Abstract: In this paper I propose to talk about affective structures, the ways human feeling is expressed and cultivated, in recent poems by Adrienne Rich’s and Jean Valentine. Feeling toward others (acknowledgment, regard, empathy, love, a desire for justice) is complicated terrain for politically engaged writers. While it is the source and moral imperative for poetry it is also fraught with dangers, from the immediate risks of sentimentality and sententiousness to the very construction of the lyric self in its “authenticity,” “sincerity,” and self-awareness. Meditation on these necessities and dangers is a central strand in Rich’s writing over many years.

Jean Valentine, Rich’s friend of many decades, is likewise committed to a poetry of humane engagement. But Rich and Valentine use very different poetic strategies to convey feeling. I argue that Rich’s approach is fundamentally political, rooted in the metaphor of voices. Her poems open—sometimes intimately, sometimes expansively—to other voices; her “lyric subject”—the “I” of the poems—is the scene of continuing negotiation between the many and the one. In Valentine’s poems acknowledgement and love are expressed in biological and religious, even sacramental, terms. One becomes or sustains or takes the place of the other in bodily and mystical ways, in substance rather than in voice alone. Valentine’s challenging lyrics stand to complicate and enrich critical understanding of the poetics of engagement and of Rich’s poetry.