"The Only Lesbian:"
Issues of Identity and the Erotic in Poems by Adrienne Rich and Staceyann Chin

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Abstract
This paper addresses the ways in which Adrienne Rich and Staceyann Chin represent different invocations of lesbian identity through the use of the erotic in their poetry. Rich's "The Floating Poem, Unnumbered" from "Twenty one love poems" rewites the history of patriarchal heteronormativity in love poems by explicitly alluding to lesbian sexual acts in her descriptions, use of language, and inversion of gender roles. Chin's "Haiku on being the only lesbian from Jamaica" and "Lesbian Chasing Straight" represent the intersection of race and lesbian identity. She challenges strict categorizations of sexuality through her use of language as well as the personalized form of slam poetry. The comparison of Rich's militant demand for space in a traditional poetic world and Chin's articulation of a fluid sexual identity points to an evolving definition of sexuality, leading to a new sexual paradigm.

The varying ways in which lesbian identities have been negotiated in literature has differed considerably through places, cultures, and times. Within this paper, I will be discussing two lesbian-identified women and the ways in which they have explored their own identities, sexualities, and issues of the closet through the medium of poetry. Starting with Adrienne Rich's writing, I will be looking at her attempts to make her personal life a source for both her politics and poetics. Her attempts to counteract patriarchal forms of literature by infusing them with erotic lesbian subject matter will be specifically addressed. Following this I will be looking at some of the contemporary work by Staceyann Chin and the ways in which she identifies her lesbian identity as intersectional with other minoritized identities. How this multitudinous sexual identity plays out in her chosen forum of spoken word poetry will also be touched upon. Hopefully, I will be able to garner a greater understanding of how two women from two different generations used poetry as a means to express their minoritized places in the world.

It does not take much to argue that Adrienne Rich is hugely interested in exploring issues of lesbian identity. She is in particular interested in issues surrounding the "erasure of lesbian existence (except as exotic and perverse) in art, literature, film." Thus, much of her focus is on combating this notion along with its partner assumption that the majority of women are innately heterosexual: "partly

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because lesbian existence has been written out of history or catalogued under disease, partly because it has been treated as exceptional rather than intrinsic, partly because to acknowledge that for women heterosexuality may not be a 'preference' at all but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force."

For Rich, her politics and personal life are hugely interconnected and overlapping. Therefore, when she sees an erasure of lesbian representation in art and literature, she explicitly moves forward to create this representation within her own poetry. Because of her intensely political identity, Rich often uses her poetry to focus on representations of the lesbian existence that she finds so lacking in society. For her, a lesbian existence is easily intertwined with her feminist politics as she writes that "there is a nascent feminist political content in the act of choosing a woman lover or life partner in the face of institutionalized heterosexuality. But for lesbian existence to realize this political content in an ultimately liberating form, the erotic choice must deepen and expand into conscious woman identification--into lesbian feminism." The ways in which she takes these articulations of her feminist lesbian politics into her poetry are particularly fascinating.

This articulation of her politics in her poetic work can be seen especially in Rich's "Twenty one love poems." These pieces are very much engaged with the history of heterosexual and patriarchal poetry. As such, Rich's intention is to work in much the same format of earlier male writers and yet queer this format through her use of content. In particular, "The Floating Poem, Unnumbered" exemplifies this motivation as it breaches the explicitly erotic area. What should first be noticed about this poem--and the rest of the "Twenty one love poems"--is that it visually resembles a sonnet. In fact, one could argue that Rich is invoking the sonnet format because of its long history of use by men to discuss the beauty of their female lovers. Here, however, Rich clearly is describing a lesbian erotic relationship particularly in language such as "Your traveled, generous thighs / between which my whole face has come and come--." This interplay of patriarchal form with explicitly lesbian erotic language is a clear political stance on Rich's part.

Rich's use of pronouns is also of great important to an understanding of this poem as compared to a patriarchal poetic history. She begins by using words such as "us" and "your lovemaking" which evoke a focus on both the lover as an individual person as well as the couple as a separate entity. This flies in the face of the tradition of patriarchal poetry which simply focuses on descriptions of the female love as "she" and "her." Rich's choice to use "you" and "your" specifically marks her lover as an individual and separates from the tradition of simply pontificating about the

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3 Ibid. 36.
lover's outward beauty. Instead, Rich focuses on her as an autonomous person with a specific touch and lovemaking. It is this specificity that brings the nameless and faceless woman to life. While the history of patriarchal poetry may have emphasized discussions of a woman's lips, eyes, hair, breasts, etc., Rich turns this on its head and creates a much more personal poem cut of describing a woman without using these tropes.

Instead, Rich's descriptions of the physical characteristics of her lover are quite surprising. She talks about "your traveled, generous thighs," "the live, insatiable dance of your nipples," and "your strong tongue and slender fingers."5 Each of these phrases engages with Rich's feminist politics. The emphasis on thighs is not particularly strange in a poem of this nature. However, Rich describes "traveled, generous thighs" evoking images of larger-than-average thighs with possibly a few stretch marks, veins, and/or cellulite. This can be understood as both a celebration of femininity (thighs being a part of the body where women often gain weight), as well as a focus on an atypical, feminist-minded beauty. Rich's description of her lover's nipples is equally fascinating because it is not focused on the breast as a whole--which might be a typical move for a male poet. Instead, Rich has the nipples "live" and "dance" thereby giving their owner a moving, living, subjective personality. Her description of "your strong tongue" makes similar moves in that it attributes strength to the female lover, a move unusual for the male poets she is writing against.

Another aspect that sets "The Floating Poem" apart from a history of poetry is Rich's attention to an "us." The poem is no longer one describing a beautiful woman on a pedestal but it describes instead a giving and taking mutual relationship. This mutuality between the speaker and the lover can also be seen in the descriptions of "tender, delicate / your lovemaking" as compared to "your touch on me, firm, protective."6 There are no firmly defined gender roles keeping the woman tender and delicate and the man as firm and protective. Instead, Rich writes her lover as embodying both these feminine and masculine characteristics equally. As well as playing with expected notions of femininity and masculinity, Rich further equalizes the speaker of the poem and the lover. In very simple terms, this can be seen in the fact that Rich writes both figures as performing cunnilingus. She is then even playing with expected notions of how lesbian relationships may or may not be imagined to function.

Rich's poetry is therefore heavily invested in notions of a feminist and specifically lesbian politics. However, looking at the work of contemporary lesbian poet Staceyann Chin, we can begin to see a few of the ways that other writers have attempted to blur the boundaries set up by Rich's politics. This can be seen most clearly in the inclusion of intersecting minoritizations as representational points in poetry. Staceyann Chin's "Haiku on being the only lesbian from Jamaica": "Wonder

5 Rich, The Fact of a Doorframe, p. 150, ll. 5, 8, 10.
whose pussy / I was eatin' when I had / a P. O. Box there?" exemplifies her interest in entering a discussion of a multitude of minoritizations.\(^7\) Chin is writing from both a personal and political perspective—like the work of Rich—but it is a perspective that has multiple facets to it. This poem, in the space of only a title and three lines manages to bring to the table a whole host of issues surrounding both Chin's personal identity as a lesbian and national identity as a Jamaican. As well, it addresses the intersection of these two minorities and the ways in which homophobia plays out in Jamaican culture through a complete denial of the existence of homosexuality.

We can begin to see, through Chin's writing, new movements to breaking down the strict boundaries of identity that Rich set up in her work in the 1980s. Chin's writing represents a movement away from lesbian poetry simply existing as a means of countering the history of patriarchal writing rather it serves to explore a more multidimensional lesbian identity. This idea of exploring identity is also connected to the forms in which Chin writes. Chin is predominantly known for her work and involvement in slam poetry. This poetic form alone is enough to distinguish her as having made a great leap from the more traditionally lyrical writing style of Rich.

We should first try to garner a fuller understanding of the form of slam poetry as well as its cultural implications before delving into Chin's poetry in closer specifics. Susan B. A. Somers-Willett has attempted to look at the culture of slam poetry and understand it in terms of performance identity. She therefore defines slam poetry as different from other poetic modes because of the "use of live performance to maximize the 'authenticity and sincerity' of the first-person voice overwhelmingly used by slam poets."\(^8\) As well, she emphasizes a discussion of how the poems often have a "sense of 'personality'" which is seen as reflective of the poet.\(^9\) Thus, for Somers-Willett, slam poetry can be understood as intensely personal poetry even in the same moment that it is a performance of the intensely personal.

In the context of a discussion of lesbian identity, this is a particularly fascinating medium through which to write. The emphasis on a first person voice allows for a much more forthright and obvious lesbian identification. This can be seen even in Chin's "Haiku on being the only lesbian from Jamaica" as she clearly identifies her own sexuality in the title alone. Slam poetry's focus on "authenticity and sincerity" from the poet-performer also does not allow for a closeted sexuality but, rather, rewards the use of the personal in the poetic. Opening up one's inner identity and showing it to the audience is thus applauded in this type of forum.

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7 Staceyann Chin, "Haiku on being the only lesbian from Jamaica," in Poems & Writings, Staceyann Chin Official Website, 2004, staceyannchin.com, ll. 1-3.
Another extremely important characteristic common to slam poetry is a discussion of the issue of marginalization. While the poets are lauded for representing their authentic and sincere personalities, these identities are "more often than not, marginalized gender, class, sexual, and racial identities [which] are celebrated at poetry slams."\(^{10}\) The slam, as an event, then becomes a celebration of those identities and personalities which are normally marginalized. This makes it easier to understand how some audiences can see slams "not only as literary or performative but ultimately as political events."\(^{11}\) As the poetry slam becomes a politicized event, the idea of performing a marginalized identity gains significance in this forum: "the slam itself [becomes] a representational practice which authenticates certain voices and identities."\(^{12}\)

Thus, in many ways, the new form of slam poetry can be seen as the embodiment of the connections between the personal and the political that Rich was trying to make. It allows for a marginalized identity (such as a lesbian identity) to be shouted from the stage and, in fact, rewards the poet for such an action. The slam poetry event then becomes a locale for the work which Rich was so heavily promoting; that of both politically and artistically representing the hidden outsider identities. This authentication of these identities then represents a step towards a new view of lesbian identity.

One of the characteristics that can sometimes occur in contemporary slam poetry is the intersection of multiple minoritized identities. This, of course, is a change from Rich's essays which focus predominantly on strictly female and lesbian identities. However, writers such as Chin are identifying a number of varying and sometimes conflicting personal identities in their works. Returning to "Haiku on being the only lesbian from Jamaica", this piece directly deals with the disjoint that can occur between two different marginalized identities. Chin, living in New York, can express herself through her poetry as an out lesbian. However, her life in Jamaica denied the opportunity to be open about her sexuality. Thus, her identity as a Jamaican is directly in conflict with her identity as a lesbian.

This playing with issues of identity is seen by Somers-Willett as something that does not commonly happen at poetry slams. However, she argues that some of the better poet-performers "tap the potential to critically investigate the performance of identity on the slam stage."\(^{13}\) This investigation of identity is what, for Somers-Willett, makes the personal identity poems "brave, enlightening, and inspiring."\(^{14}\) Thus, it is no longer about shoring up a distinct identity but rather about questioning

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\(^{11}\) Ibid, 54.


\(^{13}\) Ibid, 66.

\(^{14}\) Ibid, 70.
the ways in which identities are defined. As well, the truly interesting work occurs where the lines of identity are blurred and multiple identities begin to overlap.

Staceyann Chin is one of these poets who address the various negotiations of identity, particularly with respect to her identity as an out lesbian. Another excellent example of Chin's negotiations of identity is her poem "Lesbian Chasing Straight." A slam piece discussing numerous aspects around the issues of a lesbian woman attempting to date and/or sleep with a straight woman, "Lesbian Chasing Straight" is framed by a story of the speaker's advances being rejected by a straight woman. This performance piece is particularly engaged with issues around the fluidity of identity. To begin, the entire poem functions under the principle that a straight identity is not necessarily set in stone and that a straight woman is capable of being open to a lesbian relationship. If this sexual identity fluidity were not possible, there would be no point to a discussion of lesbian and straight women dating/having sex.

Chin's interest in identity continues within the language that she uses in "Lesbian Chasing Straight." In particular, Chin utilizes a number of different sexually identifying labels in her poem including "straight girls," "bi-curious," "lesbian," and "dyke." These words function in two different ways. First of all, they set up clearly demarcated identity groups. However, secondly, they also manage to blur the boundaries between such groups in the ways that Chin uses them to often refer to the same people. The concept of "lesbian" and "straight" as binary opposites is therefore taken into question. Another way in which Chin plays with these identities and creates fluidity between them occurs in the line "a boy I kissed once (perhaps twice)". By admitting to previous heterosexual interactions—no matter how insignificant—Chin affects the definition of her lesbian-identified position. Through a seemingly typical slam poem, Chin manages to negotiate a number of issues around her own lesbian identity.

This idea of visualizing the negotiation of identity continues throughout "Lesbian Chasing Straight." In particular, Chin's use of the erotic departs from the work of Rich. On a very simple level, she brings objects to play in her discussion of lesbian sexuality. More specifically, Chin chooses to differentiate between two kinds of lesbian sexuality. The first is represented as a "run-of-the-mill-dyke / with the 11 and a _ plus one flesh colored dildos" and "three multi-speed vibrators." The second representation of lesbian sexuality focuses on how it "has a way of being outrageous / what with the bedposts and those handcuffs" and how it can include objects such as a "fluorescent butt plug." Not only is Chin describing forms of lesbian sexuality not even mentioned by her poetic predecessors, she is representing a new and versatile definition of lesbian sexuality. Through a discussion of varied

16 Ibid, ll. 58-9, 61.
17 Ibid, ll. 70-71, 64.
object-related sexual acts, Chin is redefining what it means to write an erotic lesbian poem.

This inclusion of a broader lesbian sexuality also leaves room for Chin to allow broader definitions of both lesbianism and sexual identity in general. In particular, Chin opens up this fluidity of identity near the end of her poem with the lines: "I know I could have taught her a thing or two / she could have learned something new about gender-bending and multiple / orgasms." This discussion of the straight woman who spurned her advances is interesting for a few reasons. First of all, Chin has left the door open for the opportunity of "gender-bending" without ever defining how that may or may not happen. Secondly, she allows for the possibility of encounters (sexual or otherwise) between two presumably oppositional groups.

Chin follows these lines with a few more that even further open up a fluidity of identities: "maybe she could have taught me things about the way I've been coming / to terms with my own sexuality." This is almost a complete about-face from Rich's work. While Rich's energy was focused on lesbian identity as informing the world, Chin writes about the possibility of a heterosexual identity informing her own lesbian sexuality. This is particularly important as it opens the doors to a world of non-demarcated sexualities. Chin's work is therefore very interested in attempting to broaden the horizons of existing definitions of sexuality. She thus leaves the opportunity for the creation of a new sexual paradigm in the hands of her audience. It is this opportunity for new sexual paradigms that leaves wide-open the possibilities for lesbian poets to come. What will they write? How will future poets address these issues of identity and the erotic? Following upon the legacies of Rich and Chin, in what ways will identity and sexuality co-exist in the future?

\[\text{Footnotes}\]

18 Chin, "Lesbian Chasing Straight," ll. 80-3.
19 Ibid. 83-4.
Works Cited


