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An Essay to Read While Standing-Up in a Bookstore: An Examination of Rich's Pedagogical Philosophy, Her Involvement with SEEK, and Her Reflections on Teaching within An Atlas of the Difficult World

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Through her poetry and her involvement with the SEEK program, Adrienne Rich demonstrates her commitment to uplifting students' voices and providing them with the educational and social resources they need.

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In the culminating section of her 1990-1991 poem *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, titled "Dedications," Adrienne Rich speaks directly to her readers. She encourages them—mothers, speakers of different languages, the young and the old alike—to keep reading poetry despite any of life's obstacles, "because even the alphabet is precious" (728). Upon first reading, the phrase "I know you are reading this poem" appears to be ubiquitous. She repeats the statement twelve times throughout this last section, and similarly, "you" or "your" appear a total of twenty-nine times. Even though she alludes to specific types of readers—like those listed above—such a personal and direct address would suggest that each reader is meant to identify with the repetitious "you" and the empowering message attached. However, a closer examination of *An Atlas of the Difficult World* reveals that this poem may be, in part, a reflection of Rich's time as an educator and thus written specifically for, and addressed to, her past students.

The poem's first section gives us a strong indication that education was on Rich's mind when she wrote it. In that section, we encounter the following lines:

> In the writing workshop a young man's tears
> wet the frugal beard he's grown to go with his poems…
>
> In the classroom
> eight-year-old faces are grey. The teacher knows which children
> have not broken fast that day,
> remembers the Black Panthers spooning cereal. (709-710)

One of the most intriguing parts of these lines is the reference to the Black Panther party because it grounds the poem in historical and personal context. A quick internet search yields key information: "From 1969 through the early 1970s, the Black Panthers' Free Breakfast for School Children Program fed tens of

thousands of hungry kids" (Blakemore). This program was specifically geared towards "serving low-income people of color" and for reshaping the Black Panther Party's image from militant to more community and social justice minded (Senescall).

For readers who know Rich's personal timeline, the late 1960s and early 1970s were particularly generative because she was guided by very similar social justice goals when she joined the Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge (SEEK) Program at the City University of New York (CUNY). This program, where Rich taught writing starting in 1968, had existed in some form since the 1930s when it was "a concentration of poor radical European immigrant students and teachers committed to anti-racism, anti-fascism, and thriving intellectual debate" (Brown et al. 37).

This political hotspot didn't evolve into the official program Rich knew until 1965—by that point, Iemanjá Brown and the other editors of Adrienne Rich's CUNY teaching materials note that "campus life [had] drifted from [its] radical milieu" that existed three decades prior (Brown et al. 37). Despite this apparent shift among its stakeholders, the program's guiding mission did not shy away from the political movements of its time. As Brown et al. describe it, SEEK was aimed at dismantling "institutional inequalities" in education by providing "non-credit preparatory courses, study stipends, and social work counseling" for Black and Hispanic students (Brown et al. 38). The program is still in existence today and serves approximately 8,600 students (Lehman College).

Looking at section four of *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, we see Rich talking about a different group of people:

> 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. (716)

Notably, Rich blends the actions of teaching and outreach with the role of the poet; given her involvement with SEEK, this blurring makes sense because she—as well as several other poet-activists such as Audre Lorde, June Jordan, and Toni Cade Bambara—had a foot in both worlds. The Open Lab at City Tech's website says that Rich and her colleagues "sought to be allies for their SEEK students, not saviors there to liberate oppressed students" (Jones). Interestingly, Rich seems to have a slightly more self-deprecating view of things. Although the aforementioned quote solidifies Rich's belief that teacher-poets were necessary to incite change, later in the section of the poem, she says that this change is a "never-to-be-finished, still unbegun work of repair" (716). One reading of this quote is that Rich, writing this poem almost two decades after her time with SEEK, reflects on her experiences and believes she fell short at dismantling the institutional-level issues that necessitated such a program as SEEK.

Thankfully for her readers, Rich's biased and self-critical viewpoint is not the final word in this scenario. As part of an initiative of the City University of New York (CUNY) Graduate Center, the Lost & Found project has compiled and published some of the teaching materials that Rich and her colleagues used. In her essay on "The Extraordinary Educators of the SEEK program," Rachel V. L. Jones notes that Rich—alongside academic superstars and activists Lorde, Jordan, and Bambara— "exchanged syllabi, lesson plans, and assignments and sat in on each others' classes" (Jones). The teaching materials in this collection span from 1968–1974 and offer a deeper look into Rich's ideas about teaching when she was steeped in the experiences and didn't have two decades of hindsight influencing her perceptions.

The first resource in the collection is a memo, written in the spring of 1970, from Rich to her students during a nationwide student strike where students protested the Vietnam War and the shooting of four students by National Guardsmen during a demonstration at Kent State University. Rich's memo details what her students should do to successfully finish the semester in light of the strike; she says, "Whatever happens… and whatever effect this has on classes at the College, I consider myself responsible to all my students until the end of the semester" ("Memo in Place of a Prologue"). Rich's use of the preposition "to"

rather than "for" in this memo demonstrates that Rich sees her students as autonomous—she isn't in charge of them and whether they choose to participate in the strikes. However, she holds herself to a high standard and doesn't want to completely disappear to where her students cannot reach her. As such, in the same memo, she gives her students her address and telephone number and says that "[y]ou should feel free to call me at home" ("Memo in Place of a Prologue"). Although this may be seen as solely for students to reach out about their assignments, this interpretation is not explicitly stated in the document—it may be read that Rich is encouraging her students to connect with her about their coursework but also the larger political events influencing their college experience.

This decision, from a pedagogical perspective, speaks to Rich's strength as an educator; it demonstrates that she was more than willing to go above and beyond for her students. Specifically, she achieves this by positioning herself as an academic *and* a social resource for students to use—not only can they ask her about content-area questions, but they can also go to her for help navigating college because she has more experience, connections, and respect due to her position on the faculty. This practice is still seen today, albeit with a more official name: teachers can be what Linda Murray calls "gateways, not gatekeepers" by practicing Rich's philosophy, especially if their students are falling into the systemic "opportunity and achievement gaps" which affect students of color and make it more difficult for them to receive resources to prepare them for the rigors of college (Murray).

Before diving further into the archive of Rich's teaching materials, it is important to note that they come from CUNY, SEEK's main collaborator. The small slice of resources made available to the public is likely the compilation that most strongly aligns with the program's overarching goals. However, it is also important to note that, despite these resources coming from a partial source, they are exact transcripts of Rich's writing. She did not write them with the intent of publication—these are glimpses into writing solely for her students. Further, because Rich wrote documents such as the previously-mentioned memo in response to then-current events, they are not as polished as her published pieces. She simply wrote from what she thought would be the most pedagogically-sound perspective, giving students the resources they needed to thrive.

We can see Rich's teaching prowess in the writing assignments she gave to students. Among them are prompts for students to write what "you imagine your future after college" to be and a prompt about a situation "where you found yourself playing a role you didn't like" ("Writing exercises drawn from various classes"). Although they may seem superficial at first glance because they don't inherently inspire analytical reasoning, these prompts align with one of SEEK's core principles that Rich takes herself to task for within her poem. This principle is what educational scholars would refer to as Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) where the educator offers "a bridge between home and school life, [affirms] students' history and culture, and [centers] student voices and learning styles in all lessons and classroom experiences" (National Equity Project).

Although Rich and her colleagues wouldn't have had these exact words and official terminology at their disposal—CRT, for example, wasn't coined until 1994—it is more relevant that they pursued these uncommon teaching practices because their ultimate goal was to decenter the teacher and place a larger emphasis on the students' experiences and funds of knowledge (National Equity Project). Coming from established poets and activists, this decision illuminates the principles of humility and a genuine desire to teach which imbued their teaching practices. They practiced what SEEK preached with a fervor.

Rich's almost-prophetic teaching philosophy, far ahead of its time but which deftly traced the pathways of current scholarship, shows up in the final section of *An Atlas of the Difficult World*. Although one can read the following quote as Rich speaking to a non-native English speaker, the genuine curiosity in her tone speaks to an educator's interest in a student's progress: "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" (728). This statement demonstrates Rich's investment in the person she's speaking to—she wants to know what parts of poetry are inaccessible to the average reader and which parts speak to them. This connects back to the ideas from before about her teaching practices where she wants to uplift student voices and see what they find valuable rather than assuming that she knows what is best for them because she is a celebrated poet.

Perhaps the most compelling piece of evidence which suggests that Rich is reflecting on and speaking to her students throughout this poem, and specifically in the final dedications section, is in the lines: "I know you are reading this poem/standing up in a bookstore far from the ocean/on a grey day of early spring, faint flakes driven/across the plains' enormous spaces around you" (727). Initially, what is striking about the quote itself is how Rich plays with the contrasting ideas of familiarity and distance. She can easily imagine the readers and their reading habits of standing up in a bookstore while perusing titles to purchase. Likewise, she can imagine the intricacies of the space they inhabit—the gray, snowy weather and the vast plains. However, because she only imagines this scenario due to the "plains' enormous spaces" dividing her and the readers, her audience is left with an understanding that her intimacy with the readers is outdated. She used to know them and their personal habits extremely well, but now there is space and time that makes it impossible for her to update this knowledge.

This idea of intimacy and distance comes into sharper focus when reviewing the rest of Rich's teaching materials. The final resource in the Lost & and Found project archive is a reading list which Rich titled "Books to Buy, Beg, Borrow, Steal, or Read Standing-Up in the Bookstore." The almost identical phrasing of "standing-up in a bookstore," written decades apart, is too close to be written off as mere happenstance. It is possible that Rich kept all of these teaching materials and perhaps even returned to them when writing this poem. She may well have been thinking of her students, particularly her poorer students, who wouldn't have had the money to buy all the books they would have needed for study.

This idea is further supported by the fact that Rich uses the same phrase again in a brief note accompanying her reading list: "Standing-up in the bookstore is strenuous but many a good book has been read that way" ("Books to Buy, Beg, Borrow, Steal…"). What is striking about this addendum, when read in conjunction with the interplay of intimacy and distance, is that her audience can see a unique, almost generational layering to this habit. Rich has lived a life of voracious reading in which she has developed the habit of reading books she hasn't paid for while standing up in a bookstore, and she suggests that habit to her students, legitimizing reading without buying (and also aligning herself with her poorer students). Rich then identifies her students by that habit years later. Even though we may not know whether she is still in contact with any of her past students or if these lines are purely speculative, they can be read as Rich reflecting on the indelible marks she has left on a generation of young minds. No matter what her students took from her class, no matter where they ended up after the SEEK program, her teachings are still with them whenever they pick up a book. She is supporting and encouraging their right to read, whatever their personal, social, or economic circumstances.

Compared to the beginning of *An Atlas of the Difficult World*, these reflections are markedly more optimistic than when she said that the work she underwent in SEEK was stalled and perpetually unresolved. If Rich did have these resources on hand when writing her poem, it could be stated that the reading list's contents might have swayed her to have a kinder opinion of the work she did. For example, when Rich wrote the book list for her students, she described it as containing "samples of nearly everything." In effect, this is Rich's literary canon, and she wants these texts to become her students' foundational texts, too.

This connects back to her teaching principles that embody the idea of "gateways, not gatekeepers" because within the list, Rich lists texts and authors that are often assigned cultural capital within high schools and colleges: Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Nietzsche, Camus, and Tolstoy to name a few. When she assigned these particular pieces, it was likely with the knowledge that, if it is her job to prepare underprivileged students for the rigors of college, they need to be versed in the central texts that professors and even other students will reference. However, these are not the only texts she lists.

In a move that subverts the established literary canon and shows her students that their voices—and voices like theirs—have a place in the classroom, she recommends books and criticism from Black writers and about Black writings, a book about the "day-to-day realities of slavery in the U. S.," and poems by Victor Hernandez Cruz, "a 20-year-old Puerto Rican, very much alive" ("Books to Buy, Beg, Borrow, Steal…"). This is indicative of Rich's commitment not only to preparing students for the rigors of collegiate institutions as they already exist, but also using her influence in the classroom to speak directly to her students who will read these works and poems "listening for something, torn/between bitterness and hope/turning back once again to the task [they] cannot refuse" (728). She knows that her job as an educator must be to leave her students with the skills to recognize that their voices shouldn't just be important only in specially designed programs

like SEEK. Rich, like all great educators, wants her students to leave her classroom with an understanding that they are an important part of every classroom and every space they will enter thereafter.

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