American Journey Toward Female Equality with and Through Adrienne Rich's Works

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AMERICAN JOURNEY TOWARD FEMALE EQUALITY
WITH AND THROUGH ADRIENNE RICH'S WORKS

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of English
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
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May 1999
AMERICAN JOURNEY TOWARD FEMALE EQUALITY
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What initially triggered my writing a thesis on the feminist movement in America was the question, "Will women ever truly achieve equality?" Further, will all humanity ever achieve equality? I found through the movement toward equality for women that any movement toward equality progresses toward equality for all because if one group only wants to be equal with others, then they want others to have equality as well.

This thesis surveys the feminist movement in America from the 1950's to the 1990's through the realm of the works of Adrienne Rich, American female poet. Rich's progression as a political feminist poet becomes a microcosm of the overall female journey toward equality. This piece also explores endeavors made by others that parallel Rich's venture. Through this survey of the American movement toward an equalitarian society from the 50's to the present, one finds that women and other oppressed Americans have come far in having equal standing in society, but what Rich and others find is that equality still does not truly exist in all public nor private domains, yet especially in private realms.

The need for further change, in addition to laws and status, is the inherited cultural thought that women and minorities are somehow inferior to the Caucasian male. This pervading idea is a part of our history books, and until it becomes just that--history--then the movement to eradicate its presence, even in our subconscious minds, has to continue.
We are all of the human race, and we are all born equally and freely into this world; thus, we all deserve to live freely and be treated equally. When freedom is truly felt and lived by all, then the pace toward equality will finally cross the finish line.
Introduction

My interest was sparked to write a thesis on the women's movement when I contemplated the question, "Will women ever truly achieve equality?" My focus is on equality for women, but within this movement, the search for equality for all who are oppressed ensues, because if a people truly want equality, not domination, then they want all to be equal. Therefore, the feminist movement aims to improve not only the life of women but also that of all. Although I further wanted to draw parallels between women and oppressed "Others," such as African Americans, Native Americans, and the like, I knew, at the same time, I needed to focus on one area and hope that a microcosm would emerge.

Indeed, one did, I feel, in the works of the American poet Adrienne Rich. Rich's work reflects the American feminist movement from the 1950's to the present. Throughout her career, she contemplates the complexities and the boundaries of society, life, language, and women's private and public roles and calls on other women to do the same. Rich recognizes individual achievements by women but also stresses that women have to come together to form an overall female strength that demands equality for all. Not only a poet but also an activist, Rich urges all humanity to bond together to ensure survival. Ultimately, Rich mirrors the feminist movement, as I believe feminism mirrors her.

Because of the feminist movement, women can now have their livelihoods outside the home, yet home, family and children still remain and need as much support as ever.
Who should raise our children and maintain our homes and families? Logic tells us those who have the children, build the homes, and create the families should. However, for so long, though men were equal participants in conceiving a child, they were not expected to share in rearing the child. Are women now supposed to do it all—maintain a career, a family, and a home solely on their own? The answer is only if they create all of these on their own, and not surprisingly, most women have a significant other/partner who helped them create these entities. If two contribute equally to making a home, then why should not the two contribute equally to maintaining it?

For so long, our country saw nothing wrong with women staying in the home. (Of course, for so long, too, our country saw nothing wrong with enslaving other human beings as property and workhorses.) Many would say that while the wife was at home, the husband was out making the living for the family. However, was he doing the living with the family? While he was primarily absent from the home, he was also primarily absent from his children's lives. Thus, this tradition was thought by Rich and many other women to be outdated and unfair. Although everything seemed right, something was wrong. A dissatisfaction with the established social roles for women emerged and slowly brought about change on how people thought about women and their place in society. Through Rich and others, we will see why and how these changes came about. Moreover, we will also explore why women still have not achieved full equality and what it is that has to change if women are ever to do so.

Rich approached poetry initially from an objective standpoint in her first book of poetry *A Change of World*; like the male masters that were taught to her, Rich formalized
poetry, instead of personalizing it. Being removed from one's poetry was not only the way poetry was "supposed to be" written but this removal also enabled Rich not to identify herself and who she really was in her work. Poetry was to be a rendering of art, not of oneself.

As Rich began to write, she also began her life as a young adult. Rich became a writer at the same time she became a wife and a mother. The struggle she felt playing these multiple roles appears in her early poetry although she is consciously unaware of it: as she says, "Poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know" ("When We Dead Awaken," On Lies. 41). Rich soon realized that for her, creating poetry was as personal as creating life itself. One renders poetry through one's own rendering.

Rich also found that nurturing her own being as a poet often conflicted with her being the nurturer of others. "I cared a great deal about my husband and my children," Rich states, "But in those years I always felt the conflict as a failure of love in myself" (On Lies, 43-44). Rich's frustration with her allotted role in society soon became anger, and she began to express this anger more openly and honestly in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962: "In the late fifties I was able to write, for the first time, directly about experiencing myself as a woman" (On Lies, 44). Here, Rich makes a conscious choice to explore what is beyond being a wife and a mother. She begins to understand and shows us too that what is beyond is unknown, scary, yet somehow better for the state of women, because women need to discover who they are for themselves and not just who they are to others.

This discovering of oneself appears in her next two works Necessities of Life:
Poems 1962-1965 and Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968. A sense of rebirth, re-creation, and renewal permeates these two works, as Rich reconnects with a part of herself—her energy and her imagination (On Lies, 45). As Rich renews her poetic spirit, she also revives her female spirit. This revival of oneself anticipates the revival of society that Rich will later call for in Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972.

In her next work The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970, Rich continues to explore the dynamics of poetry and society, as she analyzes both the construction and destruction language can render, especially a patriarchal language. Expressing herself through words is Rich's livelihood, yet the words of her culture are male-dominated. Hence, this biased language and this biased culture hinder her expression of not only who she is as a poet but also of who she is as a woman. Rich states, "Both the victimization and the anger experienced by women are real, and have real sources, everywhere in the environment, built into society, language, the structures of thought" (On Lies, 46). An ambivalence toward language is felt here because language derives from one's culture, and the patriarchal culture that surrounds Rich limits female expression. Thus, Rich sets out to find a way women can fully express themselves, despite outside forces that would like otherwise.

We can re-create ourselves individually as Rich begins to do in Necessities and Leaflets, but we also have to re-create our communities for an overall change. One exists in her or his own realm, yes, but one also exists in the realm of her or his environment. Our American environment is what Rich explores in Diving into the Wreck. She finds our surroundings to be a wreck of patriarchy, in which those who have been dominated and
oppressed are "half-destroyed" (Diving, 24). We are halved because we have not been able to exist wholly—a part of us lies buried under the ruins of society. However, that we still exist means that we have survived the wreck. After surveying the wreck and learning from it, we need to rise and rebuild, forming new foundations that support everyone. What we inherit we cannot change, but what we have in the present and future we can determine.

In the mid- to late seventies (The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977), Rich calls on women to form a communal effort toward equality more than ever. She looks to past women of strength and calls on present and future women to come together, forming an unified female force. However, by the mid-eighties (Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems 1986), Rich finds contradictions in the movement toward equality because although we are gaining an overall female strength, some fail to gain an individual strength because of a still ingrained and present force of male dominance.

By the late eighties and mid-nineties, Rich recognizes that our country has come far, but many are still dishonored, mistreated, and therefore unequal. Thus, the movement toward equality has to continue. Even more, we have to continue to examine our cultural failures of the past and of the present, so that for the future, they are no longer lingering or current failures but only memories of a time when we were once divided and fragmented.
Chapter One


Throughout the twentieth century, American women have moved back and forth in their standing in society from female representations such as Florence Nightingale to Rosie the Riveter to Barbie. Society has looked at women as the caretakers of the world, as the ones to "hold the fort down" when the men are at war or just not present, and as simply sex objects. Objectified and classified, women have been ostracized from the patriarchal culture that surrounds them. However, as women cannot deny their limiting surroundings, their surroundings cannot deny them or their presence. Many roles have been played, and now, more than ever, women try to play as many roles as possible at once.

Women are establishing their identities in various ways. No longer must a woman be only a wife and a mother, nor does she have to be such. Doors have been opened for women, but some still remain shut. In many fields, women's pay still does not equal that of men's, and in many areas of life, in and out of the work field, women suffer discrimination, as Anita Hill can and did attest to, not too long ago. Although more equality exists in society, patriarchy still exists. An equalitarian society cannot exist in a patriarchal one. However, women are making their way into this patriarchal society, and if enough make their way in, then a female strength will match the male one, and perhaps an egalitarianism will arise. Through continued individual achievements by women, perhaps a communal achievement for all will occur.

Adrienne Rich is one such woman who makes her way into the patriarchy. Rich is
a young wife and mother when she begins to write poetry in 1951. Similar to others in that period, Rich takes on multiple roles as a woman. As a female poet in the 1950's, Rich is a minority, for literature, at least recognized literature, was dominated by male poets and writers. To fit into this male-dominated poetic world, Rich had to make her way subtly—she does this by operating within their terms and conditions. In so doing, she gains acceptance, as indicated by W.H. Auden's Foreword in her first book of poetry *A Change of World*:

I suggested at the beginning of this introduction that poems are analogous to persons; the poems a reader will encounter in this book are neatly and modestly dressed, speak quietly but do not mumble, respect their elders but are not cowed by them, and do not tell fibs: that, for a first volume, is a good deal. (10-11)

This foreword indicates that Auden believes women can be writers, but they need to be conservatively so. However, within these male-dominated surroundings, Rich will create her own female place, forcing boundaries to expand to include her and others like her.

Thus, in her first book of poetry *A Change of World*, the reader detects only a quiet hint of disdain toward the social inequality women suffer, as, for instance, in "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers":

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.
Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (19)

The tigers walk proudly and fearlessly. They do not fear men, as perhaps Aunt Jennifer fears her husband, almost as if he is a god. Many American wives of the 1950's revered their husbands in this way because these men had rescued them from the barren life they would have without a husband and children. These attainments—a husband and children—were supposed to be and often were the ultimate goals for all women during this time. However, an unrest was felt, as Aunt Jennifer feels the weight of Uncle's wedding band—weighing her down, weighing her identity down. Rich shows the control Aunt Jennifer feels from "Uncle," yet Aunt Jennifer creates the tigers who prance proudly and freely. Though Aunt Jennifer will die still terrified, the tigers will go on, and though subtly, so will Aunt Jennifer. However, this power she gives the tigers she will never give herself, letting herself still be mastered not only by her husband but also by rituals such as this—needlepoint—a traditional, passive, and wifely pastime done in the home. In
"Reconstituting the World," Judith McDaniel states, "While apparently accepting the traditional female roles in early life, nonetheless feelings of strain and stifled emotion characterize Adrienne Rich's first [works]" (3).

These feelings of strain and stifled emotion were felt not only by Rich but by countless others as well during the 1950's, as Betty Friedan's landmark work The Feminine Mystique notes in the characteristic first chapter "The Problem That Has No Name":

The problem lay buried, unspoken, for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban wife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night--she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question--"Is this all?" (15)

Ingrained in American culture was the idea that women were the caretakers of society. What was overlooked, however, is that women could not take care of themselves when who they were individually was suppressed by who they were to others. Friedan further notes, "When we were growing up, many of us could not see ourselves beyond the age of twenty-one. We had no image of our own future, of ourselves as women" (69).

Unfortunately, many women buried their discontent, whereas Rich had an outlet--her poetry. As a poet, Rich could define herself beyond her established roles as a wife and mother. At the same time, as she struggles to discover who she is, not necessarily who
she is to others, she also discovers what femaleness is and what women can be.

In "Storm Warnings" from *A Change of World*, Rich addresses female unrest:

I draw the curtains as the sky goes black

And set a match to candles sheathed in glass

This is our sole defense against the season;

These are the things that we have learned to do

Who live in troubled regions. (18)

One wonders if the regions are troubled only by unsettling weather. Perhaps those who live in these regions suffer threats of war or postwar results or, even more, threats of revealing one's identity; thus, the curtains have to be drawn. Being a poet was a part of Rich's identity, yet in revealing her poetry, she reveals herself—a woman, a wife, and a mother. Rich finds a contradiction among these roles, because during the early 1950's in America, one could not really be a traditional woman and a poet. June Sochen in *Movers and Shakers* states that during this time, "If woman persists in being interested in things outside the home, we insist that she must be neglecting her home. If she still persists and makes a success through incredible dogged persistence, we laugh at her" (178-79).

Hence, Rich knows she is dipping her foot into unknown, lonely, and condemned waters, but she also must have known that being a poet was a part of her being, one she could not deny. Thus, we will eventually see Rich move from a "dutiful daughter/apprentice to mother/creator" to finally a "radical lesbian feminist" (McDaniel 3). Rich moves into the world of poetry and does so surreptitiously, but this movement of quiet will not last for
Rich's next major work, Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law: Poems 1954-1962, is more personal, open, and overtly angry at the patriarchal world than A Change of World was. From the title itself, we infer a definition of identity, though a relational identity: a daughter-in-law. Thus, society defines a woman by her marital status—who she is depends upon whom she marries and into what family she marries. Her ultimate identification is that of a wife. That Rich takes on this persona in this book of poetry reflects her struggle with who she is. Not surprisingly, the title poem shows this struggle the most passionately:

You, once a belle in Shreveport,
with henna-colored hair, skin like a peachbud,
still have your dresses copied from that time,

Your mind now, moldering like wedding-cake,
heavy with useless experience, rich
with suspicion, rumor, fantasy,
crumbling to pieces under the knife-edge
of mere fact. In the prime of your life.

Nervy, glowering, your daughter
wipes the teaspoons, grows another way. (9)

The daughter is most likely Rich, and though she has inherited the same role as her
mother, she grows another way. She knows "A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes" (9). Rich recognizes that when a woman defies her given role as only wife and mother, she takes a dangerous chance. To think beyond these roles is to think beyond one's society, defying not only one's society, but also one's culture, one's government, and one's environment. Others who have taken this chance, Rich notes, have been labeled "harpy, shrew and whore" (11).

In this poem, Rich looks for role models of other unconventional women, and we see here the beginning of Rich's mission to unearth female history. Female history, as is anything female, is subordinate in a patriarchal culture, and as Rich tries to express herself not only as a poet, but as a woman, she looks for who has come before her. Claire Keyes notes in "The Angels Chiding" that "a woman writer needs a sense of a woman's active role in the shaping of a literary heritage. As long as poetry is regarded as what men write, a woman writing poetry must deny a crucial part of herself: her female identity" (48). Rich finds she has to strain to find a female inheritance of risky women because those who "cast too bold a shadow / or smash the mold straight off" suffer "solitary confinement, / tear gas, attrition shelling," and there are "Few applicants for that honor" (12). Sochen cites feminist editor Freda Kirchwey who "spent her last decade [1945-55] as publisher and editor of the Nation commenting upon American foreign policy, [yet] historians of the post-World War Two period . . . ignore [her] perceptive writings" (213). Rich calls upon herself and other females to search not only for the bravery of past women, but for the bravery of present women, because we have inherited "her cargo" which is "delivered / palpable / ours" ("Snapshots" 13). As Keyes observes, at this stage in her career, Rich
realizes she has to reconcile "what she is (a poet) with who she is (a woman)," where the two identities of Rich intertwine, forming for her "a new language capable of embracing female energy and creativity" (49).

In creating a female poetry, Rich knows she will have to cross unfamiliar territory. She sets up this situation in "Prospective Immigrants Please Note," where untraveled ground waits to be explored by those who choose to open the door and their eyes to the unknown:

Either you will

go through this door

or you will not go through.

If you go through

there is always the risk

of remembering your name.

If you do not go through

it is possible

to live worthily

but much will blind you,
much will evade you,
at what cost who knows?
The door itself

makes no promises.

It is only a door. (Snapshots, 17)

Rich simply and, thus, startlingly lays down the facts of making choices. She reaches no resolution in the poem because the decision is every individual's. Rich just presents the door; she does not open or keep it closed for us. Her informative tone of knowing both consequences, of knowing what is beyond the door, lets us know that most likely "Rich herself has gone through the door" (McDaniel 8). Rich explores what is beyond society and poetry as we know it for women. She reveals to others that the step to take, the door to open, is present--progression can be made if one wants to proceed. For Rich, however, she has made her decision and forces open the door to this new world, despite the old world's barricades set up before it.

Rich continues moving toward recreating the world of poetry and society in her next two works Necessities of Life: Poems 1962-1965 and Leaflets: Poems 1965-1968. However, in these collections, Rich struggles with how exactly to recreate the poetic world amid the American culture and patriarchy that surrounds her. She opens Necessities of Life with the title poem:

Piece by piece I seem

to re-enter the world: I first began

a small, fixed dot, still see
that old myself, a dark-blue thumbtack

pushed into the scene,

a hard little head protruding

.................

After a time the dot

begins to ooze.

............

Now I was hurriedly

blurring into ranges

of burnt red, burning green. (9)

Rich knows she has made her way into the poetic world with a quiet strength (a small yet fixed dot), but she is now blurring, changing. No longer fixed, she is uncertain where she can go, where she and her poetry can exist. She has found her creation--poetry--but where to express it perplexes her. No domain exists for a female poet because women have only been allowed to exist primarily as a wife and a mother. As a poet, Rich nurtures her own spirit and self, and that in itself is radical because women are supposed to be the nurturers of others, not themselves per se. Thus, for so long, women have denied a self-interest; they have not pursued anything that benefits only them. However, when one
denies herself, one dehumanizes herself. Friedan asserts, "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my home'" (32). Rich is one such woman who looks beyond what society has granted her to see what she can give herself.

For guidance into the realm of being a female poet, Rich looks back to Emily Dickinson, whose life and poetry existed in almost total isolation. She writes of her,

[in your half-cracked way you chose
silence for entertainment,
chose to have it out at last
on your own premises. (Necessities, 33)]

Rich sees Dickinson as being her own person and having her own unique language. However, although Dickinson lived life and wrote life her own way, she did it in alienation--so much so that many view her as an enigma--someone we marvel at and admire but whom we really do not see fitting into the real realm of things. This existence is not enough for Rich because for her, to exist is to exist within the world, not outside of it. For women to truly survive, they have to make their way into the world even if it tries to keep or push them out. The statement of purpose of "NOW," the National Organization for Women, founded in 1966, acknowledges this need to exist equally with men:

[We, MEN AND WOMEN who hereby constitute ourselves as the National Organization for Women, believe that the time has come for a new movement toward true equality for all women in America, and toward a]
fully equal partnership of the sexes, as part of the world-wide revolution of
human rights now taking place within and beyond our national borders.

(96)

This pivotal time surrounded Rich and, inevitably, became a part of her and her works.

In Leaflets, Rich more strongly and angrily expresses her belief that women have
to make their own way into the world. Rich opens Leaflets with "Orion," which she later
explains is her "active principle, the energetic imagination" ("When We Dead Awaken"
45). Thus, she calls on her source of power and creation in this poem:

Far back when I went zig-zagging
through tamarack pastures
you were my genius, you
my cast-iron Viking,

           Breathe deep! No hurt, no pardon
out here in the cold with you
you with your back to the wall. (29-30)

Rich seeks out what gives her strength and allies herself with it even against the wall—the
wall of tradition and patriarchy, which is "forcing her to live and write on its outskirts"
(McDaniel 9). Nonetheless, we see Rich grasping what power she has--from within--to
do battle without. Though her female spirit is suppressed externally by a patriarchal
culture, internally, it reigns. She is no longer blurring into colors but traveling a clear,
lighted path with Orion, a bright constellation and a mythical and great hunter. As Rich
moves ahead, so are other women in Rich's perception:

A new

era is coming in.

...................

Woman, stand off.

...................

She's gone. In her place stands

da schoolgirl. (Leaflets, 30-31)

The schoolgirl could represent a younger generation--"Is she your daughter?" or she could represent a new type of woman--"or [is she] your muse?"--who is just beginning to forge ahead into the world of men to make her own place in it (Leaflets, 31). Either way, the spirit of woman is being reborn, and her status is starting to change. Friedan, after serving as the first president of NOW, speaks of this change to the New York City Human Rights Commission, following the Women's Strike for Equality, which occurred on August 26, 1970 in New York City:

A man who is a director of [a] major institution in this city told me that on the morning of the twenty-sixth he was dictating a letter to his secretary, and his secretary looked at him, and she said, "I am taking dictation from you now, but that doesn't mean that this is all I can do or will do for the rest of my life. And I want you to understand that today." ("Women's Rights" 382)

A spirit of change is in the air for women, and although changes are not going to happen
overnight, they will happen.

Rich also breathes in this air of renewal in "5:30 A.M.," where perhaps the time of early morning signifies a rebirth, a starting over:

The fox, panting, fire-eyed,
gone to earth in my chest.
How beautiful we are,
she and I, with our auburn pelts, our trails of blood,
our miracle escapes,
our whiplash panic flogging us on
to new miracles! (Leaflets, 10)

Surviving attack, the fox and Rich prevail and begin again. Rich identifies with the fox here—a sly, cunning creature whose wits, agility, and quietness help her to endure. Similarly, Rich resolves to overcome whatever forces try to destroy her poetry and her spirit. Blood is shed, yet Rich/the fox persists. Even more, new miracles will occur in spite of and perhaps because of miraculous escapes. McDaniel states, "Like the four-year-old flinging herself against the closet door, the images in Leaflets strike out against . . . cultural entombment. Blood, fire, and war converge" (10). Like a child battling to have her freedom, so does Rich's female spirit battle to be set free. In Necessities and Leaflets, we see Rich move from confusion and frustration to determination and resolution. Rich knows there is a journey to be made towards female equality, and she embarks on it wholeheartedly in her forthcoming works.
Chapter Two

Movement of Adrienne Rich and Others: 1970's

From the seventies to the present, Rich presents her feminist aesthetic to the world in her poetry and prose, as she also adopts a strong feminist stance in life. Rich more directly and harshly addresses the patriarchy, and she calls for a communal effort to change the oppression of women. In *The Will to Change: Poems 1968-1970*, Rich seeks a new poetry and language, and the poetry itself seems to reflect that she has found it. As with any discovery, there are many layers to unfold, yet Rich truly begins the unfolding in this book of poetry, where a newfound spirit pervades—a spirit of revelation and wonder. "A sophisticated and passionate attempt" occurs here, McDaniel asserts, giving us "a new vision . . . Rich returns again and again to images of humankind's prehistoric and preconscious state and then carefully leads us toward a new and altered perception. The process is one of rebirth and conscious recreation" (12-13).

The opening poem "November 1968" explores the freedom that exists with new beginnings as the persona watches a leaf float into the air:

Stripped
you're beginning to float free

the unleafed branches won't hold you

You're what the autumn knew would happen
after the last collapse
of primary color
once the last absolutes were torn to pieces
you could begin. (The Will, 11)
The persona watches the leaf pull away from what held it back, so that it now floats free. The leaf survives these elements and now floats free. Noting the survival of a leaf might seem simplistic, but the leaf's escape actually signifies an endurance and a rebirth.

McDaniel states, "The smoky essence of the leaves, drifting into the air and disappearing, becomes a metaphor for the human return to a preconscious state in which the self and the environment are one, before the individual begins to differentiate itself from the group or its surroundings" (13). One can easily grasp the parallel Rich draws here between a leaf and the spirit of a woman who, though stripped, is now free, surviving forces that tried to destroy or hold her back. Furthermore, not only for this female spirit but perhaps too for Rich's spirit, the absolutes have been destroyed, and the female spirit can begin to exist. Rich has moved beyond the absolutes of poetry and patriarchy and is now finding a new way of creating and being.

However, beyond this poetic female spirit, women were still trying to dispel old, though still present, absolutes and ideologies. In "The Demise of the Dancing Dog," Cynthia Ozick speaks of a debate held at the college where she was teaching in 1965, in which the topic at hand was "Should a Woman Receive a College Education?" She recounts the reaction a female anthropology instructor receives when she, the instructor, states that not only should women "be fully educated, but that her education should be
fully used in society" (197). Ozick tells us the instructor "spoke--against mysterious whispered cackles in the audience--and sat" (198). "What of that youthful mockery?"

Ozick questions. She further asserts:

Their laughter was hideous; it showed something ugly and self-shaming about the nature of our society and the nature of our education--and by "our education" I do not mean the colleges, I mean the kindergartens, I mean the living rooms at home, I mean the fathers and the mothers, the men and the women . . . . (198-99)

Ozick maintains that the biased culture our children grow up in has to change before minds can change. If girls and women are treated unequally inside the home, then how can they be treated equally outside of it? Thus, although Rich, individually, may be moving away from absolutes in her poetry, she knows that this movement has not occurred for all in her society. Rich understands that she has to move toward not only an individual liberation but a female liberation for everyone as well. She looks not only to female predecessors, but also calls on present and future women to join her in moving toward an overall emancipation for women.

Rich unearths the existence of a past female scholar who, because of patriarchal forces that held her back, never received the recognition she deserved. In "Planetarium," Rich pays tribute to Caroline Herschel, the astronomer, "'who worked with her brother William, but whose name remained obscure, as his did not'" (McDaniel 14). Caroline is a woman "whom the moon ruled / like us / levitating into the night sky" ("Planetarium," The Will, 13). Here, Rich connects Caroline with all women, where Caroline is an example of
how far women can go, and many have—unknowst to the lot of us. Why? Perhaps because of "our education" about which Ozick so candidly speaks. McDaniel asserts, "What Caroline Herschel saw changed our earthly vision of the sky—'what we see, we see / and seeing is changing'—and the poet sees Caroline Herschel and gives the reader a new way of seeing a female reality" (14). Rich further sees Caroline in herself in the closing of the poem:

I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind. (The Will, 14)

Ultimately then, through her reconstruction of Caroline, Rich is reconstructed as well. Hence, a female poetry and discourse occur where women survive and connect with each other. In "Snapshots" and "I Am in Danger," Rich looks to past females for inspiration, but here, more than ever, we see her make a clear connection between reviving past women and reviving herself. Further, Rich knows that her doing so revives the female spirit overall. From here on, we will see her take clear steps to connect with other women, building a communal achievement on individual ones. Simultaneously, "the poet, like the astronomer, becomes an active agent of change," and Rich's "will to change" presents itself (McDaniel 14). Women connecting and communicating with and about each other will bring alive their own unique existence from the past, the present, and the future.

Rich further explores not only how women but also how humanity connects and
communicates in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children." Before writing this poem, Rich had received a telephone call from a neighbor that his son and hers were caught burning a math book on the last day of school. The neighbor is outraged, and Rich explores her feelings on words and the power of books in the poem: she had read a book on Joan of Arc so obsessively that her parents took "the book away / because I dream of her too often" (The Will, 15). The book is taken away because Rich reacts to it; the book itself has no power; Rich's reaction to it does, however, and that is why it is removed. However, Rich's reaction, her response cannot be removed. What we do with words, how we act/react with them is what truly has an effect on the outside world and others.

Throughout this poem, Rich states, "I know it hurts to burn" and further declares, "The burning of a book arouses no sensation in me" (The Will, 17). What people experience and feel is what matters; a book has no sensation--it does not feel the pain, the burn, nor the misery--we do. One's thoughts and feelings exist without words; we do not live through words--we live through living. Rich asserts, "There are books that describe all this / and they are useless" (The Will, 17). The words and the books themselves are powerless; the meaning they carry we give them.

Further, Rich imagines, "relief / from this tongue / this slab of limestone / or reinforced concrete," because words can hinder true existence, especially these words of "the oppressor's language" (The Will, 16). That the concrete of such a limiting language is reinforced signifies the passing down of not only patriarchal words but also, and more importantly, the passing down of patriarchal ways. Who re-cements the patriarchal wall? Those of us in society who allow it to stand. We can idly say we need to break down the
patriarchal system, but until we do so, nothing will happen. To just say something is not enough. To mean it and act on it and live by it is more. Rich notes, "burn the texts said Artaud" (The Will, 17). Artaud was a French poet who felt the structures of Western culture should be destroyed. Here, Rich calls not so much for the burning of books, but for the destruction of oppression whose history is recorded in books. McDaniel notes, "We sense a real ambivalence here toward the power of the written word, which Rich both denies and affirms" (14). The power of the written word comes not from the word itself, but from those who write it, read it, speak it, believe in it, and live by it.

In "Our Whole Life," Rich continues to examine the limitations of language. As a society creates and develops its culture, then it also creates and develops its language, a part of culture. To Rich, our history has been passed down through words, but these words have come from the patriarchy; thus, the history we have been told is only partial, not true, for it contains only that which benefits and reflects the patriarchy. Therefore, those of us not included in the patriarchy--women, African-Americans, and the like--are minorities:

Trying to tell the doctor where it hurts
like the Algerian
who has walked from his village, burning

his whole body a cloud of pain
and there are no words for this
except himself. (The Will, 37)

We cannot accurately express the pain we feel from our oppression because we do not have our own words to do such. Ultimately then, Rich has to recreate poetry for herself and perhaps for others who are oppressed as well, and here "in this single image Rich unites the words, the pain, the body, and the politic" (McDaniel 16). Anger is in this poem, but there is also revelation and poetic justice perhaps, because recognizing what has held one back in society is a triumph in itself, which can only enable one to move away from what or who suppresses him/her and to move toward what frees him/her.

In "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," Rich employs the title of John Donne's poem to say goodbye freely to all the old ways of writing poetry because they limit her: they cannot speak for or to her since the past literature that she has been taught has been male-dominated. Rich now recognizes the limitations yet possibilities of language: "I could say: those mountains have a meaning / but further than that I could not say. / To do something very common, in my own way." (The Will, 50). As in "The Burning of Paper Instead of Children," Rich reasserts that words can only describe an experience; however, here she further asserts that through her experiences, she hopes to connect to others.

According to Willard Spiegelman, Rich "wants to control, rather than submit to, the only power she may own," and "making a last attempt to break through language to meaning, she resigns herself to, and in, an infinitive of expectation. The very 'common'ness of the goal surpasses the assertion of individuality ('in my own way') as the single voice asks to speak for others" ("Driving" 375-76). Altogether, we share life, yet we all live it uniquely. We have a shared individualism. We can embrace our own, but we must also respect
others'. No one's individualism, no one's self is more important than another's--we make up a shared whole. Overall, in *The Will to Change*, we find Rich willing change not only in her poetry but in her society. Rich's message is that we can all have a positive effect on each other--discovering what this effect is empowers us--within and without. Through each other, we can affect all and, hopefully, effect change.

In *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*, Rich explores what has been present for women, what currently is, and what can or will be in the future. Alice Templeton states, "Critics generally agree that it is Rich's first openly feminist volume, though many of its themes are not new for her" (33). Here, Rich's journey toward female equality continues, yet she now moves with a more focused and quicker pace than ever before. We see Rich move from singular female achievements to communal ones. Communal achievements can perhaps eradicate our culture's ingrained bias toward women to where, eventually, all people view women as equal with men.

Rich opens the book with "Trying to Talk with a Man," in which she equates testing bombs to talking to a man. Thus, one discerns that Rich sees this attempt as dangerous, even life-threatening:

Out here I feel more helpless

with you than without you

You mention the danger

as if it were not ourselves

as if we were testing anything else. (*Diving*, 3-4)
This situation threatens not Rich's life per se but her life as a female. Her patriarchal marriage has failed her, as patriarchal society has failed women. This poem relates "destructive sexual relationships to the destructiveness of contemporary civilization" (Templeton 40). Further, "out in this desert" where "we are testing bombs," no hope exists--the land is barren, dry, and lifeless (Diving, 3). Essentially then, to Rich, this patriarchal land is a void for women. Moving beyond this wasteland, the speaker of the poem begins to concentrate on herself rather than her environment as Margaret Atwood notes in "Review of Diving into the Wreck":

Like the wreck, the desert is already in the past, beyond salvation though not beyond understanding . . . the task of the woman, the She, the powerless, is to concentrate not on fitting into the landscape but on redeeming herself, creating a new landscape. . . . The difficulty of doing this (the poet is, after all, still surrounded by the old condemned landscape and 'the evidence of damage' it has caused) is one of the major concerns of the book. (239-40)

Rich writes Diving into the Wreck during a turbulent time in America--the early 1970's. Along with the Civil Rights movement, a resurgence of feminism occurs. Friedan notes this air of change that envelops American culture in her speech following the Women's Strike for Equality, held in New York City in 1970:

The revolution of rising expectations of women of this city and country will only be met by full equality--full equality of opportunity in employment, in education, and in the restructuring of all institutions and professions . . . . This means, of course, also a restructuring of the home and of marriage and of childbearing. (381)
This revolution and this restructuring entails a lot, and Rich recognizes this danger in "Trying to Talk with a Man," where the danger is not far away and remote, but right here among us all, among life's rituals as we know them. Though these rituals oppress, to abandon them and create new ones appears scary. Thus, setting the tone in the beginning, Rich lets us know that in this book, she will be exploring the wrecks, the wastelands patriarchy has created, and in doing so, she will make her own space, clearing debris out of her way, finding a new way to cultivate the land so that it is accepting of and even extends its boundaries for female power.

In the poem "When We Dead Awaken," Rich calls on fellow women to recognize where they have been and where they can, indeed, go: "even you, fellow creature, sister, / working like me to pick apart / this woman's garment, trying to save the skein" (Diving, 5). Rich knows other women are trying to remake and rediscover themselves because they do not truly fit into a male-dominated world: "The fact of being separate / enters your livelihood" (Diving, 5). This separateness calls on women to look for new ways of existing, ways in which they can release their female spirit rather than suppressing it. However, Rich fears some might turn back to the old ways of living, which, though stifling, are familiar. She warns us, "never have we been closer to the truth / of the lies we were living, listen to me" (Diving, 6). She urges us on, for not only are we closer to the truth of the past but also we are closer to the beginning of a new strength, where we "would be a weed / flowing in tar, a blue energy piercing / the massed atoms of a bedrock disbelief" (Diving, 6). Like weeds that sprout up amidst a paved road, we could break through and rise above the paved way of society. Rich points out that a female strength is
just below the surface, and though it may be hidden, it does exist and can crumble the
stones of patriarchy that make up our existing ideologies, so that new ones that will
support both women and men can be built. Robin Morgan notes this emerging strength in
"Goodbye to All That": "We are rising with a fury older and potentially greater than any
force in history, and this time we will be free . . . Power to all the people or to none"
(158-59). Women know that in their fight to overcome female oppression, oppression
itself has to be eradicated.

This possibility of a unified female force recurs in "Incipience," in which Rich
envisions women "stumbling up the hill / hand in hand, stumbling and guiding each other /
over the scarred volcanic rock" (Diving, 12). That the women are stumbling shows that
the journey is long going and tedious. Though reaching a female freedom is not easy, to
know it can happen should spur women onward, as one can "feel the fiery future / of every
matchstick in the kitchen" and know "Nothing can be done / but by inches" (Diving, 11-
12). Thus, though blindly and painstakingly made, a female movement occurs in this
poem toward a fiery and bright future, because the women want to leave behind the dark
past of limitations they have shared. Rich heads toward this bright, though unfamiliar
ground in "After Twenty Years," where, again, we encounter two women together, now
sitting and talking, creating a strength in this act itself: "Their talk is a striking of sparks /
which passers-by in the street observe / as a glitter in the glass of that window" (Diving, 13).
As women ally with each other, sparks fly, which are a precursor to power, yet
neither woman knows where this strength will take them, for "Loneliness has been part of
their story for twenty years" (Diving, 13). These women have led segregated lives, yet
both have "bathed their children in the same basin" and "walked the floors of their lives" though "in separate rooms" (Diving, 13). Now these women come together, and, ironically, in recognizing their past shared isolation, they become empowered. Foundations have been broken, yet "the sense of possibility is mixed with uncertainty because they [the women] lack rules" (Templeton 52). These women now exist "where nothing is forbidden / and nothing permanent" (Diving, 13). Women are at a standpoint beyond the rules and roles society placed on them—new identities need to be found--ones defined not by society, but by themselves. The possibilities, though unknown, are limitless.

Along with the possibility of new boundaries to cross, there still exist the domains of home and childcare, which society has always viewed as women's responsibility. Beverly Jones notes this perplexing juxtaposition in "Toward a Female Liberation Movement" in which a women's group that had just formed in 1967 began to talk to each other: "Their talk at first centered on socialist theory and women, but after we had kicked around capitalist disaccumulation for a while, we zoomed right back and talked about monogamy and . . . community and . . . children" (108). Women can ponder what lies ahead and options that await them beyond the home, but at the same time, they have to look at what has surrounded them in the past and still does in the home and somehow alter or incorporate the old surroundings into the new ones they are creating.

In "The Mirror in Which Two Are Seen As One," Rich shows how domesticity does not suffice for a woman in developing a sense of herself. The speaker's "sister" offers her alternatives. This sister is her sense of herself--of who she really is, of where her real
strength lies. This underlying sister hands her sister "another book" and "a record / of two flutes in India reciting" (Diving, 15). This alternative sister teaches the other "a mode of being that is different from the abundant but unsustaining domestic way of life" (Templeton 52). All the sister has known is domesticity; she has only guessed that something more is out there. This woman seeks outlets from her present life. The persona informs this now broken half-woman that "Dreams of your sister's birth" will take over, and your "two hands grasping [her] head" will draw "it down against the blade of life" (Diving, 16). Further, the half-spirit woman will have "the nerves of a midwife / learning her trade" (Diving, 16). Through this poem, Rich encourages women to look within for strength. At the same time, she also points out that we are all sisters—with the alternative sisters that are within us individually and with the sisters/fellow women who are around us collectively. This woman is at the point of discovering herself—her true identity—"getting herself born" (Atwood 240). However, as a "sister" discovers herself, she discovers all who are her sisters. Gaining an individual strength empowers, but gaining a collective strength overcomes.

Throughout Diving into the Wreck, a sense of separateness comes across in almost every poem, and this is the central theme in "The Stranger." Here, Rich hears "them talking a dead language"—a language which is not hers, for she is the "living mind you fail to describe" (Diving, 19). "Them" most likely indicates the patriarchy, and that they are speaking a dead language recalls Rich's dilemma in The Will to Change, where she feels ambivalence toward language. She still remains as "the verb surviving / only in the infinitive," for her active will to sustain, to be, will not subside (Diving, 19). According to
Jane Vanderbosch in "Beginning Again," Rich "questions the power of names (as nouns) to describe identity and she defines herself in terms of action by referring to herself as a verb" (112). In a patriarchy, women cannot truly have their own identity. Women are strangers to and separate from this patriarchy. However, women continue to survive as active beings who will not be defined by any particular passive role or noun form.

Audre Lorde is one such female who will not be narrowly defined or categorized. In "Who Said It Was Simple," she states, "It's easier to deal with a poet, certainly a Black woman poet . . . when you categorize her, narrow her so she can fulfill your expectations. . . . I am not one piece of myself. I cannot be simply a Black person, and not be a woman, too, nor can I be a woman without being a lesbian" (169). To be limited to one role, one categorization, is what women have been fighting all along. Neither Rich nor Lorde will accept being labeled because they know women have multiple roles to play—not just the one or two society dictates they should play. Labeling leads to limiting, and women fighting for equality want neither.

Before moving ahead and beyond patriarchy's and society's failures, Rich knows we have to explore what remains from these failures, because the truth of what has passed needs to be understood before the truth of what lies ahead can be sought. In the title poem "Diving into the Wreck," Rich has come to survey "the wreck and not the story of the wreck" (Diving, 23). Moving beyond what we have been told about history, Rich wants to discover what history is actually there--where a male and female history exists as well as a black and white one, and a Native American and Puritan one. The histories further extend and extend, and so much more is there than what we have been told. Jan
Montefiore notes in "Communities of Women" that "Rich continually emphasizes our distance from and only partial knowledge of the past: a knowledge which her poetic practice seeks to retrieve and extend" (85). Hence, Rich monumentally attests to us here her commitment to not only exploring but also to revealing a collective history, not just a patriarchal one. She will search "the thing itself and not the myth / the drowned face always staring / toward the sun" (Diving, 23). That the ones drowned, silenced, look toward the sun indicates a hope, a pride. Those who survive from these drowned figures are the faces of that hope and pride that still shine in the sunlight, despite the suffocating waters under which society holds their ancestors. The history of those who have lived on the margins of America--those outcast from standard textbooks--still exists; it just needs to be uncovered and re/discovered among the ruin. Planks need to be pulled up, not only by the inheritors of these drowned ancestors but also by all American people because we are all "the fouled compass" who need to "find our way / back to this scene" (Diving, 198). Our history is fouled, and until we recognize this, we are fouled.

Continuing to uncover marginalized women, Rich revives past females and their accomplishments, as we have seen her do before with Emily Dickinson and Caroline Herschel. If we see a cohort of strong women from the past, then perhaps we can form a cohort of strong women in the present and in the future. In "For a Sister," Rich pays tribute to Natalya Gorbanevshaya, who was incarcerated in a Soviet mental asylum for her political activism. Rich imagines Natalya's coming home after many years "to light the stove, get out the typewriter and begin again. Your story . . ." (Diving, 48). Here, Rich paints the picture of a woman taking action who has stood up to her oppressors before
and will do so again. Rich depicts a strong woman who will continue to stand for what she believes in even if it defies the cultural norm that she lives in. Perhaps then, Rich is encouraging American women to do the same. That Rich writes about Natalya empowers not only Natalya but Rich herself and women in general. Templeton asserts that "for Rich, 'our poems / our lives' ("Incipience") are not simply aesthetic products but also critical challenges to destructive cultural practices and narratives," and "the hope for cultural regeneration . . . comes from two possibilities: connecting with other women and communicating an alternative feminist ethics, especially through poetry and writing" (53-54). Through Natalya's act, Rich is empowered, and through Rich's act, Natalya is empowered. Each complements the other in strength.

When women fail to connect with each other, destructiveness for both results, as in "Translations," where a woman calls her male lover only to hear him "telling someone else
/ Never mind. She'll get tired. / hears him telling her story to her sister" (Diving, 40). That he tells the story, translates it, and not her, disconnects the women who are both "ignorant of the fact this way of grief / is shared, unnecessary / and political" (Diving, 41). The women give the man the power to not only speak for them, but to choose one over the other. Rich's message here recounts her struggle in Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, where a woman's value is determined by how valuable she is to a man. This measure of worth demeans women, and when they do it to each other, it only further debases them. Women need to come together, forming a unity, not destroying each other's self-worth. Women can choose to stand together or fall together. When an "unequal power held by the man" manifests, the women give up what power they have (McDaniel 18). Instead of
letting our identity be defined by what our identity is to a man, Rich calls on us to define ourselves, to not let others have that power, that control.

"From a Survivor," the closing poem in Diving into the Wreck, fits into the book's overall idea of not only surveying society's wreck, but surviving it as well. Rich acknowledges to her departed husband, "The pact that we made was the ordinary pact / of men and women in those days," implying that both were only doing what they knew to do—what was expected (Diving, 50). However, the failure was not in the men and women themselves, but in the society in which they lived. In a patriarchal society, patriarchal marriages ensued, so when women began to have problems with patriarchy, they began to have problems with a marriage based on such an institution as well. Norman Mailer suggests in "The Married State" that "The whole question of liberation boils down to one: Who will do the dishes?" (138). Though seemingly minute and almost comical, Mailer simply and starkly reveals the complexity of breaking down our male-centered society and recreating it into an equalitarian one, where not only legal, professional, and public domains are altered, but so are domestic and private ones. Who will do the dishes? We all will, Rich and other feminists would answer—we are all responsible for the mess our patriarchal inheritance has left us. When all people from every sex, race and color pick up a dish and place it on the shelf together, then and only then will the mess be cleared. This restoration, of course, had not happened yet at the time of Rich's marriage, and she ponders, "I don't know who we thought we were / that our personalities / could resist the failures of the race" (Diving, 50). Rich recognizes that women's oppression is not the fault of any individual man, but the fault of a patriarchal system. Rich has survived these
failures, however, and she now lives in "a succession of brief, amazing movements / each one making possible the next" (Diving, 50). To recognize that patriarchy does not work for everyone is the first step, and to move toward a new way of living is the next. Rich takes these steps and calls on everyone who believes in humanity to join her.

Diving into the Wreck signifies not only what has passed for women but also what still lies ahead. Rich goes down to the depths of society's failures, its wreckage, below the surface, yet she does not drown or disappear. She has come up for air, renewed, ready to reteach and relearn women's history so that a new history will be sought for the future where women are no longer oppressed, but have progressed to find themselves standing on their own two feet.

In Poems: 1973-1974, a historical tribute toward the American woman emerges in "From an Old House in America." Rich goes through an old farmhouse, where she retreats for the summer and reflects on all women who have come to live in America, though their ways of coming here varied. Some came "Foot-slogging through the Bering Strait," others by "jumping from the Arbella," while some were forced and "chained to the corpse beside [them]" (Poems, 238). Here, Rich recalls the crossing over to America by the Native Americans, the Puritans, and the African-Americans. Overall, a woman's only purpose on this new continent, no matter with whom she crossed over, is "to be fruitful / my body a hollow ship / bearing sons to the wilderness" (Poems, 238). Hence, all American women share the collective history of being "breeding-wenches," though many are unaware of sharing this commonality, because "Most of the time, in my sex, I was alone" (Poems, 239). Rich points out to us our inheritance of isolation and struggle, no
matter from whom we descend— the Native American woman, the Puritan or European woman, or the African-American woman. Amid these obstacles of being alone and oppressed, women have also been the principal caretakers of our nation—raising our children into our leaders—yet this strength is, overall, not recognized by the patriarchy. Why does the patriarchy continue to place the man at the head of the household, when often he abandons the household, as many of our female ancestors have experienced:

When the men hit the hobo track  
I stay on with the children  
my power is brief and local  
but I know my power. (Poems, 239)

The woman knows her power, for even if it goes unacknowledged, it does not mean it is not present. Thus, Rich calls on women to take note of their strength and to know all women have power. This knowledge in itself increases female strength as a whole. Rich speaks of "the Mother of reparations" who "calmly biding her time" will repair this nation and its past wounds (Poems, 242, 244). This "sense of repair and making amends," Eleanor Wilner states in "This Accurate Dreamer," produces a poem "about the past that opens the future" (259). "From an Old House in America" calls for a new female existence in which women are so strong they break every boundary this nation once placed on them.

Rich notes that often it has been and still is the woman of a household who holds the home together, and by being the foundation within the home, women also contribute to the foundation outside of the home, because the outer realm, ultimately, depends on the
inner. In *Two Paths to Women's Equality*, Janet Z. Giele notes, "The family cannot be skipped, because one of the main reasons women lack equal education, employment, and pay is that they have unequal (and greater) responsibilities for families and children" (183). Rich urges women to use the strength within that has sustained their families now to better themselves in the home and outside of it. A balance of women's power in and outside the home needs to equal that of men's power in and outside the home as well. When we find this balance, perhaps then, we will have true equality.

*The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977* continues Rich's focus on a unified female strength. The opening poem "Power" reflects on Marie Curie, the female scientist, who died

*a famous woman  denying
her wounds

*denying

her wounds  came  from the same source as her power.* (*The Dream, 73*)

Curie is a renowned woman of science whose power both enhanced and, ultimately, took her life. Curie discovered radium, yet her work with the element poisoned and killed her. McDaniel states, "Rich's poetic image--the woman holding in her 'suppurating' fingers the test tube of uranium, source of energy and death--unites the abstract and political difficulties of power" (21). Power can deliver, but also destroy, as we have seen it do when in the hands of dominating cultures. When we give away our power over ourselves to some thing, as Curie did, or to someone, as patriarchy has women do, then our individual strength is lost. Curie's power became her power to die, because she indirectly
and knowingly killed herself. What gave Curie power also killed her; similarly, in a patriarchal structure, what some women actually think gives them power--men--actually destroys them.

In "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev," a group of women have come together to climb a range of mountains, and though they die in a storm on these mountains, they have chosen "each other and this life / whose every breath and grasp and further foothold / is somewhere still enacted and continuing" (The Dream, 75). Rich asserts that these women have set out to do what they intended, and though they do not survive their attempt, at least they have lived a life "of their own choosing" (McDaniel 21). Further, these women journeyed together, which is what Rich encourages all women to do, not through a range of mountains per se, but through the range of obstacles society places before them. In "Mining the Earth-Deposits," Marianne Whelchel notes, "Despite the team's failure to actually reach their goal, and despite their consequent deaths, Rich celebrates their attempt as representative of the achievement possible for women in community" (59). We see Rich moving beyond singular female achievements to communal female achievements. In order to gain an overall female strength and equality, women have to be recognized in solidarity, no longer disintegrated by patriarchy.

Rich moves even further in "Transcendental Etude" by recognizing an unnamed female--the "ordinary woman." In this recognition, however, Rich still acknowledges a community of women because many of us would consider ourselves "ordinary." However, in this same instance, Rich declares that we are all far from ordinary, for the woman with "experienced fingers quietly pushing / dark against bright, silk against
roughness, / pulling the tenets of a life together" is the same woman who is "the stone
foundation, rockshelf further / forming underneath everything that grows" (The Dream,
90). This poem recalls the message from "From an Old House in America," which is that
the woman is the quiet strength of this nation. Rich attempts to show us that the power a
woman has in the home can go beyond the home, yet the home still does not have to be
forgotten or compromised. One of the most pressing issues of working toward female
equality is that by gaining equal status with men, women will sacrifice the home and the
children, and who will take care of our homes and rear our children then? Giele offers a
solution:

Equality and caregiving have been constructed as opposites. Now the
challenge is to break apart this simple dichotomy and replace it with [the]
recognition that working women who are not confined to the traditional
homemaker role are still interested in and capable of concern for families,
children, aging parents, neighborhood, and community. . . . The synthesis
now emerging sees the rights of the individual and the needs of the society
as inextricably intertwined. (185)

Women are a part of and vital contributors to society, despite our patriarchal system, yet
they are also individuals who should be able to define themselves and choose to be who
they want, no longer dictated to be a certain way by someone else. Women give life to
and raise others, but they also need to give life to and raise themselves. Joanne Feit Diehl
in "Cartographies of Silence" notes that the woman needs only to look to these "life-
sustaining forces" to recreate a "new home and a new world" where women progress and
exist freely (108). If we can give life to others, we can re-create our lives as well. By looking within and looking to other women to do the same, we can form a foundation that supports ourselves and no longer just supports others.
Chapter Three


In the last two decades of her career, Rich calls on women to continue coming together on working toward equality—not only for women, but for all. She also calls on all humanity to join in this effort. We all have a fighting chance when we come into this world. Who is one to hold another down? What gives him/her the right to take away another's chance at a fulfilling life? The idea of one sex having domination over the other, which patriarchy depends upon, needs to be replaced by a "partnership way," a term coined by Riane Eisler to mean a situation in which "neither half of humanity is ranked over the other and diversity is not equated with inferiority or superiority" (453). This partnership way is what Rich calls for—a partnership not only among women but among all of the human race as well.

In A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981, Rich continues to speak to and about female figures. "Mother-in-Law" recalls one of Rich's much earlier works--"Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law." As a daughter-in-law, Rich struggled with being defined by her marital status. Literally, she is no longer bound to this particular definition because her husband has died and she never remarried. She now defines herself in her own terms to her still present mother-in-law who wants Rich to tell her "something true." What Rich tells her is this: "Your son is dead / ten years, I am a lesbian, / my children are themselves" (A Wild, 32). Rich has found her true identity, and although she has come to terms with who she is, others may not be ready to do so, despite what they
say. The part of Rich who was constricted as a daughter-in-law now breathes freely.

Although women construct their own identity and breathe freely more than ever, Rich still finds in *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems 1986* that women are not completely free, especially in a patriarchal system. Templeton states that "*Your Native Land* examine[s] the contradictions that are fundamental to culture, specifically to the dynamic, resistive relation between individual and collective being" (112). We inhabit our individual selves, but we inherit a collective conscious, as "North American Time" shows:

"That my grandfather was a slave / is my grief; had he been a master / that would have been my shame" (*Your Native*, 71). Though the repercussions of an oppressed past may be different for everyone, that we all share this past can help us move ahead together. Consequently, we have a collective present as well. The current winds of femininity blow through everyone's front yard, yet how fiercely they sweep away the stale air of the patriarchy depends upon how many windows and doors are open or remain shut in each individual's home.

The poem #4 in "Part III Contradictions: Tracking Poems" tracks the voice of a woman abused by a man:

*He slammed his hand across my face*  
*let him do that until I stopped letting him do it*  
*So I'm in for life.*

........................

*They told me how to answer back.*

........................
Women’s Lib taught me the words to say
to remind myself and him I’m a person with rights
like anyone. But answering back’s no answer. (Your Native, 86)

Despite the encouragement of the collective women's liberation movement, the individual still does not triumph over her injustice of being abused; instead, she is punished for life for taking drastic measures to end the abuse. Women can work toward a collective female equality, yet still fail to achieve an individual one. In What Women Want, Patricia Ireland, the recent president of NOW, acknowledges the fact that an ultimate female equality will not be achieved easily:

I'd always known there was no magic wand we could wave, no final victory we might win, that would mean women's lives and our rights would finally and forever be safe. None of the laws passed meant that harassment at work or domestic violence or antiabortion terrorism would automatically end... we can't stop with changing laws--that's just a first step. We have to change the entire culture that supports and legitimates discrimination and violence against women. And change doesn't happen just because laws are passed or because time passes; it happens because we make it happen.

(293)

The principles of feminism have to become the practical; women need equal standing outside as well as inside the home. Changing culture's mind as well as individuals' is the only way to true equality. We might forever have to work toward these changes and may not see the ends to the means in a lifetime, but we will have the lifetime of living life as
fully as we can, determining its course as we go. Rich, along with other feminists, has encouraged women (and still will do so) to come together, remember each other, and recognize each other as equal not only with each other but also with men. Even if society and its culture have not come together with these women, even while they still exist in an un-accepting environment, they still exist. To deny women equality is to deny oneself one's humanity: we have to work toward all individuals recognizing this denial and also remember that a woman is still ultimately responsible for herself. Even if society does not give her equal standing, at least she persists to stand.

Persistence is a prevalent theme in Rich's *Time's Power: Poems 1985-1988*. In "The Desert as Garden of Paradise," withstanding severe conditions causes one to grasp what does sustain him/her, whether it be hope or will. Using this sustaining force, one survives: "where drought is the epic then there must be some / who persist, not by species-betrayal / but by changing themselves" (*Time's Power*, 134). Those who persevere adjust to their surroundings--no matter how barren--and find sources of strength and replenishment. They live and progress in spite of their harsh environment. Women have done and will still do the same, no matter what dry spells of injustice they have to suffer. Rich takes the desert environment which can be both "promising and threatening" and equates it to the patriarchal society that surrounds American women (Templeton 149).

We can look around and see both constructive and destructive efforts being made toward women's equality, as Gloria Steinem notes in "The Way We Were--And Will Be": "As a journalist, I was already near the mainstream of my profession... yet I was still suffering from a world in which I was assumed to be far less 'serious' (and to need far less money)
than my male colleagues" (411). Even Steinem, one of the most distinguished and well-known feminists of our time, endured an oppressing environment in her early career, and though she has greatly progressed, she knows she and all American women still exist in an oppressed state. Therefore, as the cactus takes stock and fills itself with water, with nourishment, to withstand its severe habitat, we can only do the same.

In *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991*, Rich continues to look toward American locales to understand where women, as well as humanity, are and where we are headed:

Catch if you can your country's moment, begin

Where any calendar's ripped-off: Appomattox

Wounded Knee, Los Alamos, Selma

the transfer of African applique
to rural Alabama voices alive in legends, curses

----poet journalist pioneer mother

uncovering her country: *there are roads to take*. (12-13)

Rich calls to all, but particularly to women, to be aware of the common histories of violation not only of the land but of the people as well. We are all "imprisoned and implicated" in our nation's history; thus, we should be aware of it and know we are also responsible for its future history (Templeton 157). By traveling through and gaining awareness of dishonored people and communities, we recognize what and who has been
degraded and can clear out the debris left. That we have all inherited these dishonors influences us more than we think, because stemming from past prejudices, discrimination against others still occurs in our country as Rich notes in What Is Found There:

*October 1990.* Time to say that in this tenuous, still unbirthed democracy, my country, low-grade depressiveness is pandemic and is reversing into violence at an accelerating rate. Families massacred by fathers who then turn the gun on themselves; the deliberate wounding and killing of a schoolyardful of Asian-American children in a small California town. . . . Violence against women of every color and class, young dark-skinned men, perceived lesbians and gay men. (15)

We have many subcultures in America, yet when some Americans turn on other Americans, then, essentially, we turn on ourselves. Until we can rebuild, forming a resistant community that does not destroy itself, but strengthens itself, we will not have true equality--true equality being where we are one land, one people, one America.

We have seen Rich struggle with language, with female identity and status, and with American society's complexities and contradictions. Through this journey with her, we learn the struggle, the journey itself, is what makes life worthwhile, where one progresses, yet regresses and digresses once in awhile to see where one has been, where one is, and where one is headed. Rich closes her most current work *Dark Fields of the Republic: Poems 1991-1995* appropriately then with "Edgelit":

In my sixty-fifth year I know something about language:

it can eat or be eaten by experience
poetry means refusing
the choice to kill or die

but this life of continuing is for the sane mad
and the bravest monsters. (71)

Poetry means refusing to be violent or passive, but just to be. To be, to exist, defined only by oneself, is all Rich has wanted. Further, Rich declares that just continuing, surviving, and striving in life is a strength in itself, and women have done just that. Steinem reflects on the female movement in the late twentieth century, which spans Rich's works, and notes:

Women [have] reached out to each other: first in consciousness-raising groups that allowed us to create a psychic turf (for women have not even a neighborhood of our own); then in movement meetings and a women's culture that created more psychic territory; and finally across national and cultural boundaries. [We] can build on these beginnings. We are all part of the spiral of history. (415)

Creating our own space, our own niche, in America has not been easy, yet we have done it. Further, women not only want their own space, but they want equal standing with their male counterparts. Even more, the female movement wants equal standing for all--one human being is equal to all human beings. To continue the struggle and the journey toward equality and freedom is the battle to be won, and steadily, women are winning it, but the fight must continue . . . and might always have to.
Conclusion

Some powerful thoughts, words, and actions have sprung from women, particularly Rich. Many struggles have been encountered also by the same women. We have seen Rich struggle with her poetic and female expression in a culture that often limits such expression. We have seen her struggle with who she is to others and with who she is to herself. This struggle is a common one among all American women because for so long how women were of benefit to others outweighed how they were of benefit to themselves.

Rich and her poetry have lived and transformed through the last five decades. In the 1950's, Rich, like many other American women, questioned her given roles, but the question was never asked aloud, but felt within each woman—even some unconsciously so. By the 1960's and 1970's, however, this question was not only asked aloud but shouted across the nation as well. Rich began to re-create who she was within and without, and a merging of the two formed. Her poetry explored this merging of the individual and the environment, and she found that for the individual to truly exist, her/his surroundings had to allow her/his existence. However, women's true selves cannot breathe freely in a stifled patriarchy, and gasping for breaths, Rich explores this failed structure that lies beneath inequality. She determines that an equalitarian structure should be built in its place, and along with other women, she goes about this rebuilding that will benefit all citizens of society, not just one half.

Now, more than ever, in the 1980's-1990's, a female power emerges in just about every aspect of our culture. However, Rich and others still find that even though women
are creating their own space and crossing boundaries, many are still restrained, whether it be mistreatment by a significant other or employer, or by one's government. Beneath the surface we have barely scratched. What still lies just below, even if it hides, is an ever present cultural thought that women are somehow subordinate to men. Until this thought no longer pervades society's mind as a whole, the female movement has to continue.

Beyond this pervading idea, however, a fervid hope burns in many. Much that has happened for women would have been inconceivable in the early 1950's when Rich first began to write. To come this far in our journey with Rich and other females, there is no turning back. As a community of women and more as a community of humans, America needs to be truly the democracy--an equalitarian structure--that it proclaims to be. If the spirit for all to be equal persists, then the struggle to make it so will continue. One only has to remember that a spirit transcends--boundless and limitless. The feminist movement has wanted only this for women and for all.
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