Adrienne Rich: Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence

• A thesis for Rich’s essay: pages 632, 657 (especially the first paragraph of section IV)
• Remember, theorists will have often spend time describing other views they ultimately reject. Rich does this in section I.
• Her bottom line: heterosexuality is not an innate or natural predisposition but a socially constructed choice. Rather than agreeing that most women are innately heterosexual, Rich argues that male power make heterosexuality compulsory. NOTE: How is this analogous to Mackinnon’s argument?

Section II focuses on the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access.
• Heterosexuality is something imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, maintained by force (648). Note: Do you see another parallel here to Mackinnon?
• What does it mean to say that heterosexuality is a political institution (637)? How is this similar to Mackinnon’s feminist theory of sexuality?
• Can you identify how it is that male power makes heterosexuality compulsory? See if you can identity some specific practices/forces that Rich identifies.
• Interestingly, in this essay from 1980 Rich calls attention to female slavery (643), human sex trafficking continues to be a major international problem.

Section III focuses on Rich’s account of lesbian existence.
• How does Rich describe lesbian existence? (633, 637, 648, 650 – 652)? NOTE: How does this significantly distinguish her view from Mackinnon’s view?
• Lesbian existence is not simply about one’s desires or personal, private experiences or one’s lifestyle. It is a form of resistance to male tyranny.
• What do you think she means by the lesbian continuum?
• How would you situate Rich’s approach relative to radical libertarian and radical cultural feminism?