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“The One Who Find Our Way:” The Internal Otherness in Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck”

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Abstract: A diving journey through Adrienne Rich’s poem “Diving into the Wreck” (1972) reveals a process of metamorphosis that requires humans’ internal otherness. The otherness corresponds to the human ability to metamorphose and acclimatizes to unfamiliar situations; additionally, such a transboundary experience affects the diver’s cognition of gender, and makes them aware of their own non-binary gender. In the poem, a nondetermined-gender human diver employs instruments, including scuba-diving gears, to explore the underwater wreck. While descending to the bottom of the sea, the diver becomes aware of their otherness through the needlessness of the tools, their own behavior, and body function.[1]

In her notes and poems, Rich mentions her circumspection about gender representation. In the 1970s, Sandra Bem, a feminist psychologist, studied psychological androgyny as a possible ideal human figure. When *Diving into the Wreck* was published in 1973, many critics saw the title poem in the book describe an androgynous diver; however, Rich has since refuted this perception in the next collection of poems. Later, Bem also reexamined her indicator of sex differences due to her concern with gender polarization. A gender narrative in “Diving into the Wreck” needs reconsideration.

The final stanza of the poem reveals that a wreck is a place that the diver had always known and returned to; thus, the wreck represents where to start the journey not the goal. The internal plurality in “the one who find our way” (*CP* 373) is appeared at the surface of the poem because of its grammatical discrepancy. This study argues that the metamorphosis reveals the internal otherness and gender cognition during an adaptation to an uncanny place for humans.

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Adrienne Rich’s “Diving into the Wreck” (1972) describes the process of a diver’s metamorphosis through a discovery of the otherness within the self as inner plurality. This plurality, which seeks to adapt to a surrounding environment, proceeds to the surface via a metamorphosis of the lurking internal otherness. Regarding the subversion of the dualism due to the metamorphosis in the poem, the gender

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representation in the poem that is often considered as androgyny illustrates non-binary, transcending gender dualism.

As Rich notes, "In 1953, when the poem was written, a notion of male experience as universal prevailed which made the feminine pronoun suspect or merely 'personal'" (*CEP* 423). In her early works, Rich employed a male narrator or protagonist to reflect a universal human figure.[2] Since the publication of *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), the poet has established her poetic style that is political while its content is personal. This differs from the traditional poetic style, being inspired by the Vietnam War and second-wave feminism. When she published *Diving into the Wreck* in the early 1970s, critics described it as her turning point as a poet and a feminist.[3] "Diving into the Wreck" was generally regarded as a poem about spiritual androgyny being an ideal self-image, focusing on the most striking line, "I am she: I am he" (*CP* 373).[4] However, in another work, "Natural Resources" (1977), she refused to employ the words "androgyny" and "humanism" (*CP* 505) because they were considered "inadequate to feminist discourse because of both their history and their false inclusiveness" ("Comment" 734).[5] Additionally, she described "humanism" as "a false universal" ("Comment" 734). Therefore, after "Natural Resources" and her comment were published, many critics of "Diving into the Wreck" considered it her transitional stage to the "aesthetic of female power" (Keyes 152).[6] Since the 1980s, several studies have focused on the sea, which is the setting of "Diving into the Wreck," approached by ecofeminist critiques that argue that the values and power structures of patriarchal societies account for environmental exploitation and social oppression.[7]

Respecting Rich's caution against "a false universal[ity]," this paper interprets "Diving into the Wreck" as a gender narrative that is not limited by the socially constructed gender binarity. The concept of androgyny gained attention in the early 1970s because "[it] seemed to challenge the traditional categories of masculine and feminine as nothing before had ever done" (Bem, *Lenses* viii). Sandra Bem, a feminist psychologist, utilized the Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) in her psychological research to determine that masculinity and femininity coexist in a person as spiritual androgyny, "[a] human standard of psychological health" (Bem, "Measurement" 155, 162). Her 1974 article on androgyny availed a groundbreaking theory on feminism. However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Bem began to consider "the gender polarization" in BSRI and "the constructions of a cultural schema—or lens—that polarizes gender" (Bem, *Lenses* viii). Although the previous studies did not mention Rich's awareness of gendering along with Bem's gender conceptualization, the narrator of "Diving into the Wreck" should be reconsidered a non-binary gender because Bem reexamined the dualistic polarization of gender. Thus, this paper proposes that the emptiness of the lurked boundaries through the metamorphosis reveals that the sea environment transcends female/male dualism and exposes the superficiality of human identity. The approach to highlight the internal otherness will offer a new angle at Rich's intention of gender representation that she clearly stated after publishing "Diving into the Wreck."

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The diver's descent into the wreck refers to a gradual process that amplifies the metamorphosis of the self by revealing internal otherness. Through the submersion into the sea, an inner journey begins by descending a ladder through insect-like movements, swimming around the wreck with fictional characters, and glimpsing the self in parts of the wreck. The descent further indicates that the diver, whose gender

had not been revealed, is non-binary by blurring gender dualism as the metamorphosis subverts the boundaries between humans and non-humans. Before diving, the diver relied on scuba equipment and technology, but these tools cause inconveniences and evoke metamorphosis through the process.

The narrator first focuses on their breath before considering their body, which moves differently underwater. They inhale while descending the ladder, as depicted by the line "the oxygen immerses me," and exhale "the clear atoms/of our human air" (*CP* 371). Although breathing is a natural and unconscious act on the land; it becomes conscious in an unnatural environment, particularly when visualized as air bubbles under "the blue light" (371). Thus, the narrator's interest in their body shifts to their movements as the diver continues to descend the ladder "like an insect" because "[m]y flippers cripple me" (371). Insects are the absolute other of humans, but the diver realizes their insect-ness as an affirmative adaptation to the abnormal circumstance, which does not refer to complete metamorphosis since the poet employs a simile to explain the diver's motion. Nonetheless, their insect-ness indicates the possibility of the internal human otherness proceeding to the surface of the body. The reliance on tools triggers the narrator's interest in their own body; an air tank allows the diver to breathe underwater so that they begin to focus on their body functions. Moreover, putting on the flippers, the diver becomes uncomfortable while descending the ladder through an insect-like movement.

An indirect metamorphosis can be observed in the uselessness of the tools when the "grave and awkward mask" (*CP* 370) also creates an awareness of the blood flow in the body. The deeper they dive, the higher the hydraulic pressure on their body, and the tighter the area around their face mask, the more they feel their blood flow: "it pumps my blood with power." Similar to the flippers, "my mask" also becomes an obstruction for them (371). The narrator mentions "power" three times in four lines and states that "I have to learn alone/to turn my body *without force*/in the deep element" (372; italics mine). The "force" is "my mask," the most powerful tool here. Scuba gears, such as flippers and masks, are essential for human divers to swim a long distance and see underwater. However, in this poem, these tools draw the reader's attention to the diver's body functions and oppress the body.

The narrator's "body-armor of black rubber" (*CP* 370) suggests exhibiting a high affinity for mythical characters: "I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair/streams black, the merman in his armored body" (373). This communality indicates the ambiguity of human existence, leading us to question whether it is real or fictional, just as those of the mermaid and merman. As "We circle silently/about the wreck" (373), the narrator utilizes a plural pronoun, "we," acknowledging themselves and two mythological characters as an internal plurality.

Furthermore, the penultimate stanza depicts the detail of the damage to the wreck and exposes the third phase of metamorphosis, namely that "we are" also several components of the wreck: "we are the half-destroyed instruments," "the water-eaten log," and "the fouled compass" (*CP* 373). Here, each of the two broken navigation tools serves double functions. "[T]he water-eaten log" is a wooden log that was employed to build the ship; it also refers to a logbook that recorded the past route. The compass indicates a location in the present and points in a future direction. The diver recognizes themselves as a ship and the instruments as a part of the sea since they were "water-eaten." The diver's metamorphosis and assimilated tools reveal the ambiguities of the self's external and internal aspects.

Considering the ambiguities of the boundaries between the self and other through metamorphosis, the diver transcends a dualistic gender discourse. Although previous studies often interpreted the poem as the attainment of spiritual androgyny in "I am she: I am he" (*CP* 373), it can also be construed as non-

binary. Expressing themselves using the gendered pronouns that are separated by a colon, the gender representation depicts an identity that exists concurrently and in-between the genders, whether male, female, both, or not identified based on those two genders. Moreover, the utilization of the personal pronouns, "she" and "he," rather than employing the form, "I am a woman: I am a man," describes the otherness in the self. The diver transcends boundaries beyond the duality of being both she and he and recognizes their inner otherness through third-person pronouns.

Although the diver descends into the wreck, the employed tools gradually become obstructions or a part of the diver's identity. The metamorphosis begins with "like an insect," where the internal otherness was expressed through human movement; however, at the wreck, "I am" and "we are" are utilized to represent the otherness in the self. Such detailed stylistic changes illustrated the metamorphosis stages.

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The wreck signifies the beginning of the journey and not its goal. At the end of the poem—in the depths of the sea—the narrator, who had metamorphosed and transcended boundaries until they reached the wreck, reveals that the place is not an unknown territory but a possible starting point where they had returned.

While diving, the narrator repeatedly clarifies the reason for diving into the wreck, namely "to explore the wreck" and "to see the damage that was done" (*CP* 372). They descend into the wreck but never care about its story, how the ship ended up wrecking: "the wreck and not the story of the wreck," "the thing itself and not the myths" (372). They do not know the history of the wreckage but somehow know that what is there is the shipwreck; conversely, we, as readers, search for the stories in the poem. During the metamorphosis, the identity of the wreckage is revealed as the otherness within the self; thus, the narrator must not know the story because it was always a part of themselves.

The absence of any reference to life forms other than the diver commands attention to the internal changes within the diver rather than the changes caused by external factors. The comparison between Cousteau and the diver's statement, "I have to learn alone" (*CP* 372), as well as the fact that no fish or other living organisms appeared in the marine environment, emphasize the diver's sense of isolation. The only mention of marine life seems to be "something more permanent/than fish or weed" (372), which is employed to assert the transience of bodily existence. The anthropomorphized wreck behaves as another life form, which, although already dead, is "the drowned face always staring/toward the sun" (372). The second appearance of the drowned face indicates that the diver was approaching the wreck. They discover that the drowned face does not stare at the sun but "sleeps with open eyes" (373). The face may have witnessed the story of the wreck, which is not revealed in the poem; the eyes, now nonfunctional, indicate acclimation to the deep sea.

In discovering the otherness within the self, the narrator who has transcended the boundaries between the external and internal, as well as real and fictional existences, and the boundaries of the gender recognizes "We are, I am, you are" (*CP* 373). In the wreck, the narrator is aware of the distinction between the self, "I," and the other, "you," recognizing "We" as a first-person plural, which does not claim universality as a collective "we" but includes the otherness that emerged in the metamorphosis. "We" initially appears as a mental plurality when the poet employs the ladder, "We know what it is for," even though this journey is solitary (371). This mental support from others also implies the existence of an

internal other. When "I," who find a part of themselves in "the mermaid" and "merman," say, "We circle silently" (373), the diver undergoing the metamorphosis involuntarily changes from the singular "I" to the plural "we." Rich was aware of the usage of the pronoun "we," as noted by Christopher Spaide, because of the risk of ignoring the differences within and pretending to be a universal figure (Spaide 92); thus, she carefully considers her choices of pronouns.

Additionally, the utilization of definite and indefinite articles indicates a divergence in the structure of the poem. The tools reappear with indefinite articles in the final stanza: "a knife," "a camera," and "a book of myths" (*CP* 373). They, which had been specified with the definite article "the," are arranged in the reverse order of the first stanza. Grammatically, when a previously mentioned object reappears, the indefinite article "a/an" changes to the definite article "the"; but in this case, the reverse is adopted. The reverse order of tools and the usage of articles indicate that the wreck is not an unknown destination but a familiar one to the diver. Moreover, the lines "the one who find our way/back to this scene" indicate that the diver is returning to the wreck (373). The wreck should not be strange to the diver since it represents the internal otherness that is sunken in the self.

In the final stanza, the lines, "the one who find our way/back to this scene," summarize the entire poem. Since the lines are not at the beginning or end of the stanza, but between them, they act as a ladder that connects to the inner journey and condenses the metamorphosis process to the wreck. Notably, the pronoun-verb agreement is corrupted in "the one who find our way/back to this scene." Claire Keyes notes that "Rich uses the grammatically awkward 'one' to emphasize that each of us must complete the journey alone. As individuals, we contain both masculine and feminine" (154). Moreover, the following verb, "find," is plural, and Craig Werner notes that "We are what we are 'by cowardice or courage,' but we are not ourself, at any moment, multiple: we are 'the one.' But the verb is plural, acknowledging our internal plurality, the plurality of a self changing through process" (175). In addition to Werner's "our internal plurality," regarding the metamorphosis process and grammatical discrepancy, the line, "the one who find our way," describes the internal otherness: we, I, you, she, or he. Just as the grammatically contradictory singularity and plurality coexist in one sentence, the process of metamorphosis brings out the otherness, which coexists with the self.

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"Diving into the Wreck" embraces the ambiguity and fluidity of otherness/internals, female/male, and human/nonhuman, or rather transcends decision-making, as the beginning and end of the poem are ambiguous. The metamorphosis brings out the internal otherness to the surface and reveals that the wreck at the bottom of the ocean was not the end of the journey but the starting point. The unraveled gender of the diver, which is the major theme of this poem, is non-binary, transcending the boundaries of duality, between the self and the other, and the internal and external. The poem critically depicts an anti-domination discourse that includes "a false universal," which Rich had denied since *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978). She carefully utilized pronouns and articles in the poem because she had considered her privilege of writing throughout her career. She once gave the following response in an interview with Wendy Martin: "I am talking about language as taking power, really. Language is power, and language has kept us powerless, or kept many people powerless" (Martin 727). Her use of language impacts female writers, feminists, gender studies, and American society, because she wrote stories which

were previously silenced. The words seem to represent something inseparable from us; however, Rich elaborates on this idea contrastingly in "Diving into the Wreck." As she wrote, "The words are purposes/The words are maps" (*CP* 372); they represent something we are aiming for. She was conscious of the power of language, given its autonomous nature which separated it from human intent, since she was a poet who dealt with words.

Notes

1 In this paper, I intentionally employed the non-binary singular pronouns, "they" and "themselves," as endorsed by the Modern Language Association in 2020, the American Psychological Association in 2019, and the *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*, following the poet's caution of gendering the poem.

2 When Rich included "The Tourist and the Town" (1955) in *Collected Early Poems 1950-1970* (1993), she transformed herself from a male to female pronoun in the poem to express her personal experiences (*CEP* 423).

3 Based on Margaret Atwood's praising review article of *Diving into the Wreck* on the December 30, 1973 issue of *The New York Times Book Review*, Rich's poetry collection received very high attention (Atwood 161-2; Holladay 251). In 1974, Rich was awarded the National Book Award in Poetry and gave a joint speech with two nominees, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde.

4 For example, Erica Jong saw Rich's image of androgyny as "the idea that we must write new myth" and "create new definitions of humanity" (174). In *American Poetry Review*, Grace Schulman examines the critical theme in "Diving into the Wreck" as "a new definition of self," which rises "on the ashes of the person that has burst into flames is androgynous, not exclusively exhibiting a male or female identity" (11). Refer to Susan Sheridan (19-23) for contemporary reviews of "Diving into the Wreck."

5 In the other poem in *Diving into the Wreck*, "The Stranger" (1972), the narrator reveals their gender, "I am the androgyne" (*CP* 368). Affected by this clear statement, "Diving into the Wreck" is often interpreted as a poem on androgyny.

6 For example, Carol P. Christ who examined *Diving into the Wreck* and *Dream of Common Language* (1978) revealed that, in "Diving into the Wreck," the major revelation is the androgyny, which Rich describes as a buried treasure that is a vision of wholeness. However, in *Dream of Common Language*, the androgyny is rejected as not adequately expressive of women's new way of being, "Androgyny implies that women accept what men have been as part of the wholeness they seek," which is what Rich could no longer accept (84).

7 Ayça Ülker Erkan notes that the female narrator seeks to remove social restrictions imposed by the patriarchal society by escaping into nature, which symbolizes freedom (214). Although Erkan considers nature as a setting for women's self-expression, Astrida Neimanis draws on Christina Sharpe's critique of black culture, in addition to gender and environmental critiques, to analyze how the shipwreck symbolizes the collapse of the gender order, as well as ecological destruction, while also asserting "anti-blackness" in the sea (9).

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