

Susan Rich:
The Cartographer's Tongue

Readers' Resource Guide



presented by
Just Buffalo Literary Center
and
White Pine Press

Made possible by a grant from the
John R. Oishei Foundation



The Western New York Peace Center is proud to co-sponsor a workshop and public reading by Susan Rich. The Peace Center is the area's largest peace and justice activist organization. We were founded in 1967 as a chapter of Martin Luther King's Clergy and laity Concerned (CALC). We stood in opposition to the Vietnam War, and have since grown to address a wide range of social justice concerns.

Rich's travels throughout the world mirror the breadth of areas of action at the Peace Center. Currently, we have taskforces working on the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, Latin American issues, and prison/police brutality issues. Rich's visit to Buffalo is being co-sponsored by another Peace Center taskforce, the Visions for a Better World series, which aims to explore new ways of seeing the world and our place in it. And, of course, the Peace Center is at the heart of local anti-war organizing.

If you'd like to become more involved in the local peace and justice movement, give us a call at 894-2013 or send an email to colin@wnypeace.org.

In Susan Rich's childhood home in Brookline, Massachusetts, order dictated behavior in the living room while innovation blossomed on the periphery. "It was a house with lots of rules about where to play and where one could put one's feet," Rich says. Because those rules didn't apply in the basement or attic, Rich spent much of her childhood "either underground or high in the rafters." Since then, Rich's explorations of the extremities of her environment have brought her to places as varied as Niger, South Africa, Haiti, Gaza and Sarajevo. These explorations have also formed the content of her poetry, where Rich pushes past boundaries—both internal and external—as soon as she maps them.

Of the two passions most evident in *The Cartographer's Tongue*, Rich's father encouraged Rich's love of travel more than her love of literature: Rich writes in "The Scent of Gasoline" about the longing for travel that the smell of gas triggered in both her father and herself. But, more of a conversationalist than a reader, Rich's father would reprimand his daughter for spending more time reading than talking. It was not until third grade that Rich found real encouragement for her reading, and not until eighth grade that she found support for her poetry.



After high school, Rich attended the University of Massachusetts. Her teachers there discouraged her from attempting a career in poetry. "For ten years after I graduated, I listened to those harsh voices that said I wasn't good enough to be a writer," Rich has said. Although much of the substance of *The Cartographer's Tongue* focuses on Rich's work after college as a Peace Corps volunteer in Niger, she waited seven years before writing about those experiences. Rich's hesitancy to write also derived from her fear that she would "commodify other people's lives" by putting them into poetry. "What did I—an American—know about the life in Niger after only two years?" she has said. But her service in Niger piqued Rich's interest in cultures other than the American one she knew. "Peace Corps gave me a world outside of myself to explore and try to understand," Rich has said. Since then, the task of understanding that outside world has only expanded; Rich has worked in South Africa as a Fulbright Fellow, Bosnia as an electoral supervisor, Gaza as a human rights educator, and Ireland and Zimbabwe as a writer-in-residence. Many of these experiences have also made their way into her poems.

After attending the University of Oregon MFA program, Rich settled in West Seattle, Washington, where she now lives and teaches. For *The Cartographer's Tongue*, published in 2000, Rich won the PEN West Poetry Award and the Peace Corps Writers Poetry Award. She has also won the Rella Lossy Award, the Sojourner Poetry Award, the Glimmer Train Poetry Award and the William Stafford Award. Her second collection of poems, soon to be released by White Pine Press, is titled *Not a Prayer*. In it, themes of travel, human rights, and mothers reappear from her first book, but a "stronger emphasis" is placed on "finding a landscape of home," Rich says: the new poems feature a house, a garden, and two cats, elements indicative of an appreciated stasis. "In *The Cartographer's Tongue*, the narrator keeps reaching outward, wanting to know the world by exploring its obscure nooks and seeking extended views," Rich says. "Now I'm getting older. In *Not a Prayer* there's still poems of South Africa and Bosnia but they are in a counterpoint with poems of pleasurable domesticity."

What was your childhood like in Brookline/ Boston?

Rich: Right before my fourth birthday, I moved with my family from Brighton, Massachusetts to Brookline. We lived in the same house until I went away to college. My parents lived there until their deaths. It was a house with lots of rules about where to play and where one could put one's feet. However, none of these rules applied to the attic or the basement. My childhood was spent either underground or high in the rafters. There was also a small wood next door to our house, very small, on the other side of a public pathway. Exploring backyards, parks, and walkways were also a major pastime. I remember my father reprimanding me because I read more than I talked. Not that he was angry, he just liked to have conversations far more than he liked to read!

A teacher in the third grade, Mrs. Schiavo, was my first great friend in the world of books. She encouraged my voracious appetite and introduced me to *Harriet the Spy*. My two greatest wishes were to travel back in time (like the children in the Edward Eager or Edith Nesbit novels) or become an international spy.

Not until eighth grade did I have another teacher, Mr. Katz, who really took an interest in me. I showed him poems that I was writing and he seemed, or pretended to seem, which amounted to the same thing, quite impressed. He showed one of my poems to the principal which, in turn, became an integral part of our school's graduation ceremony. My classmates were made to memorize parts of MY poem! The same teacher helped me arrange to take a poetry appreciation class in high school that was meant for upperclassmen during my first semester freshman year. Here I was introduced to Emily Dickinson. It would be a long time before anyone took such an interest in me or my work again.

You have said that you stopped writing poetry before entering the Peace Corps and didn't start writing again until seven years after you returned from Niger. What made you stop? And what made you feel that it was time to start again?

Rich: I went off to university already knowing I wanted to be a poet. I wrote poems from the time I could write. I think most children love to play with sounds and naturally create their own rhythms whether it happens with two hands clapping or chanting Australian Emus and Wallaroos together after an afternoon at the zoo.

I was lucky. My older sister gave me the Oxford Book of Poetry for Children when I was eight years old. Some of the poets included were Shakespeare, Carroll, Rossetti, and one of my favorites, Anon. Poetry was a part of my life. I wasn't very happy about it when we memorized poems in the third grade (I'm afraid I don't remember which ones) but it was always there somewhere in the background.

However, at university poetry was not taught as I had expected. I wanted poems that might change the world, express some corner of our best or darkest selves. Instead, the teachers I encountered wanted us to write about spring or snow. The teachers themselves seemed so much smaller in spirit than I had dreamt them to be. They spoke of things like careers and publications. Most importantly, they gave no encouragement to their students. I will never forget one teacher telling his class: "Most of you will never write a word once you reach the age of twenty-five." This was so far from what I wanted the world of poetry to be (an enlargement of the spirit, a community of people committed to the good of all) that I stopped writing as soon as my senior thesis was completed.

How did you become involved as an election supervisor in Bosnia? What was that experience like?

Rich: When I first heard the message on my answering machine inviting me to be an electoral supervisor in Bosnia I really thought it was a joke. I had just finished my MFA at the University of Oregon and was wondering what I would do next. The message on the machine said, “Susan Rich, you fit our profile for an electoral supervisor for Bosnia perfectly.” How could this be? I had never been to Eastern Europe before, didn’t speak any Eastern European languages, and all I had ever done in an election was vote.

However, I was a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer and this meant that I had an informal degree in dealing with erratic electricity, limited water supplies, and could cope if all telephone communication went down. And yes, these minor inconveniences were part of the experience.

I loved everything about being in Bosnia as is probably apparent from the poems. I loved my driver who in reality drove a taxi and knew every single person in Sarajevo. We often joked that he was the one who should be running for president! I loved my guide and interpreter, Leyla, who had just graduated from high school and was on her way to the University of Sarajevo. I loved the energy in the air that seemed to know that some inexplicable evil had come to an end and now the country was transitioning to a new and still unknowable future.

I looked at a description of a class on the Holocaust that you taught at Highline Community College. It seems to be a subject of personal relevance to you, but not one you’ve addressed in your first book. What made you return to it in teaching?

Rich: You really did your homework. There is a poem in *Cartography* on the subject—“Whatever Happened to the Bodies”—that deals with this as does a poem in the new book—“Photograph, May 10th 1933”—which relates the story of a young German girl going to one of the first book burnings as Hitler came to power.

Why and when did you settle in Washington?

Rich: I’ve lived in Seattle a little less than five years. My MFA degree first brought me to the Northwest (Oregon) ten years ago and I immediately fell in love. Oregon was founded by Vermonters and there is a distinct sense of feeling that links the two. From Oregon, I moved up to Seattle for a teaching job. Again, I felt an immediate pull to West Seattle where I live. This is a beach community of sorts right on the edge of a lovely city. From my study I have a little view of the Olympics and the water. Ferry boats go back and forth across the sound as do commercial shipping rigs.

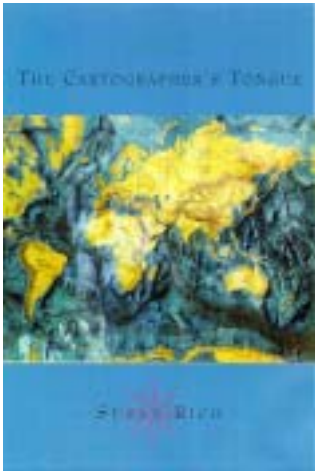
The subtitle of The Cartographer’s Tongue is “Poems of the World” while the subtitle of your next book to be published with White Pine Press is “Poems for this World.” It is a subtle, but provocative variation. What does it signify to you? What themes or sentiments carry over from The Cartographer’s Tongue into Not a Prayer and what new ideas emerge?

Rich: Themes of travel, human rights, and mothers come back again, perhaps in a different way, in the new book. I think there is a stronger emphasis on finding a landscape of home, although that was present, too, in *The Cartographer’s Tongue*. So I haven’t changed that much. I think it’s a question of the orientation of the compass points. In *The Cartographer’s Tongue*, the narrator keeps reaching outward, wanting to know the world by exploring its obscure nooks and seeking extended views. Now I’m getting older. In *Not a Prayer*, there are still poems of South Africa and Bosnia but they are in a counterpoint with poems of pleasurable domesticity. Poems of a house, a garden, two cats, and a familiar landscape give the international poems a different place mark in the collection.

The Cartographer's Tongue

1. At the end of “Atopos: Without Place,” refugee women gather in a group and knit. Rich compares this to telling stories. How might knitting be like telling or translating a story? How do both yarn and language change shape in these processes? Why is it important that knitting in this poem is communal?
2. Rich has several narrative poems in *The Cartographer's Tongue*—poems that tell a story (“Spring Break,” “Haiti,” “Lessons in the Desert”). In some of these poems, the narrator seems to be Rich herself; in others, Rich uses a third-person (“she”) or second-person (“you”) narrator. How do you respond to these different perspectives? Which narrators make you feel that you are “there” and which make you feel distanced from the story? Why?
3. There are many mentions of nomads or Bedouins—peoples who move frequently to survive in the desert—in Rich’s poems. How and where does she compare herself to them? How does she make clear her differences from them?
4. In “The Place,” Rich writes, “love in this world is a word problem.” Do you agree? What does love have in common with measurements or math? What role do language and stories (both spoken and unspoken) have in Rich’s relationship/ love poems?
5. Look at the poem, “What I Will Take From My Mother.” Which lines rhyme in the poem? Where do patterns of rhythm emerge? What does such a loose—but present—structure have to do with the subject/ feeling of the poem?
6. Rich writes that she is as “serious” about her work of “stitching sorrow to desire” as the Toureg men are about their tea ceremony. How is poetry like a ritual? Where do you find a combination of sorrow and desire in Rich’s poems? Do you agree that sorrow and desire are linked?

7. Which senses does Rich engage in her poems? Where does she make you see, feel, hear, smell, or taste what she describes?
8. Where does Rich show characters in her poems presenting certain images of themselves, both to her and others? How does Rich—as outsider (white, female foreigner)—affect how people act in different countries? Why would she highlight this artifice? What are the roles we play when we travel?
9. How is movement, for Rich, more important than getting somewhere or staying still?
10. Images of maps recur in *The Cartographer's Tongue*. When are maps useful? When do they excite imagination? When are they insufficient or flawed?



11. Look at the map on the cover of *The Cartographer's Tongue*. In what ways is it an appropriate depiction of Rich’s book? (Pay particular attention to details: which countries are central, what language is used to label places, how the words are sometimes hard to see.)
12. Rich’s poems seem to fall into different categories: travel poems, love/erotic poems, family poems and others. Which type of Rich’s poems do you prefer? Why?
13. The poems in the “Muted Gold” section of Rich’s book emphasize precipices and edges (the word “edge” appears seven times). In what contexts does she use this word? What kind of transitions and changes is she alluding to? How are edges made both precarious and tempting?
14. Even in her poems that are not distinctly about travel, Rich uses travel metaphors to express feelings or describe situations. What effect does this have?

"The Mapparium"



THE MAPPARIUM

Boston, Massachusetts

In geography class we learn the world
of oceans, continents, and poles. We race
our fingers over mountain ranges and touch
rivers lightly with felt-tip markers. Deserts, islands,
and peninsulas tumble raw and awkward
off our tongues. *Kalahari, Sumatra, Arabia.*

We visit the Mapparium on a field trip.
A made-up word we learn
for the place where the world resides.
We clamor in with falling socks and high octave squeals
Palermo, Kabul, Shanghai,
exploring the globe, crossing its circumference we take flight
touch down on the see-through bridge.

The earth as it was, a time called 1932
stays in a room-- retracts our breath,
our lives-- makes history into color and light.
We look up at the Baltics, see *Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia,*
lands my grandmother left. Sixteen
and wanting the world.

I want to stay inside this world, memorize
the pattern of blue that conceals
the origins of every sea. A wave
hitting stone is the sound my voice leaves
as a pledge of return on the glass.
Feet to Antarctica, arms outstretched
like beacons toward Brazil;
I'll take this globe as my own.

1. How are the students' senses engaged with geography in "The Mapparium"?
2. What devices or observations in the poem show that geography is personal to Susan Rich?
3. Look at the picture of the Mapparium. What words, rhythm, and sounds does Rich use to capture the colors, lights and environment inside the giant globe?
4. How does Rich emphasize the foreign in this poem (not only places that are geographically foreign, but experiences that are foreign or new)?
5. Why might Rich's memory of the Mapparium ("we clamor in with falling socks and high octave squeals") look and feel different than the photo of the Mapparium?
6. Why is the Mapparium an effective image to associate with Rich's travel poems in this collection? Does Rich fulfill her pledge to "take this globe as my own"?

"On Photographing the National Library"



Photo by Roger Richards/DVreporter.com

ON PHOTOGRAPHING THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

Sarajevo, Bosnia

Dramatic staircases leading nowhere.
Now nothing is pretty here.

A man in white overalls leans over
his wheelbarrow.

He nods his okay and we walk
through the doorway.

Cracked bricks and splinters of stone.

What does a picture reclaim
of this simple province of pain?

Jagged edges of empty frames.

Fractures of green and blue
where once lived stained glass windows.

Does it really matter,
whether we photograph the disaster?

The man beckons with broken finger,
signals for the camera to flash towards him.

He grins and brings his friends,
soon the friends are laughing.

Books and papes bombed away.

Dobra, they tell me, *dobra*.
The photograph is good, the photo is okay.

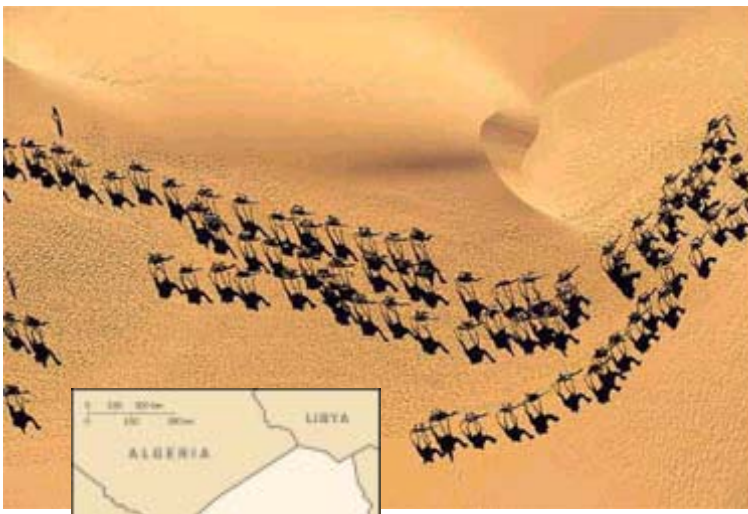
In the swirl of a
thumbprint, one fossilized leaf,

on surfaces stenciled and stained; even here,
some rubbing of the unreal remains.

1. In "On Photographing the National Library," Rich writes, "Now nothing is pretty here." How does the photograph make the remains of the library look "pretty"? Do photographers have a responsibility to make terrible things (war, disease, destruction) look ugly? Why or why not?
2. Where does Rich shift in the poem from looking at the library to looking at her photo of the library? Why might she have made this shift?
3. How might a developed photo—particularly one smudged with a thumbprint—distance someone from an experience, rather than make the experience seem immediate? How else does Rich demonstrate this distance in her poem?

4. How does Rich emphasize the surreal or “unreal” in her poem (with images, actions, and juxtapositions)? Does the photograph capture the same sense of the “unreal” as the poem?
5. By taking a photo of the library, Rich makes a new record of a place where old records were destroyed (“books and papers bombed away”), but she asks, “Does it really matter,/ whether we photograph the disaster?” How would you answer Rich’s question?
6. How is the poem—like the photographs discussed in the poem and displayed on this page—an act of documentation? Is it documenting the building or the act of looking at the building? What is the difference?
7. There are many examples of alliteration—repeated consonant sounds—in “On Photographing the National Library” (for example, “What does a *p*icture reclaim/ of this simple *p*rovince of *p*ain?”). Why would Rich want to connect the words she alliterates?
8. Why is it significant that the workman gestures with a broken finger? What is the connection between people and place in this poem?
9. Susan Rich shows the personality of the library, with its “dramatic staircases” and “fractures of blue and green where once lived stained glass windows.” Does the library have a personality or an “alive” quality in the photograph? Do we have to construct what the library *might have* looked like in order to give it personality?
10. There are many buildings in Buffalo (City Hall and the train station, for example) that are often photographed. What personality do these and other old buildings in Buffalo display? What gives these buildings their personality?

"Lost By Way of Tchín-Tabarden"



At CNN.com, a feature on the French photographer, Yann Arthus-Bertrand displays this image with the caption (summarized from Bertrand's book *The Earth from Above*), "At the edges of the Sahel, the caravan route crosses Niger, Mali, Mauritania and southern Morocco. A caravan can travel 25 miles a day. At Zagora, at the first dune of the Moroccan Sahara, a sign informs riders that Tombouctou is 52 days away by camel." A map of Niger shows a different perspective of the same area.

LOST BY WAY OF TCHIN-TABARDEN

Republic of Niger

1. What are some of the methods of navigation that Rich describes in this poem? Why does Rich focus on those methods breaking down or being abandoned?
2. Rich calls the desert, "a landscape they'd always believed," rather than the more expected, "a landscape they'd always *known*." Why is the word "believed" significant?
3. In the photograph, a caravan traveling across the desert uses a sign on a sand dune to measure the time left to reach their destination ("52 days by camel"). Why would maps be ineffective in the desert? Why would Rich, in her poem, still "want to imagine the aerial map" when she is lost?
4. In a statement on her website, Susan Rich calls the act of mapping the most appropriate metaphor for the explorations that a poet and adventurer undertake. How is poetry, in its structure and content, like a map? How are both types of documents—maps and poems—records of the world and acts of invention?

Nomads are said to know their way by an exact spot in the sky, the touch of sand to their fingers, granules on the tongue.

But sometimes a system breaks down. I witness a shift of light, study the irregular shadings of dunes. Why am I traveling

this road to Zinder, where really there is no road? No service station at this checkpoint, just one *commercant* hawking *Fanta*

in gangrene hues. *C'est formidable!* he gestures—staring ahead over a pyramid of foreign orange juice.

In the desert life is distilled to an angle of wind, camel droppings, salted food. How long has this man been here, how long

can I stay contemplating a route home?

It's so easy to get lost and disappear, die of thirst and longing

as the Sultan's three wives did last year. Found in their Mercedes, the chauffeur at the wheel, how did they fail to return home

to Ágadez, retrace a landscape they'd always believed?

No cross-streets, no broken yellow lines; I feel relief at the abandonment

of my own geography. I know there's no surveyor but want to imagine the aerial map that will send me above flame trees, snaking

through knots of basalt. I'll mark the exact site for a lean-to, where the wind and dust travel easily along my skin,

and I'm no longer satiated by the scent of gasoline. I'll arrive there out of balance, untaught; ready for something called home.

<http://www.peacecorpswriters.org/pages/2001/0107/107talkpoets.html> An interview on the Peace Corps website with Susan Rich and other poets with Peace Corps experience.

<http://www.glimmertrain.com/secplacsusri.html> Susan Rich's poem "In Search of Alternate Endings" is published here as the 2nd place winner of the 1998 GlimmerTrain poetry contest.

<http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/guides/voices/nomadiclife/readwrite/wksheet7.html> An interview with Susan Rich about her poem "Nomadic Life" and the influence of the Peace Corps on her life and writing. Published as part of a teachers' guide by the Peace Corps called *Voices from the Field*.

<http://www.susanrich.net> Susan Rich's website. Includes a biography, a bibliography, a list of recent poetry readings, recent residencies, recent classes/ lectures/ workshops, awards, and a writer's statement.

<http://www.penusa.org/> The website of the PEN USA literary awards. Susan Rich won the PEN West poetry award for *The Cartographer's Tongue*.

<http://www.peacecorps.gov> The website of the Peace Corps, for which Susan Rich worked as a volunteer in Niger in 1984-86.

<http://www.iie.org/TemplateFulbright.cfm?section=Fulbright1> The website of the Fulbright program, including information on fellowships like the one Susan Rich received to teach in South Africa.