus the speaker is clearly constructed as a witness whose vow to adhere to the truth obliges her to document what she has seen, however cruel and incomprehensible this might be. But why, we might ask, is the speaker so fervently battling against the recognition of all this? Moreover, what does her statement "these are the materials" suggest – does it not imply that the violence is viewed only as a material and therefore objectified and even fetishised?

To address the first of the two questions, possible answers abound, of course. Alice Templeton suggests that the central theme of "Atlas" is that while Rich is interested in exploring how certain oppressive social conditions "are internalized and valued", she also wants to show that she is not beyond this pattern of thought herself.[68] Templeton notes that while Rich "posits herself against this destruction [oppressed people, pollution of nature, poverty etc.]" she cannot, however,

[67] *Atlas*, p. 4.
[68] Templeton 1993, p. 156.

"define herself against it"[69]. Following Templeton, we can suggest that Rich is here positioning her speaker as someone captured by the dominant ideology (as much as anyone is) so that she can never totally free herself from it – and thus she wants to close her eyes from its potentially traumatising aspects. To quote Audre Lorde, the poet and activist whose work has influenced Rich profoundly, as I shall show, "the master's tools will never dismantle the masters house"[70] – and one facet of Rich's argument seems is that the search for new "tools" must begin in the recognition of our inevitable binding in the master narratives of society.

This interpretation can be made more profound if we take into account the theoretical perspectives discussed above. I think that we can read the speaker as attempting to struggle against the effects of vicarious trauma to be able to "bear witness to the project of witnessing" as Kaplan theorises it. Why, we might ask, is the speaker likely to be vicariously or "secondarily" traumatised by the violence she does bear witness to directly (as she only "hears" about the events)? Geoffrey Hartman suggests that in the age of digital media we so easily and with such frequency encounter pictures and other information of atrocities around the world that we in fact are often at risk at developing trauma even if our own lives have not been directly threatened. This can lead to a state what could be called an ethical numbness, for "the anxiety aroused increases our desire for not-knowing rather that knowledge".[71] In this, Hartman is most likely influenced by Caruth's statement concerning the peculiarity of the traumatic experience: "it simultaneously defies and demands our witness" because it has not been assimilated fully into our consciousness.[72] To escape the puzzlement thus resulting we would rather pretend that we do not know about the traumatic events at all. The speaker of "Atlas" definitely harbours such "desire for not-knowing" and her consciousness at first defies what she is forced to witness. The speaker finds herself in a state of

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[69] Ibid.
[70] Lorde, Audre. *Sister Ousider*. *Essays and Speeches.* (Freedom: The Crossing Press, 1984) p. 112.
[71] Hartman, Geoffrey. "Trauma within the Limits of Literature." *European Journal of English Studies (*London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 258 – 259.
[72] Caruth 1996, p. 5.

confusion, because the scene of abuse is too absurd and shocking to fit into any previous schemes of knowledge.

However, importantly, by stating that "these are the materials" she also feels that her *task* is to bear witness. It is precisely task, an ethical responsibility she has consciously set herself. The deliberately chosen task to bear witness and to testify ultimately enables the speaker to achieve the level of "bearing witness to the process of bearing witness" as defined by Kaplan. As Kaplan points out "one of the main characteristics of [this position] is the deliberate refusal of an identification with the specificity of the individuals involved"[73] in the traumatic situation. One should be able to focus on the larger social implications of the trauma without being succumbed by the suffering of another to the extent that it prevents one from contextualising the trauma. It is through acknowledging this wider perspective, only, that things can be changed. Although in reality, these positions (secondary witnessing that can be traumatising / the conscious project of bearing witness to the witnessing process), might be conflated, a work of art should not be content to remain on the level of vicarious traumatisation in order to produce a critical analysis of the larger factors at work in a traumatising situation. By treating the trauma of another as "material" for critical social analysis and simultaneously, importantly, revealing how the project is complicated by the impossibility of escaping the secondary effects of trauma, the witness-poet of "Atlas" wants to avoid the objectification and appropriation of trauma.

In the beginning of this chapter I quoted Felman stating that Rich's work (of the 1970s and early 1980s) is not autobiographical poetry but testimony to a traumatic existence. I then suggested that in "Atlas" she takes this testimonial effort further by testifying to the traumas of others beyond herself. I hope to have shown that an important factor in this effort is the conscious decision of Rich's poet persona to bear critical "witness to her own witnessing". However, this effort is further

[73] Kaplan 2005. p. 124. LaCapra, too, warns against turning identification with the trauma victim into an identity. See LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry*, (25) 4. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999), pp. 696-727.

complicated by the notion of the body.

3.2. Trauma, the Body, and Location

The discussion above suggests that Rich views the project of bearing witness to trauma as a deliberate and fully conscious process. But is it always possible to move beyond the level of vicarious traumatisation by the means of language? Are there instances where the trauma of another is at so close a proximity that one is left only with the impossibility to put it into words? I am not asking these questions in relation to Rich's poem to detect traces of the actual traumas that Rich herself has perhaps experienced. What interests me here is what Rich's poem speaks to us about these issues in a more general sense. This is where the notion of the body must be taken into account. I think that Rich's work affirms the idea that the project of witnessing is deeply tied to our physical existence, and this relation is manifested in three ways in Rich's work. Firstly, as is evident especially in her prose, Rich suggests that writing is not a fully controlled, cerebral pursuit, but something that possesses us in a way that we are not fully conscious of at all. Secondly, Rich notes, that the survival is often a matter of, precisely, physical location. Location is, as I will note, a central concept in Rich's thinking. Thirdly, Rich remarks that trauma is inherent to our very physical being because of the inevitable fact of mortality.

To address the first of the three notions above, as I showed in the previous chapter, inherent to trauma is its partial incomprehensibility, and the subsequent difficulty to communicate it. This is precisely where Rich's thinking most resembles trauma theory. This inevitable gap between the event and the text is, according to Rich, a central constituent in the process of writing poetry or, for that matter, in the creation of any art. Compare these citations from, first, Rich, and, secondly, Caruth:

> The matrix of a poet's work consists not only of what is there to be absorbed and worked-on, but also of what is missing, *desaparacido*, rendered unspeakable, thus unthinkable. It is through these invisible holes in reality that poetry makes its way - certainly for women and other marginalized subjects and for disempowered and colonized peoples generally - but ultimately for all who practice any art at its deeper levels.[74]

> And it is indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet.[75]

Both Caruth and Rich see "the unspeakable" as a central element of literature. The intersection between "knowing and not knowing" Caruth discusses is I think, a very similar construct to the social oppression turned to psychological suppression through which, Rich's writes, poetry has to plunge. That said, while Caruth, too, emphasises the historical context of trauma and its relatedness to specific events, Rich gives trauma a more directly social and physical meaning. For instance, she uses metaphorical expressions such as "what is [---] rendered unspeakable" and "invisible holes in reality" synonymously to such words as *desaparacido*, a Spanish term noting the people who have "disappeared" as a result of political terror in South America. For Rich, the notion of the "unspeakable" trauma theorists sometimes use as a sublime of sorts[76], has a very tangible referent.

I would argue that Rich sees writing about trauma as the primary task of the poet. To stress the difficulty, and necessity, of searching the words for something that we cannot comprehend at first, Rich goes on to suggest: "The impulse to create begins - often terribly and fearfully - in a tunnel of silence. Every real poem is a breaking of an existing silence."[77] The terror and fear Rich describes denote that writing about trauma can be described as an unpleasant and very physically experienced awakening into a social reality that surpasses our expectations.[78] The sensory experience of trauma is stored in the body even though we do not know how to express it in words.

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[74] Rich, Adrienne. "Arts of the Possible." *Massachusetts Review*, (38) 3 (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997) pp. 319 – 338. (Autumn 1997) Database: Academic Search Premier. Downloaded November 24th 2005. http://helios.uta.fi:2074/login.aspx?direct=true&db=aph&an=4175.

[75] Caruth 1996, p. 3.

[76] For a critique of the use of the term "unspeakable" in trauma discourse, see Vogler 2003, pp. 197 – 198.

[77] Caruth 1996, p. 3.

[78] Rich is most likely indebted here to Audre Lorde who writes that poetry is a way "to give a name to the nameless so that it can be thought". Lorde 1984, p. 37.

What we cannot talk about but somehow sense as being present is a frightening thought, because it tells us that we are not fully in control of our lives. This is what Rich discusses in "Atlas", too. In Part IV of "Atlas" we find a stanza that is parallel to the one quoted in 3.1. as regards its thematic structure and rhetorics. Similarly to Part I, the surfacing of the first-person speaker is preceded by a description, on a more general level, of different geographical locations in the United States and the traumas contained therein (this will be dealt with in later in this study). In the final stanza of Part IV, the "I" enters the poem. In the beginning of the stanza the speaker again contends: "I don't want to know". Then she goes on to describe a hate crime, the knowledge of which, as Rich's endnote tells us, is gathered from a newspaper article.[79] A man attacked two lesbians who were camping on the Appalachian Mountains, killing one of them while the other woman escaped. Rich directs our attention to the absurdity of the man's "defense" for his actions. Here is the stanza, in its entirety:

> I don't want to know how he tracked them
> along the Appalachian Trail, hid close
> by their tent, pitched as they thought in seclusion
> killing one woman,   the other
> dragging herself into town   his defence they had teased his
>   loathing
>   of what they were   I don't want to know
> but this is not a bad dream of mine   these are the materials
> and so are the smell of wild mint and coursing water remembered
> and the sweet salt darkred tissue I lay my face
> upon, my tongue within.
>   A crosshair against the pupil of an eye
> could blow my life from hers
> a cell dividing without maps, sliver of ice beneath a wheel
> could do the job.   Faithfulness isn't the problem.

It is interesting, first of all, that the knowledge of the killing is initially likened to a "bad dream" and the speaker has to remind herself that it has really happened although she would rather not believe it.

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[79] *Atlas,* p. 14. Rich explains in an endnote (*Atlas*, p. 60) that this part of the poem is based on an actual article she had read in the newspaper *Gay Community.*

What occurs in the line “this is not a bad dream of mine   these are the materials” is the speaker’s awakening to the fact that reality can indeed equal a nightmare in its absurdity. I would suggest that the emerging crisis that manifests itself as the speaker's willingness to close her eyes from reality, again, “not to know”, is a result of the way in which the speaker is reminded of the uncertainty of her own physical survival.

At the centre of this paragraph is, as said, the body, perceived as both a site of fear, pain and death (lines 1-8, 12 – 15) and of pleasure. The description of lovemaking, which occurs in the text shortly after the description of the murder scene, suggests, of course, that it is partly because she is a lesbian (the question of sexual identity also comes to the fore later in the poem, in part XII, which is addressed to the speaker’s female lover) she so strongly identifies with the women attacked. Here we can read the absurdity of the fact that one’s life can be at stake because of one’s sexuality. Rich shows here her continuing allegiance to speak for the queer community in America.

Making the connection between the speaker and the murdered woman, Rich points out, moreover, that our survival depends on our social, geographical and historical location and this is a fact we have to take responsibility for. We only survive, so to speak, at the expense of others. This notion echoes Rich’s earlier writings, especially her famous essay “Notes toward a Politics of Location” (1984). In addition to being a key text in feminist self-critique[80], it is a predecessor of sorts to “Atlas” because of its themes: location, responsibility, and the necessity to recognise the collective as well as the individual perspective. In the present context, it is interesting how Rich weaves together the notions of the body, location and politics on a very large, even global scale. She

[80] Lena Karlsson writes that it was precisely Rich who ”coined the term ’politics of location’”, which became central in the so-called ”the spatial turn” in Anglo-American feminism as “it has been recognized how spatial divisions constitute central structuring devices in gender differentiation.” Important feminist theorists discussing spatiality include Gloria Anzaldúa, Rosi Braidotti, and Audre Lorde. Karlsson, Lena. *Multiple Affiliations. Autobiographical Narratives of Displacement by (Im)migrant US Women.* (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 2001) pp. 23 – 31. Lorde’s thinking, in particular, significantly resembles Rich’s, when she discusses “the house of difference”, that is, the junction of many contradicting locations we find ourselves in. Allegiance to only one “difference” is simplistic and falsely secure, because it takes a tremendous amount of energy to “keep the other [aspects of your identity] in jail.” Lorde quoted in Karlsson, p. 76.

starts her discussion from stressing the need to locate oneself in the body one has born into, and to recognize the places it gives access to and the one's one is excluded from because of it.[81] For example, when Rich was born, she writes, she was marked as "white before she war defined as female" because she was born in a hospital that separated whites from blacks. The United States according to Rich is still a place full of these kinds of restrictions, even life-threatening ones, based on one's location, understood as a physical, geographical and social entity and it is the writer's task to render them visible.

The theme of physical location and survival is a central theme in American Jewish literature, and Rich's work, too, participates in this discussion.[82] In the tellingly titled "Split at the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity" (1982), she describes her relationship to Jewishness as an effect of confusion and suppressed feelings. Rich's father was a Jew, her mother gentile; in the family, religion or ethnicity was never discussed, and consequently, anti-semitism was a taboo subject. After the Second World War, when news and pictures of the concentration camps appeared in the United States, Rich wondered whether the victims of the Nazis were "them" or "us"; whether she could legitimately identify with them as, precisely, a Jew.[83] Rich now declares her Jewish indentity as strongly tied to place (after all, how could Jewish identity be something else?): "I am a North American Jew, raised three thousand miles from the war in Europe."[84] But because of the denial that her inquiries concerning Jewishness were met with in the family, it took her a long time until it was possible to make this assertion.

In "Atlas", Part III, we encounter several Jewish characters who have experienced

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[81] Rich 1986, p. 215.
[82] Daniel Boyarin writes: "Jewishness disrupts the very categories of identity, because it is not national, not genealogical, not religious, but all of these, in dialectical tension with one another." For these reasons Jewishness is "a diasporising identity". Boyarin, Daniel. *A Radical Jew: Paul and the Politics of Identity. (*Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) Downloaded 12.12.2006. http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft7w10086w/
[83] Complexities arose also because according to Jewish law, Rich is not a Jew (her mother was a gentile); however, as she points out, in Nazi Germany, the fact that she had two Jewish grandparents would have made her "*Mischling, first degree* – nonexempt from the Final Solution". *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, p. 103.
[84] *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, p. 216.

dislocation of life-threatening nature. The milieu of this section is an old house where the speaker has lived in her youth, and the various objects she contemplates evoke memories.[85] Among these objects is a teapot given by "a German Jew, a refugee who killed herself".[86] The German woman had accompanied her gift with words, "You will always use it for flowers"; but now the vase is rugged and useless – the between the object and its donator needs no further explication. The Jewish woman's story is followed by other traumatised histories. In the same room there is a bookplate engraved by the speaker's father "in his ardent youth", the father from whose motto had been "*Without labour no sweetness*"[87], an aphorism the daughter has learned with "grief and rebellion to take and use" – only to discover that labour is not nearly always rewarded. Moreover, a few lines onward, we learn about "the father of the children", that is, the speaker's late husband with whom she spent afternoons in the house, "listening to records, reading Karl Shapiro's *Poems of / a Jew* and Auden's 'In Sickness and in Health' / aloud, using the poems to talk to each other."[88] However,

> −now its twenty years since I last heard that intake
> of living breath, as if language were too much to bear,
> the voice overcast like klezmer with echoes, uneven, edged,
>   torn, Brooklyn street crowding Harvard Yard
> −I'd known any syllable anywhere.

A biographical note is, I think, relevant here: Rich was married to and had three sons with Alfred Conrad, a Jewish economist who taught in Harvard and New York, and who committed suicide in 1971 – precisely twenty years before "Atlas". Why does Rich use autobiographical reference this direct precisely at this point? This might be because this autobiographical allusion establishes a

[85] As everywhere in "Atlas", history is here narrated in a non-linear way: places and objects evoke multiple temporal levels at the same time. I think that Rich wants to avoid linearity precisely because straightforwardly linear narrative, mobilised by single *events,* easily leads to a narrative of progress and closure, which is a questionable way of representing traumatic experience.
[86] *Atlas*, p. 8.
[87] *Ibid.*, p. 9.
[88] *Ibid.*

connection to Rich's other texts concerning Jewishness in which she makes her point precisely by using her own experiences to reflect on the formation of American-Jewish identity. I think that "Split at the Root" can almost be considered as a subtext for this part of "Atlas", because it is, if not necessary for understanding the poem, then at least considerably deepens the interpretation, inviting us to read "Atlas" against the background of Rich's earlier works. By stressing the autobiographical material precisely here, Rich is also emphasizing the inevitable proximity at which life, as a material phenomenon, and literature, the text, exist. Whether reading or writing a literary text, it is impossible to separate your own material existence from the process.[89]

Rich goes so far as to suggest that something evoked by the texts of Shapiro and Auden – which she and her husband used as substitutes for discussion – contributed to her husband's breakdown, "as if language were too much to bear". What connotations do these poems have, then? Most noteworthy in this context is the fact that both poets had a specific relationship to Jewishness, a relationship that both Rich's father and husband, suppressed (according to Rich, at least). Firstly, the Pulitzer-prize winning poet Karl Shapiro (1913 – 2000) was one of the most visible Jewish literary figures in the post-war United States. Moreover, he was an English professor at Johns Hopkins University at the same time Rich's father had a post there – only a second Jew to be appointed to the task[90]. The Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden (1907 – 1971), in turn, was tremendously interested on Jewish culture and his circle of friends, and lovers, included, at one point, almost exclusively Jews.[91] In addition, Auden was gay, and therefore it is important that Rich

[89] This notion echoes the general tendency at the turn of the 1990s to "bring the body back" to discussions about literature, to which trauma studies was one answer.
[90] Kaufman, David. "The Praying Atheist: A Look at the Poetry of Karl Shapiro." *The Jewish Daily Forward* 22.4, 2005. http://www.forward.com/articles/the-praying-atheist-a-look-at-the-poetry-of-karl-s/ Downloaded January 1st 2007.
[91] Roberts, Beth Ellen. "W. H. Auden and the Jews." *Journal of Modern Literature* (28)3 (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2005) pp. 87-108. Auden chose Rich as the winner of the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Prize in 1951, describing her poems as "neatly and modestly dressed, [they] speak directly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs." Quoted in *The Cambridge Guide to Women's Writing in English*. Ed. Lorna Sage. (Cambridge, Cambridge UP, 1999) p. 530. This patronising definition Rich would, of course, in her later work vehemently try to subvert.

refers to, precisely, "In Sickness and in Health", which discusses love and commitment.[92] At the time to which this section of the poem refers, Rich was still, as said, living in a heterosexual relationship, and would only much later acknowledge her lesbian identity.[93] I would like to argue, then, that Shapiro and Auden are mentioned here as examples of individuals who did *not* suppress the socially marginalised aspects of their identities. The direct linkage between literary text and trauma also argues for the psychological impact of literature, which may, as we have seen, be either destructive or therapeutic.

To return to the paragraph from Part IV of "Atlas", it reveals, moreover, how Rich takes into account the way in which our bodily existence is inherently vulnerable because of the inevitable biological factors. The body is susceptible for illness ("cell dividing without maps") and for accidents ("sliver of ice beneath a wheel"). Eventually, therefore, the lovers must part, regardless of their own will: "Faithfulness isn't the problem". The fact of the essential uncontrollability of life and the enigmatic and absolute nature of death makes life itself, in a way, a perpetual question of survival. It is significant that Rich brings up one of the central tropes of the poem, that of the map, precisely here, in what can be interpreted as a reference to the unpredictability of the human body. It seems that Rich is here further questioning her original intention of showing the reader "a map" of America, evident in the title of the poem and in the declaration in Part II, "This is a map of our country", if we think about the map as a guide or a geographical document. Because of the very unpredictable nature of reality that a witness-speaker is willing to testify, her testimony is sure to contain distortions and singularities that cannot be predicted or controlled.

Caruth argues that at the heart of many "traumatic narratives" is "the oscillation [---] between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the unbearable nature of its survival."[94]

[92] Auden, W. H. *Collected Shorter Poems 1927 – 1957.* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966) pp. 204 – 277.
[93] See for example Rich's essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" for an account of her coming out as a lesbian.
[94] Caruth 1996, p. 7.

The trauma of such narratives takes place while one attempts to go on living regardless of the continuing experience of having faced death and the knowledge that one must, again, face it one day. Such a "trauma of survival" essential to our very existence: we cannot ever escape the certainty of our death although we might be able to temporarily forget it. Rich is, however, also giving the problem of survival a social context, when she shows how some people, especially those marked by oppression and marginalisation, are more vulnerable when it comes to traumatisation.

However, in the citation above Rich emphasises the experience of *pleasure* amidst all the suffering the poem's world is filled with. This brings us to the conclusion of this chapter, the relationship of aesthetics and the poetry of witness. What is the function of the artist's ability to create beauty, and the reader's inclination to take pleasure in good poetry, in the project of writing about traumatic experiences?

3.3. Beauty and Truth: Poetry of Witness and Aesthetics

In "Atlas" Rich insists that the pleasant and beautiful is the material of poetry as well as the traumatic and the painful. However, the statement about the aesthetics detectable from Rich's poem sequence is more complex than what appears on the surface. Let us return to the stanza in the first part of "Atlas", cited in subchapter 3.1, which recounted the scene of domestic violence. The poem continues:

> I don't want to know
> wreckage, dreck and waste, but these are the materials
> and so are the slow lift of the moon's belly
> over wreckage, dreck and waste, wild treefrogs calling in
> another season, light and music still pouring over
> our fissured, cracked terrain.[95]

[95] *Atlas*, p. 4.

These lines reveal Rich's faith in the recuperative effects of beauty, whether it is the beauty of nature or that of the arts, in midst of atrocity and suffering. However, although the poet may for a while enjoy the "light and music", she must treat this sensuous pleasure as the "materials" of poetry and not let herself be exceedingly absorbed in it. This resistance to describe *only* what is beautiful reflects how the relationship of politics, ethics and aesthetics in poetry has always troubled Rich. In the essay "Blood, Bread and Poetry" (1984) she confesses this inquietude:

> [---] I was easily entranced by pure sound and still am, no matter what it is saying; and any poet who mixes the poetry of the actual world with the poetry of sound interests and excites me more than I am able to say.[96]

Similarly, Rich defines herself as "the poet who knows that beautiful language can lie, that the oppressor's language sometimes sounds beautiful."[97] The citations reveal Rich's confusion in the face of the possibility that one sometimes might, arguably, take pleasure from art with ethically suspect elements and her later work continues this discussion.

"An Atlas of the Difficult World" deals with this theme, the difficult pairing of ethics and aesthetics, as well, and this is the subject of the rest of this chapter. My argument is that "Atlas" is an attempt at poetry of witness in which the primary goals are to, firstly, to structure the speaker of the poem as an ethically responsible subject, and secondly, to evoke in the reader a similar sense of responsibility. How do these issues relate to the fact that there is a definite aesthetic side to poetry as well? Is good poetry, according to Rich, something that gives pleasure to the reader only by being "an instrument of moral good"? Is "beauty" that exists only for its own sake somehow essentially ethically problematic concept? Does poetry automatically "aesthetisize" everything is represents – which claim, if true, would make poetry about trauma an ethically questionable project? These are some of the questions that Rich's poem invites us to reflect on.

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[96] Rich, Adrienne. *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979 – 1985.* (New York: Norton, 1986) p.173.
[97] Ibid., p. 123.

Part XII of "Atlas" is of special interest here, because it discusses "beauty" directly, beginning as follows:

> What homage will be paid to a beauty built to last
> from inside out, executing the blueprints of resistance and mercy
> drawn up in childhood, in that little girl, round-faced with
> clenched fists, already acquainted with mourning
> in the creased snapshot you gave me?   What homage will be
> paid to beauty
> that insists on speaking truth, knows the two are not always the
> same,
> beauty that won't deny, is itself an eye, will not rest under
> contemplation?[98]

The concepts "beauty" and "truth" dominate this excerpt. Let us look at the first five lines. The "beauty" in the first line most obviously refers to the little girl in the picture as a grown-up woman. Rest of the poem is composed as an ode to the speaker's lover, and it is quite likely that she is the child mentioned. This is not, as such, a very interesting point, though. The interpretation can be complicated by noting, however, that the poem does not only refer to physical beauty here, and not, merely express admiration to the lover addressed. This is because the role Rich grants to "beauty" is active, not merely the role of an object to be contemplated. It is precisely the "beauty" that is in charge the project of "executing the blueprints of resistance and mercy", a project which I would interpret as one connecting critical thinking and ethics. In this, Rich is uniting two central themes of her career, social activism and socially conscious art: activism, because of the possibility that the "beauty" referred to is a human being who commits acts of "resistance and mercy", and art, because, in addition to the fact that the beauty of, precisely, art is perhaps the most common connotation of "beauty" in a poetic language, the subsequent lines in the poem affirm this interpretation.

The subsequent lines discuss the difficult relationship between "beauty and truth". Rich refers to, among other things, John Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn", which ends with the famous

[98] *Atlas,* p. 24.

equation of "Beauty" and "Truth" as a basis of all the necessary knowledge in the world[99]. The critic Helen Vendler[100] argues that there is a problem in Rich's thinking: "If [Rich's] sort of beauty 'knows [that truth and beauty] are not always the same' are we to deduce that truth is always beautiful but beauty is not always truthful?" This is, of course, an appropriate question, for which Vendler does not find an answer for, arguing that Rich does have one either. However, I think that on the basis of what we have already found out about Rich's poetry, it is possible to make some suggestions.

What, then, are the constituents of "beauty" according to Rich? First, beauty "insists on speaking truth". Such beauty has not received enough respect, Rich suggests. I would argue that Rich wants to criticise the ways in which poetry – or perhaps art in general – has been evaluated on the basis of a certain concept of "beauty" despite of whatever messages it may transmit. As Thomas A. Vogler points, there is a long tradition stretching from Aristotle via Hegel to T.S. Eliot that grants poetry the role of speaking in universal terms, and perceives the lyric "I" as the fixed center of the universe of the poem. Rich is against that view, as we have seen. For her, poetry is not isolated in an "autonomous realm of the aesthetic"; [101] rather, it should take part in the temporal and the political in a concrete way: by "being itself an eye" – this image could well be a symbol for the very project of writing witness poetry – and by never "resting under contemplation" as an object to be admired, like the "still unravish'd bride of quietness" of Keats's "Ode" arguably does.

Moreover, it seems that with the allusion to Keats is Rich places herself against a particular tradition of understanding the historical role of poetry that is often associated with Romanticism,

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[99] " 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."
[100] Vendler, a professor of literature at Harvard, has often criticized Rich very harshly, mainly because she thinks that Rich has sacrificed the "beauty" of poetry for the sake of political argument. Vendler's reviews have even insipired an article defending Rich, see Mieszkowski, Gretchen. "'No Longer by a Miracle, a Twin': Helen Vendler's Reviews of Adrienne Rich's Recent Poetry." *South Central Review* (5) 2 (1988). Pp. 72-86.
[101] Ibid., p. 176.

and of which Keats is perhaps the embodiment. [102] Thomas A. Vogler argues that the late eighteenth century "fostered the ideal of an aesthetic realm of timeless formal beauty and emotional authenticity" and Romanticism was a crucial moment in the development of this ideal as applied to poetry - although by no means all Romantic poets adhered to it, of course.[103] Perhaps, of the major Romantic poets Keats is the one whose poetry is most often interpreted as discussing beauty for its own sake,[104] while it is obvious that the poets Rich is more willing to acknowledge as her literary predecessors are writing for the sake of the larger social implications of poetry.[105]

It would, however, be far too simplistic to argue for this kind of binary opposition between "aesthetic" and "political" poetry, the poetry of universals and the poetry of particulars. In fact Rich, would like to place herself in between these two strands. In Part III of "Atlas" Rich refers to the poet and activist Muriel Rukeyser (1913 – 1980) as a "poet pioneer mother", and as the following quote shows, she would like to follow Rukeyser as a poet whose work fluctuates between the abstract and the historically specific. In an essay written in the early 1990s, Rich recalls how Rukeyser discussed two distinct "kinds of poetry":

> the poetry of "unverifiable fact," that which emerges from dreams, sexuality, subjectivity; and the poetry of "documentary fact," literally, accounts of strikes, wars, geographical and geological details, actions of actual persons in history, scientific invention.

Rich says that like Rukeyser, she has tried to "combine both kinds of poetry in a single poem, not

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[102] See for example Vogler, Thomas A. "Poetic Witness". In *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* Ed. by T.A.Vogler & Ana Douglass (New York: Routledge, 2003) pp. 173-205 about the two opposing traditions of understanding the social role of poetry.

[103] Ibid., p. 176. A commitment to write lyric poetry striving toward "emotional authenticity" can as such be a political act, as Adorno, for example, argues in "Lyric Poetry and Society." In *Critical Theory and Society. A Reader.* Ed. by S.E. Bronner and D. MacKay Kellner. (London: Routledge, 1989) Pp. 155-171.

[104] The deconstructionist critic Cynthia Chase notes: "The difficulty of interpreting Keats's poetry is closely bound up with its loveliness, its power to gratify our wish for beauty." In *Lyric Poetry. Beyond New Criticism.* Ed. Chaviva Hosek & Patricia Parker. (New York: Cornell University Press , 1985) p. 208.

[105] It would be interesting to investigate the connections between Rich other poets. Brecht, for example, has clearly influenced Rich – she even makes an allusion to his "For Those Born Later" in her poem "What kind of times are these". Rich 1995, p. 1. These lines from Brecht define Rich's project well: "What kind of times are these / When it's almost a crime to talk about trees / Because it means keeping still about so many evil deeds?".

separating dream from history", but confesses, "I do not find it easy".[106] This struggle is evident in the continuous self-reflection Rich performs in "Atlas".

What does Rich mean by the "truth" of poetry, except that it cannot be discerned from beauty? This "truth" does not consist merely of the above mentioned "documentary facts"; interestingly, Rich quotes the oxymoron "unverifiable fact" from Rukeyser, to suggest that the "truth" of poetry is not something empirically verifiable. Let us look back to the stanza quoted above, about truth and beauty. First, it is noteworthy, that Rich uses "truth" without the definite article and therefore accentuates the "insistence" without giving the impression that some essential "Truth" exists. Let us compare Rich's poem to Shoshana Felman's definition of the discourse of testimony, a discourse that, by definition, "insists on speaking truth". "To testify", Felman writes, is "not merely to narrate but to commit oneself, and to commit the narrative, to others":

> to *take responsibility* – in speech – for history or for the truth of an occurrence, for something which, by definition, goes beyond the personal, in having general (nonpersonal) validity and consequences.[107]

Inherent to testimony is an insistence to speak truth and a subsequent plea to be trusted. Rich's "beauty" clearly seeks to be testimonial in this way. As mentioned, it "will not rest under contemplation": it refuses to be only admired and thus objectified and seeks a dialogical relationship between the audience and the art work. It "is itself an eye", thus committed to the project of bearing witness to the reality outside the private realm of experience. Moreover, as I hope to have shown, Rich's poetic "truth" seeks to "take responsibility" for what "goes beyond the personal", that is, to engage with the social sphere of experience.

Note also how Rich associates this testimonial notion of "beauty" to mourning. This link is

[106] Rich, Adrienne. Section "What would we create?" in "What Is Found in There." *Parnassus: Poetry in Review* (18/19) 2/1 (*New York,* 1993) pp. 9-34.
[107] Felman in Felman & Laub 1992, p. 204. Emphasis in the original.

suggested explicitly two times in the poem, in Part XII. First, as we recall, the speaker's lover, to whom the concept of "beauty" was at first attributed, has been, already as a child, "acquainted with mourning". This process has then inspired her to perform "the blueprints of resistance and mercy". After what I have quoted above, the poem continues with a scene from the speaker's recent past. She recalls how she and her loved one were driving in New Mexico and contemplated the beauty of the scenery. The tense is shifted to the present as the speaker goes on to describe what she finds beautiful in her lover. This includes, for example:

> Your spirit's gaze informing your body, impatient to mark what's
> possible, impatient to mark
> What's lost, deliberately destroyed, can never any way be
> returned[108]

Freud influentially argued that there are two major ways in which we deal with loss: mourning and melancholia. Mourning involves a necessary situating trauma in temporal and social context while in melancholy, the lost object possesses the ego completely: "In mourning, it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego itself."[109] The process of mourning, according to Freud, involves the marking of trauma as a thing of the past and beginning to live again without endlessly attaching oneself to the lost object.[110] Indeed, to survive a, one must acknowledge that "what's lost" can "never any way be returned". The outcome of this process can be, as the historian Dominick LaCapra suggests on the basis of Freud's theorisations, a renewed ethical and social

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[108] *Atlas*, p. 24.

[109] "Mourning and Melancholia,." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey. Vol. XIX (1914-1916). (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957) p. 246.

[110] Freud writes, for example, that "when [mourning] has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free --- to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious." Too optimistically, perhaps, he continues, writing during the First World War, that we may hope that "when once the mourning for the losses" of the war is gone, "it will be found that our high opinion of the riches of civilization has lost nothing from our discovery of their fragility." *The Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14. Art and Literature.* Translated by James Strachey. (London: Penguin, 1985) p. 290.

awareness.[111] As I noted before, an important facet of Rich's poetry of witness is the insistence to go beyond vicarious traumatisation to *contextualise* trauma. For this reason, mourning is inherent to the aesthetics of witness poetry. When the speaker's lover is described as one who is able to mark her losses with "her spirit's gaze", Rich in fact constructs in this very image a parallel to her witness poetry. The purpose of her poetry is, similarly, to mark trauma as a thing of the past, without provoking melancholic attachment to "what can never any way be / returned."

Rich has recently defined her view of the aesthetic in the specific context of writing poetry about suffering:

> But we can also define the "aesthetic", not as a privileged and sequestered rendering of human suffering, but as news of an awareness, a resistance, which totalising systems want to quell: art reaching into us for what's still passionate, still unintimidated, still unquenched.[112]

In other words, art is subversive as such. ”The aesthetic” is not necessarily something universal, ahistorical and static – according to Rich, the aesthetic, by definition, has an almost revolutionary quality inherent to it.

[111] LaCapra, Dominick. ”Trauma, Absence, Loss”. *Critical Inquiry*. (25) 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). I will return to this in Chapter 5.
[112] Rich, Adrienne. "Legislators of the World".

4. A Traumatised Community

In this chapter the focus will fall on how Rich addresses the experiences of other Americans in addition to her witness speaker. The speaker, as I have shown, struggles to come to terms with knowledge she is in possession of but would rather ignore. But how to bear witness to the traumatic experiences of others when one appears to have uncertain access to one's *own* traumatic history? In what follows I will look at the problem of discussing collective trauma from three angles. First I will analyse the central trope of "Atlas", *the map*, and ask why it might actually be an inadequate figure for representing a traumatised community. I will then concentrate on what I see as the central topic of "Atlas", the United States as a community torn apart by traumatic fissures. The third subchapter deals with Rich's criticism of national symbols and official practices of commemoration.

4.1. The Poem as a Mural

"Here is a map of our country", begins Part II of "Atlas". A few lines further Rich subverts this declaration by stating: "I promised to show you a map you say / but this is *a mural*".[113] This subchapter has the difference between map and mural as its starting point. The interplay of these two figures leads to the problematics of representing trauma as a specifically *collective* phenomenon. It also brings to the fore two of the more important intertextual allusions Rich makes in her poem, that is, the allusions to Walt Whitman and Muriel Rukeyser.

Many critics have seen the map as the master-trope of sorts of "Atlas". Alice Templeton suggests, for instance, that in "Atlas" (in both the poem and the volume, in fact) Rich "appears less

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[113] *Atlas*, p. 6. My italics.

interested in making a self" than "in critically, carefully *mapping* the world and the country in which she lives".[114] This is, Templeton continues rather hesitatingly, why Rich appears "more removed, *perhaps* even more passive, yet *somehow* more authoritative" in *Atlas* than in her more "I-centred" earlier poetry. Detailed comparison between "Atlas" and Rich's entire body of work is impossible here, but some of Templeton's propositions about Rich's purposes can be critiqued. When Templeton reads the poet of "Atlas" as an authoritative cartographer she is ignoring the way the figure of the map is in fact contested in the poem. The inadequacy of the map as a model for representation is, I would propose, a logical result of the traumatic nature of the experiences Rich's poem deals with.

What meanings does the figure of the map contain? In their analysis of spatial metaphors, the geographers Neil Smith and Cindi Katz suggest that map assumes a "one-to-one correspondence between representation and the represented".[115] For an author to presume that her text works like a map would be, therefore, to adhere to an outdated view of language, where the concept and its linguistic symbol, the signified and the signifier, are merged. Indeed, many practitioners as well as critics of witness poetry hold a relatively uncritical view about the relationship between the text and historical reality, giving little recognition for language as a medium of representation.[116] This is not, however, true of "Atlas", as evident in Part II of the poem, oddly neglected by Templeton. What follows the declaration quoted above is not an objective, authoritative description of space, but rather a list of the losses that this space contains:

> here is the Sea of Indifference, glazed with salt,
> This is the haunted river flowing from brow to groin
> we dare not taste its water
> This is the desert where missiles are planted like corms

[114] Templeton, Alice. *The Dream and the Dialogue,* p. 154. My emphasis.
[115] Smith, Neil and Cindi Katz, "Grounding Metaphor: Towards a Spatialized Politics". In Steve Pile (ed.) *Place and the Politics of Identity*. (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 68.
[116] Vogler, "Poetic Witness", in *Witness and Memory,* p. 189.

> This is the breadbasket of foreclosed farms
> This is the birthplace of the rockabilly boy
> This is the cemetery of the poor
> who died for democracy   This is a battlefield
> from a nineteenth-century war   the shrine is famous
> This is the sea-town of myth and story   when the fishing fleets
> went bankrupt   here is where the jobs were   on the pier
> processing frozen fishsticks   hourly wages and no shares
> There are other battlefields   Centralia   Detroit
> here are forests primeval   the copper   the silver lodes
> These are the suburbs of acquiescence   silence rising fumelike
>   from the streets
> This is the capital of money and dolor whose spires
> flare up through air inversions whose bridges are crumbling
> whose children are drifting blind alleys pent
> between coiled rolls of razor wire[117]

These lines depict a society driven by ignorance. Interestingly, to make her point Rich combines figural language with more directly referential language. The metaphorical “Sea of Indifference” leads to the very literal image of a polluted river whose water “we dare not taste”. Thus, Rich shows how the indifference and neglect in society, marked with the figure of the “Sea”, breed more bitterness and hate (through the “haunted river”), but also, literally, aggravate the risk of ecocatastrophe. Another example of this strategy is the personification of place on the second line above, where Rich uses the names of body parts to denote landscape. This image, again, unites the social and ecological concerns of the poem. We can of course read the phrase “from brow to groin” as a geographical metaphor denoting, simply, directions (“from north to south”); however, “brow” and “groin” can also be read as metonyms[118] for, as it were, different parts of “the national body”. Rich uses topographical imagery to, indeed, “map” nature and landscape, while simultaneously discussing American society and the ethical apathy prevalent in it by employing the figural qualities of language.

The quotation from Part II reveals some of the central issues of Rich’s social vision. We have

[117] *Atlas,* p.6.

[118] Metonym is a rhetorical figure in which a part is used to denote a whole (crown for monarchy, for example). I will go on to discuss Rich’s use of metonymy and metaphor further in 4.2.

already seen that the socio-geographical locations charted above are all marked by various kinds of loss: losses of jobs in agriculture and fishing, losses of lives in wars. More abstractly, Rich discusses the amnesia concerning past atrocities (the battle shrine is famous, but not the reality of the tellingly unidentified war) and the powerlessness to prevent the forthcoming ones (as the image of missiles "planted like corms" suggests). The target of Rich's critique is clear: the state and its policies, and the oppression manifested in different social practices such as the production of public memory. [119] Rich's analysis of American society through these communally-inflicted losses brings to mind Edkins's theorisation of trauma as a social betrayal. As I have mentioned, Edkins describes trauma as a *betrayal of trust* in the powers we have been accustomed to perceive as sources of protection. She purports that this is why, precisely, it is important to analyze trauma also from a social perspective. Edkins argues that traumas reveal a "bond between personhood and community" and the role of power-relations inherent in this connection.[120] More precisely, traumatic events expose "the contingency of the social order and in some cases how it conceals its own impossibility."[121] Trauma, then, is definitely a crisis but it can also be a revelation, if analysed critically.

Rich employs these possibilities for social critique in bearing witness to trauma in her poetry, for the losses she marks in her poem denote the "contingency of social order" precisely in Edkins's sense. The losses in national history are not publicly memorised, and neither is the fact that the national borders are drawn with violence.[122] Rich's poem suggests that by deliberately refusing to memorise these self-inflicted traumas, those at the pinnacle of the social power hierarchy struggle to

[119] Rich is in accord here with several thinkers who have argued that the United States is plagued by state-commissioned amnesia, and that this memory loss will inevitably lead to the re-emergence, in social reality, of these displaced issues. Lena Karlsson notes that such thinkers include the African-American author Toni Morrison and philosopher Cornel West. Karlsson 2001, p. 88. To understand history as a history of traumatic return is to be influenced by Freud, too. In "Moses and Monotheism", in particular, he argued that a repressed trauma can shape the destiny of an entire community because its re-emergence is inevitable.

[120] Edkins, 2003, p. 4.

[121] Ibid., p. 5.

[122] For example, little is talked today about such events as the so-called Siege of Detroit that Rich mentions in her poem. In Detroit, the Americans lost to the British in 1812 and this put a humiliating end to the Americans' plans to invade Canada. I will discuss Rich's critique of public practices of commemoration further in 4.3.

maintain an image of a unified nation and coherent social reality.

The made-up nature of national unity is visible in, for example, the "suburbs of acquiescence" Rich mentions in Part II. Suburbs are an epitomisation of white middle class America, being ethnically and economically extremely homogenous areas. The "silence" of the suburbs described as "fumelike" because of the "suffocating" effect of the refusal to acknowledge anything that might threaten the imaginary wholeness of the social order. In a similar vein, Part II points out how Americans are lead astray by myths of incessant personal, economical and national progress, myths manifesting themselves most visibly in the urban areas of the country. It is noteworthy, then, that the city is described as the "capital of money and dolor", as if to mobilise the associations arising from the fact that *dolor* (a literary word for suffering and grief) and *dollar* are near-homonyms. In addition, heroes are an important manifestation of national mythology, and here Elvis Presley, who is most likely the "rockabilly boy" whose birthplace is marked on Rich's map, serves as an almost clichéd tragic hero who rose from rags to riches, only to "fall" to an early death.[123]

Rich discusses here, of course, the constituents of "the American Dream". James Adams coined the term in the early 1930s, but the concept itself has existed quite probably as long as the nation itself. Henry David Thoreau gave this ideal, or at least one facet of it, a famous formulation in *Walden* (1854): "if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams [---] he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours."[124] In addition to the thus articulated unyielding belief in success, the Dream also has such general connotations as the faith in perpetual upward mobility and

[123]As Richard Slotkin writes, mythology is "one of the primary constituents of nationality. The mythology of the nation-state is a body of stories which vests this abstraction in the figurative flesh of representative heroes, embodying and exalting the character of 'the People.'" Slotkin, Richard. "Unit Pride: Ethnic Platoons and the Myths of American Nationality". *American Literary History* (13) 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) p. 471.
[124] Thoreau, Henry David. *Walden: A Writers Edition.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1963) p. 250. See also this quote from Bill Clinton (1993), which shows how similar the ideal has remained: "The American dream that we were all raised on is a simple but powerful one—if you work hard and play by the rules you should be given a chance to go as far as your God-given ability will take you." Quoted in Hochschild, Jennifer L. *Facing up to the American Dream. Race, Class and the Soul of the Nation* .(Ewing, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995) p. 18.

the sacralising of concept of individual freedom. In literature, the Dream has clearly affected the motive of the "American Adam" that R.W.B. Lewis theorised in his classic study (1955): an innocent man free of the burden of history, always facing forward. By examining the delusiveness of this dream Rich participates in a trend that has been prevalent in American literature and culture from, at least, *The Great Gatsby* onwards[125] but especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s. For instance Tony Kushner's play *Angels in America* (1991) [126] and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987)[127], to mention only a few of similarly themed works, point out how dissociated the Dream has become with reality.

Rich argues in Part III that Americans live in "self-deception" and calls the American way of life "our intricate losing game of innocence long overdue".[128] Also, in Part XI, she defines the real "patriot as someone trying to "wake up from the burnt-out dream of innocence.[129] She is of course pointing out here how obsolete the Adamic ideal has become. Here the critical relationship Rich establishes to Walt Whitman's work is worth noticing, for Lewis argues that Whitman is the primary proponent of the Adamic figure.[130] Any poet whose seeks to write an all-encompassing poem about America can and perhaps *should* be compared to Whitman. However, in addition to the obvious thematic similarities, Rich's allusions to his work are established with particular stylistic devices. As Gwiazda notes, Rich borrows the technique of "catalogue and anecdote" from Whitman.[131] Both poets tend to list numerous different geographical and historical landmarks and events in their

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[125] Rich continues her critique of the American Dream in her 1995 volume *Dark Fields of the Republic*, the title of which is, markedly, quoted from *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

[126] It is worth noting that Kushner's work resembles Rich's also in its queer and Jewish thematics, as well as in its indebtedness to Brecht. Of the latter issue, see Taft-Kaufman, Jill. "Tony Kushner on Theatre, Politics and Culture." *Text and Performance Quarterly*. (24) 1 (Columbia: National Communication Association, 2004) pp. 52-54.

[127] Anzaldúa (1942-2004), a Chicana lesbian feminist, spoke for inlcusive, multicultural feminism; her work is, again, a possible influence on Rich.

[128] *Atlas* p. 10, p. 23.

[129] Ibid., p. 23.

[130] Lewis, R.W.B. *The American Adam. Innocence, Tragedy and Tradition in the 19th Century.*(Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1977 / 1955.) pp. 41-53. Rich sets herself in dialogue with Whitman also in "The Genesis of 'Yom Kippur 1984'" in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 256 – 257, an essay where she describes how she came to write the said poem.

[131] Gwiazda 2005, p. 165.

characters lives in a cataloguing way, often placing their observations on long lines. Moreover, the connection is based on a rhetoric device employed by both Rich and Whitman, *anaphora*, that is, the repetition of the same or similar word at the beginning of each line. An example is the repetition of the demonstrative pronouns at the beginning of the lines in Part II of "Atlas" cited above. Again, anaphora is a frequently used rhetorical figure in poetry, but here it alludes, I would suggest, specifically to Whitman because of the thematic context in which it appears.[132]

In *Leaves of Grass* (original version published 1855) Whitman strove, in his own words, to create "an epic of Democracy", a vision of America as "the grand Producing Land of nobler Men and Women".[133] This is precisely *the* Whitman that Rich argues against.[134] Although Rich's views of democracy, and politics in general, might not differ that much from Whitman's, she has much less faith in the power of literary utopias. Let us now make a detour to the section in which Rich's "Atlas" is at its most celebratory and thus "Whitmanesque", Part VII "(The Dream-Site)".[135] In the first of the two stanzas, the anonymous "you" is described as sitting on "some rooftop" (the indefinitive expression is noteworthy) watching, "the nightvault swarming with stars". It is a marvelous sight, with "every known constellation flinging out fiery threads", and the spectator feels a sense of unity with the universe s/he thinks s/he knows throughout. However, what is at first pictured as a view shared by all mankind, is actually a very specific urban site, at a specific point in time (the mention of a proper name, that of the jazz musician Sanders, accentuates this):

> - cobwebs, tendrils, anatomies of stars
> coherently hammocked, blueblack avenues between

[132] Traumatic experience is characterised by repetition, as I have noted. Is there a correspondence between writing about trauma and rhetorical figures of repetition such as anaphora? I think that Rich's use of anaphora can be seen as associated with the problematics of writing about trauma, at least to some extent: throughout the poem Rich clearly wants to avoid linear, progressive narrative and rather to describe the patterns of violence and loss that repeat themselves in American history.

[133] From the "Preface" to *Leaves of Grass*, 1872 edition. Whitman 1982, p. 773, 774.

[134] This is not the first time Rich sets herself in dialogue with Whitman, see for example "The Genesis of 'Yom Kippur 1984'" in *Adrienne Rich's Poetry and Prose*, pp. 256 – 257.

[135] Atlas, p. 16.

- you knew your way among them, knew you were part of them
until, neck aching, you sat straight up and saw:

It was New York, the dream-site
the lost city the city of dreadful light
where once as the sacks of garbage rose
like barricades around us we
stood listening to riffs from Pharaoh [sic] Sanders' window

In Rich's New York loss and gain, destruction and opportunity meet. A lengthy tradition of American literature exists as a premise for this view.[136] Whitman wrote of the city, and especially Manhattan, admirably, ("Now I am curious what sight can ever be more stately and admirable to me than my mast-hemm'd Manhattan"[137]) and Rich, too, has interestingly chosen precisely New York as the "dream-site" of her poem. Like Whitman, or, for instance, Gertrude Stein,[138] she cherishes the physical, even erotic experience of urban life, as she writes of "our bodies young and ordinary riding the subways reading / or pressed against other bodies / feeling in them the maps of Brooklyn Queens Manhattan." Eventually, however, a critical tone emerges. For instance, as we have seen, the "webbed and knotted" world of "Atlas" could by no means defined as "coherent", although these New Yorkers seem to perceive it as such:

we felt our own blood
streaming   a living city overhead
coherently webbed and knotted   bristling
we and all the others
known and unknown
living its life

Generally, the narration in "Atlas" moves back and forth either horizontally, between

[136] About New York in American culture and literature, see for example Kazin, Alfred. "New York from Melville to Mailer." *Literature and the American Urban Experience.* Ed. by Michael C. Jaye and Chalmers Watts. (New Brunscwick: Rutgers, 1981) pp. 81 – 92; Salmela, Markku. *Paul Auster's Spatial Imagination*. (Tampere: Tampere UP, 2006) pp. 62 -76.
[137] "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry", Whitman 1982, p. 194.
[138] Kazin 1981, p. 88.

different geographical sites or temporally, between different points in time. "Dream Site" is the only instance in the poem when the direction is vertical, as the two stanzas move between the nocturnal sky and the streets of New York, ending, markedly, in the latter. The movement is from a timeless metaphor to material reality, from the universal to the particular. Crucially, it seems as if Rich's characters do not wish to let go of the meanings suggested by their first delusion, the instance of mistaking "the nightvault swarming with stars" for the city. Lost in this dream, they are unwilling to make their own choices, as they are "living [the city's] life"and not their own.

Markku Salmela writes that New York life has been dominated by "the belief in progress and future-oriented rationality". The consequent "drive to destroy, rebuild and forget" evident in the city is, he suggests, related to the American dream, for New Yorkers have characteristically been willing to forget their pasts in order to chase a brighter future.[139] Rich's depiction of the city as a dichotomic site of the upward-facing "dream" and street-level "reality" can be seen as a comment on the American, perhaps then especially New Yorkian, dream – complete with a vertical fall (or "Fall"), which may well denote a decline of the Adamic ideal that the characters in this section of the poem have yet to realise.

Part VII "(The Dream-Site") is also a comment on a specific way of thinking about the society and the future, evident in, for example, Whitman, an inclination that Susan Sontag describes as follows: "All facts, even mean ones are incandescent in Whitman's America – that ideal space, made real by history, where 'as they emit themselves facts are showered with light.'"[140] When in Whitman's America, both the beautiful and the ugly were merged in poetic representation to an equal aesthetic effect, Rich's commitment to see poetry as a form of political action entails that value judgments must be made. The poem, for Rich, should not speak of an ideal space, but precisely, of history.

[139] Salmela 2006, p. 63.
[140] Sontag, Susan. *On Photography.* (London: Penguin, 1978) p. 27.

To return to the map-mural dichotomy, it is interesting how at the end of Part II Rich redefines the relationship of her poem to other modes of representation. As I mentioned earlier, the poem is not, as was first declared, a map, but “a mural”. Rich adds, “these are small distinctions / where do we see it from is the question”, thus emphasizing the witness-position of the reader. But why is the map an inadequate way to represent the United States? If we understand the map and the mural as, primarily, different modes of representation, the distinction that Rich makes between them is revealing. As mentioned earlier on, the figure of the map denotes an unproblematic relationship between the represented and representation, therefore also granting the cartographer the foremost authority over the contents of the map. The second noteworthy connotation of the concept of map, especially relevant here, is nationality. As David Jacobson observes, “a revealing aspect of the cartography of modern states is its precision and its unambiguous quality.”[141] This unambiguity concerning, especially, the borders of the state, is a remarkable aspect of mapping, because it defines who is left outside and who is allowed to participate in “the national body”.[142]

The mural form, in turn, has very different connotations. Murals are wall-paintings that aim at being politically effective, often testifying to the fates of minorities and oppressed groups. It has been suggested that murals call for “the revaluation of a history and heritage previously ignored or suppressed.”[143] We can easily see the resemblance of the mural form to Rich’s poetry of witness beginning from the faith in the politically subversive potential in art. Moreover, the recognition of the mural form alludes to Muriel Rukeyser, whom, as noted, Rich calls “poet pioneer mother”.[144] Raphael C. Allison observes that – similarly to Rich, I think, although in a different historical context – she wanted to move from “isolated, self-contained subjective” poetry to a “communal

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[141] Jacobson, David. *Place and Belonging in America*. (New York: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001) p. 63.
[142] Ibid.
[143] Cockroft, Eva et al. *Toward a People’s Art.* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1977) p. 73.
[144] *Atlas*, p. 13. The way Rich calls Rukeyser among other things a “mother” brings to mind Rich’s earlier writings where she stresses the need for women to align themselves with other women, not men, to achieve a deeper sense of self-understanding. See in particular the controversial essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” where Rich introduces the concept “lesbian continuum” to mark the identification between women (regardless of sexual orientation). *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, pp. 23-75.

intersubjectivity that she feels is required for a wartime America committed to pluralist ideals" [145]. It is of particular interest here that Rukeyser theorized a great deal around *ekphrasis*, the description of visual art through the means of poetry, and concerned herself especially with the mural form. Most notably, in 1944 Rukseyser wrote a sequence of poems the central motives of which are the vast Buddhist murals in the caves of Ajanta, India. As the mural form characteristically depicts people in interconnected groups, across different temporal levels, as a motive of a literary text it enables the writer to address broad social issues very effectively. It is interesting, in addition, that according to Allison Rukeyser describes both her speaker and the potential reader of the poem as "ethically bound" *witnesses*, not as authoritative "voyeurs", by emphasising the active connection between the spectator and the meanings conveyed by the murals.[146]

These are Allison's observations, and a detailed analysis of Rukeyser's work would be required to assess them properly. It is nevertheless interesting how similar his interpretation of Rukeyser's poetry is to what I have argued about Rich's "Atlas" as regards the themes and the political commitment of the poems as well as the way in which the poet / witness is positioned. This affinity is an interesting evidence of Rich's literary influences. It also suggests that poetry of witness is a mode of writing that other poets, too, have used to purposes similar to Rich's, that is, to move beyond the individual perspective to address social issues on a more general level.

In favouring the mural in place of the map as its representational model Rich's "Atlas" thus proposes at least two points of critique. Firstly, might there be a gap between what a map, as defined above can unambiguously represent and reality - especially if the reality is described as "traumatic"? And secondly, in the specific American context of Rich's "Atlas", are the not also numerous borders *inside* the state that separate people from each other and from the national body? First of these questions I hope to have answered above; the latter shall be addressed in the next section of this

[145] Allison, Raphael C. "Muriel Rukeyser Goes to War: Pragmatism, Pluralism, and the Politics of Ekphrasis." *College Literature* (35) 2 (West Chester: West Chester UP, 2006) p. 16.
[146] Ibid.

study.

4.2. Fissures in Society

According to Rich, what can very generally be called the “American experience” is characterised by a profound psychological rift. The relationship of Americans to their (geographical, social and historical) locations and to their fellow citizens is marked by trauma, not a sense of belonging. These questions, asked twice in “Atlas”, reflect this collective confusion: “Where are we moored? What are the bindings? What behooves us?”[147] In other words, what is the location or locations we are inevitably fixed in? How should we function taking into account our different locations and the responsibilities within? This is one of the very few occasions in “Atlas” where the first person plural is actually used as a subject of an utterance, and I think that these questions are a wager of sorts of “Atlas”. I will now attempt to find out why it is so difficult, in Rich’s America, to answer them.

As I have pointed out, the psychoanalytical understanding of subjectivity is that it is formed around a traumatic lack[148]. There is an unknown core that we cannot reach if we wish to cling to a view of our subjectivity as coherent. Can this understanding of subjectivity be extended to collectives? Rich’s focus on various social “fissures” suggests precisely this: the imaginary coherence of a community is ruptured by trauma. Kai Erikson, a sociologist who has studied communities suffering from human-inflicted shock experiences, suggests that groups can indeed be traumatised in much the same way as individuals, and his findings are of interest here. Collective trauma, Erikson argues, can destroy the bonds of trust that hold a community together, eventually

[147]These questions are asked in parts V and XI of “Atlas”, readings of which are to follow.
[148] Edkins 2003, pp. 5-6.

damaging the "communal mood" of the entire group.[149] More specifically, trauma "draws one away from the center of group space while at the same time drawing one back."[150] It renders one a sense that s/he is somehow different from everybody else, but at the same time inexplicably connected to others "similarly marked".[151] Collective trauma causes the safety net of the community to disintegrate, and thus also partially destroys the self. As a result of damaging our self-understanding, and, consequently, interpersonal relationships, traumatic experience tends to emphasize whatever inner rifts have been suppressed in the community, "dividing it into divisive fragments".[152]

As a "diagnosis" of a fragmented community, Erikson's account applies to the society depicted in "Atlas", where people have lost their trust in the community that was supposed to be a source of comfort for them. Part IV[153] is interesting here because it discusses precisely the social symptoms of trauma. First, Rich depicts the country as united by the ecosystem. What actually "binds the map of this country together" is not, for example, an abstract idea of America, but nature, with the girasol as its metonymic marker:

> Late summers, early autumns, you can see something that binds
> the map of this country together: the girasol, orange gold-
> petalled
> with her black eye, laces the roadsides from Vermont to
> California
> runs the edges of orchards, chain-link fences
> milo fields and malls, shoolyards and reservations
> truckstops and quarries, grazing ranges, graveyards
> of veterans, graveyards of cars hulked and sunk, her tubers
> jerusalem artichoke
> that has fed the Indians, fed the hobos, could feed us all.
> Is there anything in the soil, cross-country, that makes for
> a plant so generous? *Spendthrift* we say, as if

[149] Erikson, Kai. "Notes on Trauma and Community". In *Trauma*. p. 197. This is, of course, a similar idea as that proposed by Edkins about the "social betrayal" that occurs in traumatic experience.
[150] Ibid, p. 186.
[151] This is one of the paradigms of trauma studies: trauma is at the same time a singular and, at least potentially, shared experience that originates outside the self.
[152] Ibid., p. 189. These communal effects of trauma are one reason why it is so difficult to communicate traumatic experience. When our sense of "us" is destroyed it is impossible to properly articulate the experience, since language is, of course, a product and property of the community. See for example Edkins 2004, p. 7.
[153] *Atlas*, p. 11.

accounting nature's waste.   Ours darkens
the states to their strict borders, flushes
down borderless streams, leaches from lakes to the curdled foam
down by the riverside.

This extract reveals, again, Rich's environmental concerns. She criticises the excessive lifestyle of modern Americans, who deem as "spendthrift" what could be very well used for nourishment. The futility of man-made borders is revealed in the face of an ecocatastrophe. The evocation of nature as something that unites Americans is also, again, an allusion to Whitman. For him, as the famous Part Six of "Song of Myself" shows, *grass* is, firstly, a marker of the unity of the country ("a uniform hieroglyphic [---] sprouting alike in broad zones and narrow / zones, / Growing among black folks as among white"[154]) and secondly, a symbol for the bond between the living and the dead, sprouting from the graves to "show that there really is no death". It is important to note that while Whitman's grass is primarily a symbol – for, arguably, such concepts as democracy, deity, immortality, and childhood[155] – Rich employs, again, environmental imagery so that it can be read also literally, not only symbolically.

Rich rarely, if ever, uses metaphors or symbols the meaning of which is entirely independent of their immediate context in the text and I would suggest that there is a political reason for this. Michael Ryan's ideas will help to explain my point. He discusses two "poles" of representation: *the vertical*, characterised by such tropes as metaphor, symbol and allegory, and *the horizontal*, exemplified by metonymy.[156] The tropes on the vertical pole work by displacing a literal meaning with another, implicit one, so that the literal meaning is rendered unimportant. Moreover, we usually need to be familiar with a pre-existing code, such as a specific cultural context, to understand them. Metonymy, in turn, stems from association between concepts on the same level,

154 Whitman 1982, p. 68.
155 McMahon, William E. "Grass and its Mate in 'Song of Myself'." South Atlantic Review (51) 1 (Atlanta: South Atlantic Modern Language Association, 1986) p. 43.
156 Ryan, Michael. *Politics and Culture*. (London: Macmillan, 1989) pp. 111 – 133.

without each eclipsing another. Importantly, “no code determines its meaning”.[157] Ryan gives an example: the eagle. In the American context eagle as metaphor traditionally denotes freedom, a meaning that has little to do with the bird itself. However, eagle as metonymy could be used to describe whatever one may establish as its context, such as other species of birds, nature in general, or the various connotations that the idea of freedom can have. On the basis of these observations, Ryan suggests that metonymy is more useful in representing politically subversive ideas, while metaphor lends itself more easily to political conservatism.

As Ryan notes himself, a particular trope does not necessarily entail particular politics. His above-paraphrased ideas apply, however, to Rich’s poem, at least to some extent. We can now begin to understand why Rich uses metaphor and symbols so rarely. It is more effective to use metonymical language – that is, to discuss particulars instead of universals – when one wishes to address, as Rich does, the difference between myth (a primary example of a pre-existing code determining meanings) and reality and the discrepancies *inside* a particular entity.

In addition to what the lines above literally represent we *can* read the ecological images in a figural way, namely as tropes pointing to the fragmentariness of society. In Part IV it is noteworthy, then, that Rich has chosen precisely the girasol to describe what unites the country. First of all, the word “petalled” is emphasized by its position in the text, as it is the sole word on its line. On the basis of the next stanza of the poem, it can be suggested that the petals refer to the fragmentation of the society in the sense that people are estranged from each other and the social reality only exists in fragments. In addition, the “black eye” of the girasol suggests, I would argue, the black points in the social consciousness, or “the invisible holes in reality”[158], that are in an unacknowledged way present in social practices.[159]

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[157] Ibid., p. 120.
[158] Rich, “Arts of the Possible”.
[159] It is noteworthy that the reading of the girasol as a metaphor for the fragmented society is not based on some pre-existing, universal code. The figural meaning is, rather, suggested by the *image* of flower as it is described in the

The interpretation of the girasol as a metaphor for a fragmented society is reinforced by the second stanza of Part IV. Rich's is a bleak view of a society where any deviance from mainstream thinking is purged.[160] Especially the dissidents, who are able to make new conceptual and material connections, are silenced, supposedly in order to maintain a "coherent" picture of social reality:

> Waste.   Waste. The watcher's eye put out, hands of the
>   builder severed, brain of the maker starved
> those who could bind, join, reweave, cohere, replenish
> now at risk in this segregate republic
> locked away out of sight and hearing, out of mind, shunted aside

As we saw in Chapter 3, the speaker of "Atlas" – one of such dissidents – is at first inclined to close her eyes from the violence she witnesses around her. However, her poet's vocation forces her to confront the atrocity as well as the beauty of the world. The difficulty of this pursuit becomes understandable in the light of Rich's broader social analysis. Rich argues that those calling for critical discussion are, in contemporary American society, deemed "waste":

> those needed to teach, advise, persuade, weigh arguments
> those urgently needed for the work of perception
> work of the poet, the astronomer, the historian, the architect of
>   new streets
> work of the speaker who also listens
> meticulous delicate work of reaching the heart of the desperate
>   woman, the desperate man

"Where are they now?", Rich asks of those who could make new conceptual and inter-personal connections. This is also a self-reflexive statement, with which Rich sets the pursuit for her own poetry, simultaneously arguing for the social importance of poetry in general. The task of the poet is

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text, in interaction with the meanings evoked by the rest of the poem. The metaphor is thus hardly lending itself to a "conservative" reading in the way Ryan suggests.

[160]Elsewhere, Rich has called the United States a country where "identities and loyalties have been shed and replaced without a tremor, all in the name of becoming 'American'". (*Blood, Bread and Poetry*, p. 223.)

to be intellectually and ethically aware and to create fresh conceptual connections. Moreover, she will, ideally, attempt to "reach the hearts" of her fellow human beings, to communicate with people *as they are*. The singular used to define the "desperate" citizens in the last two lines above suggests that, according to Rich, people need to be addressed as individuals, not as representants of, for example, a particular group.[161]

Poetry is not, of course, the only way to make these connections between people and things. It is noteworthy that Rich juxtaposes the practitioners of several other vocations with that of the poet: "the astronomer, the historian" and "the architect of new streets". It is worth noticing that the work of social "repair" of "the architect of / new streets" is more material than that of the other characters Rich names. The new streets, of course, weave the country together regardless of accustomed boundaries. To call for such geographical and social "reweaving", which Rich performs throughout the poem, is significant in the context of American national mythology. In the United States, geography, history and nationality have always been closely connected. Let us look at some of such spatial fables about America; the critical relationship in which "Atlas" is positioned in relation to them is quite evident.

According to David Jacobson, perhaps the oldest of such spatial myths of America is that of "the chosen land". In the 17th century the first Puritan settlers perceived the continent as the new Eden where "mankind would be reborn."[162] They identified themselves as God's chosen people, dislocated in the "old world", but offered a refuge in America. The notion of America as a shelter for the dislocated has pervaded the national mythology ever since, its most famous symbolic manifestation being the Statue of Liberty.[163] However, this myth of the United States as an all-

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[161] Compare this to the thought of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas. He argues that we are ethically responsible to the Other as a *face*; the past, the present, and, actually, the person of the Other do not affect my responsibility to him/her: "it does not matter who the Other is in relation to me – that is his [sic] business." Lévinas quoted in Bauman, Zygmunt. *Postmodern Ethics.* (Oxford: Blackwell) p. 48.

[162] Jacobson, David. *Place and Belonging in America*. (New York: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) p. 27.

[163] Ibid. p. 32.

welcoming nation is quite far from the truth. As we know, American citizenry has not always been very inclusive when it comes, for example, to different ethnic groups. Indeed, another central myth of American history is the idea of America as a "racial" entity, which was slowly formed during the period of American expansion to the west and south, at the expense of the original inhabitants of these areas. As Richard Slotkin points out, the myth of America as a country of white, protestant men only, affected strongly the legislation regulating admission to the United States during the decades from after the Civil War to the 1920s.[164] These two myths – America as the land of the free and America as a land hospitable to the white man only – are in a paradoxical relationship. A compromise of sorts has been the idea of the United States as a "melting pot", which has existed in American culture from the Second World War on. As Slotkin notes, it is an "idealized self-image of a multiethnic, multiracial democracy, hospitable to difference but united by a common sense of national belonging."[165]

Rich does not adhere to any of these myths. We have already seen how she contests the narrative of America as a promised land and a "racial" entity. What separates Rich's America from the "melting pot" is the way in which she contests the idea of "national belonging", an imaginary relationship between the land and "the People", by discussing the profoundly traumatic configurations between these entities. American citizenry has, at least on the mythical level, denoted rooting to a specific location. Rich observes, however, that the American experience is actually characterized by a sense displacement.

As I have shown, Rich makes much of the immigrant experience and the cultural displacement inherent to it. In this context, displacement can be understood as Angelica Brummer defines it, as "the separation of people from their native cultures through physical dislocation" and

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[164] This ideology left many traces in legislation, for instance the so called "Jim Crow laws", which restricted in numerous ways the access of African Americans to public institutions. See for example Bigsby, C.W.E and Roger Thompson. "The Black Experience". In *Introduction to American Studies.* Ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley. (London: Longman, 1998) p. 157-158.

[165] Slotkin 2001, p. 439.

the subsequent gradual substitution of the original culture with another[166]. This process is often a troubled one, because one is inevitably split between two cultures, two homes. Often the hopes directed to the new homeland are far from reality, as in the migrant workers in the beginning of the poem. In Part VI Rich goes on to expand the historical span of her "Atlas" to the nineteenth century. She discusses Irish immigrants who fled the famine in their home country to the United States, with a particular illusion of the New World in their minds: "America. Meat three times a day, they said. Slaves—You would / not be that."[167] Such disillusionment abounds in immigrant experiences, as Rich points out several times in the text (see section 4.3. below).

However, Rich discusses displacement also as a defining feature of the "American experience" – not as something exclusive to geographical immigrants. Edward Said writes about living in exile as characterized by loss and fragmentation of identity in a moving way, and I think that his insights are generalisable to the experience of displacement also in Rich's sense. Exile, as Said describes it, is "an unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home. [---] Even when an exile achieves success, his success is undermined by something lost forever."[168] Said's words are somewhat similar to Rich's in his emphasis on loss and divided selfhood in relation to the experience of exile. In Rich's poem, however, the "self" does not always even have a "true home". In "Atlas" we find numerous characters whose "exile" is more of a psychological than geographical nature.

For example, in Part XI of the poem, in a section discussing patriotism, Rich writes about how the lack of a sense of belonging can result in aggressive nationalism:

166Bammer, Angelica (Ed.) Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. p. xv. Cited in Lee, Robert G. (ed.) Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.) p. 11.
167Atlas, p. 15.
168 Cited in Lee 2005, p. 14.

A patriot is a citizen trying to
wake
from the burnt-out dream of innocence, the nightmare
of the white general and the Black general posed in their
camouflage,
to remember her true country, his suffering land:
remember
that blessing and cursing are born as twins and separated at birth
to meet again in mourning
that the internal emigrant is the most homesick of all women and
of all men
that every flag that flies today is a cry of pain.[169]

After these lines, Part XI ends with the three questions about belonging and responsibility I quoted in the beginning of this subchapter. "The patriot" is actively attempting to search for answers for the three questions quoted above without resorting to a false innocence. "The internal emigrant" is one who cannot find an answer for these questions, one who searches in vain his / her roots and a place to call home. Sometimes this sense of displacement may result in nationalistic flag-flying, which has its official representation in the "nightmarish" image of the two Gulf War generals (Norman Schwarzkopf and Colin Powell, respectively) posing "in their camouflage". Contrary to the melting-pot ideal, the representatives of different ethnic groups are not necessarily united here by a shared sense of belonging but only against what is perceived as the common enemy. Such emotionally charged, nationalist wartime reactions as "blessing" your country (regarding America as particularly worthy of divine protection) and "cursing", or demonizing, the "enemy", are eventually futile ways of attempting to create a sense of national unity and to justify warfare. They are useless in the process of mourning that will inevitably follow the war and the losses it brings about.

Rich gives the notion of dislocation a specific meaning in Part X[170], the central

[169] Atlas, p. 22.

[170] It is not a coincidence, I would assume, that this part of the poem is denoted with the Roman number X, because it discusses, through the writings of George Jackson, the Black civil rights movement of the 1960s. Slaves were often marked with X branded on their arm; and the black activist Malcolm X replaced his original surname both to reject white surnames imposed on former slaves, and to denote of the absence of an African name to take its place. We can thus read the sign X as denoting the absence of identity in a situation where a dominant culture is forced upon one's native culture – one condition of "dislocation", as I noted above.

character of which is George Jackson (1941 – 1971), the most famous member of the Black Panther Party, the African American civil rights organisation active in the 1960s and the early 1970s. Convicted of a minor robbery, Jackson spent the last twelve years of his life in prison in the city of Soledad, in Salinas Valley, most of the time in solitary confinement.[171] He became famous for his book *Soledad Brother*, which testifies to the racism and inhumanity in American prison system. In Part X the prison, and three lengthy citations from Jackson, are juxtaposed with the description of a chapel built during the Catholic Missions to California, now standing in proximity of the Soledad prison. Throughout Part X the Spanish word *soledad* ("Solitude, loneliness, homesickness; lonely retreat", as Rich translates the it in the first line of this section) surfaces repeatedly, gaining multiple meanings.

In the first half of Part X Rich describes, as said, the Nuestra Senora de la Soledad mission site. We find the statue of Virgin Mary inside the chapel, "Alone, solitary, homesick, in her lonely retreat". The chapel was originally built when representatives of the Catholic Church arrived form Mexico to California to convert Native Americans. Rich suggests that Catholicism is, in a way, misplaced in the site. "The gravestones of the / padres / are weights pressing down on the Indian artisans", Rich writes, alluding to the way in which the cultural and ecological effects of the missions, lead by Spanish ministers ("padres"), were devastating to the Natives.[172]

In the second section of Part X Rich goes on to describe what she calls "the other side of the mirror", the Soledad prison and quotes from one of its former inmates. The most interesting, here, of the three citations picked by Rich is the one in which Jackson writes about the rift between myth and

[171] In prison, as Rich points out, Jackson was kept seven years "in solitary". Solitary confinement is a common, and controversial, method of punishment in the American prison system, because, it has been argued, it prevents the political organisation of the inmates. See for example Johnson, Kevin. "Inmate Suicides Linked to Solitary." *USA Today*. December 28th 2006. Accessed through *Academic Search Premier* January 2nd 2007.

[172] Writes Kent G. Lightfoot: "The ultimate consequence of placing missionary colonies in the [Californian] coastal zone was the structural collapse of local native societies. As gentile villages experienced increasing difficulties in harvesting wild foods and suffered population losses from disease, violence, and outward migration, they no longer could function as viable entities." Lightfoot, Kent G. *Indians, Missionaries, and Merchants : The Legacy of Colonial Encounters on the California Frontiers.* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2004). p 88.

reality. He asks whether it is not “reasonable” that he should become “perplexed” when, first, he has been lead to believe, that he is free and “governed by wise and judicious men” and in reality he encounters “the exact opposite”. [173] Jackson’s words testify to the kind of psychological displacement that the rift between reality and myth results in. We are also reminded of the theorisations of Edkins, and Erikson about trauma as a loss of trust on multiple levels. Jackson, quoted by Rich, testifies to the feeling of having one’s very self threatened in the society. What is essentially lost here is belief and trust in the society and a loss of belief in oneself; a loss inflicted *by* the society itself.

We can now see why Rich juxtaposes the chapel to the prison. These places, in fact, speak of two instances of displacement. Firstly, Rich writes about the suppression of a native culture by a foreign, more powerful one. This occurs precisely by “selling” the Natives a sense of belonging and a trustworthy authority in the form of religion and the church; then, reality all but betrays these promises. Secondly, in the case of Jackson, the displacement occurs two times, firstly, in the form of a betrayal of trust to the authorities, and secondly, in a very physical way, when he is incarcerated.

The word *soledad*, as mentioned, nominates Part X. Elsewhere in the poem, Rich criticises the way in which its connotations, solitude and self-reliance, have a positive, mostly masculine meaning in American culture. In literature, this is manifested most classically in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882) and Henry David Thoreau, for instance, and revived in the work of such contemporary writers as Paul Auster (b. 1947).[174] Solitude is often seen as a prerequisite for the work of the creative artist, something one has to compel oneself into. Rich questions the sentimental connotations of this idea when she describes Jackson (and, implicitly, countless other black American men) who had no other chance to educate himself and to write except in the forced

[173] *Atlas*, p. 21. Originally, according to Rich’s endnotes, in *Soledad Brother: The Prison Letters of George Jackson* (New York: Bantam, 1970). Rich does not give the exact page number for this citation.
[174] See Emerson’s essay “Self-Reliance” (1841), Thoreau’s aforementioned *Walden*, and, for instance, Auster’s *The Invention of Solitude* (1983).

solitude of the prison cell.[175] Moreover, in Part IX, Rich asks: "What have I learned from stories of the hunt, of lonely men in / gangs? [---] I thought those solitary men were happy, as ever they had been."[176] Inherent to the myth of the lonely vagabond is indeed the notion of freedom of choice and the idea that the solitude is a self-ordained subject position. By contrasting the supposedly self-defined solitary men with Jackson who was *condemned* to solitude – where he "wrestles bitterness, / self-hatred, sexual anger" – Rich ask whether a solitary position can ever be actually chosen.

As I have shown, the traumatic core of the American experience is, for Rich, the sense of dislocation and solitude. People seem to be unaware of what their location accounts for, how it binds them to a particular social and historical continuity. People's knowledge about their own history is partial, and that influences their present identity, too: when there is no knowledge of history, our present deeds may seem unimportant and futile. This brings us to the question central to the next subchapter: the difficulty to establish a link to collective history when one encounters everywhere nationalistic symbols concealing the traumatic content of history.

4.3. The Poem as a (Counter)Monument

Memorials are an important way to deal with national traumas. As Edkins notes, in memorising traumatic events we have to respect the non-linear temporality of trauma, that is, to represent trauma as it figures in the present, not only in the past.[177] Otherwise what could be a way of preventing future traumas risks becoming simply a static symbol of national unity that contributes to forgetting only. One of Rich's methods of contesting American ways of memorising the past is to juxtapose public commomorative sites with places of historical and social significance that are not *officially*

[175] As I will go on to show, Rich does take into account the necessity of solitude for the writer, in Part III of her poem. But even then, solitude is not an excuse for self-absorption but a way to pause for a moment to reflect on one's relationship with other people. See section 5.1.
[176] *Atlas,* p. 19.
[177] Edkins 2003, p. 59.

marked as such. She seeks, thus, to bear witness to the "blind spots" that, she argues, continue to distort the Americans' vision of their country and history.

The opening of Part V is telling when it comes to Rich's view of American history: "Catch if you can your country's moment, begin /where any calendar's ripped off [.]"[178] From the beginning of this section of "Atlas" Rich shows that it is impossible to find a single denominator for the nation and its history; even an attempt to do so would be to forget the traumatic and unsymbolisable content of history. This is how the poem continues, by naming what Rich sees as the voids in the official annals: "Appomatox / Wounded Knee, Los Alamos, Selma, the last airlift from Saigon / the ex-Army nurse hitch-hiking from the debriefing center; medal / of spit on the veteran's shoulder."[179] In chronological order, then: Appomatox is the site of the last battle of the American Civil War. Wounded Knee is the site of the massacre of Native Americans in what was the bloodiest battle in the American expansion to the western frontier. Los Alamos is most famous for the nuclear laboratory in which the atomic bomb was developed. In Selma, in1965, the police attacked a group of African Americans peacefully demonstrating in order to gain an equal right to vote.[180] According to Rich, then, the defining moments of American history are all connected to the major American traumas: slavery and the massacre of Native Americans. To these is added the employment of American military technology in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and, later, in Vietnam.

While attempting to summarise the meaning of the geographical names above, one is inevitably met with a sense of insufficiency. It is simply impossible to put into words all the possible connotations of these sites, as all of these sites denote what are culminations of longer social processes. Not any single point in time can symbolize collective experience, as the "country's moment": the reliance on such symbolic moments is to assume that there exists a unified group of

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[178] Atlas, p. 12.
[179] Ibid.
[180] See for example Bigsby, C.W.E and Roger Thompson. "The Black Experience". In *Introduction to American Studies.* Ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and Howard Temperley. (London: Longman, 1998) p. 171.

people with similar experiences. Rich rejects, too, the view that national history is a linear time span where the most important dates can be marked by symbols. The phrase "your country's moment" is bitterly ironic, then, for it is not the question of finding the definitive "moments" when we attempt to understand the way in which past continues to influence the present – we need to search for larger patterns of implication.

The expression "where any calendar's ripped off" suggests that sometimes the gaps in historical knowledge are a result of conscious social procedures. Contrary to the traumatised individual, who struggles between the dialectic of knowing and not-knowing, here the traumatised community is producing these voids in its history deliberately, to protect its imaginary cohesion.[181] Among the strategies to achieve this fake cohesion are public practices of commemoration, such as the building of monuments and the establishment of other symbolic sites that often contribute to forgetting trauma. In what follows Rich critiques official ways of remembering American history and defining the nation by the means of juxtaposition:

> catch if you can this unbound land these states without a cause
> earth of despoiled graves and grazing these embittered brooks
> these pilgrim ants pouring out from the bronze eyes, ears,
> nostrils,
> the mouth of Liberty
> *over the chained bay waters*
>
> San Quentin[182]

By placing the symbol of liberty standing in New York Harbor side by side with a notorious prison – with the knowledge that members of ethnic minority groups are much more likely to end up in

[181] Studies on trauma do not always take into account the difference between trauma as an individual experience and trauma as a collective phenomenon. In Freud's "Moses and Monotheism" the belatedness of the experience of trauma is seen as functioning similarly in individuals and entire cultures, that is, without any conscious procedure (indeed, Freud writes that his aim in the said study is "to establish an analogy" between neurosis as it occurs in individuals and in groups, p. 92). *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Vol 23, pp. 6 – 123. The collective trauma Rich addresses is somewhat different, as the forgetting seems to be primarily a result of political practices.

[182] *Atlas,* p. 12.

prison than whites – Rich points to the hollowness of the ideal of America as "the land of the free". Accordingly, the Statue of Liberty is dissected in the poem by marking its facial features as holes from which the "pilgrim ants" are streaming out. The ants denote the outdated status of the monument as a symbol, but they can also be read as metaphors for the immigrants who saw America as the "chosen land", a potential destination for their "pilgrimage". The experiences of the immigrants in the United States, where they were very often refused citizenship and given odd jobs at best, indeed tread to the ground like insects, show the ideal of American liberty as hopelessly empty construction.

The citation connecting the statue and the prison is from the poem "To Brooklyn Bridge" by the American poet Hart Crane (1899-1932). In his book *The Bridge* to which this is a proem, Crane attempted, in his own words, to create "a new cultural synthesis of values in terms of our America"[183]. By citing Crane – who, in his turn, commented on Whitman[184] – Rich again places herself in the long tradition of poets addressing the collective American experience, as Joshua S. Jacobs notes.[185] Moreover, Rich's allusion to Crane is significant because it reveals her critique of mythology as a means of dealing with national history. There are many interpretations about Crane's poem. On one hand it celebrates "the energy of human manufacture" (the bridge is seen as an almost sacralised example of human skills), but on the other, it takes into account the marginalised homosexual experience.[186] Therefore the intertextual connection to "To Brooklyn Bridge" serves well as, indeed, a bridge, between the traditional national symbol and a space in the margins of nationalistic discourse. Trauma is what resists symbolization by definition; thus the traumatic American experience that Rich's poem seeks to "encircle" can hardly be expressed by symbols such

[183] Schultz, Susan M. "The Success of Failure: Hart Crane's Revision of Whitman and Eliot in *The Bridge". South Atlantic Review*, 1989. p.55.
[184] Ibid. pp. 57-64.
[185] Jacobs p. 734.
[186] Yingling, Thomas A. "The Unmarried Epic," *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text: New Thresholds, New Anatomies* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1991), pp. 191-194. Republished on the website *Modern American Poetry* http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/crane/proem.htm. Downloaded November 12th 2006.

as the Statue of Liberty or Brooklyn Bridge.

Further to the same section of the poem Rich juxtaposes another infamous prison with an almost equally ill-famed immigrant station, this time on the west coast of the United States:

> Driving the San-Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge
> no monument's in sight but fog
> prowling Angel Island muffling Alcatraz
> poems in Cantonese inscribed on fog
> no icon lifts a lamp here
> history's breath blotting the air
> over Gold Mountain

Firstly, we again note the image of the bridge. Rich's poem can be read as a metaphorical "bridge" connecting different points of view, temporal levels and geographical locations. In the poem's fourth section, as I pointed out, Rich laments precisely the lack of "those who could join, reweave, cohere, replenish" the "fissured" society. The recurring figure of bridge suggests that Rich sees herself as such a "reweaver". However, it also becomes clear, again, that such a "work of repair" does not entail adhering to the nationalist idea of unity without differences.

By the "poems in Cantonese" Rich refers to the poetry found on the walls of the Angel Island immigrant station in San Francisco. The poems were written in the early years of the twentieth century by Chinese immigrants who were often kept there for months, virtually imprisoned, before they were allowed to enter the continent.[187] It is noteworthy that Rich alludes to such unpublished verse, placing herself in a tradition of poetry arising primarily out of the need to take a political stand. Moreover, Rich alludes, again, to the rift between the ideal foregrounded by symbols such as the Statue of Liberty and the exclusiveness of the notion of American citizenship.

The image of "poems inscribed on fog" in Cantonese (not, remarkably, in English) suggest

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[187] See for example Kvidera, Peter. "Resonant Presence: Legal Narratives and Literary Space in the Poetry of Early Chinese Immigrants." *American Literature* (77) 3 (Durham: Duke UP, 2005) pp. 511-39.

that the shelved memory of the immigrant fates is still present today, although in ways that often remain inaccessible to contemporary Americans, among which the speaker counts herself. According to Jacobs, the "intangibility" of fog is "central to its capacity to record the immigrant experience, which emerges both as marginalized and as a pervasive pattern through American culture."[188] Indeed, the image of fog suggests pervasiveness: the way these histories pertain society in a way that contemporary Americans may not realise. In addition to being a symbol of a marginal position, as Jacobs suggests, it is also (and I would argue, primarily) a symbol of ignorance and short-sightnedness that prevents one from seeing clearly the "unmonumented histories". When fog is likened to a monument, it suggests that the only memorial we have for the lives of the Chinese immigrants is the very obscurity to which their histories have passed.

We may well ask whether "Atlas", as a whole, can be read as a poetical monument of sorts to the traumatic content of American history. But to what extent can we compare a poem to a monument? To answer this question, let us look at what meanings the monument form contains. Salmela summarises well the main connotations of traditional monuments in observing that "[m]onuments are designed to embody specific myths, and in doing that they underscore the ideals of consensus, cultural unity and unproblematic local and global history."[189] Sometimes monuments and memorials contest these predicaments, however. Edkins points out that to be more than just a nationalistic symbol, a memorial will have to avoid narrativisation of history, therefore respecting the way in which the traumatic experience is devoid of closure, and to show how trauma thus implicates the present. Rather than recounting stories of heroism and sacrifice, practices of commemoration should mark individual suffering without appropriating it as the property of the state.[190]

[188] Jacobs 1996, p. 733.
[189] Salmela 2006, p. 36.
[190] Edkins 2003, p. xv.

Edkins argues that one monument which succeeds in this respect is the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, also known as the Vietnam Wall. Rich mentions the Wall, too, and therefore it is worth asking what makes this memorial so special. According to Edkins, two things are noteworthy in this respect: firstly, the temporality evoked by the Wall is non-linear, and secondly, the memorial presents the soldiers as individuals, not as material for celebrating nationalism. The memorial consists of two triangle-shaped walls of black marble sunk in the earth. On the Wall, the names of the dead or missing soldiers are inscribed in a chronological order according to the date of their death or disappearance. However, crucially at the meeting point of the two walls this chronology is contested: the end and the beginning of the war thus symbolically meet. The temporality of trauma is contested also in another way in the monument. The sheen of the Wall is reflective, so that when the visitors read the names on the wall they simultaneously see their own reflection projected on the marble. Edkins argues that in reading the names of the dead the onlookers can relate to them not as "the property of the state" but on a more personal level. Edkins sees the Wall as "a place at which the dead were still alive could be addressed".[191] I would argue, too, that if trauma is an encounter with death as well as an experience of survival, as Caruth suggests, this "double-bind" might be just what the visitors to the Wall experience. The visitors are thus positioned as concrete witnesses to history and their own place in it.

Jacobs argues that in "Atlas", Rich constructs a "countermonument"[192] that brings those whose lives have gone "unmonumented [---] into an ongoing process of defining national identity that emerges from within the official symbols and narratives of America".[193] Unlike some contemporary critics of the monument form, Rich still believes in its power to account for collective

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[191] Ibid., p. 231.

[192] The countermonument is a term often used when discussing certain memorials established, especially, in Germany during the last 15 years. Lupu argues that the success of a countermonument depends entirely on the reactions of its audience. Many of the German countermonuments have failed, he thinks, because they cannot escape the didactism of traditional monuments and establish real dialogue with the audience. Lupu, Noam. "Memory Vanished, Absent and Confined: The Countermonumental Project in 1980s and 1990s Germany". *History & Memory* (15) 2 (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2003) pp. 130-164.

[193] Jacobs, p. 729.

experience, if used critically, Jacobs argues. Interestingly, he suggests that, precisely, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is Rich's "countermonumental" model, an argument based on this allusion to the Wall in Part XI:

> A patriot is not a weapon.   A patriot is one who wrestles for the
> soul of her country
> as she wrestles for her own being, for the soul of his country
> (gazing through the great circle at Window Rock into the sheen
> of the Viet Nam Wall)
> as he wrestles for his own being.   A patriot is a citizen trying to
> wake
> from the burnt-out dream of innocence, the nightmare
> of the white general and the Black general posed in their
> camouflage
> to remember her true country, remember his suffering land[194]

In the extract "the patriot" is gazing through the stone arch at Window Rock, the capital of Navajo Indians, and sees this scenery reflected on the sheen of the *Viet Nam* Wall. Jacobs suggests that "these monuments combine their empty spaces in the earth to define a lens for the individual reckoning with America's soul".[195] Rich's juxtaposition of the "empty spaces" both at the Wall and in the arch at Window Rock is indeed interesting. But I think that as much as these voids function as a "lenses" to a personal view of what it is to be American (if this is what Jacobs means by the peculiar expression "America's soul"), they also suggest a gap existing in official practices of commemoration in the place of the massacre of Native Americans. It is odd, then, that Jacobs leaves out the meaning of Window Rock in the Native American context, merely referring to the "natural arch in Utah".[196] Moreover, contrary to Jacobs's reading, what is arresting in the passage above is the way in which an officially established memorial for the losses of war is juxtaposed with what is *not* a monument in the same sense. The arch at Window Rock is a sacred site for the Navajos, a

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[194] *Atlas,* p. 23.
[195] Jacobs 1996, p. 741.
[196] Ibid.

place in which memory has traditionally been kept alive without state-commissioned practices of commemoration.

The distinction between national monuments and communally established memorial sites brings to mind the French historian Pierre Nora's theorisations on "sites of memory" and "environments of memory".[197] The "sites of memory" – museums, monuments, archives – are built to preserve memory of events and people considered historically significant. In the "environments of memory", however, memory is attached to specific places, where it is repeatedly enacted for example by ritualistic means. In contemporary society we suffer from the loss of such "environments of memory" where living memory would be thus contained. We need special "sites of memory" to preserve the past, Nora argues.[198] However, such public commemoration can also be a way of forgetting, because it is selective considering what is preserved. The traumatic moments of history, such as the wars, genocides and instances of political oppression, are often difficult to commemorate in public, because they show the fragility of the state as a source of protection of their citizens.[199] Therefore, the traumatic "pages" have to be ripped from the national "calendar", to use Rich's figures of speech. In describing her "patriot" as watching the reflection of a Native American sacred site from the sheen of the officially commissioned Vietnam memorial, Rich purports to create a non-nationalistic memorial that connects the past with the present, and death with survival, *outside* the official practices of commemoration.

It is, finally, uncertain as to what extent we can assimilate the representational tactics of Rich's poem to those used by the architect Maya Lin in the Vietnam Wall. As we have seen, Rich's way of representing American history subverts chronology and thus remains true to the

[197] Nora, Pierre. "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire". *Representations* 26 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) p. 8.
[198] Ibid., p.7 and *passim.*
[199] It has often been asked, for example, why no museums exist for the history of African Americans and Native Americans in the United States. At the moment, there are plans to build several museums for the history of slavery – but we may well wonder why it has taken so long.

temporality of trauma. However, it is also worth noting that by using the original Vietnamese spelling of the country's name (Viet Nam), Rich subtly critiques the way in which the monument presents the war as entirely American, as any reference to the suffering of the Vietnamese is absent. The politically subversive potential of the Wall, cherished by for example Edkins, is thus questioned.

Traumatic memory is found at the boundary of history and memory, the individual and the collective, the past and the present, mingling these concepts in a way that can at best unsettle the existing power hierarchies. By juxtaposing, throughout her poem, official memorials with places that are not usually granted this status, Rich reminds us of the risks involved in practices of commemoration: sometimes they may all but contribute to reproducing nationalistic narratives that erase memory rather than keeping it alive.

5. Beyond Trauma

In the last section of this study I will ask whether Rich's "Atlas" succeeds in proceeding *beyond* the traumatic. Developing Freud's theory of mourning and melancholia further, the historian Dominic LaCapra distinguishes between working-through and acting-out as ways of coping with trauma. In acting-out the past is "regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed."[200] Sometimes this attachment to the past may prevent "respectful recognition and consideration of others."[201] Working through, in turn, aims at establishing "a relation to the past that involves recognizing its difference from the present [.]"[202] After the process of working-through traumatic events are *remembered* but not repeatedly *relived*; and it thus is possible to think of identity, that of oneself and of others, without centring it solely on a particular historical trauma. Importantly, ethical consciousness is restored too, in case it was affected by the traumatic.

Rich's America appears to be caught in the process of acting-out the traumas of the past in the way that indeed destroys, in some cases, any recognition of ethical responsibility. Rich attempts to "work-through" these traumas by contextualising individual suffering. But contexualising has been done before, in social sciences and historiography, and it cannot be the paramount pursuit of a literary text. In this chapter I will ask what is the role Rich gives to poetry in the working-through of American traumas.

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[200] LaCapra, Dominick. "Trauma, Absence, Loss". *Critical Inquiry*. (25) 4 (Chigaco: University of Chigaco Press, 1999) p. 716.

[201] Ibid.

[202] Working-through is not fully synonymous to Freud's idea of mourning, for it involves, according to LaCapra, other methods of dealing with loss, too: for instance, critical thinking. LaCapra, p. 714.

5.1. Poetry as a "Web"

As I have noted earlier, Rich perceives the United States as a coutry where dissident voices are silenced and the social and the historical perspective is shallow and distorted. The recognition of the Americans' denial of history is not Rich's original idea, of course. R.W.B. Lewis observed, in the early 1950s, that "America, since the age of Emerson, has been persistently a one-generation culture."[203] The denial of the past contributes, according to Lewis, to what easily brings to mind traumatic repetition: "We generally return, decade after decade, and with the same pain and amazement, to all the old conflicts, programs, and discoveries."[204] Rich's work is a further example of the tendency to rebel against the denial of the past that has characterised American culture. Rich grants her witness poet a role as someone keeping knowledge of the past alive so that traumas could be worked-through, not endelssely repeated.

I would like to point to two figures that Rich uses, I believe, as a metaphor for her effort as a poet in "Atlas". First, the *wind.* In Part III, which we have already looked at, after memorising her past, the speaker steps into the porch of the house, listening to the wind: "it's warm, warm / pneumonia wind, death of innocence wind, unwinding wind, / time-hurtling wind."[205] Like Rich's text, the wind mingles different temporal levels together. It is difficult not to see the indebtedness of this figure to Romanticist thought, and thus we can read the wind as a metaphor for imagination. Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind" is the most obvious example. Shelley called the wind / imagination "The trumpet of a prophecy" driving "dead thoughts [---] like withered leaves, to quicken a new birth." By this allusion, Rich demonstrates, once again, her participation in a particular tradition of poetry, that which seeks directly to make a difference and to have a continuing validity in the future.[206]

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[203] Lewis 1975, p. 9.
[204] ibid.
[205] Ibid., p. 10.
[206] Compare this to the citation from the essay "Legislators of the World" I quoted in the beginning of this study.

Rich's wind awakens various "voices" in the house:

> Conversations that can't be happening, overheard in the bedrooms
> and I'm not talking of ghosts.   The ghosts are here of course but
> they speak plainly [---]
> not only those known in life but those before our time
> of self-deception, our intricate losing game of innocence long
> overdue.[207]

Rich is here referring to imaginary characters, as well as to her now absent acquaintances, and, finally, to people that have existed before her time. All this can be used as a material for writing. Rich's longing for a time "before our time" may sound illusionary – has such a time of innocence ever existed? Rich can be criticised by fusing absence, that which has never been, with the loss of something we have once possessed.[208] However, as we recall the temporal scope of "Atlas", the history of the United States in its entirety, we could suggest that Rich refers to "our time of self-deception" precisely to strengthen her critique of the ignorance in contemporary United States of the more traumatic aspects of the national history.

After the meditation on ghosts, the figure of the spider comes to the fore. It appears, in fact, both in the beginning and the end of Part III. First the speaker contemplates candleholders she has bought decades ago, and notes that "now they hold half-burnt darkred candles, and in between / a spider is working."[209] Later Rich describes how "she" weaves a web between the candleholders: "she will use everything, / nothing comes without labor, she is working so / hard and I know / nothing all winter can enter this house or this web, not all labor / ends in sweetness."[210] The spider thus resembles the poet, whose task is to make new connections between things and to bear witness to everything she encounters in the world around her. The critic Laura Arnold Leibman gives an

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[207] Ibid.
[208] See LaCapra 1999.
[209] *Atlas,* p. 8
[210] Ibid. p. 11.

interesting piece of information: in the oral tradition of Native Americans “storytellers are often represented as spiders”, as figures who are able to weave together strands of memory and community, and who possess powers both creative and destructive. [211] It is most likely on the basis of “Atlas”, that Rich is aware of this tradition.

The figure of the spider’s web can be taken also as a metaphor for the connection to other writers that Rich is willing to establish throughout the poem. Markedly, many writers on intertextuality speak of, precisely, an intertextual *web* or tissue. This is not surprising because the Latin verb from which the term originates (*inter+texto*) means “to weave together”. Importantly, the spider is itself an intertextual allusion, again, to Whitman, and specifically to the poem “A Noiseless Patient Spider”[212]. It is a short poem in two stanzas: in the first one the “I” is similarly observing the work of the spider “ever unreeling” filament after filament “out of itself”. In the second stanza Whitman’s speaker is situated “in measureless oceans of space, / ceaselessly musing, venturing, throwing, seeking the / spheres to connect them, / Till the bridge you will need be form’d, till the ductile / anchor hold.” Rich, a poet seeking to “reach the hearts” of her readers and search for fresh conceptual connections (see my reading of Part IV) emerges in “Atlas” as a similar figure. However, while Whitman’s “Adamic” American draws “from itself”, and actually sees the universe as representing aspects of his own soul, Rich’s witness speaker has, as we have seen, a different bond to reality. Her survival, as a poet and a human being, depends on the nature of the connections she is able to establish to her fellow individuals and to nature, while respecting the otherness of both.[213]

Rich concludes her meditation on the spider’s work by noting that the “web”, that is, the poem, even that of an earnest poet of witness, can never be truly at one with what she attempts to transmit to the reader. In what follows, the image “house within a house” suggests that there is

[211] Leibman, Laura. ”A Bridge of Difference. Sherman Alexie and the Politics of Mourning.” *American Literature*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005) p. 541.
[212] Whitman 1982, p. 463.
[213] A connection to Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical philosophy is again evident here.

always a difference between the poem of witness and the object of witnessing. I would like argue that the speaker's confusion concerning the scenery she is bearing witness to results, precisely, from her recognition of this difference: the writer cannot ever completely master the reality she attempts to represent, for there is always a traumatic, unspeakable, core in this relationship between reality and our testimonies. However, this bemusement is, as Rich's work purports to point out, not an excuse for not taking a stand. This is how Part III of "Atlas" ends:

> But how can I know what she needs?   Maybe simply
> to spin herself a house within a house, on her own terms
> in cold, in silence.

Rich very often refers to her own, earlier work, and here one is reminded of an earlier appearance of the spider in her poetry. In a 1981 poem "Integrity" Rich praises "the spider's genius / to spin and weave in the same action / from her own body, anywhere -- / even from a broken web."[214] Indeed, the spider weaves a web of presences and absences. Integrity exists as a distant goal only, as the web is never complete. The most urgent absence for a writer is, of course, the reader, one for whom she writes with the perpetual uncertainty considering whether her poem will ever be read. In the case of a "poem of witness", the position of the reader is of particular importance, as I will go on to point out next.

5.2. Addressing the Reader

I will now conclude my analysis of "Atlas" in the same place where Rich ends her poem. The last section, Part XIII, of "Atlas" is entitled "Dedications". It consists of twelve addresses to different imagined readers, each beginning "I know you are reading this poem". Here are examples from the beginning, the middle and the very end of the section.

[214] Rich, Adrienne. *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far*. (New York: Norton, 1981) p. 9.

I know you are reading this poem
late, before leaving your office
of the one instense yellow lamp-spot and the darkening window
in the lassitude of a building faded to quiet
long after rush-hour.

I know you are reading this poem
in a room where too much has happened for you to bear
where the bedclothes lie stagnant coils on the bed
and the open valise speaks of flight
but you cannot leave yet.[215]

I know you are reading this poem which is not in your language
guessing at some words while others keep you reading
and I want to know which words they are.

I know you are reading this poem because there is nothing else
left to read
there where you have landed, stripped as you are. [216]

At a glance, the poet-speaker of “Dedications” sounds confident and omniscient, very much different from the hesitant witness speaker recurring in the poem. Earlier in this study I showed how the speaker of the poem testifies to the impossibility of gaining full knowledge of the traumatic reality she lives in. Is this section with its authoritative “I” a counter-argument for what I have suggested before? No, it is not; for what the speaker claims to “know” is an impossibility. The confidence of the “I” is ungrounded, because she cannot know for sure where her poem will be read, or whether it will be read at all. As I noted in the beginning of this chapter, Rich wishes to find a point of reference for her poetry in the future, and this section reaffirms this suggestion by pointing to the ”still uncreated site”[217] that the poem wishes to be.

The trope of *apostrophe* is a significant rhetorical figure in the last section of Rich's poem. Jonathan Culler defines apostrophe as “the address of something that is not an empirical

[215]Atlas, p. 25
[216]Ibid., p. 26.
[217] Rich, ”Legislators of the World”.

listener."[218] What is interesting in Culler's discussion about apostrophe is the way he connects the trope with performativity, and thus, with politics. Culler purports to write politically conscious deconstructionist theory of literature and to defend deconstruction against accusations of apoliticality and ahistoricity – his project thus bears resemblance to that of, for instance, Caruth. Culler argues that poststructuralist thinking, that of Jacques Derrida, for example, is far from being apolitical. For instance, performativity has been connected by Derrida to the "the modern form of democracy", as he argues that the discursive regimes of politics and the performativity of literature accompany each other.[219] Culler finds the starting point for discussing these questions precisely in the trope of apostrophe. Apostrophes, he writes, pose questions about the "performative efficacy of poetic rhetoric itself"[220].

However, Culler's discussion on the performativity of the apostrophe is itself, too, only a starting point, as he does not present very convincing ideas concerning how this performativity of the apostrophe might actually function. However, with the help of my previous discussion, some ideas can be suggested. In 2.3. I pointed out how several critics have argued that poetry is an especially pertinent method for testifying to traumatic experiences. Felman argued, as we recall, that poetry can become a "testimonial project of address" if it actively reaches towards its reader. Gubar, in turn, suggested that "lyrical utterance" (such as Rich's addresses to her potential readers) contests the linear understanding of time, announcing itself as a return to a moment that has not been fully understood as it passed. What is at stake in these discussions is precisely the temporality that apostrophe evokes: it contests linearity, and at the same time, reaches towards the future. I think that in Rich's poem, the apostrophes are important in two ways. Firstly, by

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[218] Culler, Jonathan. "Deconstruction and the Lyric."*Deconstruction is/in America. A New Sense of the Political.* Ed. by Anselm Haverkamp. (New York: New York University Press, 1995) Pp. 41-51. Good examples of "apostrophised" addressees include Keats's "Grecian urn" (an inanimate addressee), Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" (who is, as we learn from the poem, dead) - or Rich's potential readers in the extract above (addressees who may be embodied in the future).
[219] Cited in ibid.
[220] Culler 1995, p. 44.

apostrophizing of potential readers Rich asks the poem to be woven, so to speak, in a social web where the text will be added new meanings every time it is read. Secondly, it is important that the thirteen-part poem sequence ends precisely in “Dedications”. It concludes the whole poem without a narrative closure, marking the continuity of the process of bearing witness that the poem is thus only a part of.

Piotr Gwiazda proposes that “Rich’s main objective in ‘An Atlas of the Difficult World’ is to envision and expand the concept of poetry readership in the United States beyond its traditionally stipulated parameters”, that is, outside academic and other “intellectual” circles. Gwiazda points out that the characters of “Dedications” differ from the those Rich apostrophises in her earlier poetry, as they are not “easily identifiable individuals”, such as the people in Rich’s life, but portrayed as strangers to the poet and each other.[221] I would like to suggest a different interpretation. Although Rich certainly makes a point in imagining her readers as representatives of different ages, classes and geographical locations, the only meaning of “Dedications” is not the social one; for here search for the general, universal meaning of poetry partly (but not entirely) surpasses the particular, historically specific meanings prominent elsewhere in “Atlas”.

In addition of what I have quoted, the individuals Rich addresses are found in the following situations and locations: “standing up in a bookstore “; reading ”as the underground train loses its momentum and before running / up the stairs”; “in a waiting-room / of eyes met and unmeeting, of identity with strangers”; reading “through your failing sight [---] yet you read on”; “beside the stove / warming milk, a crying child on your shoulder”; “torn between bitterness and hope / turning back once again to the task you cannot refuse.” All of these characters are, in a more or less concrete way, in motion. However, as the figure of the non-English speaking reader in the quotation most powerfully suggests, for all these characters *the act of reading* is also a kind of departure to a new

[221] Gwiazda 2005, p. 167.

mental location.

Caruth writes about the “departures” that we take in reading literary texts, and this notion is interesting in the context of Rich’s “Atlas”. Caruth bases this idea on Freud’s writings. Freud argues, as I have noted, that traumatic experience itself is characterised by departure: the victim may “get away, apparently unharmed” from the site of the accident and the meaning of the event only appears in another place and time. An entire identity may be based on departure, also on a collective level: Freud argues that Jews were formed as a people with certain religion and culture only in the context of their departure from the captivity in Egypt.[222] We can certainly suggest that the idea of America has also been formed on the basis of departure, that is, departure from Europe in order to build a new world. The homelessness that accompanies departure echoes in the feelings of displacement that Rich sees as Americans’ foremost trauma.

Departure can be seen also as an ethical predicament, if we follow Caruth. She analyses Freud’s letter to his son, written in the face of his leaving from Vienna to London because of the Nazi occupation of Austria. Freud writes: “Two prospects keep me going in these grim times: to rejoin you all – and to die in freedom.”[223] Caruth makes a point of the fact that in Freud’s original letter, which is in his native German, the words “to die in freedom” are written in English. This denotes a departure from the place and language where Freud has lived his life and written his body of work to the new country and language where he is about to bring the legacy of psychoanalysis.[224] Caruth contends: “It is here, in the rewriting of the departure [from Vienna to London] within the languages of Freud’s text that we participate most fully in Freud’s central insight, in ‘Moses and Monotheism’, that history, like trauma is never simply one’s own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas.”[225] Caruth argues that Freud’s text affects the reader

[222] Freud, “Moses and Monotheism”.
[223] Caruth 1996, p. 19.
[224] Ibid., p. 24.
[225] Ibid.

according to the logic of the traumatic experience, in which a period of latency follows the traumatising event so that its meaning is only realised in the future.

What does this reasoning imply in relation to the final part of Rich's "Atlas"? I would like to argue that in ending her poem to this sequence of apostrophes Rich is hoping to establish a bond with her readers, in a specific way enabled by the rhetorical function of apostrophe. While many of the events of which the poem speaks are historically specified to either the past or the present the address to the potential readers extends the time span to the future. One characteristic of apostrophe is, as noted, the absence of the addressee. Although the speaker of "Atlas" claims to know that her text is being read in the future, such knowledge is actually inaccessible at the moment of writing. Therefore Rich's use of apostrophe is an evidence of what Felman defines, as I have noted, as one of the main characteristics of "testimonial", addressive poetry: the questioning of the authority and authenticity of the text through the acknowledgment of the voids it contains.[226]

"Dedications" nevertheless demonstrates, again, Rich's belief in the power of text in the formation of identity. Especially the last apostrophe is revealing in this respect, as it depicts a person with "nothing else / left to read [but the present poem] / there where you have landed, stripped as you are." Rich comments that when she first conceived this image, she thought of someone in isolation, for instance in prison, for whom a book would be the only link to other people. However, more generally she wishes to allude to the American society "stripped of so much of what was hoped for and promised and given nothing in exchange but material commodities, or the hope of obtaining material commodities. And for me, that is being truly stripped."[227] Rich's comment demonstrates, again, her critique of the American dream, adding into it an anti-capitalist tone.[228] The final image of "Atlas" also speaks of the power granted to poetry. This power is evident elsewhere

[226] Felman 1992, p. 38. Trauma studies' indebtedness to deconstruction is easily detectable here.
[227] Rich interviewed in Moyers, Bill. *The Language of Life. A Festival of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, 1995. p. 344. Quoted in Gwiazda 2005, p. 184.
[228] Rich's allusions to Rukeyser and Brecht, for example, suggests that her connections to Marxist and anti-capitalist thought in general would provide a fruitful topic to study.

in the poem too, for example in Part III, where something evoked by literature is shown to be "too much to bear" for the individuals depicted by Rich. Here, the impulse proposed by the text is contrary: the text induces survival. The life-affirming power of literature, for Rich, lies in the way in which it potentially connects individuals to each other, like the spider weaves her web. This connection, Rich appears to be suggesting, is the only means of survival for the individual, but also for the text.

6. Conclusion

In 1991, when “Atlas”, too, was completed, Rich wrote “In those years”.[229] In the poem, Rich imagines how, at some unspecified point in the future, “we” will look back, lamenting how “in those years [---] we lost track / of the meaning of *we*, of *you* / we found ourselves reduced to *I* ”. Underlying this solipsistic, reductive, viewpoint is the view that “personal life [---] was the only life / we could bear witness to”. However, this is ultimately an indefensible position, as the final stanza of the poem shows:

> But the great dark birds of history screamed and plunged
> into our personal weather
> They were headed somewhere else but their beaks and pinions drove
> along the shore, through the rags of fog
> where we stood, saying *I*

History will prove the shallowness and short-sightedness – emphasised by the figure “the rags of fog” – of the view that the personal is the only realm of experience accessible to us, the only position on the basis of which we can take a stand. According to Rich it is actually questionable as to what extent any experience can be merely ´”personal”, that is, unmediated by the social reality where *any* experience nevertheless takes place. This view brings to mind, quite obviously at this point of my study, the simultaneously personal and impersonal experience of trauma. Trauma theorists suggest that “history” is something that affects the individual precisely the same way as trauma does, and it is maybe not too much to suggest that Rich might agree with them.[230] Like a traumatising event, the emergence of the “dark birds of history” in the poem is an unexpected, incomprehensible experience which is not “simply one’s own”.[231]

[229] Rich, Adrienne. *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991 – 1995.* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995) p. 4.
[230] As we recall, Caruth suggests that "history, like trauma, is never simply one's own" and that “history is precisely the way in which we are implicated in each other's traumas”. Caruth 1996, pp. 23 - 24.
[231] Susan Gubar argues that this poem discusses the Holocaust and the way in which ethics should have changed “after

"In those years" summarises well the ethical stance emerging from "Atlas". Should we search for a particular "message" or "moral" in the poem, it would perhaps be, precisely, this ethical consciousness the text clearly seeks to transmit to us. The text invites us to recognize the ways in which we are already implicated by each other through the experience of trauma. As shown in Chapter 3, Rich's poetry of witness seeks to surpass the sphere of individual experience which earlier has been a central motive in her poetry. Yes, the witness speaker of "Atlas" appears to be stating, the personal *is* political, but so is the collective; not in a totalitarian, totalising way, but as "a web of connections" uniting the text, the reader and the world as a whole.

The inevitable relationship of mutual implication exists, too, between the text and the material reality, as I demonstrated in the disucssion about the poem as a juncture of trauma, location and the body. Often the encounters between these entities are seen as voids for which no linguistic representation exists. However, in taking the position of ethically conscious witness Rich attempts to give words to what is considered "unspeakable" or even "unthinkable". In Rich's poem, the *social* origins of "the unspeakable" are given a special emphasis. As I observed in Chapter 4, this notion of reality consisting of various socially determined "black holes" characterises, in Rich's view, American society in general. Rich encourages us – and particularly contemporary Americans, the primary addressees of "Atlas" – to look beyond the socially constructed structures of meaning, in order to bear witness to the confusion and despair unexpressed in official speech.

In my introduction I argued that the notion of trauma manifests itself in two ways in Rich's "Atlas": as a problem of writing, and as a concept inherent to her social critique. This was proven to be true, although the extent to which writing and politics are interconnected in Rich's

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Auschwitz". (Gubar 2001, p. 263). I think it is perhaps an over-interpretation to suggest that Rich discusses specifically the Holocaust, unless we understand "Auschwitz" as the major point of reference for what in history is "traumatic". It is more likely, if we want to find a specific historical context for this poem, that Rich criticises here the over-emphasis of the personal in she sees as prevailing in American culture instead in the place of more socially conscious viewpoints. See for example Rich, "Arts of the Possible".

work suggests that the twofold argument risks at being too dichotomous. As Chapter 5 showed, "working-through", and surviving, trauma is a process in which the social and political aspects of language and of writing become manifest particularly clearly.

It must be added that the trauma studies approach did not alone suffice to explain all the aspects of the text, especially those that relate to either the rhetorics of poetry or to the more particular social and literary-historical framework. This partial inadequacy of trauma theory (and perhaps theory as such) is, in a way, only a logical result of the nature of trauma. As Caruth contends in a recent interview, trauma is "about occurrence, about historicity. It is not about a structure alone [.]" She adds that for this reason it is not easy to "assimilate" trauma theory to a philosphical theory of ethics such as that of Emmanuel Levinas (that is, to search for general similarities between the two) "because there is a historical dimension that is crucial."[232] This notion, as applied to the study of literature, leads us to one of the central dilemmas of the discipline: how to combine the particularity of a certain reading with a more general vision of a literary text? This is, of course, a question the response to which must be sought again and again in every instance of reading.

One further comment is necesary, for it is noteworthy that Caruth mentions specifically Levinas as the philospher whose work might invite comparisons with trauma theory. I have argued in passing that Rich's writing about trauma has clear affinities with Levinas's core ideas about ethics. Therefore I disagree with Caruth as regards the relationship of trauma studies to philosphical ethics. When it comes to Levinas, at least, Caruth appears to be somewhat misguided: he did not attempt to *construct* an ethics (that is, "a structure"), but to ponder on its meaning.[233]

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[232] Caruth interviewed by Aimee L. Pozorski in *Connceticut Review* (28)1 (Hartford: Connecticut State UP, 2006) p. 84.

[233] Critchley, Simon. *The Ethics of Deconstruction. Derrida and Levinas*. p. 5. As mentioned earlier, trauma studies was seen as "bringing the body back" to theory excessively absorbed in (perhaps a somewhat reduced version of) deconstruction. Levinas's thought, in turn, has been regarded – firstly by Derrida himself – as a way to emphasise the ethical content in deconstruction. It would be fascinating to study the links between these strands of thought more closely.

Levinas writes that “moral consciousness is not an experience of values, but an access to an exterior being.”[234] Encountering this “exterior being”, termed “face” by Levinas, is the basis of all moral considerations. It is crucial how Levinas defines “the face” as “the way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*.”[235] This suggests that the relationship to the other is historically specific and situational – unlike in Caruth’s account – and not by any means dependent on a pre-existing idea or structure. Moreover, certain similarities exist between the Levinasian understanding of otherness and the way in which trauma is theorised: in both cases, the subject is divided against itself and its authority is questioned in the face of the unexpected, and this crisis can, at best, lead to new knowledge.

The various writers I have referred to in this study share the idea that survival is ethically binding: it entails the establishment of a respectful relationship with the other. In succesful working-through ethical awareness accompanies survival. I would suggest that one direction into which research could proceed is, precisely, the ethics of writing and reading about trauma. One question to consider will undoubtedly be whether general parametres can be set concerning the ethics of representing trauma, as trauma is always a historically specific experience.

I cannot hope to have emptied the text, however, and the surplus that is left for future readers might precisely be the proof its survival. This inconclusive ending is not intended as a sign of deficiency; it is, rather, as necessary result for what has been said above. The last word, accentuating this point, goes to Rich:

> There is always that in poetry which will not be grasped, which cannot be described, which survives our ardent attention, our critical theories, our late-night arguments. There is always (I am quoting the poet/translator Américo Ferrari) ”an unspeakable where, perhaps, the nucleus of the living relation between the poem and the world resides”.[236]

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[234] Quoted in ibid.
[235] Ibid. My italics.
[236] Rich, ”Legislators of the World”.

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