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ABSTRACT

To ask students to write and respond to each other's papers is one means of confronting the difficulties posed by radical texts such as Adrienne Rich's "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Revision," an essay from her collection "On Lies, Secrets, and Silence." When an instructor assigns such a work, he or she places him- or herself in what Gerald Graff calls a pedagogy of conflict because it challenges values and ideas that students cherish. Though Rich is fully aware of her privileged middle-class background, she speaks from the margins of normal literary and philosophical discourse; she is reactive, peripheral, subversive, and satirical--intentionally confrontational and extreme, denying the master vocabulary which imprisons. Can such an extreme criticism which excludes so many and demands so much engage students of the 1990s, many of whom believe that the issues raised with such passion in the 1960s are obsolete or not worth the trouble of debate? The answer is a qualified yes. If there is to be meaningful dialogue, students must move beyond their stereotypical and defensive comments, which essentially announce their refusal to subject their own views to examination. To keep his own bias out of the way, a professor at George Mason University asked his students to engage in a meaningful dialogue with one another. Each student wrote a piece on Rich and then responded to that of another student. In the process, those who spouted stereotypical comments earlier found themselves taking their fellow students to task for similar comments. (TB)

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The Rhetoric of Extremity: Teaching Adrienne Rich to Undergraduates

When I assigned "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision" from Adrienne Rich's 1979 collection On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, I placed myself squarely in what Gerald Graff calls the pedagogy of conflict. Because it challenges values and cherished ideas, I felt that Rich's essay provided the point of departure for self-questioning. Since Rich's work won't allow easy answers or formulaic responses, demanding a radical shift in perspective and values, I knew I was in for some controversy; but I didn't anticipate from my easy-going students the extreme resistance. All of us had to roll up our sleeves and do some serious interpretive work to come to grips with an extremely provocative piece of writing.

I did not have a research agenda or a hypothesis in place when I assigned Rich's essay. The genesis of this paper is my students' overwhelmingly negative response to Rich's extreme rhetoric, the way in which we grappled with her confrontational, radical ideology and the way I found a strategy to teach Rich. So I'm coming about this from a practitioner's perspective, to borrow Stephen North's terminology: I was faced with a practical classroom problem, and the welfare of my students was central to my interests in this problem. I am an interested party whose interests coincide, in the classroom, with the interests of another group--students. Thus my research or inquiry is not a primary interest but a co-interest, so to speak, with teaching.

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As I thought about strategies to teach the essay, I thought of Rich as a representative figure of what I would like to call "the rhetoric of extremity." Though she is fully aware of her privileged middle-class background, she speaks from the margins of normal literary and philosophical discourse; she is reactive, peripheral, subversive, and satirical--intentionally confrontational and extreme, denying the master vocabulary which imprisons. She raises the stakes of the conversation and is both deconstructive and destructive. Ten years after my first reading of Rich, the passion and urgency I feel in her work has not diminished. If anything, given the high visibility and continuing struggles of feminists, lesbians, and gay men today, her voice seems more poignant than ever. It's as if I'm hearing echoes of Rich when gay or lesbian students come to visit me in my office or write about their problems and dawning consciousness.

The voice which speaks in Rich's poetry and prose--like the voice of many a political activist--is anger seeking to become articulate, accusation struggling against silence. Impatience, intemperance, intolerance blister in Rich's thought. The editorial glance backward, the re-collection of her past, does not impose tranquility, but allows turmoil to be seen. It is the meaning of marginality, the coming into being of a critical stance, the reclamation and appropriation of organic modes of thought which ground all her essays, connecting them to the past which its author decidedly denounces.

Rich's writing is initially and unavoidably disturbing. Her work is, and is meant to be, confrontational, accusatory. She becomes, as her critical stance evolves into the form of lesbian feminism, increasingly unwilling to admit exceptions, to entertain ambiguities. She deals in polarities, in terms of either/or. There is room for neither hesitation nor disagreement

in her dogma; she seeks to overwhelm through persistent reminder of the injustice she and other women face. It is this abrasiveness, this exclusivity, which speaks most clearly in Rich's criticism, and defines it as an attempt to overwhelm through persistence.

Rich is moved to the activity of criticism by her experienced marginality, the price of membership in an existential group which is denied by the powerful. Hers is a vital concern with the issues she addresses; she is viscerally present to the injustice, keenly attuned to threats of trivialization and sham solution.

Like any good rhetorician, Rich is concerned with the question of audience. Her audience is women, none of whom, she legitimately claims, has escaped the effects of patriarchal domination. In her earlier writings, Rich is willing to admit a few good men to the dialogue, recognizing for that moment that summary exclusion on the basis of sex is indefensible, arbitrary, and debilitating. Yet, as Rich's impatience grows, the focus of her concern constricts. She no longer wishes to be heard, much less overheard. Her determination that feminism should not be compromised, made palatable, by passing it off as "human liberation" suggests a tinge of emotional rigidity which readers can hardly ignore.

Rich seeks a tradition, struggles to form a self, in contact with nature and her own being; she seeks these things on behalf of a population which has, does, suffer the daily indignities of trivialization, patronization, and insult. Rich recognizes the necessity of going through anger, of experiencing intensely and radically the impact of the smallest injustice. She realizes the tremendous significance of the small, the chance, the unintentional, the unexamined, and she is willing to subject the world to tireless scrutiny. Hypersensitivity is

called for; the lies, secrets, and silences will be purged only through relentless determination to see the world clearly in the everyday events of life.

But can such an extreme criticism which excludes so many--and demands so much--engage students of the 1990s, many of whom believe that the issues raised with such passion in the 1960s are obsolete or not worth the trouble of debate? And how do we go about teaching Rich and the feminist/lesbian consciousness which imbues her work with so much of its energy and force? How do students respond to her polemic? How do such potentially explosive issues resound in the writing class?

As we began our class discussion of Rich polemic, I realized that I would have to rethink my role as teacher and the configuration of power in the classroom. I had to take on the role that Kurt Spellmeyer describes as the "maieutic dialectician who does not know what must happen in the practice of questioning, but patiently, carefully prepares the way for an insight that will come on its own, in its own time" (255). I needed to balance my deeply held political commitments against a process of learning that allows for true (and often slow) discovery, according to the metaphor of childbirth. Following Patricia Bizzell's suggestion in Academic Discourse and Critical Consciousness, I wanted to engage in the "common experiment in negotiating differences" and help lead students to discover "heretofore unrealized points of contact with the interests of other groups . . . and moral commitments with their position" (294).

Easier said than done. In response to Rich's challenging and extreme polemic, a usually open and aware group of students turn to quick, preformulated answers couched in the latest non-thinking cliche. One of my more thoughtful students began our discussion by

saying, "Oh, she's a 60s radical. Things have changed. We already are awakened!" Another one said: "Why should I listen to a lesbian who obviously hates men and blames them for everything wrong with the world?" And another: "Why doesn't she put her efforts into more constructive, positive work. If life gives you lemons, make lemon-aid." "Based on the fact that they're female, they feel that they deserve special treatment. . . . They militantly defy tradition. I believe in women's rights, but I don't have such drastic beliefs. I'm not one of those knock-down, drag-out types." Such utterances are typical of what I call "the will to package," a defensive attitude that aims to close the discussion. It arises when students put energy into resisting new ideas, when they say: "I've already made up my mind," "I can't understand any more," or "I don't want to know more." At this point in the discussion we agitated and grew tense, the easy-going congeniality becoming strained. This sort of tension is important for teachers of writing to understand, because we have to find a way to engage students in ethical conflicts that they and perhaps many of us would just as soon not face but which will simply not go away.

To help students explore Rich's extreme rhetoric more carefully, I felt I needed a way to keep my own political bias out of the way, at least until students had time to locate their own perspectives. I needed to assist and invite students to engage Rich's extreme text in a way that would allows them to enact a meaningful dialogue with their fellow students. (I much prefer Berthoff's "assisted invitation" to the usual "assignment," because it suggests a less authoritarian role for teachers, highlighting the "pedagogy of knowing" over the "pedagogy of exhortation." For this particular paper, students needed plenty of assistance--and care, not exhortation.) And so I asked students to write out their questions, problems,

and concerns about Rich to another student, who in turn was to write back in response. By removing myself as the interlocutor, the "devil's advocate" or the "domineering sorcerer," students were placed in a position allowing them to see Rich's argument in the context of their and their peers' own development and needs, and it allowed them time to compose themselves and to re-evaluate their initial response. The dynamics of the invitation aimed to engage students in the reality of academic dialogue, moving them away from quick, easy and stereotypical responses. I wanted to create a writing context that would allow students to engage in long, intense absorption, which is crucial to any meaningful critical thinking.

Students who attempt to package Rich's argument with ready cliches or dismiss it with a wave of the hand are not so easily let off the hook, and their classmates' responses almost invariably lead them to see how they had not really thought through Rich's perspective. In some of the best collaborative learning and writing that I've yet to experience in a classroom, students helped each other move from a dualistic stance of dismissal to one that re-opened the questions raised by Rich. One student, Ben, initiated a dialogue by writing, "American society has taken great strides towards understanding the mistreatment that women, both black and white, homosexual and heterosexual, have been forced to suffer for hundreds of years. . . Many of the issues discussed by Rich are no longer problems today." In a challenging response, his colleague Matt replied: "The problems of inequality that gays and feminists raise are far from being pointless, as you believe. They are far from being resolved. Think of all the gay-bashing going on. . . . I'm not trying to preach, but it's likely that you see all of these things in the world [gay-bashing, unfair treatment of women], you just don't see them

in the essay. . . . Feminists and various minorities are an emerging class, and the problems they face are alive and well."

Now what is surprising about Matt's response is that he was initially reluctant to grant serious credence to Rich's argument; his written response came after firing away some fairly intolerant remarks in class discussions about feminism and homosexuality. What happened here? I think both Matt and Ben learned a lot--both about the issues they were talking about, but also about ways of writing in response to their perception of another person's textual blind spots and misreading. By engaging in a written dialogue with a colleague instead of shooting from the hip in heated class discussions, Matt was able to revise and rethink his initial response to Rich's polemic; and he was able to articulate a much more carefully considered perspective. I found it characteristic that many students changed and refined their ideas as they wrote in response to a classmate's question. They found out what they thought by writing in a dialogue. I cannot determine with scientific accuracy when the moment of learning--or change--occurred, but I have an intuition that some real work got done over the course of a few weeks. One student, Todd, summarized the experiment well at the very end of our discussion: "Maybe we don't know enough to adequately judge Rich and the lesbian feminist position. Maybe we need to investigate it more." Another student, Dena, replied, "We also need to start looking at how the structure of language and how it has been used in the past has been limiting to people on the margins." Just what I wanted to say all along, but a student said it for me, and that made all the difference.

I am not offering this assisted invitation up as a panacea for student writing problems, but I found that student voices and attitudes remarkably changed when they wrote for each

other in a real attempt to negotiate textual problems. Gadamer's statement, "To understand a text is to understand oneself in a kind of dialogue" (57) remains an important pedagogical reminder. My students, who at first were happy to keep Rich's rhetoric at arm's distance, engaged in vital dialogue with each other--and with a writer whose differences seemed at first too exclusive. They met these differences openly by rethinking their perspective in the company of other students. By getting myself out of the highly vulnerable role of sole audience and director of opinions, my students were better able to take responsibility for their end of the conversation concerning sexuality, politics, and writing engendered by Rich's essays. The writing became a mode of inquiry, a way of learning, and a way into greater and better critical understanding.

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